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Oscar Wilde and postmodern thought

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Oscar Wilde and Postmodern Thought

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Abstract

This thesis explores the work and critical thought of Oscar Wilde from the perspective of postmodernism, and presents the argument that Wilde's thinking can be read as strikingly similar to various postmodern approaches. It positions Wilde as a 'proto-postmodernist': not as a forerunner of postmodernism, nor a full postmodernist, but rather someone who employs ideas and practices that would now commonly be regarded as postmodern, but who had those ideas and engaged in those practices before postmodernism arrived on the scene. The thesis is divided into three parts, each of which groups similar theoretical fields in a discussion of similarities (and, sometimes, differences) between Wilde and postmodernism. In part one, the discussion moves from a basic look at binaries, though deconstruction, to a discussion of truth and falsehood in postmodernism. In part two, there is a discussion on simulacra, hyperreality, and postmodern ideas on surface and depth. Finally, the third part discusses the disappearance of a naturally delineated field of expertise by discussing intertextuality, word and music studies, moving finally to ekphrasis and postmodern theories on the photograph.

Dedication

For Anniek, the most wonderful and patient woman in the world.

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Preface

The following document contains a theoretical discussion undertaken as part of a PhD thesis by Kees de Vries. It reflects four years of research and writing on Wilde as a proto-postmoderist.

Though no part of the current thesis has been published prior to this moment, a condensed version of the discussion in Part 3 of the present thesis was previously published as part of the 2011 volume *Refiguring Oscar Wilde's Salome* (edited by Michael Y. Bennett) in the form of its fifteenth chapter, entitled 'Intertextuality and Intermediality in Oscar Wilde's *Salome* or: How Oscar Wilde became a Postmodernist'. Additionally, a discussion on Wilde and Ekphrasis was previously undertaken by the author as part of a Master thesis in English Language and Culture at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen; a similar discussion appears in Chapter IX here, but no element of that discussion previously appeared in the Master thesis.

Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the help of a number of quite exceptional individuals. The author would like to thank Dr. Steven Price for his tireless and insightful guidance of this thesis; and Prof. Helen Wilcox for her great encouragement and support. Dr. Helen Abbott helped to transform the writing into something far superior, for which she is owed eternal gratitude; likewise to Dr. Valerie Robillard, whose brilliant Master course on ekphrasis provided the first sparks for what would ultimately become the present thesis.

Introduction

Increasingly, Oscar Wilde has become a writer whose work is open to a large number of interpretations. From the sparkling socialite whose brilliant verbal fireworks dazzled late-Victorian England, he became a fallen star, the author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* only; then to a gay martyr and finally to an author whose work attracts a great many approaches, such as post-colonial, materialist, and others. It would be an understatement to say that interest in Wilde is currently higher than ever before, with the possible exception of the five years before he fell from grace in the 1895 trials. This peak does not just concern critical attention; most of Wilde's plays have been in continuous production around the world, in smaller scale during the first half of the twentieth century, but with growing popularity in the second half, so that Ian Small, in a review of Wilde's *Complete Works*, is able to note that 'As the interest of the general public in Wilde has grown over the past thirty years, so too has a demand for all things Wildean'.[1] And recently, a film adaptation of *Dorian Gray* (2009) joined an ever-growing list of the novel's adaptation, cinematic or otherwise. In a word, Wilde is, once again, popular.

Wilde's popularity represents at once a success and a mystery. A success, because Wilde is unashamedly literary and philosophical. His texts are long, elaborate and require a great deal of effort on the reader's part; in their humour and references, they often bear the mark of time. Yet his works are continually in

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[1] Ian Small, 'Popular Wilde: A Review Essay', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 40.3 (1997), 310-316 (p. 311).

print. This is also the mystery, since his works are full of references to late-Victorian social practices and to the news of his day, and his jokes often require a working knowledge of people and politicians whose time is long since past. The answer, and the argument of this thesis, is that Wilde is relevant today in a way that he was not in the first half of the twentieth century, and specifically that he is relevant because his ideas resemble those popularly and critically held in the second half of the twentieth century.

Wilde and Postmodernism

This thesis seeks to position Oscar Wilde as a proto-postmodernist, which is to say, not as a forerunner of postmodernism, nor a full postmodernist, but rather someone who employs ideas and practices that would now commonly be regarded as postmodern, but who had those ideas and engaged in those practices before postmodernism arrived on the scene. That Wilde's work resembles postmodernism has been observed by a great many critics. In fact, when writing on Oscar Wilde, critics often specifically establish that the study of Wilde is relevant in modern a context. The worry here seems to be that Wilde's artistic theories have traditionally been firmly grounded in the Aesthetic movement of the nineteenth century, so that some effort is required to justify continued critical attention to them – at least, then, outside of a historical approach. Some critics have noted that he seems to be an early proponent of, or at least anticipates, modernism, such as when one critic, writing on T.S. Eliot, calls it 'startling to be reminded of how many of the fundamental formulations of Eliot's poetics can be

traced to *Intentions'* central essays'.[2] Others have explored strands of modernity

in Wilde's plays, such as *Salome*.[3] But even beyond modernism, critics note that

Wilde feels contemporary, at times postmodern. At the same time, such comments

are, without fail, either not followed up or quickly qualified. It is a move that is

exemplified in Lawrence Danson's 'Wilde as Critic and Theorist', which is

included in a standard work on Wilde, *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar

Wilde*. Danson states that Wilde's theoretical approach 'sounds presciently, even

shockingly, modern'.[4] The use of the word 'prescient' clearly suggests that

Wilde's ideas make sense in a modern context, but the article sidesteps that

argument: 'but despite his own breezy dismissal of history, the best way to

understand Wilde's intentions (whether in the biographical lower case or the

titular upper) is to locate them in the context of the times'.[5] This is, of course, an

important argument, and Wilde's ideas are tied to his own time in a very crucial

way; but the additional point here is that, while the possibility of Wilde's

seemingly (post)modern outlook is raised, it is also immediately dismissed. It is in

this way that such mentioning often happens: raising the possibility on the one

hand, but dismissing it on the other.

Another example is Neil Sammells's book *Wilde Style*. In its focus on

Wilde's use of language, it goes quite far in pointing out the link: 'Wilde's view

of language and, equally important, the way he deploys it, has much more in

common with influential poststructuralist critics such as Lacan, Derrida and de

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2 Ronald Bush, 'In Pursuit of Wilde Possum: Reflections on Eliot, Modernism, and the Nineties', *Modernism/Modernity*, 11.3 (2004), 469-485 (p. 473).
3 J.P. Riqueline, 'Shalom/Solomon/Salomé: Modernism and Wilde's Aesthetic Politics', *The Centennial Review*, 39.3 (1995), 537-580.
4 Lawrence Danson, 'Wilde as Critic and Theorist', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 80-95 (p. 81).
5 Danson, p. 81.

Man than it has with his Victorian contemporaries'.[6] After raising these three names, all of them central to some area of postmodernism, the passage continues by narrowing this general statement down to the specific movement: Wilde is placed in 'a postcolonial perspective', where his 'predicament is that of a colonial subject operating within the discourse of his imperial masters'.[7] Wilde's position becomes that of an Irishman under English rule – an additional step away from postmodernism and to an approach to Wilde that has been generally accepted and explored, also by Sammells himself.[8] This is not to say that post-colonialism is not a central part of the approaches to Wilde, but simply that this has already been established, unlike Wilde's apparent postmodernism. In *Wilde Style*, Sammells does not return to the point of post-structuralism after the above passage – most importantly because the book focusses on the reception of Wilde's works throughout time, as well as the development of Wilde's own style. Sammells does not make a proto-postmodern connection, but rather focusses on Wilde in the context of his own time. As one reviewer observes, the book mainly makes the point that 'some of the styles of Wilde […], such as his use of the fairy tale genre, his appropriation of the society comedy conventions and finally, his dandyism, were elaborately constructed rebellions against the norms of classicism, sexism, racism, and homophobia rampant in England.'[9] The fact of Wilde's possible postmodernism, then, is only mentioned.

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6 Neil Sammells, *Wilde Style: The Plays and Prose of Oscar Wilde* (Harrow: Longman, 2000), p. 40.
7 Sammells, p. 42.
8 Neil Sammells, 'The Irish Wilde', in *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Philip E. Smith (New York: Modern Language Association of America), pp. 35-41.
9 Valerie A. Murrenus, 'Wilde Style: The Plays and Prose of Oscar Wilde', *New Hibernia Review*, 5.1 (2001), 156-157 (p. 156).

A third and final example is a comment by Terry Eagleton. In a foreword to his play *Saint Oscar*, Eagleton says on Wilde and his modern appearance:

> Another such point was my sense of how astonishingly Wilde's work prefigures the insights of contemporary cultural theory. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that such theory, for all its excited air of novelty, represents in some ways little advance on the fin-de-siècle. Language as self-referential, truth as a convenient fiction, the human subject as contradictory and 'deconstructed', criticism as a form of 'creative' writing, the body and its pleasures pitted against a pharisaical ideology: in these and several other ways, Oscar Wilde looms up for us more and more as the Irish Roland Barthes.[10]

Here Eagleton seems to be arguing for Wilde in a postmodern light through a reference to a notable postmodernist, Roland Barthes; Eagleton, however, follows up his above observation by stating that: 'As I moved more deeply into his work, I began to discover that the two factors which had triggered my fascination with Wilde – his Irishness, and his remarkable anticipation of some present-day theory – were in fact closely interrelated'.[11] As in *Wilde Style*, Wilde is linked to post-colonialism and no further examination of the parallel with postmodernism is undertaken.

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10 Terry Eagleton, 'Saint Oscar: A Foreword', *New Left Review*, I.177 (1989), 125-128 (p. 126).
11 Eagleton, p. 126.

Engaging slightly more with the idea of postmodernism and Wilde, Jonathan Dollimore, in *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*, does discuss this when he writes:

> If [Wilde's] transgressive aesthetic anticipates post-modernism to the extent that it suggest a culture of the surface, the decentered and the different, it also anticipates modernism in being not just hostile to, but intently concerned with, its opposite: depth and exclusive integration as fundamental criteria of identity.[12]

However, the focus here is not on Wilde's extensive critical work and its echoes in his creative fiction. The passage on Wilde bases itself on Wilde's epigrammatic style in order to move on to an argument on Jacques Derrida's philosophy, taking the familiar Wildean inversion as similar to Derrida's deconstruction: 'Derrida [...] insists that a crucial stage in the Deconstruction of binaries involves their inversion, an overturning, which brings low what was high'.[13] This is, however, the extent to which the book discusses this connection, and the rest of the argument concerns itself primarily with how Wilde subverts prevalent sexual constructs of the time. The connection with deconstruction (which this thesis itself takes up in Chapter II) is more substantial than the common mention of Wilde's theoretical position; here too, however, the work hardly progresses beyond that point, at least in terms of exploring Wilde's ideas.

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12 Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 73.
13 Dollimore, p. 65.

This, then, is the starting point. Oscar Wilde's ideas clearly have many correspondences in various postmodern theoretical approaches, and this has been signalled, but not explored, in a great many critical works. This thesis will take up and expand those suggested parallels, sometimes from expected points (such as the aforementioned link to Derrida and deconstruction), other times from less well-known or predictable theoretical grounds. The specific ways in which this will be done are discussed below in the synopsis.

However, before examining what exactly the idea of a proto-postmodernist entails, it is crucial to examine Wilde's own context and to provide the elements from which Wilde constructed his approach.

Contexts

Though born and partially educated in Ireland, Wilde's context is explicitly that of a late-Victorian England, specifically London. After he shed much of his Irishness from his public persona while studying at Oxford, he moved to London in order to pursue a literary career, a move that placed him in a very public position. The working conditions of his chosen trade have been excellently explored in Josephine Guy and Ian Small's *Oscar Wilde's Profession*, which details the actual circumstances of Wilde's literary career, first as a reviewer, later as a writer of predominantly theatre, but also of stories and a novel. The book reminds the reader that, far from an incorrectly Romantic view of Wilde's writing for a living, the reader must realize that 'in both occupations he was writing for money: the fact that the sums involved in the theatre were considerably larger, and the tastes of the audience more difficult to satisfy, only made the commercial pressures

heavier'.[14] The availability of a professional writing career had only recently become an option. Just before Wilde's time, in the period of 1840 to 1880, the audience for literature had grown significantly, which, according to Regenia Gagnier, resulted 'in the professionalization of authorship – for example, specialist readers at publishing houses, literary agents, author's royalties, the Society of Authors' as well as in 'high and low culture industries'.[15] In other words, culture and literary production as an industry were a recent development when Wilde started out in London.

Though commercially unsuccessful as a poet, Wilde managed to sustain himself as a writer through reviews and an editorship of *The Woman's World* (1887-1889), working on his literary career with a variety of stories and the serialization of a novel. Despite equally unsuccessful early forays into theatre with *Vera; or, The Nihilists* (1880) and *The Duchess of Padua* (1883), he eventually made a name for himself as the playwright of social comedies, starting with *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892). The wildly successful comedies were very closely linked to their times, set, as they were, in his own present day; Wilde's stage characters could either be 'identified as contemporary types by his audience or represented an older, and by 1890 relatively ineffectual, nobility and gentry at whom the new administrative and enterprising classes could laugh, even while they prided themselves on having usurped their power'.[16] In either case, as Regenia Gagnier notes, audiences identified with Wilde's characters. However, a different problem lay with the reviewers, who, since they often 'enlisted their

14 Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession: Writing and the Culture Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 44.
15 Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), p.26.
16 Gagnier, p. 106.

sympathy with labor rather than administration or enterprise, identified Wilde's

characters with the new upper classes; thus they frequently attacked his plays, or

less frequently interpreted them as satires on Society'.[17] Wilde did not draw his

audience from the lower classes, though they represented a very large portion of

Victorian paying audiences. Those audiences no longer frequented the traditional

Victorian theatre:

> The first-night audiences who frequented George Alexander's St. James's
> and Beerbohm Tree's Theatre Royal, Haymarket – the two theaters that
> initially monopolized Wilde's comedies – and whose approval guaranteed
> the prolonged runs of Wilde's plays, included little more than the 1890's
> version of social Exclusives. Since the 1860's, music halls had been
> drawing the lower classes from the theaters, leaving room for smaller,
> discriminating audiences.[18]

It was these discriminating audiences to whom Wilde's very successful comedies

played, and who provided the relative financial success that he enjoyed during the

first half of the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Aside from worries over money, however, Wilde had other problems, most

predominantly his sexual nature, which deviated from a norm which had fairly

recently become much stricter. By the end of the nineteenth century, 'the mildness

and tolerance that characterized the lingering traces of the early modern structures

of heterosexism were gradually displaced by a much harsher and less forgiving set

17 Gagnier, p. 106.
18 Gagnier, p. 107.

of attitudes', of which an important contributing factor was 'the gradual emergence throughout the nineteenth century of a professional discourse which attempted to understand and define the phenomenon of "same-sex passion" according to medical and scientific criteria'.[19] Victorian definitions of Wilde's sexual orientation established him to be, if exposed, unequivocally an outsider to be shunned:

> The behaviour which had been deemed criminal by civil and ecclesiastical courts of law, and which had previously been understood by most people, within traditional ontological parameters and within a Christian moralistic context, as a deficiency of willpower and a lack of self-control (i.e. the sodomite considered as 'dissipated, dissolute debauchee,' or simply as 'sinner'), was being increasingly characterized as representing an alternative ontological reality altogether, that is, a third sex, a 'sexual invert,' whose inclinations and behaviour were biologically determined and manifestly 'other'.[20]

Victorian public morality was coming down hard on anything that it saw as sexual deviancy. It was a public debate, which, beyond politics, took place very much in the written word. The debate's participants actively sought to place any aberrant sexuality in the realm of mental disease, and in print writers 'argued that sexual vice, especially masturbation, was both a cause and an effect of mental degeneracy, [and] signs of sexual nonconformity on the part of artists were

19 Michael S. Foldy, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde: Deviance, Morality, and Late-Victorian Society* (London: Yale University Press, 1997), p.69.
20 Foldy, p.69.

especially ominous'.[21] The debate was not one-sided, though any authors going against the prevailing trend needed to pick their words carefully. Among those attempting to nuance the discussion was Walter Pater, who, 'by deciding to celebrate Leonardo's perversity, attempts […] to convert the perceived disabilities of sexual nonconformity into sources of cultural growth.'[22] Part of the problem for those authors trying to produce a positive construction of differing sexuality was the fluidity of the terms; rather than having been crystalized and available for debate, the terminology surrounding the debate on sexuality was unclear, so that, for example, while 'men's effeminacy had been read by this time as signalling sexual deviancy, and even homosexuality explicitly, the correlation was still ambiguous for many'.[23] In Wilde's time it was entirely unclear what it meant to be a homosexual – indeed, the term itself is problematic, as several gender theorists have noted the word had very different connotations over the span of history. Wilde himself rested much of the interpretation of his sexuality on Ancient Greek models of sexuality, but was unable to control the narrative at the time of his trial, so that when he was sentenced, 'the press, apart from one or two notable exceptions, vilified him'.[24]

In public, Wilde did not associate himself openly with these issues of sexuality – though he did not shy away from veiled references in his work, as the relationship between Dorian Gray and Basil Hallward in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) shows. Rather, he associated himself with Aestheticism, even going

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21 Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 118.
22 Dellamora, p. 118.
23 Dennis Denisoff, '"Men of my Own Sex": Genius, Sexuality, and George Du Maurier's Artists', in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. by Richard Dellamora (London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 147-170 (p. 149).
24 Joseph Bristow, 'Introduction', in *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (London: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp 3-37 (p. 5).

so far as to style himself 'Professor of Aesthetics' on his lecture tour through the

United States, in order 'to undertake the education of America'.[25] Wilde's

interpretation of this movement is his explicit emphasis on beauty and the

individual, but in general Aestheticism was not a clearly defined and delineated

movement; a 'vagueness is startlingly evident in accounts of literary Aestheticism.

If there is any consensus, it is that Aestheticism as a category is exceptionally

elusive'.[26] Nevertheless, among its core principles was included the idea of art for

art's sake, an aphorism that had been incorporated into the movement by the time

Wilde had become interested in it: 'In the 1870s, though, the term "art for art's

sake" was gradually superseded by "Aestheticism"'.[27] The movement was in

development in Victorian England, becoming crystalized in criticism and art as

the era went on: 'The distinction of Victorian Aestheticism may be its

thoroughgoing attempts to realise the speculative notion of the "purely aesthetic"

in the concrete forms of works of art and literature'.[28] Thus, by the time that Wilde

came down from Oxford in 1878, Aestheticism was available to him, both as a

movement which he could subscribe to, and as an approach that, only partially

solidified, he could still make his own.

     In addition to Aestheticism, Wilde is often associated with Decadence.

This artistic movement originated in France, but spread to Britain through writers

such as George Moore, Arthur Symons and Wilde himself, but also by means of

academic authors such as Pater. Decadence was a good fit for Wilde, as Kirsten

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25 Peter Raby, *Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 31.
26 Elizabeth Prettejohn, 'Introduction', in *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England*, ed. by Elizabeth Prettejohn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 1-16 (p. 2).
27 Prettejohn, p. 3.
28 Prettejohn, p. 6.

MacLeod notes:

> Aestheticism shared many of the same tenets as Decadence – a
> commitment to art for art's sake, a rejection of bourgeois industrialism and
> utilitarianism, and a desire for intensity of experience – its force as a
> resistant aesthetic for the literary élite was, by the 1880s, on the wane. In
> part, Aestheticism's declining power was a result of its popularity with the
> middle class, a group against which proponents of the movement sought to
> define themselves. To add insult to injury, Aestheticism had become the
> subject of much ridicule and parody, notably in the caricatures of its main
> proponents, James McNeill Whistler and Oscar Wilde.[29]

However, much like Aestheticism, Decadence remained a term that was only
broadly sketched, and so here, too, the 'problem of meaning around Decadence
derives, as numerous critics have argued, from the instability of the term itself.
Because […] the definition of Decadence is predicated on an opposition to
"arbitrarily defined norms", its meaning changes in relation to its context.'[30] As a
result, both Aestheticism and Decadence are more clearly definable through their
adherents than they are through formulated rules and accepted practices – as is
appropriate for an approach that foregrounds personality and individual reaction.
This personalized element gives Decadence a connotation of the subjective, and
perhaps even of the non-serious, so it is important to note that 'the decadent novel

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29 Kirsten MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Writing, and the Fin de Siécle* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 2.
30 MacLeod, p. 19.

can deal in very earnest matters'.[31] Wilde's own novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, certainly does.

Three names are especially important in the context of Wilde's critical writing, two of whom are named by Wilde himself. Walter Pater and Matthew Arnold feature in *Intentions* (1891) in 'The Critic as Artist', but John Ruskin's thoughts are also in the background of Wilde's critical thought. Ruskin argued, in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1852), that individual expression was extremely important in art, taking as his example the rough but therefore unique craftsmanship of Gothic architecture. His praise of beauty and individualism links him to Wilde, though the two writers part ways, theoretically speaking, in Ruskin's emphasis on an underlying natural reality that an artist may touch – essentially a Romantic idea, for Ruskin 'assumes that fidelity to natural phenomena is wholly consistent with the expression of noble, personal style. He assumes that only a noble individual does wholly perceive and represent nature truly, fully'.[32] This in contrast to Wilde, who in 'The Critic as Artist' soundly rejected the idea that it is important to see an object for itself.

'The Critic as Artist' does mention both Arnold and Pater. Wilde was clearly more enthralled with Pater, on whose book *The Renaissance* (1873) he wrote:

But Mr. Pater's essays became to me 'the golden book of spirit and sense, the holy writ of beauty.' They are still this to me. It is possible, of course,

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31 George C. Schoolfield, *A Baedeker of Decadence: Charting a Literary Fashion, 1884-1927* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 70.
32 Wendell Stacy Johnson, 'Memory, Landscape, Love: John Ruskin's Poetry and Poetic Criticism', *Victorian Poetry*, 19.1 (1981), 19-34 (p. 31).

that I may exaggerate about them. I certainly hope that I do; for where

there is no exaggeration there is no love, and where there is no love there

is no understanding.[33]

In fact, Wilde follows Pater's articulation of an Aesthetic philosophy closely,

something he almost acknowledges in 'The Critic as Artist'. In one sense at least,

though, Wilde is nearer to Arnold: 'for Wilde, as for Arnold, finally, criticism

offers more than delight. For Arnold, the value of criticism is in discovering the

object as it really is', while Pater is more interested in the expression of the artist,

and 'considered the results of criticism rather than its larger possible functions, its

value is in increasing our delight in art; for Wilde it offers both insight and

delight'.[34] A fuller exploration of Wilde's attitude towards criticism and art will

be made in Part 1 of this thesis, but here, the most important point is Wilde's

theoretical context, which was shaped strongly by these great names of Victorian

England.

Outside Victorian England, however, there were other philosophical and

artistic movements that were part of the intellectual circumstances in which Wilde

wrote his most important work. On the one hand, according to Philip Smith and

Michael Helfand, there is 'Wilde's interest in the theories of Max Müller and John

Ruskin', but,

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33 Oscar Wilde, *A Critic in Pall Mall, Being Extracts from Reviews and Miscellanies*, ed. by E.V. Lucas (London: Methuen, 1919), p. 188.
34 Wendell V. Harris, 'Arnold, Pater, Wilde, and the Object as in Themselves They See It', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 11.4 (1971), 733-747 (p. 745).

at Oxford, Wilde also found in William Wallace's and Benjamin Jowett's explanations of Hegelian theory a variety of idealism better fitted than Müller's and Ruskin's to incorporate the materialist assumptions and findings of science, and especially evolutionary theory. Furthermore, Wilde adapted Hegel's aesthetic theory and a modified version of his history of art, which he learned either first hand or indirectly from Walter Pater or J. A. Symonds.[35]

As the authors of *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks* also explore, Hegel was a logical fit for Wilde's Classically-oriented interest in beauty, since Hegel had posited that 'artistic beauty reveals absolute *truth* through perception […]. He holds that the best art conveys metaphysical knowledge by revealing, through sense perception, what is unconditionally true.'[36] Hegel's phenomenology, which advocates a focus on the (artistic) object under discussion, furthermore serves as a model for Wilde's own exploration of art for art's sake, which advocates the same kind of attention to a work on its own.

Hegel is not the only continental philosopher who inspired Wilde. His work also shows remarkable similarities with that of Friedrich Nietzsche, who shares with him a thinking on individualism as almost transcendental. In this context, Kate Hext has pointed out, speaking of *The Antichrist* (1888) and *Twilight of the Idols* (1889), that 'Nietzsche's spirit in these mature works is more

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35 Philip E. Smith and Michael S. Helfand, 'The Context of the Text', in *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of Mind in the Making*, ed. by Philip E. Smith and Michael S. Helfand (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 33-34.

36 Robert Wicks, 'Hegel's Aesthetics: an Overview', in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, ed. by Frederick C. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 348-377 (p. 349).

than a little like Wilde's in the late 1880s and early 1890s'.[37] Among the

similarities is a tendency to make philosophical points in a literary way, as

exemplified for example in Wilde's essay-story 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.': 'The

works of Nietzsche and Wilde exemplify "philosophy in literature". Their visions

of Romantic Individualism are inextricably linked to their reforming styles and

forms, which operate to bring the reader into being as a creative subject', a

similarity that manifests in both Nietzsche's and Wilde's 'idiosyncratic and

divisive poses, aphorisms and contradictions, [which] grant their readers freedom

from disciplineship to a dogmatic or systematic argument; they ask each reader to

realise their own truths and thus to become "perfectly and absolutely" him or

herself'.[38] The extent to which Wilde and Nietzsche influenced each other – the

two were contemporaries – is unclear, but strong parallels between them certainly

exist. This is a crucial point, as Nietzsche in many ways figures heavily as a

forefather of postmodernism, and if Wilde's thought matches his, this is an

indication that the similarities may extend to postmodernism, too.

Though Nietzsche shares some characteristics with Wilde, there is also a

difference that is, in the context of this thesis, crucial: while Wilde has only been

connected to postmodernism in the sense of the mentioned but unexplored

similarity, Nietzsche's role as a philosopher whose work has a place in

postmodernism has been widely critically debated.[39] Even if critics do not

necessarily agree that Nietzsche himself represents an early, actual step towards

postmodernism, most critical debates take his status as an (indirect) forefather of

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37 Kate Hext, 'Oscar Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche: "Rebels in the Name of Beauty"',
Victoriographies, 1.2 (2011), 202-220 (p. 203).
38 Hext, p. 211.
39 Clayton Koelb, ed. *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: Essays Pro and Contra* (Albany: State
University of New York Press, 1990).

postmodernism as given.[40] The acknowledgement of Nietzsche even goes so far as to explore the link between Nietzsche and postmodern feminism: though often labelled a misogynist, 'Nietzsche's texts contain many possibilities for postmodern feminism, since these texts strongly exemplify the two themes that characterize much of the postmodern feminist position: woman as multiple and woman as representation'.[41] Because Nietzsche's relationship to postmodernism has already been so profusely discussed, his role in relation to postmodernism will not be further explored in this thesis other than to discuss similarities with Wilde at select points.

This is the late-Victorian context of Wilde's ideas, sketched briefly here, since this context does not feature heavily in the arguments presented in this thesis. Where appropriate, Wilde's debt to contemporary or preceding thinkers will be acknowledged, but, as stated, the goal is not to examine Wilde's ideas in their historical circumstances and connections, but to investigate his striking resemblance to postmodernism.

Approaches

The study of Oscar Wilde's life and work has had a strange course over the twentieth century. After the high point in the 1890s, Wilde fell from grace and his work went into disrepute, not to be looked favourably upon for a while after his death in 1900. In 1917, for example, his work was characterized in the following way:

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40 Ronald Beiner, 'Gadamer's Philosophy of Dialogue and Its Relation to the Postmodernism of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and Strauss', in *Gadamer's Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. by Bruce Krajewski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 145-157.

41 Lewis Call, 'Woman as Will and Representation: Nietzsche's Contribution to Postmodern Feminism', *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture*, 11 (1995), 113-129 (p. 113).

Wilde was a third rate poet who occasionally rose to the second class but

not once to the first. Prose is more difficult than verse and in it he is rather

sloppy […] on any catalogue of Wilde's plays there should be written:

Here lions might have been. For assuming his madness, one must also

admit his genius and the uninterrupted conjunction of the two might have

produced brilliancies.[42]

Although his works never completely disappeared from public view – *The Picture*

of Dorian Gray and *The Importance of Being Earnest* remained popular – there

was little attention, certainly not academic, for Wilde in the first half of the

twentieth century. In fact, as late as 1993, Ian Small was able rightfully to

complain that 'until very recently there were none of the basic tools for a proper

study of Wilde: no standard – nor even adequate – editions of the collected works,

no satisfactory biography, no full census or description of the manuscripts'.[43] The

absence of a 'satisfactory' biography had been partly solved by Richard

Ellmann's biography *Oscar Wilde*, which openly and frankly discussed Wilde's

sexuality.[44] Small is perhaps a little harsh on a handful of preceding critics; the

scholarship of Sir Rupert Hart-Davis, for example, resulted in an edition of the

Complete Letters (at the time not quite as complete as the title would suggest),

while an early attempt at a critical edition of Wilde's poems was undertaken by

Bobby Fong (who would later publish the Oxford critical edition together with

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42 Edgar Saltus, 'Edgar Saltus on Wilde's Literary Ability', in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Karl Beckson (London: Routledge, 1970), p. 379.
43 Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde Revalued: an Essay on New Materials and Methods of Research* (Greensboro: ELT Press, 1993), p. 1.
44 Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987).

Karl Beckson).[45] Most early Wilde scholarship relied on editions of Wilde's works, including an early Complete Works, which had been compiled by Wilde's literary executor, Robert Ross. Ross's editing of those texts, in turn, was problematic, as will be discussed during the treatment of Wilde's *De Profundis*. Notably, Wilde's own family stayed active in preserving his legacy, and especially Wilde's grandson, Merlin Holland, has assumed an active role in this, even taking over the editorship of the complete letters from Hart-Davis. Holland's stake as a surviving family member may be more personal than some of the more independently-minded critics would like; on the other hand, his contributions in bringing Wilde into current scholarship are beyond reproach.

Wilde's return to prominence occurred in the latter part of the twentieth century, and is in no small part thanks to the attention afforded him by theorists who were developing what was to become queer theory. Major names include the aforementioned Jonathan Dollimore, and Alan Sinfield, whose work is examined in Chapter I of this thesis. At the same time, Wilde became an important name in Irish post-colonial studies, as exemplified by the earlier quotation from Neil Sammells, but also by Declan Kiberd, who links Wilde's theme of lying to Irish roots, where locals lied to English scouts for the sake of saving Irish lives.[46] The comprehensive study of Wilde has much reason to thank these two approaches, for among their achievements is a renewed interest in Wilde, one that allowed others to come to Wilde and read him again.

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45 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000). Fong's early work eventually resulted in: Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, vol.1*, ed. by Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
46 Declan Kiberd, 'Oscar Wilde: the Resurgence of Lying', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 276-294.

With some exceptions, the quotations used in the present work have been derived from the 2003 HarperCollins' *Complete Works* edition of Oscar Wilde's works. This represents a widely available text, with which many readers, both popular and academic, will be familiar; as such it represents not just Wilde's works, but a popular perception of it. The present thesis draws on this edition in order to provide a version of Wilde that is relevant to the twenty first century – and thus based on a popular edition that is readily available in that century. However, a more central problem lies with the available critical alternatives. An obvious choice would have been the emerging Oxford editions of Wilde's complete works, of which presently four volumes are available, with a fifth (the early plays) and a sixth (the journalism) to become available in June 2013. These scholarly editions offer a meticulous and annotated version of the texts. There are several problems there, however. Firstly, there is an issue in consistency, with the Oxford editions being far from complete at the time of the writing of this thesis. The Oxford editions also make editorial choices that are potentially a source of discussion; in printing the essays of *Intentions*, for example, the editors have opted to print those essays including passages that were cut after a discussion between Wilde and *Intentions*' original editor. This prompts textual discussions which the present thesis has neither the range nor focus to consider in detail. Thus, for the sake of simplicity, the texts almost all derive from the HarperCollins edition.

Nevertheless, the HarperCollins volume is not without its problems. For example, it provides the four-act version of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a choice that is, critically, not without controversy. Additionally, a major issue is

the basis for many texts in the edition, which still rests in Robert Ross's posthumous editing of Wilde's work. As Josephine Guy and Ian Small have argued in their critical examination of *De Profundis* – discussed below – Ross made substantial, and at times controversial, changes to Wilde's work in preparation for the 1908 edition of Wilde's works. Differences between the HarperCollins edition and other scholarly editions have been checked where possible, in order to make sure that no textual differences arise that could affect the arguments presented in this thesis.

Similarly, the choice of postmodern texts must be clarified. It will become immediately obvious that this thesis sometimes draws on anthologies or introductory texts, such as Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory*. The presence of such sources in the argumentation is primarily due to their pervasiveness in modern critical approaches. If Wilde corresponds to the approaches as they are presented in their most current, widespread form, as well as to the more specific sources of postmodern thinkers, this can only strengthen the comparison. Additionally, if Wilde's thought can be linked to texts which are chosen or constructed for their accessibility, this in turn aids the argument that Wilde himself is as accessible, and as relevant, as these widely-read postmodern critics.

In discussing Wilde as a proto-postmodernist, the focus of the argument is primarily on Wilde's essays, as they regularly contain the clearest articulation of specific aspects of his thinking. Nevertheless, often the argumentation will move beyond the critical work and into the creative output. Wilde's ideas may be clearly formulated in his essays, but they are also woven into the stories, novel, plays, and poetry.

Thus, the assumption is that *Intentions* is at the critical heart of Wilde's work. His fame rests mostly on other works, but it is through the lens of the collection of essays that this thesis re-examines the rest of Wilde's work in terms of proto-postmodernism. The volume shows the author arriving at critical positions that had been simmering in previous works and that would find expression and development still in the works created and published after *Intentions* had appeared. Thus, for example, Wilde's intertextual interests had started to emerge as early as the time of the publication of his poetry; it would be prominent still in his final work, 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', but their foremost moment comes when Wilde writes, in *Intentions*, that 'Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams'.[47] Such points allow the meaningful exploration of Wildean literary 'thievery' as a technique rather than a transgression, as will be explored in Chapter VII.

In the same way, one of the great concerns of Wilde's work is the combination of creative art on the one hand and criticism on the other. That combination itself is never clearly stated before the arrival of *Intentions* in 1891, but there are signs before that time. Wilde, after all, was a Trinity and Oxford graduate who looked to poetry after his days in university. When he became a prolific reviewer and editor of the magazine *The Woman's World*, Wilde was also writing poetry. During his editorship of that magazine between 1887 and 1890 he also wrote short stories, including the entire collection *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* as well as working on the manuscript of the magazine version of *The*

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47 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), p. 1078. Further references to Wilde's work from this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Picture of Dorian Gray.

Linked to this idea of creative criticism are Wilde's artists. There are several in the works he had written before the publication of *Intentions.* Many if not all of them exhibit, as artists, a fine critical instinct, which is to say that they have achieved some mastery in life through their critical faculty. The immediate example is Basil Hallward, whose perception of Dorian enables him to create a portrait special enough to become the supernatural receptacle for Dorian's sins and ageing, even if he does not quite grasp what, exactly, is going on. Prior to *Intentions*, indeed before the publication of its separate articles (the significant entries were published in January 1889), there are already various examples. There is Alan Trevor, the painter in 'The Model Millionaire', who has attained a carefree life and who is capable of speaking in the typical, telling Wildean manner: at one point he says that 'the only people a painter should know […] are people who are *bête* and beautiful, people who are an artistic pleasure to look at and an intellectual repose to talk to' (p. 209). He also ends the story by remarking that 'millionaire models […] are rare enough; but, by Jove, model millionaires are rarer still!' (p. 212). Trevor has the same kind of verbal intelligence that suggests the aforementioned critical faculty.

Such faculty also appears in 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.', although there the interplay of life and art is much more dangerous, killing one man and ruining another's final days. The protagonists of this work are also engaged in critical reflection; the reader finds two of the three main characters discussing the merits and flaws of forgery, while the third, though a gentlemen, is clearly also a gifted actor. Of his playing Rosalind, it is said that 'it was a marvellous performance.

[…] It would be impossible to describe to you the beauty, the delicacy, the refinement of the whole thing. It made an immense sensation' (p. 305). This is the same man who will go on to create a theory of Shakespeare's Sonnets that is compelling enough to inspire death. This, too, is an instance where protagonists are both artistic and powerfully critical.

These examples represent an author who is adept at combining art and criticism, an act which he subsequently enshrined in 'The Critic as Artist'. After *Intentions* Wilde turned to writing plays, and his wish to combine criticism and art receded into the background, becoming a theme woven into the works rather than a concrete point he tried to make. It is good to remember, however, one of the many points offered in 'The Critic as Artist': that the two supreme arts are 'Life and Literature, life and the perfect expression of life' (p. 1114). Linked to the artist's critical faculty, this allows for the view of Wilde's plays as acts of criticism. Specifically, they are criticism of life and thus a continuation of the practices he had combined in the years before: 'some writing practices in the early poems are the first examples of a strategy which Wilde later developed in more sophisticated ways', meaning that readers may read, for example, Wilde's poetry 'as an attempt to renegotiate the relationship between concepts such as originality and creativity, journalism and art'.[48]

Where much attention is given to *Intentions*, another work will be entirely absent from the analysis in this thesis. For several reasons, *De Profundis* is not included as either theory or as an illustration of Wilde's thought at work. For one, the more religious overtones of the argument, especially the prolonged discussion

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[48] Ian Small, 'Introduction', in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, vol.1*, by Oscar Wilde, ed. by Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. ix-xxvi (p. x).

on Christ, does not sit well with much of Wilde's other theory. Whereas much of *Intentions* seems to problematize the existence of an objective, accessible reality, *De Profundis* seems to counter that. Rather than pursue a coherent argument, the work is a combination of a biographical document on Wilde's relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas with a musing on art and Christ. The two do not seem to be related, in the sense that neither passage illustrates nor reinforces the other. Scholars have therefore suggested that, given the fact that it was written during Wilde's imprisonment, when he was clearly mentally and physically suffering, the

> recognition of the manuscript's artificial nature should alert us to the possibility that the complex and conflicting personality we find in it might be the result of rather more prosaic circumstances, of Wilde's inexpert (or unfinished) 'welding' together of documents initially composed separately and with different audiences in mind.[49]

These different audiences are most likely partly a general public interested in criticism, which might have benefitted from Wilde's discussion on the role of the artist; and, separately, Lord Alfred Douglas, for whom it is a letter, and one containing a bitter lover's quarrel at that.

Furthermore, critics have pointed out the 'need to acknowledge that the manuscript is uneven to the point of inconsistency; and that Ross's editing of it should be revalued'.[50] Ross, who edited Wilde's works after the latter's death, is known to have made extensive cuts and changes; the full version of *De Profundis*,

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49 Josephine Guy and Ian Small, 'Reading De Profundis', *English Language in Transistion 1880-1920*, 49.2 (2006), 123-149 (p. 127).
50 Guy and Small, p. 132.

for example, was not released to the public until the second half of the twentieth century, possibly because Ross feared further damage to Wilde's reputation over the more explicit parts of Wilde's letter.

Useful as it may be in terms of biographical details, as a theoretical development the arguments of the work come at a late phase, as Bruce Bashford notes when he discusses the theoretical elements emerging from *De Profundis*: Wilde 'underestimates the difficulties that he creates for himself by discarding the basic principle of his earlier position, and as a result, his new theory lacks development'.[51] *De Profundis*, then, presents several important problems: it has an internal inconsistency that, crucially, is not compatible with Wilde's earlier theory – even when taking into account that Wilde promoted self-contradiction to some degree; it has a problematic history in terms of its composition and editing; and its late creation under mentally and physically difficult circumstances throw doubt on the theories Wilde presents within. The issue of *De Profundis* is one that Wildean scholarship will have to solve one way or another; in the current thesis, however, it is not brought in.

The aim of this thesis is to compare Wilde's work to general ideas of postmodernism, in order to show Wilde's apparent proto-postmodernity. This immediately runs into a considerable problem, as it has been noted that 'there is no such thing as a "postmodern theory," only postmodern *theories* and *theorists*'.[52] Postmodernism, much like Aestheticism and Decadence, is a hard term to define. Since the correspondence between Wilde's thought and

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51 Bruce Bashford, 'Oscar Wilde as Theorist: The Case of De Profundis', *English Language in Transition 1880-1920*, 28.4 (1985), 395-406 (p. 395).
52 Garen Torikian, 'Against a Perpetuating Fiction: Disentangling Art from Hyperreality', in *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 44.2 (2010), 100-110 (p. 100).

postmodernism should be more than a mutual adherence to hard-to-define ideas,

there will need to be some assumptions about postmodernism on which to base

the arguments. One illuminating example is Christopher Norris's rather strong

depiction of a version of postmodernism by Jean Baudrillard. Norris defines a

postmodern viewpoint, which he sees specifically as a process:

> that everything is appearance, that 'truth' was always a species of self-
> promoting fiction, and that scepticism misses the point since it still makes
> a big dramatic scene of this belated discovery. […] It is pointless to
> deplore or to criticise this process, since it represents not only an accurate
> diagnosis of our present condition but, beyond that, a readiness to cope
> with the absence of all 'metaphysical' guarantees, all those old self-
> deluding appeals to reason, truth, reality, and so forth.[53]

This version of postmodernism is in one sense the foregrounding of the fictive

nature of many basic assumptions and, in another, a dismissal of a coherent,

pervasive concept of metaphysics.

The same sort of starting point of postmodernism is described by Jean-

François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*. In it, Lyotard famously identifies

postmodern thinking as 'incredulity towards meta-narratives'.[54] This incredulity

entails a scepticism of absolute ideas: the 'metanarratives' that Lyotard identifies

are grand ideas that seek to explain reality to the exclusion of all other ideas – for

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53 Christopher Norris, 'Lost in the Funhouse: Baudrillard and the Politics of Postmodernism', *Textual Practice* 3.3 (1989), 360-387 (p. 367).
54 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

example, the idea that Western civilization is objectively superior to other kinds of civilization and should therefore always be preferred. 'Postmodern critique attacks the transcendental illusion, which is [the description of] life in universal, context-overruling Ideas.'[55] Instead of these 'context-overruling Ideas', postmodern thought favours that context, allowing any number of ideas to approach a given topic from various directions.

Lyotard has also stated, in an effort to define the term postmodernism more clearly:

> the postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he [sic] writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for.[56]

There are several key moments in this passage that already illustrate Wilde's

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55 H. R. Brons, 'Philosophy under Fire: J.F. Lyotard transcending the trenches of postmodernity', in *History of European Ideas*, 20 (1995), 785-790 (p. 785).
56 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', in *Innovation/Renovation*, ed. by Ihab Habib Hassan and Sally Hassan (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), pp. 71-82 (p. 82).

proto-postmodernism, introducing these for chapters to come: the 'unpresentable in presentation' will return in the discussion on ekphrasis; the postmodern artist being 'in the position of a philosopher' will show in the chapters where Wilde's fiction is used to reinforce his theory; and the statement that the critic can no longer apply 'familiar categories to the text or to the work' will be extensively discussed in the chapters on deconstruction and truth. In all these, it will be demonstrated that Wilde's work bears a similarity that goes beyond the coincidental.

This is the general sense in which this thesis will explore postmodernism. That exploration is divided into three parts, each of which examines a particular postmodern aspect. These parts, in turn, each contain three chapters, with every chapter zooming in on one particular aspect. The choice is to focus on different elements that exist in postmodernism and which, in some way, may themselves be called postmodern because they respond to issues specifically raised by postmodernism.

Synopsis

The argumentation is divided into three parts, each corresponding to a major element of postmodernism. Each part, in turn, consists of three chapters, taking up and analysing the various finer points that constitute the major element.

Part 1 deals with the foundations of postmodern thought. Much of postmodernism is based in some way about a change in thinking about binary oppositions, and Chapter I takes up these basics, moving from binary inversion to collapse, and also investigating the correspondences to Wilde's statements on the surface and the symbol. Chapter II follows the logical continuation of the binary

debate in examining deconstruction, which is partly based on problematic

oppositions such as centre and margin or writing and speech. The chapter

examines a broad similarity between Wilde's starting points and those of

deconstruction, and then spends some time on specific similarities between Wilde

and Jacques Derrida, before discussing the implications of deconstruction for

creativity. Chapter III then picks up on the complications, introduced by

deconstruction, of concepts of truth, reality and nature, and discusses their

implications for law, crime and the monstrous.

Part 2 moves on from the implications of a problem of the reality/fiction

divide, originating in Chapter III, and discusses some prominent postmodern

theories on the subject. Chapter IV focusses on Jean Baudrillard's articulation of

the simulacrum and proceeds to show the power and persuasiveness of such

simulacra and their mirrors in Wilde's work. Chapter V follows Baudrillard's

development of the simulacra into the full simulation of reality known as

hyperreality, discussing its implication for theory, but also for the punishment of

crime, after which the strong link between hyperreality, magic realism and

Wilde's fiction is explored. Chapter VI then rounds off the discussion of reality by

looking at other ways of representing it, including issues of responsibility for

interpretation and instances of (self-)portraiture.

Finally, Part 3 takes up the implication of fading boundaries and the

disappearance of strictly delineated fields of research, emphasizing the blending

and fragmentation that is foregrounded in postmodernism. Chapter VII tackles

intertextuality, with a special eye towards its implications for Wilde's much-

signalled plagiarist tendencies. Chapter VIII partly moves away from a focus on

text and explores the newly emergent field of word and music studies, foregrounding the similarities between that field and Wilde's own treatment of music and musical language within his work. The last chapter, Chapter IX, contains a discussion of ekphrasis, or the representation of images in words, by sketching this recent theoretical field in correspondence with Wilde's profound interest in the image, revealed especially in his attitude to painting, but also in a rare use of photography in Wilde's work.

Before moving on to Part 1, a final note must be made on the use of language and gender. The use of personal pronouns in the case of unclear gender has been pluralized to 'they' and 'their', rather than opting for a generalized masculine or feminine option. The reader might therefore encounter a sentence such as 'in other words, it is up to the artist to construct meaning out of the many fragments available to them' (which appears in Chapter III). In all cases, the intention is to maintain gender neutrality, as the academic criticism presented by Wilde may have been aimed mostly at men, but in the reading presented in this thesis it is available to readers, regardless of gender.

Part 1   Postmodern Foundations

The first part of this thesis examines some of the elements that are consistently viewed as foundational to postmodernism. Starting from a basic questioning of the binary opposition so fundamental to much pre-postmodern thought, the chapters expand the argument advanced by post-structuralism and deconstruction that there is no such thing as a stable text for interpretation. After discussing deconstruction and one of its eminent thinkers, Jacques Derrida, Part 1 then moves on to explore the theoretical implications of these developments for ideas of natural meaning, most importantly the concept of truth.

Part 1 thus seeks to establish the foundations on which much of the rest of this thesis will be built. These include both Wilde's foundational ideas – his attitudes towards objectivity or crime, for example, or his famous use of the literary device, the epigram – as well as foundational postmodern ideas.

Chapter I examines how Wilde makes use of binary oppositions and juxtaposition to achieve subversion and humour in his work. It also explores the relationship of the critical stance towards binaries with the development of postmodernism. Chapter II then examines how these critical and philosophical developments resulted in this rise of deconstruction, while also showing parallel developments in Wilde's ideas. Finally, Chapter III picks up the issues of truth and nature, ideas rendered highly unstable by the blows against them in deconstruction's wake, all the while showing how these complications feature in Wilde's critical thought, too.

Chapter I　　　　Binaries and the Wildean Epigram

Editions of Wilde's complete works have always remained in print, and there is an

important place in the British theatrical canon for *The Importance of Being*

Earnest, generally considered to be his 'most successful play'.[1] Yet modern

readers must miss what was apparently one of Wilde's most striking gifts: his

conversation, of which Wilde famously remarked to André Gide: 'I've put my

genius into my life; I've put only my talent into my works'.[2] His conversation was

widely praised, a fact often noted by his biographers. Although this conversation

is lost to modern audiences – there are no recordings of Wilde speaking nor any

verbatim accounts of these private performances – a hint of them remains in one

of Wilde's most prominent stylistic feature: the epigram. Wilde's style in general

has been described as epigrammatic and he has been identified as a master:

'Among the later masters of the English epigram [is] Oscar Wilde'.[3] This Wildean

epigram follows a particular style that goes beyond the standard definition.

Epigrams, as defined in the *OED*, may be seen as 'an inscription, usually in

verse'; as 'a short poem ending in a witty or ingenious turn of thought' or 'loosely

used for a laudatory poem'; and as 'a pointed or antithetical saying'. Wilde's

epigram lies somewhere in between the latter two definitions: his epigrams are

most often the 'pointed saying', but they incorporate the short poem's use of a

'witty or ingenious turn of thought'. Wilde's own views on language put him

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1 Russell Jackson, 'The Importance of Being Earnest', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 180-197 (p. 180).
2 Barbara Belford, *Oscar Wilde: A Certain Genius* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000), p. 240.
3 *Poetry and Drama: Literary Terms and Concepts*, ed. by Kathleen Kuiper (New York: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2012), p. 28.

closer to poetry on account of his own ideal language – in *The Critic as Artist* he argues that poetic art and critical language are very close, as explored below.

The Wildean epigram follows a set formula, which is, for example, at work in one of Wilde's more famous lines, spoken by the character of Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Remonstrated for calling someone a 'fascinating puritan', the aristocrat counters that he could not help doing so, saying, 'I can resist everything except temptation'.[4] The basic pattern of this kind of epigram starts with a factual statement, which the reader is invited to take at face value. That is done here by the opening of Lord Darlington's statement: 'I can resist everything' – the position, after all, publicly expected of a morally upright Victorian gentlemen. From this starting position, the Wildean epigram then undertakes an in- or subversion, so that the first part of the sentence or phrasing is undermined by the second part. In Lord Darlington's statement, this is achieved through qualifying the earlier statement: he adds one exception to the 'everything' he is able to resist. 'Temptation', the very category that encompasses everything that one could need to resist, effectively negates the first part of the sentence; if temptation is not resisted, there is very little else to resist (except perhaps such things as authority or morality). This basic pattern, then, works on expectations aroused by a statement only to reverse or subvert them.

These Wildean epigrams thus represent a juxtaposition, often of two extremes; they can also be called paradoxes, as Wilde himself hints when, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he has Dorian label the extremely epigrammatic Lord Henry as 'Prince Paradox' (p. 140). These paradoxical, epigrammatic statements

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4 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), p. 424. Further references to Wilde's work from this edition are given after quotations in the text.

occur very frequently in Wilde's work: 'Paradoxes in Oscar Wilde are an obvious phenomenon in the works written between 1887 and 1895.'[5] Their appearance and frequency depends to a large degree on the kind of work: *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a comedy that derives much of its humour from its wit and particular use of language, contains many more epigrams than a tragedy like *Vera, or, The Nihilists*. This is not to say that epigrams are wholly absent there: the character of Prince Paul Maraloffski utters several, such as 'experience, the name men give to their mistakes' or 'to make a good salad is to be a brilliant diplomatist—the problem is so entirely the same in both cases. To know exactly how much oil one must put with one's vinegar' (p. 696). *The Duchess of Padua* has the character of the Duke, who says about his people's opinion of him: 'I hold its bubble | praise and windy favours | In such account, that popularity | Is the one insult I have never suffered.' (p. 614). Like Wilde's tragedies, his fairy tales contain relatively few epigrams. One notable example of them is the statement in 'The Remarkable Rocket', spoken by the eponymous rocket: 'The only thing that sustains one through life is the consciousness of the immense inferiority of everybody else, and this is a feeling I have always cultivated' (p. 297). Here is the same basic move: an expectation is set up – that there is a thought that keeps one going and that this thought is something positive, like a hope or a wish – only to be subsequently defeated when the sustaining thought turns out to be supremely negative – the assumption that all other people are of 'immense inferiority'. The epigrammatic subversion here is all the more powerful since it represents the basic human impulse of viewing one's own actions in a much more positive light than those of

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5 Rolf Breuer, 'Paradox in Oscar Wilde', *Irish University Review*, 23.2 (1993), 224-235 (p. 224).

others.

Other parts of Wilde's writing use the paradox or epigram much more frequently. The essays of *Intentions* are full of them. A notable example occurs in 'The Decay of Lying', where the writer George Meredith finds his writing rather paradoxically praised: 'As a writer he has mastered everything except language: as a novelist he can do everything, except tell a story: as an artist he is everything except articulate' (p. 1076). In 'The Critic as Artist', Meredith is again at the receiving end of a paradoxical or epigrammatical statement, this time coupled with the poet Robert Browning: 'Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning' (p. 1111). The essay 'Pen, Pencil and Poison' is no exception: the forger and poisoner Wainewright returns to England in order to obtain some funds that are tied into his marriage – funds he has obtained through fraud. Wilde writes that the poisoner 'knew that his forgery had been discovered, and that by returning to England he was imperilling his life. Yet he returned. Should one wonder? It was said that the woman was very beautiful. Besides, she did not love him' (p. 1104). The statement 'besides, she did not love him' is in stark contrast to the preceding fact of the woman's beauty; suddenly the forger's motives are not the traditional, possibly romantic ones (a woman's beauty) but rather the more malicious impulse of wanting what one cannot have.

With few paradoxical statements present in the poetic works, the remaining Wildean epigrams are found in the plays and prose (with, as noted, the early tragedies as something of an exception). Both are full of them. Even more radically, some of Wilde's smaller works are comprised almost entirely of the inversion technique, such as *A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-*

Educated. Here, even the title itself turns on its head the idea that an overeducated person needs anything but instruction. The same is true for his *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young,* containing lines such as: 'The ages live in history through their anachronisms' (p. 1245). Wilde, though by far not the epigram's first or last great proponent, was indeed a master of them.

Binary Oppositions

The underlying foundation of the Wildean epigram – the raising of expectation followed by a surprise negation or reversal – is essentially the disruption of a binary opposition. This attention to a binary and to its alternation is as typical of a great deal of postmodern thinking as the epigram is to Wilde. The origin of postmodern attention to the binary lies with two prominent thinkers: Ferdinand de Saussure and Jean-François Lyotard. Saussure postulated a linguistic theory – foundational for structuralism, but later very much complicated by the post-structuralists – which rested on a division between a sign and the mental construct it refers to. This division means that 'for Saussure, the linguistic sign is binary or bilateral, since it consists of two parts. Its meaning, its content, is defined as a concept and therefore as a psychological or mental entity'.[6] Since much literary theory after Saussure was built on a linguistic model, this binary mode proved extremely influential.

Doubts about this binary approach came with the advent of post-structuralism. Though articulated as much by Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, and to some degree anticipated by structuralist thinkers such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, it is elaborated upon clearly by Lyotard in his various attempts to

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6 Leanhard Lipka, *English Lexicology* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2002) , p. 56.

determine and define postmodernism. Lyotard posits that postmodernism went against the 'call for order, a desire for unity, for identity, for security, or popularity'.[7] He argues, in other words, against a strict, binary opposition of right or wrong, either this or that. This binary thinking is deeply ingrained in Western modern thought, as

> for two centuries, the West invested in the principle of a general progress in humanity. This idea of a possible, probable, or necessary progress is rooted in the belief that developments made in the arts, technology, knowledge, and freedoms would benefit humanity as a whole.[8]

In postmodern approaches, then, there is pronounced attention to the binary and, more specifically, to its instability. It is a general postmodern 'tendency to reverse the polarity of common binary oppositions like *male* and *female*, *day* and *night, light* and *dark*, and so on, so that the second term, rather than the first, is 'privileged' and regarded as the more desirable.'[9] This reversal is not simply based on whim, but rather employed to demonstrate the inherent arbitrariness of a given binary's positions. Nothing can be objectively established about the juxtaposition of light and dark in terms of the one's superiority over the other; in many cases the desirability depends on the context in which it appears. Thus binary oppositions are, as a rule, constructs, and moreover, as Jonathan Dollimore

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7 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', in *Innovation/Renovation*, ed. by Ihab Habib Hassan and Sally Hassan (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983) , pp. 71-82 (p. 73).
8 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Note on the Meaning of "Post-"', in *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 64-68 (p. 65).
9 Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 74.

has pointed out, they are 'unstable constructs whose antithetical terms presuppose, and can therefore be used against, each other.'[10] In many cases, the basic postmodern move is to show their inherent instability through the process of inversion.

However, postmodernism also involves an interest in oppositions that are not simply reversed, but collapsed altogether. The point then becomes not whether light or dark is the position of greater importance, but whether it is possible to point out moments where neither point of the binary is valid, e.g. dusk or dawn. The development of many schools of postmodern thought increasingly went in the direction of this collapse of binaries, realizing that a diverse and rich theoretical approach did not lie in the direction of attempting only a reversal, bringing low what was high and vice versa – an approach that would keep the discussion 'within its limited framework', when the framework was the very thing which was flawed.[11] In a general sense it is possible to speak of a historic development spanning the second half of the twentieth century. Although both reversal and collapse remain of equal importance, the former no longer receives as much critical attention. This is because, as Derrida stated, the inversion of binaries constitutes a crucial step in deconstruction, even when later deconstructionists did not necessarily hold the same opinion and preferred to jump past the inversion: 'despite this emphasis in Derrida, some of his adherents still want to make that jump, insisting that the inversion of a binary achieves nothing, and opting instead for its ahistorical, conceptual deconstruction'.[12] (Wilde himself, as will become

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10 Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 64.
11 Dollimore, p. 64.
12 Dollimore, pp. 66.

apparent, favours the inversion more than the outright negation of a binary opposition – though in a complicated way – if only because many of his epigrams rest on the surprise of bringing high what was low.)

One example of the move from inversion to collapse occurs in post-colonialism, and is exemplified by the works of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha. In his discussion of Orientalism, Said introduced (and severely criticized) a binary opposition between colonizer and colonized. This system placed the colonizer on one end as a negative but powerful, even overpowering, force, with the colonized on the other end, framed by the colonial subject as exotic and alien. Said, by contrast, framed the colonized as a resisting recipient of that overpowering force: he points out 'the staggering human cost of each of the reductive and oppressive figures of representation', and that 'starting with the basic dichotomy between East and West, one is *always already* exposed to binary oppositions of human existence which rule out the possibility of nuance'.[13] This nuance is where Bhabha enters the discussion, pointing out that 'such a coherent system […] fails' precisely because its coherence is imposed – because it is framed as a binary opposition, even if that binary is reversed. Rather, 'the closure and coherence of Said's system of representation neutralize the disturbing effects that the unconscious and its fantasies have on the colonial system.'[14] The colonial situations that post-colonial approaches seek to study are messy and complicated and resist being framed in a neat duality.

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13 William Schouppe, 'Orientalist Visions and Revisions: Edward Said's Orientalism and Representations of the Orient in Paul Bowles', in *Oriental Prospects: Western Literature and the Lure of the East*, ed. by C.C. Barfoot and Theo D'haen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 209-223 (p. 209); The emphasis is Shouppe's. The text being referred to is: Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).

14 Shai Ginsberg, 'Signs and Wonders: Fetishism and Hybridity in Homi Bhabha's The Location of Culture', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3.9 (2003), 229-250 (p. 231).

Other critical approaches underwent similar developments: both feminism and gender studies have gone through considerable changes that duplicate the postmodern move from binary to complexity. Early feminism was involved in the binary of male-female. Only a few notable exceptions exist early on, one of them being Virginia Woolf, whose discussion on feminine and masculine roles attempts to get away from strict adherence to the male-female binary. Woolf does this through the introduction of the idea of androgyny:

> In effectively stating that all adults are androgynous, Woolf disrupts both the notion that gender has an essence and the belief that only rare types have the experience of thinking or feeling like both a man and a woman. If everyone is androgynous, then androgyny is nobody's distinguishing characteristic, nobody's rare trait.[15]

For Woolf, the desired move is away from a male-oriented definition, or at the very least away from a definition of androgyny along the binary of male-female, and towards a more complex take on the term. This move away from classic male-female opposition is achieved through Woolf's disrupting of the 'essence' of gender.

Woolf's attempt at changing perception did not take hold at the time. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century feminism remained largely occupied with the binary of male and female. It was not until later in the century that feminism, in a particularly postmodern gesture, opened itself up to a non-

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15 Brenda Helt, 'Passionate Debates on "Odious Subjects": Bisexuality and Woolf 's Opposition to Theories of Androgyny and Sexual Identity', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 56.2 (2010), 131-167 (pp. 148-149).

binary point of view, so that a feminist critic was able to write in 2007 that 'feminist critics now recognize the ways in which [feminism] is ever more precarious, ever more uneven and uneasy, ever more divergent, as we attempt to find a cosmopolitan or planetary view that would incorporate all women within its scope.'[16] There is an emphasis here on a very diverse spectrum of feminisms, which may or may not fit within the general scope of more classically defined feminism. The binary gives way to a mass of complications. The current position is one that critics have identified as being postfeminist: 'a feminism that would deconstruct the binary between equality-based or "liberal" feminism and difference-based or "radical" feminism.'[17] Feminism, possibly in the guise of postfeminism, has embraced the idea of multiple viewpoints at the cost of aligning itself along a single binary opposition.

Gender studies underwent the same development, albeit in a slightly different time frame. Its approach to criticism not only focussed attention on differences in gender, but also included sexuality and most importantly, homosexuality. Early gay and lesbian studies of the 1980s aimed mostly at the critical emancipation of those two particular groups; this was also the time when the study of Wilde, held up as a gay martyr, first started seriously to resurface, for example in the words of Sinfield and Dollimore. Soon, however, the same postmodern preoccupation with multiplicity arose: 'what is more important than genital similarity is the fact of some kind of difference: age difference, class difference, gender difference. As numerous scholars have pointed out, across time

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16 Felicity Nussbaum, 'Risky Business: Feminism Now and Then', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 26.1 (2007), 81-86 (p.84).
17 Misha Kavka, 'Feminism, Ethics, and History, or What is the "Post" in Postfeminism?', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 21.1 (2002), 29-44 (p. 29).

and space those differences have in more cases than not structured what we call same-sex acts in ways that are far more important to the people involved and to the societies in which they lived than the mere fact of the touching of similar bodies.'[18] The single polar opposite of heterosexual versus homosexual was discarded in order to make room for these other considerations of gender, class and age, to name but a few. Nor was it just the theoretical basis of this approach itself that was changing; its target body of art works similarly expanded, so that a story or other work of art could not simply be read as commenting on same-sexual interest. The reality of such stories became far more complicated:

> There are rich stories of same-sex sexuality out there that will tell us a great deal about gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, bodies, emotions, social relations, religion, law, identity, community, activism, culture, and just about every other thing that is part of what we think of as history.[19]

Finally, just as the term feminism came under pressure and some critics started voicing the idea of a post-feminism, so did queer theory find its very name under discussion: 'Critiques of the term *queer* and our difficulties with naming raised the central concern of whether sex or sexuality could or should be isolated from other social formations, like gender, race, ethnicity, and class.'[20] Again the move is towards the organisation around a diverse field rather than a single opposition.

One particular focus of queer theory has been the Early Modern period.

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18 Leila Rupp, 'Toward a Global History of Same-Sex Sexuality', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 10.2 (2001), 287-302 (pp. 287-288).
19 Rupp, 302.
20 Carolyn Dinshaw, 'The History of GLQ, Volume 1: LGBTQ Studies, Censorship, and Other Transnational Problems', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12.1 (2006), 5-26 (p. 9).

The study of Shakespeare, performance and gender proved fertile ground for critics who would also contribute to the renewed interest in Wilde. These critics include Simon Shepherd, but also Alan Sinfield, whose book *The Wilde Century* (1994) has directly helped Wilde to regain critical prominence; Sinfield's sometime co-author Jonathan Dollimore is also the author of *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (1999), which, as noted in the Introduction, portrays Wilde's theoretical significance through his sexual politics.

The move away from binary oppositions and towards attention to multi-faceted diversity itself was a product of the philosophical movement of deconstruction, which is discussed in the second chapter. As touched on above, however, the complicating of binary oppositions and the move away from them clearly underpinned more widespread developments in postmodern approaches other than deconstruction.

Binary Inversion in Wilde's Works

Playing with binary oppositions, as Wilde does in his use of the epigram, also informs some arguments in Wilde's writing. One of these instances underlies the tone that Wilde adopts in much of his non-fiction writing. There is a distinct playfulness to his criticism, something that was realized in as early as 1913, when Holbrook Jackson wrote in reflection of Wilde as thinker and artist that 'his intellectual playfulness destroyed popular faith in his sincerity. […] One can be as serious in one's play with ideas as in one's play with a football'.[21] Underlying this playfulness is a sustained attention to, and in some ways reversal of, the binary

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21 Holbrook Jackson, 'Wilde as Dandy and Artist', in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Karl Beckson (London: Routledge, 1974), pp. 325-338 (p. 329).

opposition of playfulness versus seriousness. The presumed opposition lies in the idea that only the serious may bring intelligent insight, while the playful may be easily dismissed; in other words, that only the serious is a suitable tone for critical discussion.

Wilde's frivolous tone sometimes belies the serious nature of the work. One example, from 'The Decay of Lying', is Wilde's portrayal of lying as potentially beautiful, the capitalized 'Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things' (p. 1091). What Wilde proposes here – and has put into practice – is the presentation of work in a (frivolous) way that takes the focus off that work's serious nature. Through confrontation with a serious point couched in an obvious lie, the reader is forced to consider the point closely on their own terms. The critical position, thus, is made stronger because it is bereft of a conveniently packaged point, uncritically to be digested wholesale. One instance in 'The Decay of Lying' where Wilde discusses this approach comes when he argues that the creation of content is spurred on by innovation of form. Talking about the force of art, and specifically theatre, he states that:

Then [theatre] enlisted Life in her service, and using some of life's external forms, she created an entirely new race of beings, whose sorrows were more terrible than any sorrow man has ever felt, whose joys were keener than lover's joys, who had the rage of the Titans and the calm of the gods, who had monstrous and marvellous sins, monstrous and marvellous virtues. To them she gave a language different from that of actual use, a language full of resonant music and sweet rhythm, made stately by solemn

cadence, or made delicate by fanciful rhyme, jewelled with wonderful

words, and enriched with lofty diction. She clothed her children in strange

raiment and gave them masks, and at her bidding the antique world rose

from its marble tomb. A new Caesar stalked through the streets of risen

Rome, and with purple sail and flute-led oars another Cleopatra passed up

the river to Antioch. Old myth and legend and dream took shape and

substance. (p. 1078-1079)

This force of art, then, manifests through a 'language different from that of actual use', or simply, the language used in theatre. On the one hand this results in creativity – manifested, for example, in the creation of a 'new' Caesar – while on the other hand this newness entails an element of retelling: it is very clearly the existing images and names of the antique world that take 'shape and substance'. That use of theatrical language – which is, after all, ultimately fiction – does not necessarily cause falsehood; rather it may lead, for example, to 'keener' perception of joys. Wilde is getting at the idea of a difference between the presentation – those 'gods, who had monstrous and marvellous sins, monstrous and marvellous virtues' – and the subject being treated, such as the concepts of sin and virtue. The effect would have been very different if such Lying behaviour had been no part of theatre: 'Of course the aesthetic value of Shakespeare's plays does not, in the slightest degree, depend on their fact, but on their Truth, and Truth is independent of fact always, inventing or selecting them at pleasure' (p. 1166). Thus the 'fact' of normal speech or of the historical accuracy is, in Wilde's examination of Shakespearean theatre, to be entirely disregarded unless it serves

to enhance the play. Rather than being accurate, the plays can present things entirely as they like, the result being a truth that is far richer than fact alone. That this truth is not, or only partially, based on facts, is a problem that, as illustrated in the above quotation, readers of Wilde were aware of from a very early point.

Such frivolous treatment of facts is not reserved for theatre, but also finds expression in Wilde's critical work. In 'The Truth of Masks', the same essay where he makes the point about truth in Shakespearean plays, Wilde ends on a qualification of some of the positions that he has taken up in order to arrive at his arguments. He writes, surprisingly: 'Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree' (p. 1172). Several things are going on here. First of all, Wilde is showing in critical practice what he has argued for in theatrical practice: that to gain a certain truth he does not have to adhere to fact, or even to opinion that he himself holds. His critical positions can be adopted temporarily without, he feels, impinging on the validity of the arising argument. Secondly, Wilde is putting up for discussion the ideas of consistency and seriousness in this essay. In making a rather frivolous claim at the essay's ending, he undermines the certainty that an essay will have a serious tone and will lead up to a conclusion, resulting from the preceding arguments, where all facts remain valid. Thirdly, the essay's ending also complicates the simple binary of agreement and disagreement, in that Wilde uses facts that he apparently disagrees with in order to establish a critical position he does agree with. (In fact, Wilde's ending of the essay points to a common but crucial feature of his writing: his apparent disregard for internal consistency. This will be explored further in a later chapter.)

Wilde wrote from a similar critical view when he constructed the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. While the book itself is fiction, the Preface offers its readers some critical views from which to approach the novel and, presumably, other works. Indeed the Preface presents, among other things, a critical position on art. Wilde included it 'to make his position clearer to future critics by inculcating them with the "right" set of artistic values in the hope of influencing their reviews'.[22] These 'right' values also include the juxtapositions of the serious and the frivolous. Thus Wilde writes in the Preface: 'No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved' (p. 17). Here again seriousness is discredited and the process of 'proving', of arriving meticulously at a reasoned point, is ridiculed. This happens again later in the Preface: 'The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely' (p. 17). Again Wilde is asking his reader to take the non-serious, the 'useless', as cause for admiration and thus as occupying a high position, in contrast to more standard assumptions, which place seriousness above frivolity.

The reversal of binaries is something that Wilde also develops in his fiction. One of the richest and most illustrative sources is Wilde's collection *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories*. It contains five short stories, in all of which binary opposition plays some part. In addition to the title story, the second work, 'The Canterville Ghost', portrays an American family moving into a typically haunted British mansion and being very pragmatic. They are comically unafraid of, and actually helpful towards, the resident ghost. Here Wilde inverts the binary of fear, with its normally high end of the reaction of fear being

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22 Norbert Kohl, *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*, trans. by David Kohl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 167.

upturned by its normally low end of practicality. The third in the volume, 'The Sphinx Without a Secret' concerns a woman who creates an elaborate plot to make it appear that she has something to hide, when in reality she does not: it turns out she just wants to appear interesting. This story inverts a binary opposition of secrecy as opposed to openness. It accomplishes this inversion by making secrecy and the appearance of a possibly ruinous secret a desirable thing instead of a problem. The fourth story in the volume, 'The Model Millionaire', is about a reasonably well-to-do gentleman bachelor who cannot marry because he is not rich enough. When he gives alms to a beggar who is, unbeknownst to him, a millionaire in disguise, he receives from the millionaire more than enough money in order to be able to marry the woman he loves. 'The Model Millionaire' places the low poor in opposition to the high rich, questioning this juxtaposition by bringing high the supposed beggar, and by making the man who thought he was giving instead the recipient of all he hoped for. The fifth and final story of the volume (not official part of the collection until later editions) is the longer story, and half essay, 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.', which deals with a man who becomes convinced of the truth of a theory by its association with a forged portrait. Its inversion is yet another variation on the opposition of truth and lies: the portrait gains the ability to inspire belief in the theory, while its status as a forgery ought to inspire direct dismissal; the portrait is the theory's only proof. (The portrait's unusual power is discussed in more detail in Chapter VI.) Again, lying is portrayed as superior to the truth.

'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime' represents a strong example of a narrative that plays with a number of sets of oppositions. Wilde presents the morally upright

gentleman Lord Arthur, engaged to Sybil Merton, a woman he loves so much that 'the idea that anything could come between them made his eyes dim with tears' (p. 165). When a palm reader tells Lord Arthur that he will commit murder, the young lord is naturally disturbed – but the disturbance is caused not by the revelation that he will be a criminal, but by the realization that he 'had no right to marry until he had committed the murder', lest the imminent death cloud the marriage (p. 169). He then spends the rest of the story in pursuit of the perfect murder, with all his carefully laid out plans going awry due to chance, until finally chance puts the palm reader in his path in an ideal situation for murder. The deed being done, Lord Arthur can finally marry.

Three binaries are at work throughout the title story. The first is the opposition of crime and innocence, with the default high position being attributed to innocence. Wilde's inversion of it lies in the attitude which Lord Arthur assumes towards crime: instead of seeing it as a vile and possibly laughable thing, he considers it his moral duty to commit the predestined murder. Although Lord Arthur is suitably horrified by it, he nevertheless comes to regard it as the thing from which all good things in his life will flow. Rather than attributing bad consequences – evil, imprisonment, shame – to this criminal act, he foresees only good ones in the form of his impending marriage to Sybil. 'Romance was not killed by reality', the narrator notes, shortly after telling the reader that 'never for a single moment did Lord Arthur regret all that he had suffered for Sybil's sake' (p. 182).

The second binary is that of chance as opposed to careful planning, with careful planning as the higher of the two. Having established that the imminent

murder is necessary, Lord Arthur proceeds to plan very carefully, choosing his victims with care and selecting the most suitable and least painful ways to dispose of them. Yet every carefully wrought plan fails completely. His first target, an old woman, dies of age before she can consume the poisoned sweet meant to kill her. His second target, a clergyman, fails to be blown up when the explosives that Lord Arthur has had hidden in a decorative clock produce little more than the ironic fall of Liberty. It is not until he goes on an impulsive walk to clear his head that the protagonist comes across the palm reader, purely by chance, and is presented with a situation in which he can murder the man without any possible link to himself. The situation turns out to be so perfect that even the newspapers immediately assume that the victim has committed suicide. Pure chance has arranged matters much better than any careful planning could ever have done.

Finally, a third binary appears when Lord Arthur has finally committed the crime. Now he is free to pursue his marriage. Conventionally, he should be racked by guilt over the deed he has had to perform to get his life back, but he feels no such remorse: 'he has retained his innocence and saved his happiness, and by a continuation of the inverted logic he cannot suffer remorse, for that would be selfish.'[23] Remorse is made subservient to remorselessness, which is raised up in its place.

Surface, Symbol and the Tertium Quid
However, the postmodern approach to the binary sometimes goes farther, leading beyond inversion to complication or collapse, which is to say, moving away from a scale of two extremes. This is what Richard Ellmann has called Wilde's ability

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23 Isobel Murray, 'Introduction', in *Complete Shorter Fiction*, by Oscar Wilde, ed. by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 1-17 (p. 7).

'to rise beyond alternatives to a tertium quid.'[24] The notion that Wilde plays with

opposites in this way has been critically examined before, such as the stylistic

tendency in Wilde of 'establishing his position by collapsing apparent

opposites.'[25] This, however, has not been examined outside of the immediate

historical or postcolonial context.

The move from reversal or inversion of binaries towards their collapse

must take the intermediate step of making the binary opposition suspect or

problematic – in other words, must show it is faulty beyond the repair of a

'simple' inversion. The Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contains many of

these instances. For example, Wilde writes that 'The highest, as the lowest, form

of criticism is a mode of autobiography' (p. 17). While he will elaborate greatly on

this idea in the essay 'The Critic as Artist', the line given here in the preface is, at

least in part, confounding. The very essence of a binary, after all, is a high and a

low position; yet Wilde specifically asserts there that the genre occupies both ends

of this spectrum – essentially what an opposition is not, as this involves being

either the one or the other. The line undermines the very idea of a binary

opposition.

On other occasions a line simply conflates two opposites into a single

point. In the same Preface Wilde writes that 'vice and virtue are to the artist

materials for an art' (p. 17). The classic opposition here between high virtue and

low vice is not merely reversed – though often in Wilde it is – but is rather

blended into a starting point for art. This equation makes the binary more

complex: rather than either inspire or horrify, vice and virtue together combine

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24 Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), p. 503.
25 Neil Sammells, *Wilde Style: The Plays and Prose of Oscar Wilde* (Harrow: Longman, 2000), p. 44.

into a work of art, something infinitely more complicated than a binary.

Such conflation and combination of the seemingly opposite also occurs when Wilde states that 'all art is at once surface and symbol' (p. 17). Here, too, opposition between the surface and the symbol is not simply inverted but altogether collapsed when the introduction states that they occur at once – a feat that should be impossible for opposites. Moreover, this collapse also illustrates how Wilde endeavours to change the meaning of the oppositions themselves slightly. In the above example, 'symbol' is used in its normal meaning, but 'surface' put in opposition to symbol finds itself altered. The *OED* defines a surface in its various guises as 'the outermost part of a solid object considered with respect to its form, texture, or extent; an exterior of a particular form or finish' and as 'the most superficial layer or element of anything; that part or aspect which is apparent on casual consideration; outward appearance'. These meanings of the word surface refer to either the material, external elements of a work of art, or a surface reading, which explore none of the possible additional interpretations that might arise when a reader reads a work in different contexts or, indeed, when interpreting its use of symbolism; they represent, in other words, the standard assumptions that a reader has about the concept of a surface. Wilde, however, does not necessarily use the word in this way. The author who proposes physical beauty as one of the pillars of art may indeed have a different meaning in mind altogether, one which does not mesh so easily with the unambiguous meaning of the term 'surface'. There is, for example, this passage from Wilde's American lecture 'The House Beautiful':

In asking you to build and decorate your houses more beautifully, I do not ask you to spend large sums, as art does not depend in the slightest degree upon extravagance or luxury, but rather the procuring of articles which, however cheaply purchased and unpretending, are beautiful and fitted to impart pleasure to the observer as they did to the maker. And so I do not address those millionaires who can pillage Europe for their pleasure, but those of moderate means who can, if they will, have designs of worth and beauty before them always and at little cost. (p. 913)

In the description of a beautifully decorated house, Wilde's choice of words is telling: he carefully points out the need for beauty and the fact that this is not intrinsically linked to large sums of money; clearly the emphasis here is on the physical appearance of everyday things (Wilde mentions such items as hat racks and floor covering.) More importantly, Wilde uses the word 'art' in this context. Art, then, is to be located in the physical appearance, or surface of these items. This signals Wilde's position that the beauty which lies in the appearance of these items can most definitely be considered art. In this sense, Wilde's words are as much an echo of the Romantic era as they are a prefiguration of postmodernism, mirroring, as they do, lines such as the concluding statement of Keats's 'Ode to a Grecian Urn: '"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all | Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know'.[26]

When Wilde notes that 'all art is at once surface and symbol' his meaning for surface becomes something entirely different altogether: rather than making

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26 John Keats, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) , p. 178.

the basic opposition, his surface is already art, capable of inspiring in people complex feelings and appreciation. It is a far more complex concept of surface than found in the expression 'surface reading', with its connotation of haste or superficiality. In collapsing this binary Wilde also makes the terms involved problematic and newly expressive.

Collapsing Binaries in the Essays and the Plays

Some of Wilde's essays, such as 'The Decay of Lying', focus on a single binary. That essay is full of Wilde's typical, inverting style, like the remark about a novelist who 'is so loud that one cannot hear what he says' (p. 1074). At the basis of the essay is the (Platonic) opposition of nature and art. Art is represented in this essay by lying, a position defended by one of the two speakers, Vivian. This is done by linking art strongly to such things as poetry – Vivian at one point states outright that 'Lying and poetry are arts' and points out that, 'as one knows the poet by his fine music, so one can recognise the liar by his rich rhythmic utterance' (p. 1073). He establishes his definition of a lie early on: 'After all, what is a fine lie? Simply that which is its own evidence' (p. 1072). The opening passages establishes this opposition clearly, enacting an apparent reversal of the binary as nature is brought low in Vivian's damning speech against it:

> But Nature is so uncomfortable! Grass is hard and lumpy and damp, and full of dreadful insects. Why, even Morris's poorest workman could make you a more comfortable seat than the whole of Nature can. Nature pales before the furniture of 'the street which from Oxford has borrowed its

name,' as the poet you love so much once vilely put it. I don't complain. If Nature had been comfortable, mankind would never have invented architecture, and I prefer houses to the open air. In a house we all feel of the proper proportions. Everything is subordinated to us, fashioned for our use and our pleasure. Egotism itself, which is so necessary to a proper sense of human dignity, is entirely the result of indoor life. Out of doors one becomes abstract and impersonal. One's individuality absolutely leaves one. And then Nature is so indifferent, so unappreciative. Whenever I am walking in the park here, I always feel that I am no more to her than the cattle that browse on the slope, or the burdock that blooms in the ditch. Nothing is more evident than that Nature hates Mind. Thinking is the most unhealthy thing in the world, and people die of it just as they die of any other disease. […] In the meantime, you had better go back to your wearisome uncomfortable Nature, and leave me to correct my proofs. (pp. 1071-1072)

In this fragment nature is contrasted with man-made objects: architecture, but more importantly items 'fashioned for our use and our pleasure,' a turn of phrase reminiscent of Wilde's description of the House Beautiful. Vivian is establishing a contrast between nature and art, with art here represented by the decorative items that Wilde himself had praised in his lecture. The artificial, that which is not natural, thus becomes art.

However, the binary is not simply reversed. Rather, in a move to complicate rather than invert, the essay turns to one of the central themes of

Wildean criticism: the contention that life imitates art. In the latter half of the

work, Vivian concludes that 'Literature always anticipates life' (pp. 1083-1084).

This seems a straightforward extension of the inverted binary of nature and art,

simply taken one step farther. However, just prior to this statement, Vivian has

already noted a few things in his discussion on art, nature and life that have put

the apparent reversal in a different light: a series of qualifications, each of which

move the binary farther away from a clear-cut inversion. For example, Vivian

notes: 'Paradox though it may seem—and paradoxes are always dangerous

things—it is none the less true that Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life'

(p. 1082). Vivian takes a step away from the outright elevation of one side (art)

over the other (life) when he notes that there is influence going both ways, even

though the flow from one side might be much more substantial than the other.

Rather than establish the one as superior, the two sides are drawn into a complex

relationship.

Further complicating the relationship between the two binary opposites is

another passage, where Vivian is drawing on the example of Romantic poets:

'Wordsworth went to the lakes, but he was never a lake poet. He found in stones

the sermons he had already hidden there' (p. 1078). These lines play upon the

opposition introduced at the beginning of Wilde's essay, but also develop that

opposition to a more complex degree. Vivian argues that Wordsworth the artist

already had the art within him – an argument also reminiscent of Wilde's critical

position that great art stems from intense personality. He does not, however,

outright dismiss the role of nature in Wordsworth's discovery of the poems within

himself. The location of the lakes is crucial to Wordsworth's discovery of the

poems, even when they do not create those poems within him. What the reader is left with is not a reversed, but rather a collapsed binary. Wilde has set nature and art in opposition, but the emergent term of art carries with it the influence of nature (such as Wordsworth's lakes) both different and more complex than the original idea of art. This new concept of art is what Vivian describes as 'lying', the decay of which he laments. It is the result of a carefully collapsed binary, in a way that is strikingly similar to modern approaches.

When this phenomenon appears in Wilde's creative works, it is often under the guise of the criminal who, paradoxically, is rewarded in some way for his crime. One clear instance of this is *An Ideal Husband*, which moves along the lines of the development of three problems: Robert Chiltern's wife having a very high moral opinion of him while he is in fact a criminal; Chiltern's own problems with being blackmailed because of his criminal act; and Lord Goring's trouble in finding his place in life (much of which depends simply on him somehow getting rid of his father's insistences that he take life seriously and get married).

At the opening of the play, Gertrude Chiltern holds her husband to very exacting standards. She is absolutely certain of her own high moral position and equally secure in that of her husband. Yet over the course of the play's events, she has to face a number of revelations and developments that shake her faith in Sir Robert's moral superiority. This feature of a morally upright wife demanding the same morality of her husband is a staple of late-Victorian theatre, as shown by Kerry Powell.[27] The typical end of such a play is the decision of the husband (who often has a criminal act in his past) to either withdraw from public life or to

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27 Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1980s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 89-108.

commit suicide. In *An Ideal Husband* things progress in a different way. Sir Robert himself will not have changed by the end, and moreover, will be victorious in every way: he has secured both power, through a seat in the cabinet, and love, through his wife's acceptance of him for who he really is. Wilde, meanwhile, sets up a double binary. The first is the opposition between low and high morality in regards to Lady Chiltern. The second is rewarded innocence and punished crime. In both cases these binaries are inverted in the now-familiar fashion: Gertrude Chiltern accepts her husband's criminal past and need for power, thus rewarding low morality instead of high; and Sir Robert himself is rewarded for his crime and ruthless pursuit of power by acquiring a loving, accepting wife and a seat in the cabinet. This is an inversion of the accepted tradition of the Victorian theatrical representation of the ideal husband, where 'the usual outcome is […] the male becoming the "ideal husband" or "model husband" of his wife or fiancée's imagining.'[28]

Up to this point it seems that Wilde is content with merely inverting the binaries. However, Robert Chiltern's own problem – being blackmailed – is resolved in a far less straightforward way. When he is initially presented with the problem, Chiltern puts up only nominal resistance before acquiescing. He finds himself on the wrong end of the binary, so to speak: having committed a crime, he will now pay dearly, his crime punished in some way, as the traditional binary requires. At the play's finish, his position will have changed once again to that of a criminal allowed to bask in his illegitimately obtained glory, which has even been increased. The binary is not fully inverted, though, as Chiltern's victory is far

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28 Powell, p. 98.

from unambiguous, and indeed the process by which he gains that victory adds a few important footnotes to the whole proceeding. As the play goes on he will wrongly assume that his best friend Lord Goring is having an affair with the very woman blackmailing him, mistake a letter suggesting Goring and his wife are similarly having an affair for her love-note to himself, write a letter to resign from public life only to have it torn up by his wife, who requested it in the first place, and almost refuse the cabinet position but for the intervention of Lord Goring with Gertrude. Indeed, it can be said that Chiltern's triumph at the play's close is due to everyone but himself. The binary here is not inverted, but rather the opposition between rewarded innocence and punished crime is altered. While Chiltern's initial wealth is acquired through criminal means, his subsequent good fate at the end of the play is achieved through his innocent, almost naïve behaviour. The two opposites literally become one, as by the time the curtain closes, it is no longer certain what has brought Chiltern his wealth: his initial act of 'strength and courage' to yield to the temptation of an extraordinarily rewarding act of fraud, or his fumbling navigation through the ordeal of being blackmailed (p. 538). The distinction is blurred and the binary is collapsed.

The role that Lord Goring plays in these events follows a similar path. The binary here is less distinctive, but crucial. Throughout the first act, Goring is portrayed as having the personality of a dandy. This phenomenon was characterized through 'displaying conspicuous idleness, moral scepticism and effeminacy. […] The dandy represents the over-refinement and moral laxness that middle-class hegemony ascribed as one way of stigmatizing upper-class

pretention.'[29] Lord Goring certainly qualifies, with lines such as 'I love talking about nothing, father. It is the only thing I know anything about.' Or, just a little later, 'You see, it is a very dangerous thing to listen. If one listens one may be convinced; and a man who allows himself to be convinced by an argument is a thoroughly unreasonable person' (p. 523). In the juxtaposition of the 'preferred' moral, hardworking place, against the (disavowed) morally lax, lazy positioning, Wilde's Lord Goring upsets the scales. The dandy occupies the high, rather than the low position; but again it turns out that the process is not quite a straightforward inversion.

As Powell discusses, Goring's character is far from an uncomplicated portrayal of a dandy.[30] His moral judgements of Sir Robert's crime in the second act as well as of Lady Chiltern's strict views in subsequent acts, in addition to his active pursuit of marriage, do not necessarily sit well with his status as a dandy. However, this is anticipated in Goring's description when he enters a short while into act one, where he is identified by Wilde as being 'clever, but would not like to be thought so' and 'fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a post of vantage' (p. 521). His is the role of the grand architect of most beneficial turns of events in the play: he provides an ear to the troubled Sir Robert and offers good advice, influences Gertrude Chiltern to forgive her husband and to cease standing in the way of his career, and even disarms the threat of Mrs. Cheveley late in the fourth act. In this way, the status of the dandy as a supremely capable problem-solver is assured. Yet at the end, Lord Goring is getting married, and confesses that he prefers the domestic; he has subscribed to a very traditional, almost reactionary

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29 Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (London: Cassell, 1994), p. 69.
30 Powell, pp. 104-105.

moral concerning the role of women by stating (without a hint of irony) that, unlike the logic of men, women's lives are governed by 'curves of emotion', and that 'a man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions' (p. 579). He has also chided Robert Chiltern for achieving great success by flouting conventional morals – by committing fraud. Goring, then, is something half way in between the two extremes of the idle dandy and the morally upright, industrious Victorian. Wilde takes the term dandy and seems to reverse the binary by ascribing the higher point to that position; but again, as seen earlier, in doing so he alters the subject to something else entirely, collapsing the binary opposition into something new.

As noted earlier, the postmodern attention to subversion of commonly accepted binary positions was foundational for many postmodern approaches. Chief among these is deconstruction, a critical approach so typically postmodern that it is often popularly confused wholesale with it. And, as it turns out, Wilde's tendency to play with juxtapositions is indicative of a strong similarity to deconstruction, which is explored in the next chapter.

Chapter II   Deconstruction

Denis Donoghue has argued that there are three different ways of reading, and he links each to a prominent Victorian name.[1] The first is represented by Matthew Arnold's well-known claim that the critic must 'see the object as in itself it really is'.[2] For Donoghue, this represents a formalist or structuralist approach to literature. The second way of reading is represented by Walter Pater, in whose work *The Renaissance* Donoghue finds Arnold's phrase again, altered: 'the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly'.[3] This represents a middle ground between objectivity and subjectivity in criticism. It is, however, Donoghue's choice of an author to embody the third way that is intriguing. He quotes Wilde's 'The Critic as Artist' to represent purely subjective criticism: 'the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not'.[4] Donoghue links Wilde's phrase to Jacques Derrida, and specifically to Derrida's sense of play in literature.[5] He does not detail what, if anything, the exact nature of the link between the Victorian Wilde and the postmodern Derrida is. He seems much more interested in qualifying, perhaps even dismissing, Derrida: his article occasionally contains sentences such as 'When Jacques Derrida writes about Rousseau, Nietzsche, Hegel, Celan, Mallarmé, Ponge, or Genet, he is not much interested in

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1 Denis Donoghue, *The Practice of Reading* (London: Yale University Press, 1998).
2 Matthew Arnold, 'The Function of Criticism', in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold: Volume III. Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, ed. by R.H. Super (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1990), pp. 258-285 (p. 261).
3 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xxix.
4 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), p. 1128. Further references to Wilde's work from this edition are given after quotations in the text.
5 Donoghue, p. 47.

saying what is there in the works under consideration; he is far more concerned to invent a piece of writing by improvising upon the themes they offer.'[6] This represents, as will become evident, something of a misreading of the French philosopher. Unfortunately, as much as he has to say on Derrida, little more is said about Wilde in the essay; Donoghue continues his examination of the three ways of reading and does not return to the idea that Wilde is in some way compatible with postmodernism. In this way, Donoghue's comments conform to the general trend of critics who mention, but do not follow through in defining, Wilde's apparent postmodernism.

Deconstruction

The parallel that Donoghue draws between Wilde and Derrida, however, is absolutely valid. There are significant connections between Wildean critical thought and the tenets of deconstruction; these connections arise in part from a shared interest in the analysis of binary opposition. This is not to say that deconstruction merely constitutes the analysis of binaries, though they do lie at the heart of the approach. The critical interests of deconstruction are primarily philosophical; the study of binaries is one tool in a larger collection of goals, techniques and critical assumptions.

Making matters more problematic is the fact that there has traditionally been great confusion over the precise nature of the concept of deconstruction. Many critics operating under its critical and philosophical tenets employ their own version or variation on deconstruction, placing different emphases, in an approach

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6 Donoghue, p. 49.

that is in itself very postmodern. Deconstruction is often somewhat misunderstood, or at least dismissed as obstructing a positive critical approach. It is a type of assumption that is exemplified by Donoghue's quotation above, with Donoghue misreading Derrida's interest in subjective elements by assuming this means that Derrida is interested only in what he himself has to say about the thing under scrutiny. Deconstructive critics must often defend themselves against what they perceive as 'the popular idea of Deconstruction as a species of out-and-out hermeneutic licence, a pretext for critics to indulge any kind of whimsical, free-wheeling or "creative" commentary that happens to take their fancy.'[7] This is not to say that creative commentary is not an essential part of deconstruction. However, the frequent assumption that critics interested in deconstruction operate in an intensely egotistical, seemingly random way, does not fit the philosophy itself.

The misunderstanding arises in part from the set of tools that deconstruction offers for the critic to employ. Critics working on deconstruction focus on the use of language and the way in which that language carries not one, but multiple meanings. They also have a keen eye for the assumptions and prejudices that underlie a text but are never mentioned outright, so that the critic 'engages the "unthought axiomatics" of philosophers like Plato, Husserl and Austin, exposing their ideological blind-spots, their moments of complicity with a naïve or pre-critical attitude.'[8] This means that deconstruction can sometimes sweep the very theoretical ground from beneath a critic's feet by questioning previously secure critical grounds, a matter which, understandably, can raise some

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7 Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: theory and practice*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 136.
8 Norris, p. 139.

measure of frustration on the part of the receiving theory or critic.

The misunderstanding also arises due to the problematic status of deconstruction as a critical method or approach. While it is possible to discuss the practice of deconstruction, the approach itself is not a critical method. Deconstruction's thesis is that it is already to be found within any text that the critic cares to examine – including within deconstruction itself – and therefore it is not a question of subjecting a text to deconstruction, but rather of analysing a text in order to find deconstruction already at work within it. Therefore the critic who keeps an eye out for deconstruction at work within a text will, along the lines set out by Derrida, pay special attention to 'the uncanny effect by which one is invited to sense the unfolding of all of his thinking starting out from anywhere, from any idea, any word, any thought that happens to be at issue. [..] In some sense its effects are always already going on.'[9] Thus the term deconstruction represents at once a method – analysing a text with attention to deconstructive forces at work within it – and no method, meaning that a critic does not bring deconstruction from outside into the text as a method by which to analyse that text. This may seem as immediately divergent from Wilde's thought – Wilde's advice to see an object 'as in itself it really is not' seems to deny any forces, including deconstruction, already at work in the text. As will be shown, however, Wilde's denial of the text's content is more complicated than that, and much closer to what Derrida and others aim for with deconstruction.

One qualification, however, must be placed on the usages of the word deconstruction in the present thesis. Because of the complexity of saying to what

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9 Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 16.

degree it is or is not a method, it is desirable to keep pointing out that critics search for deconstructive forces at work in a text, and do not 'use' deconstruction in that way; at the same time the idea of a deconstructive critic is not wholly beside the point. For ease of use, the references are simply to 'deconstructive' critics and to critics 'deconstructing' a text. Whenever such phrases appear, however, they must be read as shorthand for the more complex sense of deconstructive analysis.

One important consequence of deconstruction always already being at work in the text is the implication that literary theory can no longer search for an objective, outside, 'natural' or rational explanation of a text. This is the main thrust of deconstructionists such as Paul de Man. His views on these implications are described by Martin McQuillan in the following way:

Literary theory is interested in literature in reference to itself (in its own right) rather than as a way of referring to a 'real world' beyond the text. Rather than saying that literature represents the real world and texts have value because they tell us something about that world, literary theory is concerned with the internal processes of literature itself. […] This conventional way of understanding literature is supported by an idea of language which proposes that language has meaning as a result of the natural and intuitive use of words by humans to describe their world. In contrast, literary theory thinks of meaning as a function of language itself rather than an act of human will.[10]

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10 Martin McQuillan, *Paul de Man* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 51.

The kind of literary theory that goes with deconstruction, then, juxtaposes the concepts of a 'conventional' literary approach with one that is based on language. The use of the word 'natural' here will become crucial once it is examined alongside Wilde's essay 'The Decay of Lying' a little later on; and the idea of language as a basis for literary theory will likewise be examined. What results from this shift of focus is a move away from a 'natural', which is to say pre-existent and objective, meaning that resides in the correct interpretation of a given text: it is no longer the expression of a creator whose stance must influence the text's meaning. The text becomes truly textual, literally only words. This links up with Derrida's own famous and often misunderstood phrase that 'there is nothing outside the text'.[11] This means simply that, along the lines also suggested by Paul de Man, the reader has only the text before them, not some objective meaning that arises from the natural use of language by a specific author. (A common misconception is that Derrida meant to say that everything is just text, something which, as Nicholas Royle has observed, is incorrect.[12] He proposes Derrida's own clarification of text as context: 'there is nothing outside context'.[13] This is close to, but not the same as, stating that everything is textual.)

Two things result from this: firstly, texts do not have a single, stable meaning, and secondly, writing does not rely for its meaning upon the person with whom that writing originated. Writing becomes something that functions on its own, as Derrida remarks; it becomes 'a mark that will constitute a sort of machine

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11 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 163.
12 Royle, pp. 61-69.
13 Jacques Derrida, 'Afterword: Towards an Ethic of Discussion', in *Limited Inc*, trans. by Samuel Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 111-160 (p. 136).

which is productive in turn, and which my future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder in its functioning.'[14] Authority over the text no longer rests on a person or one distinct interpretation; rather, that text can function perfectly well on its own.

This, in turn, means that the meaning of a text may change depending on who reads it. It is here that the process of deconstruction enters the study of a given text: rather than finding the one true meaning, a critic is capable of finding multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings within the one text. Contradictory here might mean that a statement could mean the opposite of what it seems to mean, but the word is also used in the sense that an argument seeming to support an essay's case may, under deconstructive scrutiny, turn against the very point it was enlisted to make.

Deconstruction's reaction against the idea of the 'natural' (a topic that will be further explored in Chapter III) is part of what sets it apart from preceding critical and philosophical movements. Although it goes without saying that it would be difficult to sum up all preceding movements, nevertheless deconstruction clearly turns against a prior interest in mimesis, which is to say, how art reflects the world (and is therefore dependent upon it). Such approaches were present in Wilde's time (with Arnold's quest to see the object 'as in itself it really is') and remained influential up to and including structuralism, which sought to fix language in place scientifically (though not mimetically). Though it may be considered something of an oversimplification, it is nevertheless valid to place deconstruction against these movements, just as Wilde can be placed against

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14 Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *Limited Inc*., trans. by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evenston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 1-23 (p.8).

them.

Deconstruction often works with a text's binary oppositions. One example of this play with binaries involves Thomas Docherty's treatment of the binary opposition of male and female.[15] Docherty describes the deconstruction of the terms 'male' and 'female' by pointing out a traditional assumption that 'male' is defined by the presence of a penis, while 'female' is defined by the lack thereof. The deconstructive move is then to consider how to take the terms 'presence' and 'absence'; Docherty points out that the presence of a penis becomes entirely meaningless unless there is a female present with which to contrast it. The male requires a female to be present for the binary to work, which means that female can be associated with presence, transferring absence to the male. This highlights a vital point in much deconstructive thinking: the fact that often the binary opposition is caused by itself rather than an outside – again, 'natural' - force.

The best example of this is Derrida's emphasis on the opposition of writing and speech. In the standard deconstructive move, Derrida shows that speech and writing, with the former thought superior, are not in a binary relationship at all given that writing brings the writing/speech binary into existence. Kathleen Wheeler gives an excellent summary:

> Derrida placed writing under scrutiny, and reversed the traditional priority of speech as antecedent to writing, as closer to self-present truth. In a second movement or stage he also gave up the priority of writing over speech, once he had shown the absurdity of the former priority. […]

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15 Thomas Docherty, 'Deconstruction', *Modes of Reading: Theory* <http://itunes.apple.com/us/itunes-u/modes-of-reading-theory/id407477532 > [accessed 2 April 2012]

'Writing' is not opposed to speech, but is that which enables

conventionally conceived-of writing and speech to occur.[16]

In the sense rejected by deconstruction, the written word is a representation of the

spoken word, an imperfect echo that gets away from its originator and from the

chance to be clarified by that originator. But, as discussed, deconstruction is not

interested in this natural explanation outside of the text; the writing is a thing on

its own, the 'machine which is productive in turn'. It is this specific focus on

writing as something different from spoken words written down that originates the

perception of deconstruction as playing with a text. Refusing to be bound by prior

explanations outside a text, the deconstructionist explores the text for its own sake

and with its own implications – a process that appears to be a kind of free-form,

improvisatory exercise.

It is worth nothing that, though Wilde engages with this same topic of

writing and speech, he is much more traditional. At one point in 'The Critic as

Artist' he claims that 'writing has done much harm to writers. We must return to

the voice' (p. 1115). In this particular statement, Wilde is decidedly not a

forerunner of deconstruction, as he upholds the distinction, with its preference for

speech and its distrust of writing – at least in the context of appreciating Greek art

criticism, which is where the above quotation appears. Yet, as will be shown,

Wilde's linguistic playfulness links him strongly to the more postmodern side of

this division.

In its exploration of texts, deconstruction also focuses on language use in

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16 Kathleen Wheeler, *Romanticism, Pragmatism and Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993),
p.214.

order to expose gaps and illogical leaps of faith inherent in critical or philosophical texts. It asks for attention to the multiple available interpretations of words and for the unspoken assumptions at the base of a text, in order to show how arguments are incoherent. Deconstruction frequently asks that the reader discard the obvious meaning or connotations of a word or stock phrase in favour of its multiple alternate meanings.[17] This is a move which establishes the text as polyphonic rather than unified. This is a facet of most of postmodern literary approaches, but is certainly emphasized in deconstruction. It engages Roland Barthes's concept of the irrelevance of the writer regarding the interpretation of their text – Barthes notes that 'textual analysis indeed requires us to represent the text as a tissue […], as a skein of different voices and multiple codes which are at once interwoven and unfinished'.[18] The result is an unstable text – meaning that a single, stable meaning cannot be produced because the text contains contradictory meanings within itself. A reader is free to approach the text with the goal of exploration through a sense of play, or at the very least an associative interest that takes little account of traditional assumptions.

The element of play is not simply a derogatory misreading of deconstruction's aims. Consider the following passage, taken from a discussion by Derrida of the role of the centre in deconstruction. First he notes that 'the concept of the centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted upon the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play'. He then argues that,

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17 Norris, pp. 18-40.
18 Roland Barthes, 'Textual Analysis: Poe's 'Valdemar'', in *Modern Criticism and Theory: a Reader*, ed. by David Lodge and Nigel Wood, 3rd edn (Harlow: Longman, 2008), pp. 317-336 (p. 334).

based on this reassuring certitude, 'anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were at stake in the game from the outset'.[19] The two things to note here are the recurring words 'game' and 'play'. Even within this relatively short passage, they both appear three times, though Derrida shifts their meanings in some instances. Play and viewing the interpretative process as a kind of game are indeed pivotal to deconstruction.

This central role of the sense of play within deconstruction leads to a very personal and individual approach to texts. The reader is capable of playing this game with a text because that game is an extension of the process of generating meaning. As Barbara Johnson writes, interpretation, like the game, is individualized because

> what we can see in a text the first time is already in *us*, not in *it*; in us insofar as we ourselves are a stereotype, and already-read text; and in the text only to the extent that the already-read is that aspect of a text which it must have in common with its reader in order for it to be readable at all. When we read a text once, in other words, we can see in it only what we have already learned to see before.[20]

The deconstructive act becomes personal because the text is always personal; its meaning is to be found within the critic and not within the text, thus making

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19 Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Modern Criticism and Theory: a Reader*, ed. by David Lodge and Nigel Wood, 3rd edn (Harlow: Longman, 2008), pp. 211-224 (p. 212).
20 Barbara Johnson, 'The Critical Difference', *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism*, 8.2 (1978), 2-9 (p. 2). Emphasis is Johnson's.

objective criticism impossible. The reader is free to play games with(in) a text so as to expose the multiple meanings that Barthes supposed to reside within it.

Though deconstruction originated as a philosophy, this shows that it is also something of a method for literary criticism. It is one of the approaches that allows for the focus on text alone, bringing out whatever interesting element the analysis strikes upon. 'All that a poem can be about, or what in a poem is other than trope, is the skill or faculty of invention or discovery, the heuristic gift.'[21] In other words, the approach frees up, for the critic, the acts of creativity and the freedom of selective analysis because the act of criticism is now based on personal interest and background. Criticism becomes subjective, and though subjective, contributes to a greater understanding of the text's possibilities through the exposition of its 'different voices'.

Derrida and Wilde

The immediate similarity between Wilde's approach to art and criticism, which emphasizes personality, and deconstruction, which places the act of interpretation squarely with the specific reader and the specific texts being read, is that both find themselves emphasizing the personal. The next step is to examine some of the positions held and, to some degree, shared specifically by Derrida and Wilde.

The first point of correspondence is that neither Derrida nor Wilde presents a straightforward method for the critical activity that they employ. In both their cases, this is because what they present is a way of viewing the literary or artistic act – or simply the text – rather than an all-encompassing methodology that remains the same regardless of the critic or text. Derrida, as stated earlier, does not

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21 Harold Bloom, 'The Breaking of Form', in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. by Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 1-31 (p. 1).

see deconstruction as something that is done to the text, but rather a force present in the text already. This lack of a structured method has resulted in the impression that Derrida's writing is obscure or vague. However, as Royle suggests, 'there is nothing vague or impressionistic about his work. His concern is to respond to a text or situation with the utmost rigour and clarity. If we are to talk in terms of his "ideas", key or otherwise, these ideas are in the world, changing the world'.[22] In a sense this is the one central idea of Derrida, 'this "key idea of no key idea": it depends on the context, in particular on what text, situation, etc., is being analysed'.[23] There is no single, central tenet in analysis because every text is different and thus will have different, deconstructive forces at work within it. This means that the critic only has at their disposal the circumstances of a particular text and their own capacity for reading that text. This particularity is further increased by that lack of a natural referent to resort to; had there been, for deconstruction, an objective thing, an intention that language purely refers to, then a general method could have been built upon that possibility. But Derrida denies this natural option in the pursuit of deconstruction.

Wilde's method, likewise, does not prescribe solid ways to analyse any and all texts, because, like Derrida, Wilde's method of responding to a text is personal: he does not see the critic's role as an explicator of the natural contents of whatever text is under consideration. The Wildean critic, he suggests in 'The Critic as Artist', 'will not be an interpreter in the sense of one who simply repeats in another form a message that has been put into his lips to say' (p. 1131). Wilde is here denying that the critic's responsibility is to convey a message 'put into his

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22 Royle, p. 17.
23 Royle, p. 17.

lips', which is to say, already present in the text naturally. Rather, critics bring to bear their own personality as the prime interpretative tool. It must be a strong personality in order to create a kind of contrast:

> For, just as it is only by contact with the art of foreign nations that the art of a country gains that individual and separate life that we call nationality, so, by curious inversion, it is only by intensifying his own personality that the critic can interpret the personality and work of others, and the more strongly this personality enters into the interpretation the more real the interpretation becomes, the more satisfying, the more convincing, and the more true. (p. 1131)

Thus it is the critic, emphasizing their own interpretation in its most personal – through the intensification of personality – who must approach a singular text and highlight what they may find within that text. Wilde makes it clear in this above passage that there are two forces present here: the text, which has personality of its own – Wilde's phrase 'the personality and work of others' suggests that both the author and the work have a personality available for reading – and the personality of the critic, whose function it is to gain understanding through contrast. This corresponds to Derrida's concept that deconstruction is not a method but a force to be detected by bringing together a text and a personality reading and interpreting that text.

Additionally, both Derrida and Wilde share a sense and specific usage of humour. As shown in the first chapter, the often humorous epigram is one of the

bases for Wildean thought and it engages with destabilizing binary oppositions. In that sense humour is, for Wilde, a tool that can be used to make critical points. Thus, for example, before stating that Wilde's critic will not become an interpreter in the sense of repeating a message that was simply already waiting for him in the text, he has actually made an effort to discredit those critic-interpreters who attempt such a thing. In a very lengthy passage, he makes a list of everything one ought to know:

> He who desires to understand Shakespeare truly must understand the relations in which Shakespeare stood to the Renaissance and the Reformation, to the age of Elizabeth and the age of James; he must be familiar with the history of the struggle for supremacy between the old classical forms and the new spirit of romance, between the school of Sidney, and Daniel, and Johnson, and the school of Marlowe and Marlowe's greater son; he must know the materials that were at Shakespeare's disposal, and the method in which he used them, and the conditions of theatric presentation in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, their limitations and their opportunities for freedom, and the literary criticism of Shakespeare's day, its aims and modes and canons; he must study the English language in its progress, and blank or rhymed verse in its various developments; he must study the Greek drama, and the connection between the art of the creator of the Agamemnon and the art of the creator of Macbeth; in a word, he must be able to bind Elizabethan London to the Athens of Pericles, and to learn Shakespeare's true position in the history

> of European drama and the drama of the world. (Wilde 1130.)

This bold passage serves to ridicule the idea that a critic can get at the true meaning of any particular Shakespearean text. The requirements become more absurd as Wilde continues to name them, going to far as to request that the Shakespeare scholar learn the entire history of the world so as to be able to connect Shakespeare to ancient Greece in an effort to place him in his 'true position in the history of European drama'. The requirements are impossible to follow completely, illustrating how this search for the one, objective message of a work of art is essentially futile. At the same time Wilde endangers his positions with this kind of humour, as there will have been many a professor in Wilde's day – Wilde even names one, the 'Rector of Lincoln' just before the passage – who would have gone along as far as two-thirds of this list before realizing that the joke really was on them. Like most of Wilde's humour, it is instrumental in making his points, yet it also defuses, so that 'the force of his humor [sic] not only challenged the hegemony of these identifications, but simultaneously destabilized the "seriousness" of his critique'.[24]

The same problem, if it is a problem, is found in reading Derrida. Critics hostile to Derrida have often pointed to his tone and his sense of play as a disrupting element to the serious pursuit of literary theory. At the same time there is distinct humour in Derrida's work. This humour is not the same as Wilde's, in that the tone is different; but the overlap lies in the fact that both use humour as part of their method. Derrida is 'a very funny writer: this is one of the things that

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24 Ed Cohen, 'Laughing in Earnest: The Trying Context of Wilde's "Trivial" Comedy', in *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 3.1 (1991), 57-64 (p. 57).

some people evidently find infuriating about him. It is difficult not to feel that he is doing something strange with words: language can come to seem like very funny stuff'.[25] In part this returns to game-playing as an important critical component of deconstruction: if the game is played with some enjoyment and fun, humour becomes the next logical step. However, Derrida's humour also serves another purpose: by drawing, for example, attention to puns, unfortunate alternate meanings of words, and other things such as these, he is able to emphasize the unstable nature of the language being used.

Creativity in Deconstruction and the Critic as Artist
Beyond the specific correspondences between Derrida and Wilde, there is a broader agreement with the general movement of deconstruction and the Wildean critical approach. Wilde constantly questions what language can express, and shows that language may turn on itself or come to express things in a paradoxical way, the prime example of this being his epigrams.

The Wildean paradox is itself a kind of deconstruction. As a type of literary approach, deconstruction foregrounds 'the sort of paradox […] at work not only in literary texts but in criticism, philosophy and all varieties of discourse, its own included'.[26] Deconstruction allows for this paradox, these apparent or even outright contradictions, to be an integral part of all text, including criticism and theory. It even allows for contradictions within its own discourse, something to which Wilde certainly was no stranger. For example, in the article 'London Models' Wilde writes about 'the great truth that the aim of art is not to reveal personality but to please' (p. 978). However, he takes an opposite approach to the

25 Royle, p. 28.
26 Norris, p. xi.

subject of personality in 'The Critic as Artist'. There he states that art is 'made vivid and wonderful to us by a new and intense personality' (p. 1131). The apparent contradiction invites closer scrutiny as to what exactly 'art', 'personality' and the intention 'to please' involve. Different readings allow the critic to draw out ideas on art, for example, taking the comments as engendering a discussion on popular or elitist art. The contradiction itself remains in Wilde's work, with Wilde making no apparent effort to clarify it. Something similar happens at the end of 'The Truth of Masks', where, as noted earlier, Wilde states that he disagrees with some of the things he has just argued; and again in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* where he states that 'when critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself' (p. 17). That latter quotation comes closest to Wilde making a statement that fully fits deconstruction *avant la lettre*: it suggests that the artist should not worry about the one true meaning of their work, or indeed over being understood or misunderstood, because this will be a normal and acceptable result of art. The critic, either deconstructionist or Wildean, approaches the work for its own sake and along personal lines, making it all but certain that there will be disagreement between critics.

Deconstruction also places in doubt the concept of different kinds of texts, or genres. This results from the notion that there is nothing but text and that readers do not have a natural referent to fall back to when searching for meaning; genre is seen as problematic because it does not reflect the natural category of any given text. The text exists; genre is imposed upon it by the reader. Thus the concept of the genre is held 'together as a provisional coalition rather than a structure, and the utterance represents a fragmentary and descriptive discursive

practice' which is opposed to the traditional, formal view of genre as a naturally authoritative definition, where it 'demands rigorous compliance, and then carries that imperative'.[27] This does not negate the existence of genre, but does diminish its authority, which is to say that a text cannot be wrong for failing to fit the criteria of the particular genre it finds itself in. This, in turn, allows deconstruction to call into question the distinction between literature and the literary criticism, or literary theory, that supposedly stands apart from it. A strong distinction between the two is somewhat problematic for deconstruction, and this shows in Derrida's view on literature: 'we should acknowledge the logic of contamination between the two. "Good" literature, the only worthwhile kind, in his view, is itself necessarily "critical". And conversely, "good" literary criticism always involves a certain inhabiting of the literary'.[28] Thus Derrida clearly proposes that the critical is to be viewed as a kind of literary practice.

This, as it happens, is the focus of Wilde's essay 'The Critic as Artist'. Central to the essay is the argument that the critic himself must be considered an artist and criticism a type of art. Wilde establishes this by working at the distinction between the two, transforming the concept of criticism and bringing it closer to art. To do so, Wilde destabilizes criticism, showing that the term's conditions and assumptions make it something other than what had previously been assumed. The method Wilde uses is meticulous; he takes care to subvert the traditional underpinnings of the term 'criticism' in order to loosen it from its position. The process by which he does this is very similar to deconstruction. In the course of this process – the game that Wilde plays with these underpinnings –

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27 Jonathan Crimmins, 'Gender, Genre, and the Near Future in Derrida's "The Law of Genre"', in *Diacritics*, 39.1 (2009), 45-60 (p. 48).
28 Royle, p. 88.

he makes the following moves: first there is the default position of criticism as required to maintain a kind of objectivity; second is criticism as deductive rather than creative; third is criticism as dependent upon, rather than equal to, art; and fourth and final is the need to be clear and concise.

Wilde's first move must be to establish art as subjective rather than objective, as this is a necessary step if he is to claim the subjective for criticism as well, once art and criticism have been equated. The point is articulated in the following exchange:

ERNEST. Surely you would admit that the great poems of the early world, the primitive, anonymous collective poems, were the result of the imagination of races, rather than of the imagination of individuals? GILBERT. Not when they became poetry. Not when they received a beautiful form. For there is no art where there is no style, and no style where there is no unity, and unity is of the individual. No doubt Homer had old ballads and stories to deal with, as Shakespeare had chronicles and plays and novels from which to work, but they were merely his rough material. He took them, and shaped them into song. They become his, because he made them lovely. (p. 1119)

By making art an intensely personal thing he situates it in the realm of the subjective. The key move lies in the phrase 'there is no art where there is no style, and no style where there is no unity, and unity is of the individual'. At first he seems to be arguing for objective categorisation, such as a prescription for style in

terms of unity. The ultimate move is away from such general prescription, however, when Wilde defines unity as something 'of the individual'. Again Wilde keeps away from prescriptive claims as to the natural meaning of art.

His next step is carefully to establish a strong link between creativity and criticism. Earlier in the essay Ernest has claimed that the Greek had no art critics. Dismissing this notion entirely, Gilbert replies that the Greek were 'a nation of art critics', and necessarily so because creativity and criticism are intrinsically connected: 'there has never been a creative age that has not been critical also. For it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms. The tendency of creation is to repeat itself. It is to the critical instinct that we owe each new school that springs up, each new mould that art finds ready to its hand' (p. 1119). Wilde then mentions thinkers like Aristotle and Plato, who wrote on art criticism. The link between art and criticism becomes more intimate, with criticism granting some kinetics to the otherwise static, self-repeating creation.

Wilde, of course, had rich contemporary debates on art and criticism to draw on. Critics such as Pater, John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle had already made the delineation of art and criticism into the subject of discussion, as, for example, when Pater lists inspirations for art and thought: 'every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us, – for that moment only'.[29]

However, unlike Pater and Ruskin, Wilde concedes the higher position to criticism: he displays an apparent preference for the critical over the creative. In

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29 Pater, p. 152.

the above quotation the two are shown to be symbiotic, with the critical gradually emerging as seemingly higher. First Gilbert asserts that 'criticism demands infinitely more cultivation than creation does,' and then goes on to make a similar claim in saying that 'it is very much more difficult to talk about a thing than to do it' (p. 1121). These claims allow criticism to rise above creation. In the realms of culture and cultivation, effort and difficulty, criticism appears to be the greater achievement, while art must be content with second place.

Having destabilized the term 'criticism' and put parts of its relationship to art in question, Wilde moves towards equating the two terms. In the following passage, Gilbert attempts to make a case for criticism and the art it discusses:

> Criticism is no more to be judged by any low standard of imitation or resemblance than is the work of poet or sculptor. The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticises as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought. […] To an artist so creative as the critic, what does subject-matter signify? No more and no less than it does to the novelist and the painter. Like them, he can find his motives everywhere. (p. 1125)

There are traces in this passage of the earlier argument concerning criticism's superiority, but here they work towards a different goal: to assert the creative independence of the critic. As Wilde has Gilbert ask in the above quotation, 'to an artist so creative as the critic, what does subject-matter signify?' Divorced from the need to be based on the original intent of a work of art, criticism is given a

freedom normally reserved for the artist, a freedom 'no more and no less' than that

accorded 'to the novelist and the painter.' This important step, seemingly only a

small one in the line of reasoning within the essay, undermines that assumption of

the critical pursuit of natural meaning, especially when that meaning is dependent

on art, its very subject matter. Wilde does this not by discarding art as the source

for criticism, but by removing the natural subservience associated with it. And he

essentially does so by rhetorical means, by using the tricks and leeway of

language and assumption to come to a conclusion that departs significantly from

the accepted Victorian position.

Deconstruction also views the practice of textual criticism as a kind of

writing of fiction. Like Wilde's critical position, deconstruction seeks to create

meaning in a sometimes unexpected but nevertheless coherent way. Interpreting a

text becomes the same as writing a text. 'By seeing interpretation itself as a

fiction-making activity, deconstruction has both reversed and displaced the

narrative categories of "showing" and "telling", mimesis and diegesis.'[30] This is in

part grounded in the idea that philosophical and critical language itself makes

copious use of metaphoric – thus artistic – language and, indeed, cannot do

without that language. For deconstructionists like Derrida, the fact that metaphor

and philosophical language are entwined, becomes

> an implicit justification for his style of writing philosophy, and for putting
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> the aesthetic at the centre of thought. If metaphor cannot be eliminated
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> from philosophy, and the attempt to do so is necessarily metaphysical, then

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30 Barbara Johnson, 'Rigorous Unreliability', *Critical Inquiry*, 11.2 (1984), 278-285 (pp. 279-280).

there is a reason for writing philosophy that emphasizes the forces of

metaphorical play which are always necessary for there to be language,

including the language of philosophical writing.[31]

For both Wilde's critical thought and deconstruction, art and criticism are, in a

complex way and through some sort of symbiosis, interchangeable.

In 'The Critic as Artist', Wilde's next move is to return to criticism as a

creative discipline. Earlier Gilbert has asserted the role of creativity within

criticism a few times. Now the point is articulated much more clearly. Gilbert

discusses the role of poetry, comparing the work of the poet to that of the critic.

This comparison carries him so far as to state that criticism 'works with materials,

and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful. What more can one

say of poetry? Indeed, I would call criticism a creation within a creation' (p.

1125). Having earlier dismissed any idea of inferiority regarding the creativity of

criticism, criticism's 'creation within a creation' establishes it as a work that

employs creativity in the exact same way as art itself does. Another concept

inherent to the understanding of criticism, that of its analytical rather than purely

creative role, is here reduced by its clever equation with a poetic method.

The next point he makes is the most contentious one, and again one that he

has been preparing carefully. Having established the independence and creativity

of the critic, Wilde now turns to the idea of criticism as purely subjective, as based

on personal impression. Gilbert lectures Ernest on the follies of assuming

criticism ought to be objective by telling him that

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31 Barry Stocker, *Derrida on Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.151.

this is a very serious error, and takes no cognisance of Criticism's most

perfect form, which is in its essence purely subjective, and seeks to reveal

its own secret and not the secret of another. For the highest Criticism deals

with art not as expressive but as impressive purely. (p. 1126)

In other words, good criticism does not concern itself with what readers believe

the work of art is trying to express, but rather, what they themselves can read in it

– the impressions they may receive from it. Ernest, who has already accepted that

criticism is independent and creative, has no choice but to go along with this; after

all, subjectivity is the hallmark of creativity. The essay's speakers thus move

towards a theoretical stance that more and more clearly defies standard

assumptions of the role of the critic, at least those articulated by critics such as

Arnold and Pater, who speak of the 'object as in itself it really is'.

Having established that criticism is not objective and prefers invention

over deduction, and having shown that it is equal to art itself rather than

subservient to it, Wilde then moves to tackle the assumption that criticism should

be clear and concise rather than broad and elaborate. This is another way in which

Wilde's work resembles deconstruction: if he were to aim for an objective point

and avoid any kind of playful treatment, then the default position would be to

establish points in a concise and clear manner, moving from objective point to

objective point until, finally, the 'truth' has been revealed. Wilde has very

different ideas on the way critics present their material, and he provides an

example of how it can be done when he describes the manner in which the

Wildean critic chooses their source materials:

> He does not even require for the perfection of his art the finest materials. Anything will serve his purpose. And just as out of the sordid and sentimental amours of the silly wife of a small country doctor in the squalid village of Yonville-l'Abbaye, near Rouen, Gustave Flaubert was able to create a classic, and make a masterpiece of style, so, from subjects of little or of no importance, such as the pictures in this year's Royal Academy, or in any year's Royal Academy for that matter, Mr. Lewis Morris's poems, M. Ohnet's novels, or the plays of Mr. Henry Arthur Jones, the true critic can, if it be his pleasure so to direct or waste his faculty of contemplation, produce work that will be flawless in beauty and instinct with intellectual subtlety. Why not? Dullness is always an irresistible temptation for brilliancy, and stupidity is the permanent Bestia Trionfans that calls wisdom from its cave. To an artist so creative as the critic, what does subject-matter signify? No more and no less than it does to the novelist and the painter. Like them, he can find his motives everywhere. Treatment is the test. There is nothing that has not in it suggestion or challenge. (p. 1125)

It would have sufficed, in order to make his point, merely to state that the critic may take anything as their source material and to give the one example of Flaubert. Wilde, however, moves into a list of what appear to be (to Wilde) rather mediocre artists, and the passage acquires an element of humour as Wilde takes

shots at some of his creative contemporaries. Then Wilde makes the only slightly relevant, sweeping statement that 'dulness is always an irresistible temptation for brilliancy'. Yet he returns to this point of subject matter at the end of the passage, restates his case for criticism as using the same type of subject material as the rest of art, and justifies his profuse examples with the statement that 'there is nothing that has not in it suggestion or challenge'. The point has been made, but not in a short and clear way. Nothing about the passage suggests that Wilde feels the need to be clear and concise, but rather, like deconstruction, he follows where the associations will take him; and the subject of suitable subjects happens to take him down the path of humorous comments on mediocrity.

After the four steps that Wilde undertakes to unsettle the traditional Victorian understanding of criticism, one final obstacle remains. Though not objective, analytical, and in service of understanding a greater work of art, the idea yet remains that criticism should shed some light on its subject, and in some way increase an audience's understanding of it. Gilbert tears down this final distinctive element of criticism with the usual verbal playfulness. At the start of the second part of the essay, Ernest and Gilbert have dined, and Gilbert has promised that he will talk a little about the critic as an interpreter. Ernest is a little relieved by this more concrete approach, which has more in common with traditional practices of criticism. Gilbert's concession, however, is just another move in the rhetorical game he has been playing. Soon enough the tables are turned again: Gilbert states that

yes; the critic will be an interpreter, if he chooses. He can pass from his

> synthetic impression of the work of art as a whole, to an analysis or
> exposition of the work itself […]. Yet his object will not always be to
> explain the work of art. He may seek rather to deepen its mystery. (p.
> 1130)

Again Ernest is tricked into following an argument through Gilbert's language games. Gilbert, meanwhile, uses this latest indulgence in verbal pyrotechnics to suggest that criticism's aim, if anything, should not be clarification, but rather the opposite: mystification.

All of the previously solid distinctions between art and criticism are reduced to flexible positions that can be accepted or rejected seemingly at will. Where criticism was assumed to have certain aims and methods, Gilbert argues that in fact there is little difference with art, whose assumptions and choices are radically different. The essay goes on to argue, on this basis, the place that criticism ought to have in his ideal version of things, but at this point the main event, something very much like a deconstructive analysis of the relationship of art and criticism, has been completed. Displaying a meticulous attention to language use and to assumptions ripe for overturning, Wilde exposes just how strongly the distinction between criticism and art is based on entirely arbitrary points, which fall quite easily before the effort he displays in 'The Critic as Artist'. The technique is basically a deconstructive one, and where it misses the philological aspect that is often an element of deconstructive analysis – specifically the eye towards the roots and variant meanings of words – it more than resembles the approach in these other aspects.

Deconstruction and 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism'

'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' is an essay that was not included in *Intentions* originally (though Wilde himself suggested that for the French edition of *Intentions* it should replace 'The Truth of Masks'). In this essay Wilde does not employ speakers but writes in one voice. Despite the lesser emphasis on rhetoric and artificiality resulting from not employing fictional speakers, he makes use of the same kind of verbal trickery and play on concept and convention. As the title suggests, Wilde takes on 'Socialism, Communism, or whatever one chooses to call it' (p. 1175). In doing so he attempts to claim for socialism what is commonly accepted to be the hallmark of a Democracy, namely individualism. He does this, as in 'The Critic as Artist', by exposing the hidden assumptions and prejudices associated with the two forms of government. For 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' Wilde deals with three aspects that he wants to destabilize: the concept of authority, the ideal of the working man, and the complex and developed personality.

The first point Wilde takes up is that of authority. He starts off by noting that 'it is to be regretted that a portion of our community should be practically in slavery, but to propose to solve the problem by enslaving the entire community is childish' (p. 1177). The remark in itself is quite straightforward and Wilde continues: 'every man must be left quite free to choose his own work. No form of compulsion must be exercised over him. If there is, his work will not be good for him, will not be good in itself, and will not be good for others. And by work I simply mean activity of any kind' (p. 1177). This point is only a small step from

the previous position, but the implication, as Wilde notes, is much wider: it allows every person to do exactly as they please. To qualify, Wilde goes on to say: 'I hardly think that any Socialist, nowadays, would seriously propose that an inspector should call every morning at each house to see that each citizen rose up and did manual labour for eight hours. Humanity has got beyond that stage, and reserves such a form of life for the people whom, in a very arbitrary manner, it chooses to call criminals' (p. 1177). In this way Wilde distils a strong sense of individualism and freedom of choice from the basic concept of socialism, establishing these as its primary qualities.

Having established this personal freedom as a basis of Communism (or socialism – Wilde's use of the terms appears to be interchangeable), Wilde's next step is to take the argument in an unexpected but nevertheless logical direction. Moving from individualism and freedom to personality, Wilde places the emphasis not on action or physical labour – aspects more commonly associated with Communism – but instead focusses on thought, and art specifically. Freedom, he argues, lies in the expression of personality; and 'it is a question whether we have ever seen the full expression of a personality, except on the imaginative plane of art. In action, we never have. […] Wherever there is a man who exercises authority, there is a man who resists authority' (p. 1178). The essence, for Wilde, lies in thought, not in action – just as when he notes in 'The Critic as Artist' that 'it is very much more difficult to talk about a thing than to do it' (p. 1121).

Now that Wilde has shown that the arguments for Communism can lead in the direction of contemplation rather than action, which is associated with

physical labour, he takes it one step farther. In the following passage, which occurs just a little later, Wilde is describing the personality that will emerge once socialism has been put into practice:

> It will be a marvellous thing—the true personality of man—when we see it. It will grow naturally and simply, flowerlike, or as a tree grows. It will not be at discord. It will never argue or dispute. It will not prove things. It will know everything. And yet it will not busy itself about knowledge. It will have wisdom. Its value will not be measured by material things. It will have nothing. And yet it will have everything, and whatever one takes from it, it will still have, so rich will it be. It will not be always meddling with others, or asking them to be like itself. It will love them because they will be different. And yet while it will not meddle with others, it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is. The personality of man will be very wonderful. It will be as wonderful as the personality of a child. (p. 1179)

(Wilde's positive use of the word natural here, in 'it will grow naturally and simply, flowerlike, or as a tree grows', seems to contradict the assumption that he does not wish to base his criticism on the assumption of a natural truth within the work of art. Again this is misleading, but the discussion of truth and consistency in postmodernism is a complex one and will be undertaken in the next chapter.)

The description is, if anything, almost ascetic. In combination with the previous point, however, it starts to sketch a picture that is divergent, in that the

personality being described is, if anything, idle. It will not 'busy itself about knowledge' or 'meddle with others'; it will act towards others 'by being what it is' and 'will have nothing'. The description conjures up associations with the recluse, with meditations and contemplation. It is also strikingly similar to a passage from 'The Critic as Artist', where a similar stance of inaction is described in the following way: 'I am certain that, as civilisation progresses and we become more highly organised, the elect spirits of each age, the critical and cultured spirits, will grow less and less interested in actual life, and *will seek to gain their impressions almost entirely from what Art has touched*' (p. 1132, emphasis is Wilde's). Wilde's emancipated worker is exceptional: a person who spends their time in contemplation, rather than mindless, hard labour.

Wilde adds a flourish to the argument by positing that the criminal will be as free as all others. Another unforeseen consequence of the freedom and personality that Communism will bring the individual is a freedom from morality. Because there is no need for authority (which Wilde equates with slavery earlier in the essay) the consequence must be that 'with authority, punishment will pass away' (p. 1182). What is to be considered harmful crime flows, for Wilde, from personal possession and influence over others; with those crimes abolished by the individualistic approach to Socialism, all other crimes simply become expressions of personality, which are to be celebrated and not punished.

It would be easy to dismiss this whole line of reasoning as Wilde's wilful attempt at paradox, or as some elaborate game that Wilde is playing in defiance of Victorian ideals and morals. Such an argument, however, would be remarkably similar to the accusations levelled against deconstruction. Wilde does not argue

merely for the joy of arguing. The analysis of "The Critic as Artist" conducted in this chapter shows a sustained effort to expose the term 'criticism' for what it really is and is not. Wilde achieves this exposition not simply by showing his readers a different meaning for the term, but also by playing a rhetorical game with each and every element underpinning criticism's position. He shows just how much the term is flexible in either direction, and thereby alerts the audience to the assumptions and, perhaps, prejudices underlying the subject of criticism. That these sorts of critical enquiries ultimately lead to themes such as truth and crime – opening up from a critical approach to social-political themes – is one implication that can now be explored.

Chapter III   Truth, Lying and Crime

In April 1895, Oscar Wilde found himself at the receiving end of a very different

kind of public scrutiny. Until that time he had been considered mostly scandalous

and immoral in artistic terms. Now the Crown had brought a case against him of

gross indecency after evidence of his sexual encounters with other men surfaced

during his attempted suit against the Marquess of Queensberry. At one particular

moment of the trial, Wilde was forced to defend himself against insinuations

based on a poem by Lord Alfred Douglas. Wilde felt that he was being called a

criminal while in reality being something else, and made an eloquent defence:

> 'The Love that dare not speak its name' in this century is such a great
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> affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and
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> Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as
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> you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep,
>
> spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades
>
> great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo [...]. It is
>
> beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing
>
> unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an
>
> elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the
>
> younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him.[1]

The passage is well known because it constitutes Wilde's (literary) defence of his

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1 Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), p. 435.

same-sex desires. It is a great irony that the artist who had written (in a qualified way) in praise of crime and lying was made to face the public's judgement of what he had preached. In the passage above Wilde engages in a typical activity: taking what was, in Victorian England, commonly considered criminal and framing it as something artistic and beautiful.

Wilde's interest in the complicated cross-sections of crime, truth and aesthetics corresponds to the way in which these issues are viewed in postmodernism. The severely problematic concept of truth is key to deconstruction. The previous chapter saw the discussion of the specific problems that truth represents, especially in its attempt to access a natural, authoritative referent. This attitude towards truth – the strong suspicion raised against it – pervades much of postmodern thought and has implications, both in Wildean and in postmodern terms, that are far-reaching.

Postmodern Attitudes towards Truth and Reality

Postmodernism's distrust of terms like truth emerges from the approach's position regarding the period of the Enlightenment. In various ways, the criticism of postmodern times is responding to the Enlightenment claim of an absolute truth, a claim that ultimately led to, among other things, imperialism and slavery.[2] After the Enlightenment, the concept of truth only gained strength: located in nature, the Romantics found the 'idea of truth-as-self-expression and self-assertion'.[3] Though now truth was seen as originating in 'self-expression and self-assertion', however,

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2 Christopher Norris, *The Truth about Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 182-256.
3 Jorge Ahumada and Maria Carneiro, ''Tradition and Truth in Postmodern Times: Everyday Life, the Academy, and Psychoanalysis', *American Imago*, 63.3 (2006), 293-314 (p. 300).

it remained entirely objective; the Romantic notion held that it was more easily found in sublime nature. This changes with postmodernism, where critics take positions that range from entirely dismissing the possibility of truth to seeking to maintain as much of a concept of objectivity as possible. The point is that the nature of truth itself is very much a matter of debate. In postmodernism there is 'violent disagreement among scholars and scientists over the relationship between scientific knowledge, truth, and reality, the kinds of ideological and political uses to which science and technology are or should be put'.[4] At the core of the discussion, there is a persistent questioning of the concept of truth in all of its implications.

Important here is the emphasis on truth as a kind of language-game. The language of truth thus becomes not objective truth but linguistic play, constructed through metaphor and rhetoric, as noted by Richard Rorty:

> certain metaphors which we once used to explicate the notion of truth – those which revolve around notions like correspondence and adequate representation – need to be abandoned. Doing so will lead us to stop […] the language-game which uses the hypostatized adjective 'truth' in such phrases as 'the quest for Truth' or 'the love of Truth'.[5]

It is this strong emphasis on truth as a type of language, steeped in metaphor, that characterises discussion on truth in postmodernism, for the simple reason that it

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4 Ursula Heise, 'Science, Technology, and Postmodernism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed, by Steven Connor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 136-167 (p. 149).
5 Richard Rorty, 'Is It Desirable to Love Truth?', in *Truth, Politics and 'Post-modernism'* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1997), pp. 11-32 (p. 24).

allows the nature of truth to be discussed rather than simply established: the object is no longer a 'quest' since there is no single destination – at least, not one that could be realistically reached.

Though these philosophical and critical positions mark postmodern thought, they partly derive from a near contemporary of Wilde. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote extensively on issues such as truth and, as early as 1873, lies, in an unpublished essay entitled 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense'. In this essay, Nietzsche proposes

> that 'truth' is a mode of illusion and that the schemes our intellects impose upon things by means of language, while practically useful, are fundamentally deceptive. Moreover, while language is always metaphoric, one usually forgets that this is so, imagining that the conceptual schemes of one's own construction are permanent fixtures.[6]

As Nietzsche himself puts it – in a way that is notably similar to Wilde's distinction on art, truth and lying in his essay 'The Decay of Lying', discussed later in this chapter – 'Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions'.[7]

These ideas were crucial in the development and articulation – to some degree even foundational – of postmodern critical practices. Nietzsche bases truth

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6 Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins, 'Nietzsche's Works and their Themes', in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. by Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 21-70 (p. 29).

7 Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense', in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, trans. and ed. by Daniel Breazeale (New York: Prometheus, 1990), p. 84.

and illusion in language, something that especially appealed to the linguistic models of criticism:

> The stock of 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense' has risen in the eyes of many scholars over the past few decades, primarily because it analyzes truth in terms of metaphor. Many literary theorists and philosophers influenced by literary criticism, in particular, interpret Nietzsche as defending a view of 'truth' that treats it as an illusion foisted upon us by language. Truth, on this view, amounts ultimately to a mode of rhetoric.[8]

It is notable that this quotation phrases the importance of Nietzsche's thought for postmodern philosophers and critics as having risen 'over the past few decades'. In contrast, Wilde's thoughts on truth and lies can be seen as either an unconscious parallel or a tacit, unattributed development of Nietzsche's critical ideas; as such it demonstrates all the more how Wilde's critical thought had failed to establish itself as relevant until the second half of the twentieth century.

Among a number of postmodern thinkers who reframe the concept of truth, a prominent name is Michel Foucault. He examines the relationship between knowledge and power, and concludes that in areas such as social science there are considerable assumptions, rather than evidence-based positions, at the base of what is held up as truth. Some of his writings examine those social sciences that 'have tended to operate on the assumption that the

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8 Magnus and Higgins, p. 30.

investigator/interpreter has a privileged access to explanation and interpretation, to the "truth", and in addition that the knowledge so gained is independent of relations of power.'[9] Explanation and interpretations, methods of communicating knowledge based in language, are now made suspicious. It is Foucault's emphasis that reveals the role that power plays in this, which is to say that an absolute truth is a biased position promoted by those who stand to benefit from turning a relative position into an absolute truth. Bias such as this is not limited to the (social) sciences. Any intellectual becomes, to some degree, suspicious under this postmodern idea; because they have been trained to seek out objective truth, now 'the contemporary world is ill fitted for intellectuals as legislators'.[10]

One additional, resulting problem is the position of law and legislation. These, after all, depend on concepts of truth and the possibility of establishing clearly whether something is objectively wrong. Foucault, in his analysis of power, questions how justice is not necessarily universal or impartial. In Foucault's reading, 'law is indeed often made the instrument and accessory of powers external to it […]. Disciplinary and bio-political operatives and knowledges come to invade and inscribe themselves within modern law.'[11] Where law was previously considered an objective, unquestionable thing, best left to legal specialists who attempted to further the process of making law even more objective, increasingly in the second half of the twenty first century it was perceived as subjective, a mechanism in the hands of specialists whose interests lay partly in mystifying the nature of their field.

Jean Baudrillard likewise writes on the problem of law as objectively true.

9 Barry Smart, *Michel Foucault* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1985), p. 137.
10 Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 122.
11 Ben Golder and Peter Fitzpatrick, *Foucault's Law* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 2.

His criticism is very direct: he notes that 'there is something stupid in the current forms of truth and objectivity, from which a superior irony must give us leave'.[12] The irony here creates a sort of distance, which will result in the possibility of viewing law as other than 'truth and objectivity', so that critics can realize that 'law and order themselves might really be nothing more than a simulation'.[13] While in the coming chapters there will be a lot more to be said about Baudrillard's theories of reality and simulation, his positioning here of law as a kind of simulation (and therefore not real) exemplifies postmodern attitudes towards the law.

Naturally, the consequences of the deconstruction of truth and objectivity reflected not simply on law in the legal sense, but also on the laws governing the study of literature: that is, literary theory. Critics such as De Man have made extensive forays into this theoretical questioning of truth in literature. This, too, is not just a reiteration of deconstruction, but rather an extension and logical continuation of its reading of truth. Like law, literary theory had previously worked with the aim of finding the 'true' meaning in literature – its relationship with reality – and, like law, this relationship is questioned and complicated rather than negated. A key step is moving (literary) theory away from the traditional ideas of mimesis, where art imitates life and can be easily categorised based on how this imitation is done. Deconstructionist critics such as De Man accomplish this by removing theory from preset notions, as argued by McQuillan:

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12 Jean Baudrillard, 'Fatal Strategies', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster, trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 185-206 (p. 205).
13 Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster, trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 166-184 (p. 177).

If literary theory rejects a mimetic model of literature and the aesthetic categories of art it is not out of a desire to replace them with a purely linguistic understanding of the world. One would understand nothing of deconstruction and de Man's work if one thought of it as merely an extension of the so-called 'linguistic paradigm' (the idealist belief that reality is merely a linguistic construct). Rather, de Man wants to free the study of literature from naïve oppositions between texts and 'the real world' and from uncritical conceptions of art. Literary theory does not deny the relation between literature and the real world but suggests that it is not necessarily certain that language works in accordance with the principles of the supposed 'real world'. Therefore, it is not at all certain that texts are reliable sources of information about anything other than their own uses of language.[14]

For deconstructionist critics of this type, the aim of approaching literature, and thus the aim of literary theory, is to disable a general approach that largely determines the reaction to works of art along predetermined ideas. Rather than assuming truths that are then to be located within the work of art, this kind of postmodern theory presents sets of questions that can be asked of it, an approach that negates the existence of an absolute truth that need only be found within that work.

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14 Martin McQuillan, *Paul de Man* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 52-53.

Wildean attitudes towards Truth

The discussion of truth in Wilde's work takes on a variety of forms. 'The Sphinx Without a Secret', for example, deals with the account of a woman who constructs for herself a kind of scandalous life – or at least the semblance of it – in order to appear interesting. Both 'The Model Millionaire' and 'The Happy Prince' deal with reality and its outward appearance as two quite different things: 'Millionaire' through featuring an obscenely rich nobleman posing as a beggar, 'Prince' through a richly decorated statue that loses its outward lustre as its inner beauty grows through good deeds.

In 'The Critic as Artist', the essay's two speakers discuss criticism, art and truth. At one point Gilbert says to Ernest, 'if you meet at dinner a man who has spent his life in educating himself, […] you rise from table richer, and conscious that a high ideal has for a moment touched and sanctified your days. But oh! My dear Ernest, to sit next to a man who has spent his life in trying to educate others! What a dreadful experience that is!'.[15] If truth were attainable, the instruction of others would be a very valuable thing; but education, so far removed from life and so hopelessly uninteresting for the individualist, becomes something that can only be dreaded over dinner. The individual element is a direct result of the status of truth in Wilde's arguments on art and life.

It is clear that Wilde plays with the idea of an objective truth. He presents truth in two ways: an impossible objective truth and an accessible subjective truth. In 'The Critic as Artist', which deals primarily with criticism and its relationship to truth, one of the essay's key phrases is, after all, that 'the primary aim of the

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15 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), p. 1140. Further references to Wilde's work from this edition are given after quotations in the text.

critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not' (p. 1128). The essay presents both of these kinds of truth. The accessible subjective truth is alluded to when one of the speakers asks: 'for what is Truth? In matters of religion, it is simply the opinion that has survived. In matters of science, it is the ultimate sensation. In matters of art, it is one's last mood' (p. 1143). A little later on, the objective, unattainable side is broached when there is talk of a class of philosopher-critics who love truth even though 'it knows it to be unattainable' (p. 1153). The former is what Wilde champions in essays such as 'The Critic as Artist' or 'The Decay of Lying', but there are hints of the latter, the real but unattainable truth, scattered throughout the works as well. One such instance is when Wilde admits that 'the critic will be an interpreter, if he chooses' and even that in that mode 'there are many delightful things to be said and done' (p. 1130).

This Wildean way of approaching truth is very similar to how critics such as Derrida view the matter. Like Wilde, Derrida does not believe in the possibility of objectivity, though he does believe in the existence of objective truth. The obstacle – really the intervening, insurmountable barrier – is language. Any kind of expression of truth must, after all, happen in a language, which, as noted, is the complicating factor: 'for Derrida truth is inescapably dependent upon the work of difference and thus typically relative to a language because truths are primarily statements made in a language.'[16] This, then, is the truth which the Wildean philosopher loves even though he 'knows it to be unattainable'. This does not eliminate the theoretical possibility of truth: 'as long as there are "stable contexts of interpretation", and thus stable meanings, there is every reason to expect truth

16 Thomas Baldwin, 'Presence, Truth and Authenticity', in *Derrida's Legacies: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. by Simon Glendinning and Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 107-117 (p. 114).

to be objective.'[17] Until mankind gets away from language, truth remains unattainable. Thus, for Derrida, truth must be separated from the facts that are obtained from a reality mediated through language.

Wilde makes a similar point in that he detaches truth from the interpretation of facts. At the end of 'The Truth of Masks', Wilde writes about truth in theatre, having just defended an archaeological interpretation of a Shakespeare play. Generalizing for a moment towards truth in general, he states that 'of course the aesthetic value of Shakespeare's plays does not, in the slightest degree, depend on their facts, but on their Truth, and Truth is independent of facts always, inventing or selecting them at pleasure' (p. 1166). Wilde's phrasing partly obscures that the second 'Truth' is general, rather than theatrical or aesthetic, so that his point here is that 'Truth is independent of facts', subject to creative whim because the facts that construct it are chosen, and even invented, as desired. As with Derrida, Wildean Truth (the kind written with a capital letter) is by necessity divorced from reality through its mediated status.

There is more discussion on truth in 'The Critic as Artist', which takes the form of 'insincerity'. In the section where this is discussed, Ernest has been asking what the traits of a good critic are, and finally enquires whether the critic will, at least, be sincere. Gilbert scoffs at the notion:

> A little sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal of it is absolutely
> fatal. The true critic will, indeed, always be sincere in his devotion to the
> principle of beauty, but he will seek for beauty in every age and in each

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17 Baldwin, p. 115.

school, and will never suffer himself to be limited to any settled custom of
thought or stereotyped mode of looking at things. He will realise himself
in many forms, and by a thousand different ways, and will ever be curious
of new sensations and fresh points of view. Through constant change, and
through constant change alone, he will find his true unity. He will not
consent to be the slave of his own opinions. For what is mind but motion
in the intellectual sphere? The essence of thought, as the essence of life, is
growth. You must not be frightened by words, Ernest. What people call
insincerity is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities.
(pp. 1144-1145)

Gilbert makes an argument for insincerity, or lying. The truth becomes irrelevant
to the critic and growth, or at least personal growth, is achieved through following
the many paths that are generally considered untrue. This is another instance
where Wilde sees constant motion, or difference, as an alternative to a stagnant
concept of truth. Moreover, the passage presents a next step in this Wildean view
on truth. Gilbert refers to insincerity as a 'method by which we can multiply our
personalities'. The development is quite similar to another postmodern element
arising from the discussion of truth: that of a fractured reality, of the loss of a
single unifying type of truth. In the absence of truth, multiple viewpoints can be
asserted; it also becomes problematic to argue, so that rather than presenting
arguments towards one central point, postmodern approaches often present one
possible view out of many (though this does not mean that approaches do not
sometimes place themselves above others in terms of importance).

The reasoning in 'The Critic as Artist' reflects a particular stance on truth, but in its discussion is limited to art, or even simply to just literature; and so it may seem that the arguments presented in that essay pertain only to literary criticism, while postmodernism deals with the topics of truth, subjectivity and fracturing in relation to all facets of life. Wilde, however, moves to establish that the points on criticism in 'The Critic as Artist' are really also about life. After all, the two highest arts, according to Gilbert, are 'Life and Literature, life and the perfect expression of life' (p. 1114). Wilde does not juxtapose literature and criticism against living one's life, which makes sense given the earlier collapse of the critical distinction between different kinds or genres of text. In equating life with literature as an art – even if the wording seems to suggest a hierarchy – Wilde also suggests that the rules which apply to art, and thus to criticism, must apply to life in turn.

Wilde, however, is not content to represent life in quite so straightforward a way. Elsewhere, in 'The Decay of Lying', he comments that 'literature always anticipates life' (pp. 1083-1084). This presents an obvious problem, in that literature is already the perfect expression of life; it seems contradictory that literature should precede the thing that it expresses. The order of things appears disrupted. This has to do with Wilde's interpretation of cause and effect: with objective truth being unavailable, it is very much possible that effects cause the thing that they construct. This turns a straightforward idea of life as truth into a complex system in which cause and effect are never clearly distinguishable – in which, in a sense, the 'true' cause of something is never without risk of really being a creative invention called into being to explain the thing it has supposedly

caused. This Wildean approach entails exactly what has also been defined as a key element of the postmodern problem with truth: that meaning is a 'complex interaction of signifiers, which has no obvious endpoint. Meaning is the spin-off of a potentially endless play of signifiers'.[18] At the same time, Wilde's discussion of cause and effect here is very similar to Nietzsche, who places doubt with their combination and relationship in *The Gay Science*: 'An intellect that saw cause and effect as a continuum, not, as we do, as arbitrary division and dismemberment – that saw the stream of the event – would reject the concept of cause and effect and deny all determinedness'.[19]

Wilde's championing of a personal, subjective criticism is similar to the claims Roland Barthes would later make with regard to the 'death of the author'. Barthes writes that 'the *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produces it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* "confiding" in us.'[20] For both Barthes and Wilde, the explanation of a literary work lies not with the author but with the reader, even if Wilde then takes that argument in a different direction when he claims it as the basis for calling the reader, or critic, an artist in their own right. Barthes and Wilde both see the text itself as the basis for interpretation – in combination with a (critical) reader – but Barthes's emphasis is very much on the text: 'Where does such a writing, free from the confines of the author, exempt from any final signified, exist? The

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18 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 100.
19 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. by Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 113.
20 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Modern Criticism and Theory: a Reader*, ed. by David Lodge and Nigel Wood, 3rd edn (Harlow: Longman, 2008), pp. 313-316 (p. 313). Emphasis is Barthes' own.

answer for Barthes is in the notion of *the text*, which is clearly distinguished from the more traditional notion of a work with an author behind it'.[21] In the case of both Wilde and Barthes, then, readers need only concern themselves with the text at hand when it comes to interpretation.

Another indication of Wilde's interpretation of truth arises in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism'. Having postulated the conditions of socialism that will make an intense individualism possible for all, Wilde speculates on the true personality of man, the personality that will reveal itself once man is freed from the considerations of everyday life. He contrasts this true personality of man with those personalities developed through a life of adversity, so that 'half their strength has been wasted in friction' (p. 1179). Wilde sees the true personality develop in the 'simply, flowerlike' quotation referred to above:

> It will grow naturally and simply, flowerlike, or as a tree grows. It will not be at discord. It will never argue or dispute. It will not prove things. It will know everything. And yet it will not busy itself about knowledge. [...] It will not be always meddling with others, or asking them to be like itself. It will love them because they will be different. (p. 1179)

Two things stand out in this passage. First of all, Wilde notes that this person 'will never argue or dispute' nor try to 'prove things'. It has already become clear that Wilde does not see truth as being attainable, and so the idea of not disputing or arguing, of not having to or being able to prove anything, fits this proto-

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21 Graham Allen, *Roland Barthes* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 76.

postmodern attitude towards truth. The next lines, 'it will know everything', seems to contradict this; yet the following 'it will not busy itself with knowledge' places this back in line with the reading that doubts truth. Knowledge here refers to the idea of an objective truth that need not be bothered with, because it is unattainable; what is available instead is the subjective truth, one which will be fully knowable – hence 'know everything' – because it is based on the individual. The closing line again links Wilde's thought to Derrida, emphasizing, as it does, difference (though Derrida's concepts of difference and différance are notably more complex than Wilde's use of the term difference here).

Wilde's phrasing does, however, introduce a possible confusion. At the start of the passage he states that the true personality of man 'will grow naturally and simply, flowerlike, or as a tree grows' (p. 1179). The use of the word 'natural' here would seem to imply that Wilde does subscribe to a sort of natural, objective truth that could be got at by the critic. However, a closer look at what 'natural' means exactly, both in postmodern approaches and in the essay 'The Decay of Lying', reveals that his use of the word is still very much proto-postmodern.

Nature and Lying: The Arboreal and the Rhyzomatic
Wilde deals primarily with Nature in his essay 'The Decay of Lying'. Where in 'The Critic as Artist' Wilde focussed more on the role of criticism and its place within the arts, in 'Decay' he introduces another set of speakers, Cyril and Vivian, whose discussion focusses on the Wildean lie. The essay carries on from the same points of truth that are also present in 'The Critic as Artist', but those points are more pronounced here.

'Who wants to be consistent?' asks Vivian, stating that he wishes to 'write over the door of my library the word "Whim"' (p. 1072). He makes it quite clear that he distinguishes between lying as an artistic endeavour – the form he is defending – and lying merely for personal gain. This view excludes politicians, according to Vivian, as 'they never rise beyond the level of misrepresentation, and actually condescend to prove, to discuss, to argue. How different from the temper of the true liar, with his frank, fearless statements, his superb irresponsibility, his healthy, natural disdain of proof of any kind!' (p. 1072). This signals the sort of lie that Wilde is talking about: not the one that sets out to deceive, but the one that acknowledges that, on some level, a lie is simply the way in which people represent individual truth. This individual truth is represented in the essay by the juxtaposition of nature and art. It is signalled in the beginning of the essay, when Vivian says that, when he goes outdoors into nature, 'one's individuality absolutely leaves one'. By extension, this individuality is gained when indoors, or in the presence of art: 'what Art really reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition' (p. 1071). In short, nature is crude and unfinished whereas art is constructed and designed. If nature is equated with truth and art equated with lying, this means that lying represents a constructed version in contrast to the unfinished, flawed version called truth. (It is important to note that this does not necessarily entail that art is a finished version of nature; Wilde's essay argues quite the opposite, and nowhere can the claim be found that art represents a later, polished version of an earlier, crude version in nature. Rather the two are both versions of the same thing, but different and non-sequential versions.) Thus lying

becomes something to be constructed and honed. In this sense, Vivian classifies it as a kind of art, like sculpting or poetry:

> Lying and poetry are arts—arts, as Plato saw, not unconnected with each other—and they require the most careful study, the most disinterested devotion. Indeed, they have their technique, just as the more material arts of painting and sculpture have, their subtle secrets of form and colour, their craft-mysteries, their deliberate artistic methods. (p. 1073)

This draws attention to the nature of reality. By conceptualizing the debate as art against nature, Wilde again touches upon the juxtaposition of objective and subjective criticism. The realization of the nature of reality as not accessibly objective requires that readers pay close attention. Later in the passage from which the above quotation originates, Vivian will speak of the 'careless habit of accuracy' (p. 1073). What this means is that, through laziness and carelessness, there might be a fall back to notions of accuracy and objectivity – that dictum to 'see the object as in itself it really is' – and forget that this position really represents that 'natural' rather than the preferable, constructed view of reality.

The main point of 'The Decay of Lying' is thus that truth and nature are constructions. They arise from fragments, from the 'complex interaction of signifiers' mentioned earlier – without an 'obvious endpoint' or, to phrase it differently, without a natural form. Such a view of reality as fragmented and constructed is at the heart of many approaches to postmodernism. Its underlying theoretical assumption is exactly the absence of a unified, organic whole. Critics

such as Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari are associated with this exploration of the so-called rhizomatic, the non-hierarchical structuring as opposed to something representing a 'natural' order. They share with Wilde a deep suspicion of the term 'natural'. This suspicion goes back to a postmodern distrust of anything that is taken for granted – the same sort of distrust that is found in the questioning of images and the kind of postmodern thinking that led to the conception of hyperreality and simulacra – discussed in Part 2 of this thesis. Deleuze and Guattari reject the concept of the 'tree' or 'root' (the terms vary depending on the translation; another frequent concept is 'the arboreal') for similar reasons. For them, it represents a kind of fictional version of nature and reality:

> The tree is already the image of the world, or the root the image of the world-tree. This is the classical book, as noble, signifying, and subjective organic interiority (the strata of the book). The book imitates the world, as art imitates nature. The law of the book is the law of reflection, the One that becomes two. […] Nature doesn't work that way: in nature, roots are tap-roots with a more multiple, lateral and circular system of ramification, rather than a dichotomous one. Thought lags behind nature.[22]

The problem, for Deleuze and Guattari, is not the existence of the tree, or of its image; rather, they see matters are being complicated by writing, or 'the classical book'. This book, or the human representation of the world, 'imitates the world'

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22 Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 5.

and through its imitation becomes a construct rather than another natural thing.

Additionally, nature is not an orderly affair. The above passage represents the

orderly representation of nature in the model of 'One that becomes two', a nicely

closed and predictable system that can be neatly imitated and overseen. 'Nature',

however, 'doesn't work that way'; Deleuze and Guattari feel that nature is far

more chaotic than its representations suggest.

In order to demonstrate this, they juxtapose the concept of the natural or

the 'tree' with that of the 'rhizome'. This is an entity that lacks the sort of order

supposed in more classical representations of nature, while still being natural.

Rhizomes are masses more akin to amorphous entities than the classic (and

problematic) representation of a tree: examples include things like potatoes,

crabgrass or swarms of rats. 'Any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything

other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point,

fixes an order'.[23] Thus the difference between a root and a rhizome is, at least in

the aspect relevant here, one between arbitrary interconnection and order; between

the imagined order of nature, and the actual random connections of the rhizome.

This is what leads to fracturing: the breakup of a natural order leaves the reader

stranded with fragments that may be interconnected in any way the reader likes.

The term 'fragmentation' suggests that this one-time concept of unity has been

shattered into pieces, but it would be misleading to think that those pieces might

then be utilized to rebuild the natural order. To extend the metaphor, the former

cracks and break lines would remain visible, a reminder of the ultimately

constructed nature of that so-called unity.

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23 Deleuze, p. 7.

From there on, this concept of the rhizome feeds into other postmodern aspects. The fact that 'any point […] can be connected to anything other, and must be' leads, among other things, to concepts of intertextuality, where, as Frederic Jameson has said, 'everything can now be a text' because a text is essentially a collection of connections; thus such connections are no longer subject to dismissal based solely on not being a traditional, or 'natural', text. [24] This has implications for textuality which will be explored in Chapter VII. The rhizome itself underlies more than just intertextuality, however. The fragmentation that it leads to is a vital part of Deconstruction, which relies on the ability to make unexpected connections that are not a part of the traditional interpretation of texts or concepts.

'The Decay of Lying' provides a link between Deleuze and Guattari on the one hand and Wilde on the other. There, Wilde takes this same concept of nature and subjects it to equally critical – though much more playful – questioning. Deleuze and Guattari counter the phrase 'as art imitates nature' by stating that art has not, in fact, imitated nature, but rather has imposed a representation upon it. This matches Wilde's statement that 'Nature, no less than Life, is an imitation of Art' (p. 1086). These words arise when Cyril sums up what Gilbert, the defender of the nature-as-art theory, has been saying; Cyril then challenges him to prove it, which Gilbert consents to do. He drives the point home by arguing that the perception of nature 'is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing' (p. 1086). For Wilde, nature is constructed. As 'our creation', people

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24 Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 77.

construct an idea of nature through its representation in art. This is the same situation that leads, in the view of Deleuze and Guattari, to the misconception of nature. In both views, nature has been constructed through people's perception of it, rather than through something actually 'natural'. It is the way the 'classical book' is constructed: not as a natural element, but as a projection of the human mind on an artistic phenomenon.

Additionally, this manner of constructing natural objects is a concern for both. Deleuze and Guattari base their juxtaposition of tree and rhizome on it; Wilde, somewhat more cryptically, cautions that 'to look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing', suggesting that the lazy observer will fall prone to the same errors of misconception mentioned above. Presumably 'seeing' the thing will lead to a less misguided perception of it, although ultimately the point for Wilde will be more artistically oriented than the general philosophical point Deleuze and Guattari are trying to make.

Elsewhere, Wilde engages with the fragmentation that arises from this sort of thinking. It is a frequent focus of Wilde, who incorporated it into his work as much as he sometimes praised it in others. Thus Wilde 'praised in his friend E.W. Godwin's sets and costumes for *Helena in Troas*, performed in London in 1886 with Mrs. Oscar Wilde in a nonspeaking part'; most importantly, he did so because it was 'not a slavish imitation of Greek originals but a harvesting of details from different sources and their unification in a designed whole'.[25] It is important to note that Wilde does indeed praise someone for achieving a 'unification in a designed whole', which may suggest that Wilde favours

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25 Iain Ross, 'Charmides and The Sphinx: Wilde's Engagement with Keats', *Victorian Poetry*, 46.4 (2008), 451-465 (p. 456).

unification rather than fragmentation. However, the connections are not natural, but designed. In other words, it is up to the artist to construct meaning out of the many fragments available to them. Artistic endeavour always entails unification in that sense; it is simply not a 'natural' unification, but rather a constructed whole, a rhizomatic unification. The problem lies in the way in which such unification is discussed, for if the discussion becomes too careless, the reader ceases 'seeing' and resumes merely 'looking'.

There are additional moments where Wilde shows what he sees as proper ordering principle. At one point he notes that 'one does not see anything until one sees its beauty' (p. 1086). Here he is suggesting that beauty might be some kind of ordering principle instead of nature. Again the reader is not dealing with a natural, hierarchical order, but with a series of (randomly) interconnected fragments, which is similar to postmodernism: 'an integral and especially important aspect of postmodern approaches is a refusal to avoid conflict and irresolvable differences or to synthesize these differences into a unitary, univocal whole'.[26] Both in Wilde and in postmodern approaches the emphasis is on synthesis, the construction of a whole from fragments. Though Wilde's desire to establish an overarching principle (Beauty) in the place of what came before (nature) may seem to indicate his preference for one grand narrative over the other, Wilde's beauty is, after all a product of synthesis.

Another element that makes this very postmodern is the attitude towards the disavowal of the natural. Both Wilde and, for example, Deleuze approach this with a sense of liberation. Wilde's whole essay is a staunch defence of this idea of

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26 Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), p. 4.

lying – of constructing a personalized reality from whatever is available or desirable – and it is clearly presented as a positive outcome. Likewise for Deleuze:

> in Deleuze's case, like many other post-structuralists, this recognised impossibility of organising life into closed structures was not a failure or loss but a cause for celebration and liberation. The fact that we cannot secure a foundation for knowledge means that we are given the opportunity to invent, create and experiment.[27]

However, this does lead to a problem, in that postmodernism does not merely discard old ways and patterns of thinking (an act which itself raises resistance) but engages in this discarding with eagerness, joy and even 'celebration'. Yet the results of such approaches are ways of thinking that may be called alien; certainly the replacement of a natural approach for a rhyzomatic one is, in a sense, monstrous. Exactly that idea of a new way of thinking that appears monstrous in its newness to the older ways is one that is taken up both by Wilde and by postmodern critics.

The Monstrous

Derrida notes that there is a historical trend to label newly emerging approaches as repulsive and even monstrous, especially if such a break is radical: 'all history has shown that each time an *event* has been produced, for example in philosophy or in

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27 Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 2.

poetry, it took the form of the unacceptable, or even of the intolerable, of the incomprehensible, that is, of a certain monstrosity.'[28] Here monstrosity is equated with both the intolerable and the incomprehensible, clearly indicating that it entails a fearful reaction to something new, something which is not yet understood. Derrida speaks of the arrival of something so significantly new as to cause a traumatic break. Evoking childbirth, he notes that he deliberately chooses this vocabulary

> with a glance towards those who […] turn their eyes away when faced by the as yet unnamable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity.[29]

This goes some way to explain hostile reactions to postmodern approaches such as deconstruction or post-structuralism, which seek radically to reframe the way that critics and thinkers approach truth.

One such analysis that places this clearly in a postmodern context is Jean Baudrillard's highlighting of the metaphorical nature of law. He does this by linking it to the metaphor of a Sphinx, the creature that asks riddles of men. He writes:

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28 Jacques Derrida, 'Passages – from Traumatism to Promise', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, *Points ... Interviews, 1974-94*, ed. by Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) pp. 372-95 (p. 387).
29 Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. by David Lodge and Nigel Wood, 3rd edn (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2008), pp. 211-224 (p. 224).

Today it is man who puts to the sphinx, to the inhuman, the question of the

inhuman, of the fatal, of the world's indifference to our endeavors and to

objective laws. The object (the Sphinx) is more subtle and does not

answer. But, by disobeying laws and thwarting desire, it must answer

secretly to some enigma. What is left but to go over to the side of the

enigma?[30]

In this quotation there is another approach to the idea of 'real' reality, of a kind of

real truth, existing yet unattainable; and of the need to look for alternatives when

such truth is not available. Baudrillard writes of the 'world's indifference'

regarding 'objective laws', making the point that such supposedly objective laws

do not necessarily resonate with reality. He then represents the alternative, the

'enigma', a kind of alternative to objective knowledge. Clearly Baudrillard is

glorifying mystery in this quotation; it represents the logical choice when previous

interpretations of reality, the 'endeavours' and 'objective laws', have failed to

grant insight into what things really are. The answer lies somewhere else, in

mystery – in the monstrous sphinx.

The same is found in Wilde. Having proposed in 'The Critic as Artist' that

critics could pursue the less interesting path of attempting to represent truth by

explaining a work of art, Wilde then proposes that really the preferable course of

action would be to glorify the artwork's mystery. Ideally the critic's 'object will

not always be to explain the work of art. He may seek rather to deepen its

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30 'Fatal Strategies', p. 205.

mystery, to raise round it, and round its maker, that mist of wonder which is dear to both gods and worshippers alike' (p. 1130). For Wilde this mystery is key, just as with Baudrillard. Wilde's essay, however, goes a step farther in this comparison. Shortly after the above quotation, the speaker returns to his point on art as a mystery, stating that the critic ideally 'will not treat Art as a riddling Sphinx, whose shallow secret may be guessed and revealed […]. Rather, he will look upon Art as a goddess whose mystery it is his province to intensify, and whose majesty his privilege to make more marvellous in the eyes of men' (p.1130). The second part of the quotation is a logical extension of Wilde's previous words, reinforcing the importance of truth as mystery. It is the first part of the quotation that is crucial here, as it urges that art not be portrayed 'as a riddling Sphinx'. Like Baudrillard's version, Wilde's Sphinx is not someone whose secrets are guessed, but rather the reverse. Neither man believes that the Sphinx will, or should, answer.

This position is reinforced in Wilde's poem, 'The Sphinx'. Here, the Sphinx is once again portrayed as a monstrous keeper of secrets. Thus the poem's speaker at one point urges the creature: 'Get hence, you loathsome mystery! Hideous animal, get hence! | You wake in me each bestial sense, you make me what I would not be' (p. 882). However, before this point the speaker has been fascinated by the Sphinx, asking what secrets it holds and even desiring it. The first part of the poem consists mostly of questions that the speaker puts to it, such as the request to know about Egyptian gods and historical figures:

O tell me, were you standing by when Isis to Osiris knelt? | And did you

watch the Egyptian melt her union for Antony | And drink the jewel-drunken wine and bend her head in mimic awe | To see the huge proconsul draw the salted tunny from the brine?' (p. 875)

Then there is a passage where the speaker contemplates the Sphinx sexually, which shows in the language: for example the speakers describes how the Sphinx 'watched with hot and hungry stare' and asks 'Which was the vessel of your lust?' before launching into a fantasy of how the god Mammon must have been the Sphinx's lover. Clearly the speaker desires knowledge from the Sphinx. It, however, 'is more subtle and does not answer', as Baudrillard puts it. Finally the speaker grows desperate and starts to view the Sphinx as a monster, with the sensuous contemplation of the Sphinx mixing with more monstrous imagery: its 'eyes are like fantastic moons that shiver in some stagnant lake, | Your tongue is like a scarlet snake that dances to fantastic tunes' (p. 881). This monstrosity is the face of the mystery that emerges as an alternative to truth, and just as in postmodern approaches, it is horrifying in its becoming.

Wilde and Postmodern Crime Fiction

Crime is a form of monstrosity, in that it is a deviation from the norm that normally requires identification and punishment. This is a major recurring theme in the works of Wilde. Its most frequent appearance is in *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories*, where three of the five stories contain crime in some way. It also features heavily in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, with murder being part of the protagonist's moral descent; and in *An Ideal Husband*, where the risk

of exposing the criminal past of one of the central characters is a driving force of the play. These works all contain a criminal protagonist, whose transgressions often go unpunished – at least in a social context. Wilde's essay 'Pen, Pencil and Poison' celebrates – though not without some irony – a criminal artist, and 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' foresees the disappearance of the criminal entirely. The crime of forgery is, in a complicated way, glorified in 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.'. 'The Portrait' offers another postmodern overlap, specifically with the first part of Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*.[31] Both stories are about crime, feature a literary forgery (Wilde's forgery of a painting to prove the existence of Willie Hughes, Auster's forgery of a Bostonian colonial who authors a crucial pamphlet), and contain passages that a reader would conventionally expect to be in an essay than a crime story. Finally, there is the work that shows the misunderstood criminal in a different light, 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol'.

In general, crime fiction becomes different in postmodern times as opposed to earlier incarnations. It has to take into account the changing attitudes towards truth and law, so that 'in postmodern fiction coincidence, overlapping accounts, indeterminacy are the plot motifs and parody, irony and inconsequence are technical tools to dislodge the idea of a single knowing and moralising subject, operating in ordered time and with purposive function.'[32] This is not to say that there is not still a healthy mainstream genre of traditional crime fiction; however, this specifically postmodern crime fiction complicates crime and punishment in the same way that critics have called into question the concept of law. It is this branch of crime fiction, too, that contains elements to which Wilde's writing

31 Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987).
32 Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction, 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 195.

demonstrates a remarkable similarity.

Victorian novels usually deal with crime in a moralising way and generally tie up stories of crime so that the criminal is punished. None of Wilde's works, however, present crime as something necessarily bad or objectively evil. The nearest thing to crime as something undesirable is when Dorian Gray finally crosses over into the criminal realm with his murder of Basil Hallward. There are rumours before that point in the book, but here Dorian finally and clearly arrives at a criminal state. It is remarkable that the thoroughly criminal nature of this action is hardly part of its impact; Dorian has already begun a kind of moral decay that supersedes his shift into actual crime by far. By the time of the murder, crime has become simply a symptom. As the background to the central event – Dorian's descent – the criminal nature of the murder is largely drowned out. Dorian has already killed another person (though Sybil Vane was murdered through his words, not his actions), and what stands out in the murder of Basil Hallward is not its brutally criminal nature, but the seemingly random impulse that triggers it. Dorian murders Basil on a whim, succumbing when 'suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred came over him' (p. 117). The deed being done, his impulse vanishes as quickly as it arose: 'How quickly it had all been done! He felt strangely calm, and, walking over to the window, opened it, and stepped out onto the balcony' (p. 117). Wilde's focus is not on the crime, but on Dorian's psychological development. The actually criminal element is clearly less important.

Aside from Dorian, there are other Wildean criminal protagonists who fit the description of postmodern crime fiction. The elements of coincidence,

indeterminacy, overlapping accounts, and highlighted parody and irony are present in 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime'. The main use of coincidence in the story (other than its use of Lord Arthur in choosing his 'victims') is his final meeting with the cheiromancer. The whole story consists of following Lord Arthur's most carefully laid out plans, juxtaposing careful planning and chance, and subverting them by rewarding chance instead of planning. Lord Arthur meets his victim by chance; and it is chance alone that allows him to fulfil his murderous destiny, thereby granting him his happily ever after. Chance, then, plays a central role in these events.

Indeterminacy is present in the story's refusal to keep to prescribed roles and social stations. A clergyman becomes a target for murder based on rather trivial reasoning, none of it to do with controversial elements like religion. The anarchist constructor of bombs turns out to be quite the gentleman, offering tea and, after the failure of one of his devices, something that amounts almost to customer service in his offer to provide an explosive umbrella. Lord Arthur spurns his fiancée time and again due to his sense of duty regarding the murder he has to commit, yet she waits patiently for him despite the fact that the events can only look entirely random to her. And finally Lord Arthur himself is a blend of the well-mannered gentleman and the sociopathic murderer: informed of his destiny, he seeks out opportunities for murder with a ruthless determination, yet his gentlemanly sensibilities are in striking contrast. All these elements serve to keep the reader from accurately determining these characters in the story.

Overlapping accounts appear primarily in the explanations given to Lord Arthur's various murderous acts, so that the explosive clock is misread as being

symbolic, Lord Arthur's numerous spurnings of his fiancée are not explained in the way he himself represents them, and in how an anarchist bomb maker is interpreted as civil – more of a hobbyist. Parody and irony are also rife in 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime', such as when the cheiromancer who foretells Lord Arthur's murderous deed, thus upsetting the balance in his life, ultimately ends up as the victim himself.

There can be no doubt that there are striking similarities between the elements in 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime' and those listed as common elements to postmodern crime fiction. However, Wilde also complicates the distinction of crime itself, which he turns into necessity in this particular instance. As Simon Joyce has remarked, 'Wilde seems instead to offer here a powerful critique of the tendency to flatten out the differences between crime and culture'.[33] There is an indication here of Wilde's theoretical stance on crime.

He develops this theory of the nature of crime centrally in several essays. In 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' Wilde discusses crime and its origins briefly while aiming for the larger point of individualism. He starts by clarifying that he believes there are two types of criminals. The first, petty criminals, he sees as a problem caused by society:

> Starvation, and not sin, is the parent of modern crime. That indeed is the
> reason why our criminals are, as a class, so absolutely uninteresting from
> any psychological point of view. They are not marvellous Macbeths and
> terrible Vautrins. They are merely what ordinary, respectable,

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33 Simon Joyce, 'Sexual Politics and the Aesthetics of Crime: Oscar Wilde in the Nineties', *ELH*, 69.2 (2002), pp. 501-523 (p. 507).

commonplace people would be if they had not got enough to eat. (p. 1182)

These 'uninteresting' criminals are hardly worthy of Wilde's notice, and a few quick comments on starvation are enough to dismiss this problem entirely. For Wilde, there is a second class of criminal, who is really not a criminal at all, but rather someone who has been branded as such by the state's desire to punish:

One is absolutely sickened, not by the crimes that the wicked have committed, but by the punishments that the good have inflicted; and a community is infinitely more brutalised by the habitual employment of punishment, than it is by the occurrence of crime. It obviously follows that the more punishment is inflicted the more crime is produced, and most modern legislation has clearly recognised this, and has made it its task to diminish punishment as far as it thinks it can. Wherever it has really diminished it, the results have always been extremely good. The less punishment, the less crime. When there is no punishment at all, crime will either cease to exist, or, if it occurs, will be treated by physicians as a very distressing form of dementia, to be cured by care and kindness. (p. 1182)

For Wilde the problem lies with the punishment. The criminal, in this sense, is entirely innocent – after all, Wilde's point is 'the less punishment, the less crime'. There really are only two options: either the crime is no crime at all, and as its punishment will go away, it will be perceived as such; or it will be a kind of criminal insanity, a 'dementia' to be treated by medical, not legal, experts. Normal

crime is simply an invented cause to justify the effect of punishment. Just as with literature anticipating life, Wilde here returns to the point that some truths are synthesized constructions that come into being to justify an already existing effect – in this case, the punishment for a supposed crime.

Wilde's vision of crime in the essay, then, entails a kind of deconstruction of crime. Aside from the type of crime that arises from real mental issues, Wilde's analysis destabilizes the concept of the criminal – pointing out the role of the state, which turns people into criminals by failing to provide food, as opposed to making crime disappear through punishment. Crime becomes merely a point of view, as illustrated when Wilde moves into his main topic, individualism, and differentiates individualism in art from individualism in crime:

> art is the most intense mode of Individualism that the world has known. I am inclined to say that it is the only real mode of Individualism that the world has known. Crime, which, under certain conditions, may seem to have created Individualism, must take cognisance of other people and interfere with them. It belongs to the sphere of action. (p. 1184)

What separates crime from art, in Wilde's view, is merely the course that the true criminal's individualism sets them upon, and crime, being a kind of action, cannot attain the true, detached individualism that Wilde here champions. It is telling that Wilde dismisses crime on these grounds while keeping morality out of it.

Further development of the theme of crime can be found in 'Pen, Pencil and Poison', where Wilde develops the idea during a discussion of the historical

figure Thomas Wainewright, both a writer and poisoner. Wilde praises Wainewright's artistic personality, but is more careful in his comments on the quality of Wainewright's actual output: for example, he comments on a passage describing a Romano that 'were this description carefully re-written, it would be quite admirable. The conception of making a prose poem out of paint is excellent' (p. 1100). It is not so much Wainewright's work that is being praised, but rather his life. Within the broader discussion on Wainewright's life, Wilde's interest in turn lies with Wainewright's personality. At one point Wilde observes that 'his crimes seem to have had an important effect upon his art'. Within the same paragraph he speculates that 'One can fancy an intense personality being created out of sin' (p. 1106). Clearly there are hints of an innate link between crime and art. While Wilde's notion of individuality causes him to see crime as the lower of the two, it is certainly not placed in an entirely negative light here.

Though Wilde is careful to distinguish between crime and art, there are constant signals of his acceptance, even tacit approval, of the man who became an artist by yielding to his criminal urges. Wainewright, writes Wilde, was eventually sentenced for forgery; 'there is, however, something dramatic in the fact that this heavy punishment was inflicted on him for what, if we remember his fatal influence on the prose of modern journalism, was certainly not the worst of all his sins' (pp. 1104-1105). For Wilde, the one destructive act that Wainewright deserves punishment for is not poisoning, but a bad literary style. Later in the essay Wilde again happens on this subject when he recounts the biographical treatment of Wainewright after his death, observing with some disappointment that the poisoner's works were being underrated. 'This,' he notes, 'seems to me a

shallow, or at least a mistaken, view. The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose' (p. 1106). Instead, crime, in Wilde's eyes, was instrumental to Wainewright's art. This, again, is a far cry from a more conventional view of crime as being worthy only of punishment.

Part of the reason for the indeterminacy of crime fiction, both postmodern and Wildean, is the distance that readers have from the narrative. Far removed from omniscient narration, readers are instead presented with accounts that are sometimes intensely personal, sometimes quite unreliable. A reliable narrator is 'one whose rendering of the story and commentary on it the reader us supposed to take as an authoritative account of the fictional truth'.[34] However, the reader may be dealing with an unreliable narrator, 'one whose rendering of the story and/or commentary on it the reader has reasons to suspect'.[35]

As a storyteller, Wilde unobtrusively achieved distance; he is often at least one step removed from a kind of accessible, objective truth. His narrator in *Dorian Gray* is unpredictable, jumping from one person to the next and never staying with one character long enough to see their mind in any consistent fashion. The reader does not always follow Dorian's thoughts; rather, they are pulled away at crucial moments, such as when Basil Hallward is asking Dorian about the sins he has committed, or when Dorian writes something onto a piece of paper to convince Alan Campbell to dispose of Basil's corpse. Likewise the reader is allowed access to Lord Henry and Basil Hallward respectively, but again never in any consistent manner that would give the reader considerable insight into their mind. Even while the reader is given Lord Henry's thoughts at least half the time,

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34 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 101.
35 Rimmon-Kenan, p. 101.

the other half they are forced to guess at them through his actions, often at crucial moments. Moreover, Basil's reasoning is almost completely unknown after being presented very clearly during the first few chapters, leaving the reader in the dark as to his final feelings and motives towards Dorian. While the narrator of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* seems clear and reliable, the inconsistency in relaying facts about the narrative keeps readers from gaining any objective knowledge about the novel's action, forcing them to guess in the face of what appears to be a very helpful and, indeed, quite verbose narrator. This is actually an act of considerable subterfuge aimed at masking that a more clearly subjective narrator is at work, rather than a normal extradiegetic (a narrator who stands outside the narrative, rather than being part of it) narrator who is implicitly trusted: 'when an extradiegetic narrator becomes more overt, his chances of being fully reliable are diminished, since his interpretations, judgements, generalizations are not always compatible with the norms of the implied author'.[36]

In 'The Decay of Lying' Wilde even goes so far as to remove himself twice. The essay is set up, like 'The Critic as Artist', to have two speakers. From the start, this allows Wilde not to speak in his own voice, as he does in the other essays in *Intentions*. Both of the essays draw deliberate attention to their being (theatrical) dialogues. This is achieved through the inclusion of such things as settings, actions, and comments on the other speaker's facial expressions, all of which are generally reserved for theatre; additionally, much like an evening at the theatre, 'The Critic as Artist' is divided in two parts. There is also something theatrical about a number of descriptive speeches, such as when Cyril reproves

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36 Rimmon-Kenan, p. 104.

Vivian for spending time in his library. He feels Vivian would be better off outside, saying 'it is a perfectly lovely afternoon. The air is exquisite. There is a mist upon the woods, like the purple bloom upon a plum' (p. 1071).

In addition to the distance created by the theatrical nature of the setting and dialogue, Wilde introduces another level of distance by having the main point of the essay, the discussion on the nature of lying, take the form of an essay, written earlier by Vivian and read out to Cyril with interspersed comments. Wilde deliberately brings all of these elements to the attention of the reader: beginning his argument, Vivian states 'Now, if you promise not to interrupt too often, I will read you my article' (p. 1073). When Cyril does interrupt some pages later, he is reproached: 'Please don't interrupt in the middle of a sentence' (p. 1074). Finally, towards the end of the essay-within-dialogue-within-essay, the approaching conclusion is also signalled clearly: asked whether his last speech was the end of the essay, Vivian replies 'No. There is one more passage, but it is purely practical' (p. 1082). These interludes, of which the above are only a few examples, are not in any way necessary in establishing the essay's critical point; they are reminders of the framing device, the essay-within-essay. Constantly reminded of this additional distance, the reader is kept at arm's length from the original discussion, presented with a representation of its representation. Even in the essay, the truth – the original – is something beyond the access of the reader.

The postmodern questioning of truth does not stop here. Now that truth has become, from the postmodern viewpoint, simply a representation, the next step is a closer examination of the intricacies and power of representation, with a specific eye towards things that appear real, but are not. Baudrillard plays a major role in

developing this theory of hyperreality and simulacra. This further step in

postmodern philosophy is one that has its mirrors in Wilde, too; it is therefore to

these theories that Part 2 of this thesis now turns.

Part 2   The Nature of Reality

One direct result of postmodernism is a questioning of the nature of reality: where prior to postmodernism, reality was something that might be taken for granted, in postmodern approaches there arose increasing scepticism about the perception and representation of what is real. Postmodernism often calls into question not just the way in which reality is represented, but the power of representation itself, not merely for its unreliability, but for its capacity for outright deception. Certainly one of the most powerful voices in this debate is that of Jean Baudrillard, the French philosopher who theorized a way in which representation creates its own reality through a process of copies without original.

Chapter IV picks up Baudrillard's articulation of these copies, the simulacrum, and examines it alongside Wilde's treatment of the stock imagery that surrounds, for example, romantic love or the soul, but also relates to the representational media in Wilde's work – statues and paintings primarily. Chapter V then moves on to examine the resulting concept of a fake reality built out of simulacra, called hyperreality; the chapter returns to Wilde's discussion of 'natural' reality and of crime, showing how, in light of Baudrillard's further exploration of these themes, Wilde's treatment of them is also deepened. Finally in this part of the thesis, Chapter VI focusses on the idea of representation itself, exploring postmodern problems such as the generating of meaning, unification and fragmentation, and the representation of the self and the other.

Chapter IV   Simulacra

In the letters of Wilde's friends dating back from his time as a student in England there is the indication that Wilde was, at least from the moment he went to Oxford, very preoccupied with the image he projected. Wilde was always dishonest about his age and lied at his Oxford matriculation about the number of years he had spent studying at Trinity College. At Oxford, Wilde had 'determined to be beyond rather than behind the English'.[1] Then, in America, Wilde again assumed another manner and way of clothing, opening in a high register when he famously said: 'I have nothing to declare except my genius' upon entering America.[2] As for the clothes, there is a telling letter that Wilde wrote to Colonel W.F. Morse. Morse arranged lectures and practical matters for him during his lecture tour of America, and one of Wilde's letters to him shows the kind of attire Wilde favoured for his public appearances:

> 26 February 1882
>
> Dear Colonel Morse, Will you kindly go to a good costumier (theatrical) for me and get them to make (you will not mention my name) two coats, to wear at matinées and perhaps in evening. They should be beautiful; tight velvet doublet, with large flowered sleeves and little ruffs of cambric coming up from under collar. I send you design and measurements. They should be ready at *Chicago* on Saturday for matinée there – at any rate the black one. Any good costumier would know what I want – sort of Francis I

1 Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), p. 37.
2 Ellmann, p. 152.

dress: only knee-breeches instead of long hose. Also get me two pair of

grey silk stockings to suit grey mouse-coloured velvet. The sleeves are to

be flowered – if not velvet then plush – stamped with large pattern. They

will excite a great sensation. I leave the matter to you. They were

dreadfully disappointed at Cincinnati at my not wearing knee-breeches.

Truly yours   Oscar Wilde.[3]

Wilde would alter his appearance again after America, changing hair styles a few

times; by the time of his first theatrical success in Great Britain, he had abandoned

the idea of knee-breeches. He was still anxious about how he appeared to people,

a preoccupation which culminated in another often-related moment of Wilde's

life: after the opening night of *Lady Windermere's Fan* caused cries of 'author!',

Wilde appeared in front of the audience, a cigarette in hand, thanking the audience

for thinking almost as highly of the play as he himself did.[4] It was a studied pose,

and even if there is uncertainty as to the exact wording of Wilde's message that

night, the cigarette, and the fact that this was simply not done in front of a

Victorian public, remain a provocative assertion of appearance. The public

forgave him, perhaps because in the coming years he gave them *A Woman of No

Importance*, *An Ideal Husband* and finally *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Public opinion would reverse only a few years after *Lady Windermere's

Fan*, when yet another aspect of Wilde's life, this one hidden from most of his

audience, was revealed before the court and the press. Wilde's life was shown to

be a projection – a mask – covering his double life as a lover of young men.

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3 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 141. The emphasis is Wilde's.
4 Ellmann, p. 346.

Tellingly the revelation did not lead to a realisation of the 'true' Wilde: if he was

not the dedicated husband and father, or the author and playwright who ultimately

accepted Victorian morals even as he playfully poked fun at them, then neither

was he the degenerate corrupter of innocent young men, the worthless sodomite,

and the perpetrator of 'unmentionable acts'.[5] His projections of himself were

representations: first of what it meant to be English at Oxford, then of what it

meant to be a dandy in America, and finally, back in Britain, what it meant to be

an Aesthete along the lines of Walter Pater. After the 1895 trials Wilde would

come to live with others' representations of him: those of an immoral man, of a

prisoner, of a fallen artist in exile – all with their preconceived narrative, none of

them necessarily indicative of Oscar Wilde. With the decriminalization of

homosexuality in Great Britain in 1967, the unreality of those post-trial images of

Wilde was reinforced.

Within the body of his work and life, then, Wilde himself was one of the

best examples of a simulacrum. The image of the author is always a copy, a

collection of fragments taken from many places – aestheticism, the Renaissance,

Beau Brummell, or the fear of those with a different sexuality. All of these images

purport to represent the real Wilde – and yet all of them are versions, leaving no

concrete indication of the author himself. Wilde is, to his readers as to his

biographers, what has come to be known as a simulacrum: his copy is

everywhere, but the original is lost. (It is worth noting, for example, that even in

Wilde's emulation of the dandy as he knew it in Beau Brummell, the original

dandy, there is something of the simulacrum: Wilde favoured knee-breeches, the

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5 Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 184.

very fashion which Brummell discarded in favour of the long trousers.[6] Wilde's knee-breeched version of the dandy was indeed, in that respect, a copy without original.)

The Simulacrum in Postmodernism

Wilde's work contains a very large number of instances of what would come to be called simulacra. This term, coined by Jean Baudrillard, refers to a process by which the 'real' (already a problematic subject, as seen in the previous three chapters) is gradually replaced by a copy: 'Reference to the real is supplanted by constant processes of signification which double and reiterate one another.'[7] This supplanting of the real means that the copy, constantly reiterated, eventually loses all its ties with the original. As a result, this original vanishes. This simulacrum is part of a larger process, which causes the appearance of hyperreality – a version of reality constructed through representations of the actually non-existent, further detailed in Chapter V – and strands the reader or observer in a place where there can be no distinction between simulation and supposed original. The end result of the appearance of simulacra and the substitution of reality for hyperreality is, then, a sea of images without any land in sight: 'The procession of simulacra means appeal cannot be made to external referents or to an objective real. Representations can no longer be compared, contrasted, and evaluated in terms of an independent real.'[8] What this leads to, then, is the substitution of 'real' items

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6 Ian Kelly, *Beau Brummell: The Ultimate Man of Style* (London: Free Press, 2006), p. 61-62.
7 Julian Wolfreys, 'Simulacrum / Simulation', in *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 226-231 (p. 228).
8 Barry Smart, 'Europe/America: Baudrillard's Fatal Comparison', in *Forget Baudrillard?* ed. by Chris Rojek and Bryan S. Turner (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.47-69 (p. 52).

(which is to say, items that previously appeared to be grounded in some sort of recognizable reality) by 'fake' items that, though they start off as copies, eventually come to fully replace, and stand for, the original, 'real' items. These simulacra arise 'when a plastic Christmas tree is more appealing than a real one; when a television show exhibits contestants participating in melodramatic ways while insisting to be "reality"; or when a lottery or casino promises large cash payouts while smugly cheating its players'.[9] Thus a reality show may purport to show its participants behaving as they would normally, all the while masking that such behaviour is obviously modified to a great extent by its participants' knowledge of being filmed, or the selective editing of such shows to establish characters and narrative. Reality in this sense is very much a simulacrum rather than real.

Here it becomes necessary to clarify terms such as 'truth' or 'reality' in the context of Baudrillard's treatment of simulacra. In the first part of the present thesis, deconstruction's intense scrutiny of the nature of truth and the accessibility of reality was discussed; there, postmodernism positioned truth as a construct, theoretically accessible but practically unattainable. Reality became mediated through language and therefore always already a subjective reading of a theoretically objective phenomenon. This is a different approach to truth from Baudrillard's. Both the simulacrum and deconstruction do not deny an objective truth and reality; likewise, both approaches see truth and reality as essentially unattainable. Baudrillard's simulacrum, however, much more easily discusses the idea of a naturally true element that, if it has not been copied, escapes simulation

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9 Garen Torikian, 'Against a Perpetuating Fiction: Disentangling Art from Hyperreality', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 44.2 (2010), 100-110 (p. 103).

and thus remains available. The Christmas tree in the above quotation is one clear example, as the original, 'natural' tree has not necessarily been lost and remains accessible.

Baudrillard touches on the possibilities for reality even in the presence of simulacra in this interview with Guy Bellavance, answering the question on his use of the word 'crystal' in relation to simulacra: 'what is the "crystal"? It is the object, the pure object, the pure event, something which no longer really has an origin or an end. The object to which the subject has wanted to give an origin and a purpose, even though it has none, is today perhaps starting to recount itself'.[10] The crystal here represents objectivity, or things as they are without human attributions such as 'origin' or 'purpose', and Baudrillard's phrase 'starting to recount itself' suggests that he, like for example Derrida, does view it as theoretically accessible. Still, the emphasis there is on the object itself communicating; human interference, it is implied, could result in the construction of subjective meaning.

Such attribution of subjective meaning does mean that simulacra are capable of taking over broader narratives. So, for example, the process assimilates even history as it turns the certainties of what has happened into uncertainty: 'The producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture. […] The past as "referent" finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but text.'[11] Wilde himself

10 Jean Baudrillard, 'The Revenge of the Crystal: Interview with Guy Bellavance', in *Baudrillard Live*, ed. by Mike Gane (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 50-66 (p. 51).
11 Frederick Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 17-18.

very much engaged in this 'imitation of dead styles' when he copied, with his own modifications, the dandy as exemplified by Brummell.

Wilde and Baudrillard both approach this concept of losing the referent in a similar way: they have a tendency to develop their argument in sweeping terms. Both thinkers often construct their essays in a playful manner, evoking, with some imagination, the consequences of their particular line of thinking; at times they take their points to the logical extreme, unafraid to show the limits of their thinking. For example, at one point Baudrillard analyses psychology and medicine in relation to the simulation of symptoms, when he concludes that as soon as symptoms are seen as possible simulations, everything grinds to a halt: medicine and psychology are

> forestalled by the illness's henceforth undiscoverable truth. For if any symptom can be 'produced,' and can no longer be taken as a fact of nature, then every illness can be considered as simulatable and simulated, and medicine loses its meaning since it only knows how to treat 'real' illnesses according to their objective causes.[12]

While reasonable, Baudrillard is in fact suggesting that medicine is meaningless because of its inability to distinguish between real and simulation. This goes too far for many thinkers, and 'Baudrillard's analysis of the ways in which simulacra function' sometimes finds itself criticized, for example as 'far from sufficient', because 'it is often marred by his penchant for overstatement, by the inexactitude

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12 Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster, trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp.166-184 (p. 168).

of his terminology, and by an over-eager application to phenomena they don't quite fit, for instance, to psychosomatic illness.'[13] This quotation also touches on a good example of the inexact tendency in Baudrillard (as in Wilde), since it sees Baudrillard applying the idea of psychosomatic illness to a situation where 'medical symptoms can be effectively simulated, in the sense of a person really becoming ill'.[14] The fact of an illness caused by simulated symptoms rather than 'real' ones brings the illness into the realm of hyperreality. Whether this sort of philosophical approach to a very real illness (in which the simulation of symptoms is perhaps a symptom in and of itself) has any place in medical practice is very much up for discussion; Baudrillard uses this example to create a compelling illustration of simulation in action and, in the course of doing this, opens himself up to criticism.

This 'over-eager' tendency that Wilde shares with Baudrillard is demonstrated most clearly in the essays. There is, for example, the previously discussed argument in 'The Decay of Lying', which reverses the relationship between art and life and states that life follows from art rather than the other way around. After making this point with regard to the appearance of fog in London (an eye for which they owe the artistic rendering of these fogs by impressionists), Vivian moves on to the Japanese style of art, another trend in British art of the time. Vivian declares that 'in fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention'.[15] This statement, a playful continuation of Wilde's arguments on what can also be called

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13 Paula E. Geyh, 'Assembling Postmodernism: Experience, Meaning, and the Space In-Between', *College Literature*, 30.2 (2003), 1-29 (p. 13).
14 Victoria Grace, *Baudrillard's Challenge: A Feminist Reading* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 108.
15 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), p. 1088. Further references to Wilde's work from this edition are given after quotations in the text.

hyperreality, seems unbelievable, suggesting as it does that there is really no such thing as Japan. Yet the statement is made perfectly acceptable: Vivian is arguing that 'the actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people; that is to say, they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them [...] the Japanese people are, as I have said, simply a mode of style, an exquisite fancy of art' (p. 1088). The point here is nothing less than that the Japanese people, presented from the viewpoint of the late-Victorian person, are a kind of simulacrum. Their image exists in art, but it would be a folly to go to Japan to seek them, as one would find something unsettlingly familiar, rather than the exotic fantasy that exists only in British art: a copy lacking an original. Wilde here seems to overstate his argument drastically by claiming that Japan does not exist, placing himself at risk of criticism; yet the argument, if brought in a similar but less drastic way, is perfectly valid.

Love and the Soul as Simulacra

In his discussion of the crystal, Baudrillard continues his description of the objective thing by noting that he sees a kind of passion at work in it. Here he distinguishes between a subjective passion and an 'object-passion', which is more ironic:

> It quite pleased me to see that the object exists in a relatively passionate form, and that there should be passion in objects and not only passion in subjects: passions in the mode of the ruse, irony, indifference, inertias, in opposition, precisely, to those of the subject which are purposeful,

stimulate … desire, for example. Whereas object-passion, that would be indifference. It certainly is a passion in my opinion, an ironic passion.[16]

These forces of irony and passion are similarly present in Wilde. It is exactly in the emphasis on passion that the overlap with Wilde's writings occurs here. Passion and love regularly result in images that are intimately familiar and sometimes clichéd, such as the heart struck by Cupid's arrow, or the bouquet of roses. More often than not Wilde presents these images in a way that matches the simulacrum, using them in juxtaposition to the elements that conclude a story or round up the argumentation in an essay. For example, there is a creation (quite literally) of an image of the soul in 'The Fisherman and his Soul' and a similar creation of an image of love in the eponymous rose of 'The Nightingale and the Rose'. Love and passion also play a large role in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which presents perhaps the most clear and sustained instance of a simulacrum in all of Wilde; and passion and portraiture finally lead to 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.', which foregrounds the lack of reality through its use of forgery.

The story of 'The Fisherman and his Soul', from the collection *A House of Pomegranates*, tells of a fisherman who falls in love with a mermaid. In order to marry her, he agrees to give up his soul. Told by a witch how to separate himself from his soul, the fisherman sends it out into the world while he goes to live with the mermaid. The soul sees more and more of the world as the story progresses, eventually becoming powerful but corrupted. It returns every year to the fisherman and asks him to take it back. Since this act would result in the

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16 *Revenge of the Crystal*, p. 51.

fisherman's separation from his beloved mermaid, the soul is refused every time, until finally it tempts the fisherman away to a city a day's walk away. The fisherman's soul, by now thoroughly corrupt, returns to him, but cannot enter into his heart because that heart is encased by love. When the mermaid dies as a result of the soul's return, the fisherman dies with her. The rest of the story relates the effects of the deaths on the local priest, who finally learns to accept love as part of his religion.

The soul in 'The Fisherman and his Soul' is presented as something fairly recognizable at the start of the story. In his quest to get rid of his soul, the fisherman encounters familiar reactions: he muses, for example, 'how strange a thing this is! The Priest telleth me that the soul is worth all the gold in the world, and the merchants say that it is not worth a clipped piece of silver' (p. 239). Then another stock image appears: that of a demonic figure interested in the fisherman's soul – a figure which flees, moreover, when the fisherman 'made on his breast the sign of the Cross, and called upon the holy name' (p. 242). The expectation is evoked that the fisherman will lose something higher – perhaps even the capability for true love – in giving up his soul and will be trapped instead in the baser impulses of the body. This expectation is then further aroused by the description of the soul as mirroring the fisherman himself. The suggestion is that the 'real' self is found in the soul. After having been told how to separate himself from his soul, the fisherman 'cut away his shadow from around his feet, and it rose up and stood before him, and looked at him, and it was even as himself' (p. 243). Again, as his mirror image, the soul is assumed to carry something essential of the fisherman with it.

At this point, however, the story subverts expectations. The fisherman goes off to become happy and the story makes no mention of him being any different for the loss of his soul. The suggestion is that he is happy just through his love for the mermaid. The soul, however, goes out into the world, and, bereft of his body, becomes corrupted. Furthermore this corruption of the soul has its source directly in the lack of a physical thing: the soul, having been given no heart, falls to corruption. At one point in the story the fisherman asks why his soul, newly reunited with him, has forced him to kill a merchant in order to acquire money. 'And his Soul answered him, "When thou didst send me forth into the world thou gavest me no heart, so I learned to do all these things and love them"' (p. 254).

The image evoked by Wilde here is that of the soul as a simulacrum. The soul, separated from the fisherman, becomes his copy; but also, more importantly, becomes a copy of the concept of the soul, burdened with all its ethereal, moral connotations. Wilde emphasizes these connotations when he discusses the soul in terms of its spiritual worth and corporeal worthlessness and in terms of its association with the demonic figure. The story then sets out to show how the soul is none of these things. Things turn out to be quite the opposite and, bereft of a physical anchor, the soul falls quickly to the kind of corruption that would normally be associated with a body that does not have a soul. Much as it introduces the question of what a soul really is – and utilizes the question to explore, in the story, the concept of love – the representation of the soul in this way leads to the introduction of that soul as a simulacrum.

The image of the soul as a double was certainly nothing new. Before and during Wilde's time, the literary theme of the doppelgänger was widespread, and

he is certainly drawing upon it here, as elsewhere (something which will also be explored later in the context of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the Victorian magic picture tradition). A way of introducing sinister doubles, or sometimes the suggestion of the double, this literary tradition of the doppelgänger entailed 'a recurring motif in Gothic and horror literature, mostly in the nineteenth century, ultimately coming from the anthropological belief in an innate duality in man'; however, it lost 'its referential power in the early decades of the twentieth century, after the discoveries of psychoanalytic theory'.[17] Examples include James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), Edgar Allan Poe's *William Wilson* (1839), and even Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* (1890), which was famously suggested during the same dinner with Joseph Stoddart where Wilde proposed *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for publication in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*. In this sense, Wilde's treatment of the double, though in itself explicitly proto-postmodern, hardly occurs in a vacuum.

The soul of 'The Fisherman and His Soul' functions in the story partly as a representation of the traditional, religious soul. It is also, however, the exact copy of the fisherman. After being given the knife by a witch, the fisherman 'cut away his shadow from around his feet, and it rose up and stood before him, and looked at him, and it was even as himself' (p. 243). That the soul is 'even as himself' can be taken to mean a physical similarity, but it is more likely that the soul's being 'as' the fisherman implies a deeper similarity. The soul and the fisherman are identical copies, save for two differences: the fisherman has no soul, and the soul has no heart. Thus, in addition to being a simulacrum in the realm of traditional

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17 Antonio Ballesteros González, 'Doppelgänger', in *The Handbook of the Gothic*, ed. by Marie Mulvey-Roberts, 2nd edn (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 119.

views of the soul and morality, the fisherman's separated soul is his double.

In this regard it is crucial that the soul falls from grace whereas the fisherman lives happily with love in his life. The soul returns to the fisherman three times, offering first wisdom, then riches and finally temptation itself. The fisherman rejects all three of the soul's offerings, although the third time around the soul manages to trick the fisherman into taking it back. By the end of the story, the soul's callous murder is proof of its degeneration, making the point that love, the one thing that the soul did not have, is what saved the fisherman from a similar fate.

The character of the Priest also illustrates Wilde's point about love. The holy man initially rejects love on purely theological grounds: after being confronted with the fisherman's earthly love, the priest says to the fisherman: 'alack, alack, thou art mad, or hast eaten of some poisonous herb, for the soul is the noblest part of man […] The love of the body is vile' (p. 238). The story will go on to prove the opposite. At the end of the story, the priest will have a change of heart: attempting to preach his normal sermon, which is based on the wrath of God, the priest finds instead that 'there came another word into his lips, and he spake not of the wrath of God, but of the God whose name is Love' (p. 258). The story thereby establishes love as a worthwhile thing. It is contrasted with the rigidly religious conception of the soul, which is a false image without original, a simulacrum.

Where love is something real in 'The Fisherman and his Soul', it becomes instead the subject of another simulacrum – this time connected to a rose – in 'The Nightingale and the Rose'. Here Wilde uses a strategy similar to the one employed

in 'The Fisherman and his Soul' when he chooses an image overburdened with attributed meaning; he then sets out to expose that meaning as essentially meaningless. In this story, the titular nightingale comes upon a young student who is in love. The girl he is in love with has promised to dance with him if he brings her a red rose. Impressed with this boy's love, the nightingale asks for a rose from the Rose-tree. The tree informs the bird that death is required to create the rose. The nightingale then sacrifices herself by singing to the tree all night and finally having her heart pierced by one of its thorns. This creates a rose, which the student brings hastily to the girl the next morning; however, she has received jewellery from the Chamberlain's nephew, and thus chooses the other. The rose is discarded into a gutter, where it is driven over by a cartwheel, and the student returns to his room to study metaphysics from a great dusty book.

As with the previous story, there are expectations set up at the start. In this instance it is a rose that becomes an image of romantic love. It is particularly an early passage in the story that affirms the romantic imagery that is to become represented by the rose:

'The Prince gives a ball to-morrow night,' murmured the young Student, 'and my love will be of the company. If I bring her a red rose she will dance with me till dawn. If I bring her a red rose, I shall hold her in my arms, and she will lean her head upon my shoulder, and her hand will be clasped in mine. But there is no red rose in my garden, so I shall sit lonely, and she will pass me by. She will have no heed of me, and my heart will break.' (p. 278)

The story thus invokes a number of stock associations with romance: dancing till dawn, breaking hearts, and loneliness are only three elements which are touched on in this short passage. Crucially all of these elements are evoked because of the lack of a red rose, and indeed the pursuit of the rose becomes the focus of the story, so that the rose immediately becomes the symbol for all of the romantic elements, the very image of romantic love. This is further strengthened when, by the end of the story, the nightingale dies for the sake of love; here the association is with tragic romance, something Wilde had already explored to a degree in his plays *The Duchess of Padua* and *Vera, or The Nihilists*. The rose also contains romantic connotations from places outside of Wilde's work. All these concepts and associations are infused into the rose, the focal point for the Student's love for the girl.

As in 'The Fisherman and his Soul', though, the rose is unmasked. As an image of romance, the rose is powerful; in the story, however, it undergoes two processes leading to its ultimate unveiling as a simulacrum. The first of these occurs when the girl rejects the Student, the rose only eliciting a frown: '"I am afraid it will not go with my dress," she answered; "and, besides, the Chamberlain's nephew has sent me some real jewels, and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers"' (p. 281). Here the power of the rose falters, its imbued romance powerless because someone else has given the girl jewellery. It is arguable, though, that this reflects simply the materialism of the girl in question, preferring physical things over the phenomenon of love. However, the second step towards the rose as a simulacrum simultaneously disbands this possibility. The

Student, spurned by the girl, 'threw the rose into the street, where it fell into the gutter, and a cart-wheel went over it' (p.281). He goes to study his books, turning his back on love, since, in his words, 'It is not half as useful as Logic, for it does not prove anything, and it is always telling one of things that are not going to happen, and making one believe things that are not true. In fact, it is quite unpractical' (p. 282). It is not simply the girl, but also the Student himself who rejects love, going against the expectations set up by the invocation of romance. The rose, the image (and signifier) of that romantic love, finds its original (its signified) missing in the story: there is no romantic love, as indeed the outcome of the story seems to question its existence, suggesting perhaps youthful infatuation in its stead. It leaves the rose as a simulacrum, a copy of the concept of romantic love which turns out to be absent in 'The Nightingale and the Rose'.

Simulacra and Personification

The simulacrum can take the form of personification, as in the case of the soul in 'The Fisherman and his Soul'. Another possibility in this vein is the author's muse, and in this sense, Wilde's work corresponds to that of the postmodern author John Fowles. One of Fowles's later works, *Mantissa* (1982), deals with the simulacrum of a personified concept in much the same way as Wilde's soul and rose discussed above.[18] *Mantissa* is a story about the struggle between a writer and his muse, in which there is the same kind of personification in the case of the muse, Erato. The name is no coincidence: Erato is one of the Classical muses, specialising in lyrical poetry, with an emphasis on love and the erotic; Fowles

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18 John Fowles, *Mantissa* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982).

himself emphasizes this when he starts the book off with a very explicit sex scene. Rebellious and not content to feature in the writer's (mostly pornographic) fantasies, she gives him a run for his money, thereby going against the preconceived representations of a kind as serving the (male) artist: in the book, Erato is represented as 'contrary to the traditional image of muse as nurturing of and responsive to the creative demands of the male artist'.[19] Just as with Wilde's rose, Fowles presents his readers with the simulacrum of the muse: based on traditional assumptions both of their role and the traditional roles of men and women, he shows that she is a copy without an original, as Erato confounds expectations time and again.

It might be said that by being wilful, she is actually following, rather than confounding, traditional expectations of the muse. This would be true if she merely refused, at times, to give her master his creativity freely; and there certainly exists a certain romantic tradition of seeing the artist as serving his muse. However, the struggle between Erato and the writer Miles runs deeper than that, and is situated in part in Erato's struggle to represent herself as she chooses. 'By constantly changing her identity, Erato evades Miles's efforts of signification and challenges his power of authorship.'[20] She is not merely being fickle, she is actively fighting the writer over control of the creative narrative – very unmuse-like behaviour, indeed.

Alongside the simulacra of the rose and the soul, there is a third instance of a simulacrum in Wilde's presentation of the relationship between Dorian and Basil. In the beginning of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Basil very much views

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19 Jane O'Sullivan, 'Cyborg or Goddess: Postmodernism and its Others in John Fowles' Mantissa', *College Literature*, 30.3 (2003), 109-123 (p. 110).
20 O'Sullivan, p. 115.

Dorian as a kind of muse. He describes Dorian in ways that leave very little room for error:

> What the invention of oil-painting was to the Venetians, the face of Antinous was to late Greek sculpture, and the face of Dorian Gray will some day be to me. It is not merely that I paint from him, draw from him, sketch from him. […] I know that the work I have done, since I met Dorian Gray, is good work, is the best work of my life. But in some curious way – I wonder will you understand me? – his personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style. I see things differently, I think of them differently. I can now recreate life in a way that was hidden from me before. (p. 23)

Not only does Dorian feature in a number of art works that Basil considers 'the best work of [his] life', but he is deeply and fundamentally inspired by the young man. This goes so far as to inspire a whole new way of seeing things; Basil clearly feels that the influence of Dorian's personality has allowed him to attain a next level in his art, expanding his technique 'in a way that was hidden' from the painter before he knew Dorian.

Yet Basil's attribution of all these things to Dorian will ultimately ruin him: he will die by Dorian's hand and moreover, he will die because of the corruption the young man experiences as a direct result of the portrait. This suggests that Basil has severely misjudged his muse, or, to be more precise, that what Basil sees as his muse is actually something altogether different. At the start

of the novel, the reader already receives hints that Basil himself is dimly aware of

a problem when he states that he will refuse to exhibit the portrait. He knows that

he has been taken over by this vision of Dorian and therefore strayed from his

own views on the artist's role: 'Hallward has an ideal conception of the role of the

artist, and he realizes from the outset of the novel that he has not lived up to his

conception. […] The artist has put into the picture his own idolatry and worship of

the physical embodiment of his ideal; he vows, therefore, never to exhibit the

portrait'.[21] Basil strongly feels that something transgressive has happened,

something that has been drawn out by his muse beyond what he himself has been

willing to give up. It remains unclear what exactly that something is; following

'The Critic as Artist' and its central point of the personality of the artist and critic

in achieving great art and/or criticism, the reader should expect personality to be

positive, rather than the negative sense in which Basil approaches it here.

The error, such as it is, that Basil makes here is the attribution of muse-like

qualities to Dorian. As a muse, Dorian is equally a simulacrum, like the rose and

the soul; he becomes burdened with all kinds of associations, which Wilde then

goes on to reject. For example, just as the muse is supposed to, Dorian frustrates

his artist with his fickle attitude and his eventual refusal to sit again for Basil – a

refusal that can only seem to Basil to be motivated solely by whim. What Basil

fails to see that in one sense 'Dorian is what people make out of him. He is the

perfect artist's model but little more than that. His soul is a perfect *tabula rasa*,

and anything of value derived from him must have existed in the eye of the

21 Houston Baker, 'A Tragedy of the Artist: The Picture of Dorian Gray', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 24.3(1969), 349-355 (p. 352).

beholder'.[22] Dorian is ready to become that model that is idealized in 'The Critic as Artist', something that will give itself wholly over to the artist's personality. Basil, in choosing instead to view Dorian through the empty lens of the muse-simulacrum, misses this opportunity. That Dorian is 'the perfect artist's model' is all the more significant in terms of the simulacrum; as a model, he is much more prone to become a copy of the artist's desires and observations, rather than a copy of himself – something which is exemplified in Basil's remark that he has painted Dorian as 'Paris in dainty armour, and as Adonis with huntsman's cloak and polished boar-spear', or 'crowned with heavy lotus-blossoms you had sat on the prow of Adrian's barge, gazing across the green turbid Nile' or even leaning 'over the still pool of some Greek woodland and seen in the water's silent silver the marvel of [his] own face' (p. 89).

What Fowles and Wilde show here is a problem inherent in some personified simulacra. Erato, like the fisherman's soul in Wilde's short story, turns out entirely differently than expectations. With the muse unwilling to follow traditional depictions, the reader is presented with a contrasting image: the classical image of a muse and the actual, frustrating grapple with artistic creation. This highlights the difference between that struggle and the romanticized image of the writer's inspired creativity. The contrast effectively questions this romantic, classical, false sense of the creative muse in a very postmodern way: the process makes use of the simulacrum as a central tool in showing this difference. In this postmodern way, Fowles employs a method that closely resembles Wilde's own approach in 'The Fisherman and his Soul' and 'The Nightingale and the Rose';

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22 Robert Keefe, 'Artist and Model in "The Picture of Dorian Gray", *Studies in the Novel*, 5.1 (1973), 63-70 (p. 64-65).

this indicates the proto-postmodernism of those works.

The problems that arise when personifying a simulacrum such as love or the muse are explored in other places in Wilde's work. These problems are linked to physical similarity, a key part of the theoretical discussion on simulacra:

Simulacra, on the other hand, are not internally proportionate to the original, thus their resemblance-effects are produced by an entirely different mechanism. […] Resemblance-effects are obtained by introducing the external regime of appearance: from an external perspective, simulacra appear to be proportionate to the original. […] Like an enormous statue that looks proportionate to the subjective eye, simulacra incorporate an external perspective into their structure, thereby producing their resemblance-effect.[23]

The 'resemblance-effect', then, means that simulacra derive their effectiveness from a strong resemblance to their original, even when they demonstrably are not the original – a illustrated by the example of the statue, which 'looks proportionate' even when in reality it is far too large to really resemble its original. This is due to the 'external regime', which is to say an appearance that is convincing enough in copying select aspects of the original so as to project similarity. This is not just a complicated way of stating that simulacra have their effect because they simply look like the things they copy; rather, they only copy specific elements, such as perspective and proportion. After all, a complete copy

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23 John Muckelbauer, 'Sophistic Travel: Inheriting the Simulacrum Through Plato's "The Sophists"', *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 34.3 (2001), 225-244 (p. 235).

without any modification would not result in a simulacrum, but in a duplication of the original.

It is this point of resemblance-effect that Wilde uses in 'The Happy Prince' for the statue of the prince. As with the soul, love and Dorian as muse, Wilde is interested in exposing the simulacrum as a copy without an original. The statue presented in 'The Happy Prince' conforms to the rich, majestic representations normally associated with royalty: the statue is 'gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and a large red ruby glowed on his sword-hilt' (p. 271). This statue has as its original a prince who lived an extremely sheltered life and, as a result, has known no sorrow until now. The statue tells a swallow that is resting beneath it:

> I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter. In the daytime I played with my companions in the garden, and in the evening I led the dance in the Great Hall. Round the garden ran a very lofty wall, but I never cared to ask what lay beyond it, everything about me was so beautiful. My courtiers called me the Happy Prince, and happy indeed I was, if pleasure be happiness. So I lived, and so I died. And now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep. (p. 272)

The story presents two views on the statue. The one side values the outward splendour and callous magnificence of the Prince, represented both by the Prince's

courtiers in Sans-Souci and by the grown-up townsfolk who admire the statue's appearance, calling it 'beautiful as a weathercock' (p. 271). The story clearly presents them as undesirable. The Happy Prince's statue is stripped of all outwardly beautiful and valuable things, which he wants to be given to the needy people of the city; when the mayor and the town councillors, who are apparently unaware of all the suffering in their city, pass the now-unglamorous statue, they can only comment on how shabby it looks and decide to melt it down and to use the iron for a statue of the mayor instead. The other view is represented most pronouncedly by God and the angels, who choose the statue's least 'beautiful' part, its broken lead heart, as the vehicle with which to allow the Happy Prince into Heaven; but also by the young children, who are able to compare the Happy Prince to an angel because they have seen these in their dreams – much to the chagrin of the Mathematical Master, one of the more outwardly-oriented group, who does 'not approve of children dreaming' (p. 271). The second group does not fall for the statue's resemblance-effect, but rather chooses to see the Happy Prince as both outwardly splendid but also inwardly compassionate. In this context it is very relevant that Wilde shows those who can look past the statue's resemblance-effect as either dreaming – thus bringing their own creativity to the act – or as divine, such as God and the angels. This portrays the effect very much in the same vein as the postmodern simulacrum, which is equally powerful and hard to resist or pierce.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the relationship between Dorian and his portrait is typical of the simulacrum due to the book's emphasis on appearance. In the novel, Dorian is one of the characters whose identification with another, be it

art or theory, leads to a problem: 'Dorian Gray blurs the boundaries between identities, between the physical Dorian and his painted representation, between Dorian and Wotton with his vicarious pleasure in Dorian's career, and between Dorian and Basil Hallward, the unwitting creator of his alter-image'.[24] Basil's mistake in losing himself in Dorian while assuming that the latter is his muse was discussed above; but Dorian himself makes a similar mistake in regards to his portrait as a simulacrum.

Dorian's picture starts off resembling him in appearance, even though its changing appearance soon becomes crucial to the development of the narrative. In this resemblance lies the core of the nature of the portrait as a simulacrum, as it introduces an important shift when Dorian himself becomes the thing with unchanging appearance and the portrait takes on the ageing qualities of the man. The shift signals a change which turns Dorian himself into the simulacrum, rather than the portrait. Dorian's exchange with his artistic representation comes about through a fervent wish that the portrait will age instead of him, so that he can be forever young; however, what youth means to Dorian, and what he sees as the implications of eternal youth, introduce the same kind of false assumption behind images that already featured in 'The Fisherman and his Soul' and 'The Nightingale and the Rose'. For 'by exchanging places with his own portrait, Dorian becomes an image pretending to be a man, a "gracious shape of art" that assumes the appearance of life'.[25] Dorian the image is fixed, and now has a resemblance-effect: he has the right sort of outward features so that he looks like

24 Linda Dryden, *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles: Stevenson, Wilde and Wells* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 118-119.
25 Elena Gomel, 'Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, and the (Un)Death of the Author', *Narrative*, 12.1 (2004), 74-92 (p. 80).

he should as a young, virtuous man.

However, as the novel progresses the falseness of Dorian's assumptions about ageing and the toll of his extreme life come to the foreground. One of the things that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* deals with is the juxtaposition of youth and age in terms of passion. Dorian, who has remained 'young' throughout the novel, finds towards the end that he has no capacity to enjoy things: '"I wish I could love," cried Dorian Gray with a deep note of pathos in his voice. "But I seem to have lost the passion and forgotten the desire. I am too much concentrated on myself. My own personality has become a burden to me. I want to escape, to go away, to forget"' (p. 147). Given eternal youth, Dorian had assumed that he could sample all things in life, and experience life to the fullest, without limitation; this is the essence of Dorian the image. But by this point in the novel that assumption has proven false. Having paid no price for his experience, he finds that things quickly become meaningless. He lacks the time limit put upon the experience of pleasure by the process of ageing, and lacks the physical toll of the life of debauchery that would heighten its experience through rarefying it. This leaves Dorian a simulacrum, a copy of the man of eternal youth who may experience anything, whereas in fact that youth does not exist.

It is not until the moment of his death that Dorian apparently regains himself: through stabbing the portrait, the earlier exchange is undone. When he is found by his servants, it is the old, wrinkled, loathsome version of Dorian previously confined to the portrait, while the portrait has once again assumed its representation of the eternal youth. Again the transference is neat, but now the portrait in itself becomes another simulacrum, reflecting something that no longer

exists: for the portrait was of Dorian, by the hand of Basil, and partly inspired by

Lord Henry (who produced the expression on Dorian's face that is immortalized

in the portrait). Dorian, however, is the monster lying dead on the floor before the

beautiful thing; Basil has been murdered, his love for Dorian proven hollow and

fatal; and Lord Henry's words set Dorian upon his ruinous course in the first

place, so that they, too, become suggestions without any underlying meaning.

Thus to the degree that the portrait is not still the simulacrum that Dorian was, it

has become another, a combination of the particular falsehoods of three men.

The Power of Mr. W. H.'s Simulacrum

The story 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' features another very clear simulacrum: a

forgery. This forgery, a portrait created to prove a literary theory, bases itself on

Elizabethan conventions and literary assumptions so as to produce something that

is so compelling that it will inspire faith in a theory even to the point of death;

this, in turn, illustrates how the simulacrum itself is both amoral and seductive.

Identifying the genre of 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' is complicated, as it is

alternately classified by critics as a short story, a piece of very Wildean literary

criticism (due to its heavy emphasis on textual analysis of Shakespeare's Sonnets),

or a mix of the two. For reasons of space, that discussion will not be explored

here, although the mixed form does allow for a few considerations that link form

and genre to concepts like the simulacrum. The form of a given genre, for

example, gives rise to expectations that might start to live a life of their own, as in

the phrase 'the butler did it' in murder mysteries (this is almost never the case,

except in stories by Agatha Christie or Conan Doyle). In any case, the story

concerns itself with a literary theory which identifies a boy actor named Willie Hughes as the addressee of Shakespeare's Sonnets. The main feature of the story – other than the playfully convincing exploration of this possible reading of the Sonnets – is the titular portrait. This portrait is a forgery commissioned by the man who came up with the Willie Hughes theory of the Sonnets, carefully constructed to follow portraiture conventions of Elizabethan times (even down to the style of a painter of the period, Clouet). He commissions it in order to prove his theory, having been challenged to produce some kind of physical proof in order to verify Willie Hughes's historical existence. Belief in the Hughes theory is transmitted between the three characters of the story, with them falling in, and sometimes falling out, of love with the theory; however, those who fall out of love with the portrait and the theory show a remarkable susceptibility to becoming re-enchanted by them.

This belief, fall from faith, and restoration of faith is tied to ownership of the portrait. The principal action of the story concerns the characters of Cyril Graham, the originator of the Hughes theory who, by the start of the story, is already dead; Erskine, who collaborated with him on the theory and owns the forgery at the start of the story; and the narrator, whose interest in forgeries sparks the whole narrative. The reader learns that Erskine thought the Hughes theory convincing, but did not fully subscribe to it until he came into the presence of the portrait. The narrator himself first becomes convinced after glimpsing the portrait, inspiring him to explore the Hughes theory in detail alone, since Erskine has become disenchanted with it. After he sends the result of his ardent analysis over to Erskine, however, he feels spent and almost immediately ceases to believe in

the thing he has just worked hard to prove. Erskine, who is in possession of the portrait, becomes re-enchanted through the narrator's renewed presentation of the Hughes theory (in essence mirroring Graham's arguing of the theory to Erskine), and renews his dedication to it; however he dies shortly afterwards, taking pains to make it look like he sacrificed his life for the theory, much like Cyril Graham actually did. The portrait at that point comes into the possession of the narrator, and resumes its influence over him: for, in the closing lines of the story, the narrator muses that 'sometimes, when I look at it, I think that there is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare's Sonnets' (p.350).

That the portrait of Willie Hughes can be conceived of as a simulacrum is clear; it is a copy without original, and in an even closer move to simulation, the existence of the boy depicted in the portrait is impossible to ascertain, thus blurring distinctions between reality and simulation. The interest here lies in the way in which this archetypal simulacrum shows how Wilde's use of the device anticipates quite strongly the simulacrum's power as image.

The portrait of Willie Hughes undoubtedly is a powerful thing, clearly imbued in some way with the ability to inspire faith in the Hughes theory. However, this power need not necessarily be attributed to the portrait in itself, but rather arises from those who view it and the information available at the time. In this way 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' presents its portrait in the same manner as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, though the latter painting is overtly magical, and is frequently attributed its own will by observers – especially Dorian himself, who at times feels mocked by it. The effect that the painting has on people is always in

things that are attributed to it by others. Though it is prominent (and fulfils its role of showing the 'true' Dorian) it is indifferent towards its onlookers, who must bring their own interpretations to it. The same is true for Willie Hughes's portrait, which does not necessarily inspire belief in and of itself. Erskine has it in his possession for a long time, after all, and only becomes susceptible to re-enchantment after not just owning the portrait, but being brought face to face once more with the full seductive force of the theory – it is the two working in unison that triggers his new commitment.

The use of a forgery or simulacrum points to the powerfully seductive aspects of images even in the face of their apparent indifference. The point is very like that of Baudrillard, who described this power of images in the following way: 'There is a kind of primal pleasure, of anthropological joy in images, a kind of brute fascination unencumbered by aesthetic, moral, social or political judgment. It is because of this that […] they are immoral, and that their fundamental power lies in this immorality.'[26] The image, and in this case Willie Hughes's portrait, is not moral. This is illustrated by the fact that Hughes's portrait is known to be a forgery to all three men who defend, at one time or another, the Hughes theory; yet this has no bearing on the effect it engenders in its observers and their belief in that theory.

It is the very fact that the theory is partly communicated by the portrait that explains its potency: 'Communication by images seldom, if ever, leaves room for doubt because their truthfulness is taken for granted: images are reality'.[27] Thus

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26 Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images* (Sydney: The Power Institute of Fine Arts, 1987), p. 28.
27 Eugene L. Arva, 'Writing the Vanishing Real: Hyperreality and Magical Realism', *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 38.1 (2009), 60-85 (p. 63).

the doubt is very prevalent, for example, in Erskine, who asks Graham for evidence of Hughes's existence before being able to allow for a theory that solves the mysterious identity of Shakespeare's 'W. H.'; but as soon as Erskine is confronted with an image, he is won over. The theory is – certainly within the confines of the story – quite plausible, but it repeatedly takes an image to bring about conversion or re-enchantment: the image, the form, must be there before the rest can be fully believed. It is something that Wilde also explores in his essays when he writes that 'The Creeds are believed, not because they are rational, but because they are repeated. Yes; Form is everything. It is the secret of life. Find expression for a sorrow, and it will become dear to you. Find expression for a joy, and you intensify its ecstasy' (p. 1149). One need not be logical if one has the power of a repeated image, of repeated form.

This emphasis on the image being able to convince even in the face of its clear status as falsehood, as forgery, suggests finally a celebration of the surface rather than an exploration of depth. This, too, is a crucial factor in the concept of the simulacrum, which has no depth, and relies on its surface for its suggestive power. It is here that the work of simulacra can be fully observed, where the move to hyperreality is made. Describing this function of simulacra, Zygmunt Bauman has remarked on 'the decomposition of structured, "hard" reality into the play of simulacra, in which simulation and dissimulation merge, in which a deeper reality is implied where it is all displayed at the surface'.[28] The creation of an implied deeper reality where really 'it is all displayed at the surface' again fits precisely with 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' where a whole, rich explanation of Shakespeare's

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28 Zygmunt Bauman, 'The Sweet Scent of Decomposition', in *Forget Baudrillard?*, ed. by Chris Rojek and Bryan S. Turner (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 22-46 (p. 43).

Sonnets is suggested by what amounts to a forged image, one that is moreover nothing but a surface. Yet its implications are many, not merely within the story, but also outside of it; it glorifies, after all, the love of a great artist for a same-sex young actor, in that way coming close to Wilde's own repeated modelling of his same-sex affairs on the Greek ideal of the older man teaching his younger boy-lover. All of these things imply a 'deeper reality', and yet they all depend on the power of the one image – that one simulacrum – of the boy that, quite possibly, never existed.

The story of simulacra does not end here; rather, Baudrillard envisioned their coming together into a kind of simulated reality, called hyperreality. Just as simulacra come together to form this hyperreality, so do Wilde's ideas on the various representations of reality come together in a view on the – at times preferred – artificiality of the real. And it is to this larger picture of hyperreality that the next chapter turns.

Chapter V   Hyperreality

When Wilde changed his accent after arriving Oxford, it was one of the indications that he was paying close attention to the way he appeared to others. Arriving in England after his graduation from Trinity College in Dublin, Wilde immediately started to alter how he represented himself, and 'the accent went first', to be replaced by a leisurely English drawl.[1] Another indication of Wilde's close attention to his image is reflected by one of his well-known phrases: having bought two large French porcelain vases of blue china, Wilde, who was very astutely aware that these vases projected an image of some kind, could not let the opportunity slip to point this out. The vases 'may have inspired the remark which reverberated first round the university, then round the country, "I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china"'.[2] The contrast between the vases' projected reality and Wilde's own – whatever it may have been – suggests a focus on representation very much grounded in its malleability.

The illusion of a projected life is one that provides fertile grounds for examining Wilde. Biographically, this is often linked to Wilde's double life as married man and lover of men in late-Victorian times, a connection made, for example, in Neil McKenna's recent biography.[3] It also allows for post-colonial inroads, justifying Wilde as an Irishman working in England. However, the distinction also indicates a strong resemblance to the postmodern concept of hyperreality.

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1 Barbara Belford, *Oscar Wilde: A Certain Genius* (London: Random House, 2000), p.50.
2 Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), p. 45.
3 Neil McKenna, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

The Hyperreal

The term 'hyperreality' was originally coined by Jean Baudrillard in order to describe the logical result of the presence of simulacra. It describes a process whereby the representations of reality used in daily life (especially in such media as film or television) are themselves based on representation instead of the reality (or original) they are supposed to be representing. Thus a series of simulacra dislodge 'actual' reality in order to replace it with hyperreality. In *Simulacra and Simulation* Baudrillard defines hyperreality simply as 'the simulation of something which never really existed'.[4] Umberto Eco, another theorist who has written extensively on hyperreality, defines it in relation to America by stating that 'the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake'.[5] Hyperreality in part arises when something is created to emphasize a possibly fictitious contrast between real and fake. As a general term, and like deconstruction, it is sometimes seen as nebulous due to its (postmodern) claim of the impossibility of the real and the unavailability of reality. And, just as with some of the other postmodern terms, such as the monstrous and the simulacrum, the concept of hyperreality has created considerable friction within academic quarters and with names such as Christopher Norris and Douglas Kellner.

Hyperreality, then, is mainly a blurring of reality and illusion to the point where the two have become indistinguishable, or rather, something else entirely. It

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4 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), p. 46.
5 Umberto Eco, 'Travels in Hyperreality', in *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1986), pp. 1-58 (pp. 7-8).

is 'an imaginary effect concealing that reality no more exists outside than inside the bounds of the artificial perimeter'.[6] The nature of the hyperreal as an 'imaginary effect' is crucial, since hyperreality is not the same as reality. However, it is not illusion either: 'Of the same order as the impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real, is the impossibility of staging an illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible.'[7] The entire problem that hyperreality concerns itself with is not necessarily the inaccessibility of the real, which is only part of the problem: it is the degree to which reality and illusion can no longer be separated. The two have become something else entirely, a third option that is neither, but occupies the positions of both.

The steps leading to the emergence of hyperreality can be concisely summarized as follows:

> Before it becomes simulation, the image – reality relationship follows four, more or less distinct stages: in the first, the image still reflects reality; in the second, it disguises reality; in the third, it masks the absence of reality; and in the last, it loses all connection with reality and becomes its own simulacrum. The image ultimately loses its old functionality as a representation of reality to become a model – a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.[8]

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6 Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster, trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (166-184), p. 172.
7 'Simulacra and Simulations', p. 177.
8 Eugene L. Arva, 'Writing the Vanishing Real: Hyperreality and Magical Realism', *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 38.1 (2009), 60-85 (p. 64). Arva adopts and clarifies these phases of

To clarify, the term simulacrum stands for a copy without an original, whereas hyperreality is a 'real without reality', which is to say, a complex assertion of truth that cannot be verified. Hyperreality is made up of simulacra; thus hyperreality is made up of images which are not images of anything specific – they do not represent anything real. Importantly, these images are taken as referring to something real even when they do not. Baudrillard famously asserted, for example, that the event known as the Gulf War did not actually take place: the images that the world received to represent the war had nothing to do with the war itself.[9] Because of the war's representation as clean and efficient, and because it was represented in a very distinct way so as to maintain popular support for the war, the constructed event that was presented as the real war struck many critics as 'a pure product of Baudrillardian hyperreality in which the distinction between reality and its representation had become increasingly difficult to sustain'.[10] Baudrillard's claim about the Gulf war was controversial and has prompted several critical responses, mostly notably from Christopher Norris.[11] Norris criticizes Baudrillard for portraying the war as fictitious, essentially considering him 'a nihilist denying physical reality'.[12]

Because it is part of a process, as outlined above, the move to hyperreality is gradual. The effacement of the distinction between reality and reproduction

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hyperreality from Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulation', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster, trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (166-184), p. 170.

9 Jean Baudrillard, 'The Gulf War: Is it Really Taking Place?', in *Postmodern Debates*, ed. by Simon Malpas (New York: Palgrave, 2001) pp. 63-74.

10 Paul Patton, 'This is not a War', in *Art and Artefact*, ed. by Nicholas Zurbrugg (London: Sage Publications, 1997), pp. 121-134 (p. 122).

11 Christopher Norris, 'Lost in the Funhouse: Baudrillard and the Politics of Postmodernism', *Textual Practice*, 3.3 (1989), 360-387.

12 William Merrin, *Baudrillard and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), p. 86.

happens through that process of repeated reproduction, resulting in 'a world in which the distinctions between signified and signifier have all but disappeared through successive reproductions of previous reproductions of reality'.[13] The result is something that appears real, and that is taken generally to be real. It is not until closer examination that it reveals its nature as not real, but hyperreal: based on a simulacrum, a copy of a copy, long since divorced from its original.

Critics writing on the hyperreal have often found a gratifying source for their discussion in the American phenomenon of Disneyland. Disneyland (or sometimes Disney World, the complete resort in Florida) is seen as a prime instance of the hyperreal because it is a fantasy world which is supposed to contrast with reality, but in fact does not. Disneyland exists as one supposed end of the spectrum, with everything about the amusement park representing fantasy and illusion; the other end of the spectrum is reality. This turns out to be a false dichotomy, as Baudrillard points out 'it is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle'.[14]

The crucial point involving hyperreality is that in order for Disneyland to represent a fantasy world, there must be such a thing as a fantasy. There are many implications of this presence of fantasy, the main one being a counter-presence of fantasy, a state that can be distinguished from fantasy by being absolutely real. In Disneyland it is possible to see animals and princesses in the street, and moreover, it is possible for those animals to live there and to entertain visitors, and for the princess to sell goods. The implication is that the reverse becomes true for reality:

13 Arva, p. 60.
14 'Simulacra and Simulations', p. 172.

animals have no place in the city, and royalty must be aloof, above petty concerns of buying and selling. This distinction, however, does not hold: a city can be full of animals, and many countries in possession of a royal house provide their monarchy with funds. The theme park is also seen as a confirmation of adulthood: 'Disneyland is meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the "real" world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere, particularly among those adults who go there to act the child in order to foster illusions of their real childishness.'[15] In both cases the existence of Disneyland creates a false binary. By creating an opposite, desirable position, an orderly reality is implied where it does not exist.

Another aspect of Disneyland in terms of hyperreality is the active blurring of the boundaries between reality and illusion that takes place within the amusement park. Umberto Eco, writing about the concept of Disneyland as a hyperreality as opposed to something like a wax museum, notes that 'Disneyland is more hyperrealistic then the wax museum, precisely because the latter still tries to make us believe that what we are seeing reproduces reality absolutely, whereas Disneyland makes it clear that within its magic enclosure it is fantasy that is absolutely reproduced. The Palace of Living Arts presents its Venus de Milo as almost real, whereas Disneyland can permit itself to present its reconstructions as masterpieces of falsification, for what it sells is, indeed, goods, but genuine merchandise, not reproductions'.[16] Instead of selling fakes, Disneyland sells real fakes – an apparent contradiction in terms – and this is another source of the hyperreal.

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15 'Simulacra and Simulations', p. 172.
16 Eco, p. 44.

Hyperreality in *Intentions*

In 'The Critic as Artist', speakers Ernest and Gilbert turn their attention to the repercussions of a critic who foregrounds personality in criticism. Arguing that this produces a renewal of the artwork, as every critic will provide a new (and, arguably, wonderful) reading, Gilbert states:

> He will always be reminding us that great works of art are living things – are, in fact, the only things that live. So much, indeed, will he feel this, that I am certain that, as civilisation progresses and we become more highly organised, the elect spirits of each age, the critical and cultured spirits, will grow less and less interested in actual life, and *will seek to gain their impressions almost entirely from what art has touched.*[17]

The above passage is based on a disconnection of perception and reality – one that is actively suggested in Wilde's phrasing that people will grow 'less interested in actual life'. The quotation proposes that people's 'impressions' will be gained solely from art – thus implying that they will no longer be taken from reality. Elsewhere, in 'Pen, Pencil, and Poison' and 'The Decay of Lying', Wilde has already argued that the base of art is the lie. The result is that the 'elect' will base themselves on impressions and images that are suggested by, but not tied to or representative of, a kind of truth, or true life. These words seem to mirror a

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17 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 1132. Emphasis is Wilde's. Further references to Wilde's work from this edition are given after quotations in the text.

specific current which is also found in hyperrealism. After all, the argument of hyperrealism also rests on a disconnection of a supposed underlying reality and a perceived version of it. For Wilde, the situation is one of preference and of choice, but the resemblance is nevertheless striking.

Furthermore, in proposing why the 'elect spirits' will choose to live on only those impressions that are derived from art, Wilde presents a further indication of something resembling hyperreality. Gilbert argues that the elect will not base themselves on life because it is 'deficient in form'. Life is not right, an imperfect work of art. This is what Gilbert has to say on the subject: 'There is a grotesque horror about its comedies, and its tragedies seem to culminate in farce' (p. 1132). The key lies in the terms Gilbert uses to describe life: he speaks of its 'comedies' and of life's 'tragedies' ending in 'farce'. The very terms used to describe reality are here terms borrowed from theatre, a form of representation. While 'life's tragedies' could conceivably be assumed to be an expression regarding unpleasant events in life, the usage of the terms 'comedy' and 'farce' in close conjunction definitely indicates a level of staging, of performance and artificiality, which fits hyperreality quite closely. This suggests something different from the hyperreal; after all, hyperreality is not optional, but rather a blurred area that becomes impossible to escape due to a loss of distinction between the real and the illusionary. However, the above quotation hints at that very thing even though the line of reasoning seems to diverge. More importantly, this shows the Wildean process of vanishing reality as one much like hyperreality: though voluntary, it represents a shifting from the second position – disguised reality – to the third, where reality's absence starts becoming masked. The

discussion in 'The Critic as Artist' then moves on to the familiar Wildean theme of immorality as a defining characteristic of art, and ultimately to the reasons why doing nothing is the most important thing of all – but this moment in the essay is quite revealing in terms of the correspondence between Wildean thinking and hyperreality.

Wilde also incorporates those points on artificiality and performance in terms of drama later on in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Drama is used explicitly as a method for reframing the reality of Sybil's death. He prefers to take up the illusion rather than the reality when he 'embraces the illusion of drama and refuses the world of genuine feeling. The narrative of Sibyl and her tragic death is critical in establishing the detachment that Dorian cultivates throughout the remainder of the story'.[18] The thought of Sybil as theatre is suggested by Lord Henry and briefly discussed and agreed upon by Dorian; then, very shortly after Lord Henry leaves, the reader is confronted with Dorian's thoughts, which have already begun to replace reality with the hyperreality of Wildean art:

> Poor Sibyl! What a romance it had all been! She had often mimicked death on the stage. Then Death himself had touched her and taken her with him. How had she played that dreadful last scene? Had she cursed him, as she died? No; she had died for love of him, and love would always be a sacrament to him now. She had atoned for everything by the sacrifice she had made of her life. He would not think any more of what she had made him go through, on that horrible night at the theatre. When he thought of

18 Dryden, p.130.

her, it would be as a wonderful tragic figure sent on to the world's stage to show the supreme reality of love. A wonderful tragic figure? Tears came to his eyes as he remembered her childlike look, and winsome fanciful ways, and shy tremulous grace. (p. 83)

Words such as 'romance' and the pondering of her death as playing 'that dreadful last scene' signal Dorian's reframing of Sybil as theatre; likewise, thoughts of her cursing him as she dies, or dying for love of him, bear the mark of fiction rather than fact. When he finally resolves to think of her 'as a wonderful tragic figure sent onto the world's stage to show the supreme reality of love' she has crucially left the stage of the theatre for the world's stage. The illusion of theatre and the reality of the world have become mixed, and the reality of Sybil's death has become a hyperreality out of theatre. This shows clearly how Dorian, through self-delusion, makes the move from disguised reality (in this case, theatre) to the absence of reality, which is to say that he makes Sybil disappear behind the characters she has played.

Wilde makes another point on the topic of real and illusion in 'The Critic as Artist'. In the essay Gilbert is defending the foregrounding of creativity in criticism when Ernest professes his doubts as to whether such a thing could really be considered criticism. Gilbert responds that this 'is the highest Criticism, for it criticises not merely the individual work of art, but Beauty itself, and fills with wonder a form which the artist may have left void, or not understood, or understood incompletely' (p. 1127). The criticism that Wilde advocates here is allowed to empty its subject and to fill it with the critic's own personality, which

will 'fill it with wonder' even if the artist has not entirely understood their own form. Essentially, Wilde is arguing a kind of indifference to the original artwork: the work of art – the illusion – is in itself meaningless and, according to Wilde's theory, awaits the critic's personality to remove the indifference and inertia, transmuting it into something 'which in the hands of the real artist becomes not merely a material element of metrical beauty, but a spiritual element of thought and passion' (p. 1111). The words 'indifference and inertia' may sound heavy and negative here, but nevertheless this is essentially what Wilde, too, is arguing, and it is exactly how hyperreality deals with the concept of illusion:

> The illusion of the world is preserved even in a simulacral world, though with a slight twist: originally, illusion is the possibility of meaning (things are meaningful insofar as they are different from themselves), but in a world where things have become themselves, illusion exists only as the absolute meaninglessness of everything, as indifference and inertia.[19]

Another main argument that is put forward by Wilde in *Intentions* is the relationship between art and nature. Here again Wilde's critical thought matches the concept of hyperreality in his reversal of the roles of nature and art. Wilde broaches this subject in 'The Truth of Masks' when he discusses the importance of staging and costume in a theatrical production. While stressing natural costume and the importance of actors familiarizing themselves early on with costume and props, Wilde casually notes that 'a scene is primarily a decorative background for

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19 Temenuga Trifonova, 'Is There a Subject in Hyperreality?', *PMC*, 13.3 (2003), 1-36 (p.14).

the actors, and should always be kept subordinate, first to the players, their dress, gesture, and action; and secondly, to the fundamental principle of decorative art, which is not to imitate but to suggest nature' (p. 954). As with the previous quotation, the importance lies in the details of the words. Wilde suggests here the principle of 'decorative art', which in his lecture 'Art and the Handicraftsman' he had described as the highest art: 'For we should remember that all the arts are fine arts and all the arts decorative arts. The greatest triumph of Italian painting was the decoration of a pope's chapel in Rome and the wall of a room in Venice. Michael Angelo wrought the one, and Tintoret, the dyer's son, the other.'[20] This implies that all art is decorative art. Additionally, in 'The Truth of Masks' Wilde argues that this decorative art, which is to say all art, ideally suggests nature rather than imitating it. This entails another reversal of the normal order: art informs nature, rather than being informed by it. This implies that art must come first. 'The Critic as Artist' already establishes that art is detached from reality; here is another step, which takes this art that is divorced from nature – essentially isolated into an autonomous position – as the basis for creating, rather than representing, nature. This autonomous position also represents the point where Wilde's thinking crosses into the fourth and final step on Arva's path to hyperreality: that last step entails losing 'all connection with reality' in order to become hyperreal.

While the autonomy is an important argument for Wilde, he primarily discusses theatrical techniques and methods of staging in 'The Truth of Masks', and does so in a very practical manner – his discussion is grounded in an archaeological production of Shakespeare that was staged just prior to his writing

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20 Oscar Wilde, 'Art and the Handicraftsman', in *Art and Decoration* (London: Methuen & Co, 1920), pp. 17-38 (p. 28).

the essay. In 'The Decay of Lying' Wilde takes the topic on in greater depth, however. In this essay, it arises over the course of the argument that lying should be considered far superior to telling the truth – and the reasons here go farther than those used by Gilbert to dismiss life in favour of art.

After Vivian has read most of his article to Cyril, the two pause when Vivian introduces the reversal of nature and art. Cyril is unwilling to accept this theory without some further corroboration: 'you don't mean to say,' he asks, 'that you seriously believe that Life imitates Art, that Life in fact is the mirror, and Art the reality?' (p. 1082). To prove his point, Vivian launches into a long discussion on the proper place for nature and art, one that will ultimately create the lie as a point in between the two. One of his playful examples concerns a woman that he had supposedly met a while ago, who had a very malleable personality. She falls under the fatal influence of art when she is exposed to a character that strongly resembles her, originating in the story of a long-dead Russian author:

> Some months afterwards I was in Venice, and finding the magazine in the reading-room of the hotel, I took it up casually to see what had become of the heroine. It was a most piteous tale, as the girl had ended by running away with a man absolutely inferior to her, not merely in social station, but in character and intellect also. I wrote to my friend that evening […] Before my letter had reached her, she had run away with a man who deserted her in six months. I saw her in 1884 in Paris, where she was living with her mother, and I asked her whether the story had had anything to do with her action. She told me that she had felt an absolutely

irresistible impulse to follow the heroine step by step in her strange and

fatal progress, and that it was with a feeling of real terror that she had

looked forward to the last few chapters of the story. (p. 1085)

In this passage, the force of art is such that it influences, even moulds, reality. A

little later, Vivian muses on a more likely point of the images created by

Impressionist painters and their power to influence the way people perceive the

world:

Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown

fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and

changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and

their masters, do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river,

and turn to faint forms of fading grace curved bridge and swaying barge?

(p. 1086)

The argument here is the same as in 'The Truth of Masks' but much more clearly

articulated: there is a definite reversal regarding the representation of art or nature.

In clarifying his argument, Vivian takes another important step towards

hyperreality. Expanding on the previous quotation, he states that 'things are

because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts

that have influenced us. […] At present, people see fogs, not because there are

fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of

such effects' (p. 1086). With this step, the move to art as the basis of all perception

is now complete: after all, it is argued here that what people perceive is determined by what is provided to them by art. Vivian argues that these fogs 'did not exist till Art had invented them' even though 'there must have been fogs for centuries in London' (p. 1086). This leaves reality and representation – nature and art – indistinguishable from each other. The reader is left with the concept of art, which is no longer fully a representation of anything; if anything, it is instead a thing that serves as a source of its own. Yet it is still a form of representation, since Vivian concedes the fogs must have been there to begin with. Just as with the blurring of reality and illusion in hyperreality, the real and its impressionist representation are now entirely entangled.

Additionally it is possible to see the argument presented above as essentially the same as the concept of hyperreality itself. The 'problem' of hyperreality is that observers end up with a representation without an available original, a copy of a copy. This problem is mirrored when Art is considered as representation, and the resultant fogs perceived by people as the representation of that representation, the copy of the copy. So in the above example someone might comment on the fog, or write about the fog, in which case the resulting writing would be a manifestation of hyperreality.

Furthermore there is a suggestion that Wilde pursued actively, rather than theoretically, this reversal of art and nature in his first staging of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Katherine Worth remarks on an interesting phenomenon involving the play and costume. She tells of Wilde's audiences finding themselves face to face with a mirror image:

> The elaborate formality of the costumes worn on George Alexander's stage reflected the clothes of the audience with a precision which made for a rather uncanny mirror image effect. Who was imitating whom? Gentlemen were said to study Alexander's immaculate dandy's outfits - of which Jack Worthing's mourning garb is the supreme example - before ordering their own clothes: presumably they thought theirs the real thing and the actors' make-believe, but Wilde knew that it was not so simple.[21]

The audience, made part of the performance by Wilde in his attempt to erase differences between the performer and the observer, crosses over into the realm of the hyperreal. The boundary between the artistic representation (*The Importance of Being Earnest*) and the supposed reality (the audience watching the play for the actors' costumes) collapses insofar as the audience starts to clothe themselves as the actors, who in turn wear a stylized version of what a Victorian person would wear either way. The 'original' is then made unrecognisable; audience and actors' costume is based on each other.

Crime, Punishment and the Real

In this way there are remarkable similarities between the arguments presented by Wilde in *Intentions* and the general concept of hyperreality. To an extent these arguments are also present in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism'. However, a very interesting correspondence specifically between Wilde's words in that essay and the writing of Baudrillard surfaces here. This has less to do with the nature of

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21 Katharine Worth, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 6.

the theory as Baudrillard describes it, but rather with the outcome that he foresees in terms of that theory – an outcome that matches Wilde's own theoretical outlook.

In his essay, Wilde muses on the abolition of matters such as crime and hunger, but the ultimate outcome of socialism in Wilde's eyes will be an intense individualism. There will be a change in social condition, and an increased independence for everyone, for the true socialism will radiate a sort of almost enlightening individualism: 'And yet while it will not meddle with others, it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is. The personality of man will be very wonderful. It will be as wonderful as the personality of a child' (p. 1179). The way in which such an individual interferes in other people's lives is exactly by not interfering: it helps by being beautiful, by being what it is. In some ways that individual is almost like an inanimate object, the 'beautiful thing', as Wilde puts it. There is something very non-social to Wilde's individualism.

Furthermore, the advent of this individualism through socialism will bring about the destruction of certain social institutions. 'Yes;' Wilde admits, 'there are suggestive things in Individualism. Socialism annihilates family life, for instance. With the abolition of private property, marriage in its present form must disappear' (p. 1181). He then assures that there will be a place for love – in fact Wilde believes that love will be the greater for being freed from the legal constraints of marriage – but nevertheless the structure of social life has to disappear. To take matters even farther, Wilde suggests that there is an actual opposition between individualism and the public, an opposition that he sketches in his description of public reaction to art:

In England, the arts that have escaped best are the arts in which the public take no interest. Poetry is an instance of what I mean. We have been able to have fine poetry in England because the public do not read it, and consequently do not influence it. The public like to insult poets because they are individual, but once they have insulted them, they leave them alone. In the case of the novel and the drama, arts in which the public do take an interest, the result of the exercise of popular authority has been absolutely ridiculous. No country produces such badly-written fiction, such tedious, common work in the novel form, such silly, vulgar plays as England. (p. 1185)

The social, meaning the public, will become a thing of the past under Wilde's socialism. In its place will come Wilde's individuals, a strangely detached state in which interaction might take the form of inspiring others in the same way that beautiful objects might.

The same sentiment in relationship to the same kind of effect would later be voiced by Baudrillard himself. Writing on hyperreality and politics, he comes onto the point of socialism. 'By an unforeseen twist of events and an irony which no longer belongs to history, it is through the death of the social that socialism will emerge – as it is through the death of God that religions emerge.'[22] Naturally Wilde's socialism seems to have more in common with what must be called communism – the abolishment of personal property, and so forth – while

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22 'Simulacra and Simulations', p. 181.

Baudrillard believes that socialism will be the result of a desire for the social after hyperreality has complicated that concept. This certainly validates a historicist reading of the essay; at the same time, however, it continues to develop an argument along the lines of hyperreality. The very strong connections between the breakdown of the social and socialism does not so much link Wilde to hyperreality as it shows how both Wilde's and Baudrillard's thinking on the consequences of hyperreality overlap: Wilde's art and beauty, which are linked to Wilde's version of hyperreality, lead to the same kind of socialist consequences as Baudrillard's hyperreality.

The point of Baudrillard's preoccupation with politics leads to another aspect of hyperreality in Wilde's work. The thinking on hyperreality as a state of being affecting social life partly deals with relationships of power and some of its resulting manifestations, such as crime and desire. Baudrillard's arguments on crime were introduced in Chapter Three: he calls into question the existence of crime, on the basis that crime and innocence require a kind of objective real in which to be grounded. In this manner it becomes impossible, for example, to create a fake robbery. Baudrillard muses on this at one point in 'Simulacra and Simulations':

> For example: it would be interesting to see whether the repressive apparatus would not react more violently to a simulated hold-up than to a real one? For a real hold-up only upsets the order of things, the right of property, whereas a simulated hold-up interferes with the very principle of reality. Transgression and violence are less serious, for they only contest

the *distribution* of the real. Simulation is infinitely more dangerous since it always suggests, over and above its object, that *law and order themselves might really be nothing more than simulation.*[23]

This quotation illustrates the sort of transgression that fascinated Wilde in his writing. Wilde challenged Victorian public perceptions to some degree, whether it was by calling art immoral during an age of intense moralization, or by insulting their taste in one of his many epigrams on England. He specifically speculates on positive artistic outcomes of crime and sin in 'Pen, Pencil and Poison'. Wilde is constantly looking to explore how crime might be defined differently, something which matches Baudrillard's thoughts on crime in the above quotation – thoughts arising from his theory of simulacra and hyperreality, rather than from a direct correspondence between Baudrillard's hyperreality and Wilde's artistic representation.

Law and order as simulations are illustrated in "The Canterville Ghost". In this story an American family purchases Canterville Chase, an estate that is said to be haunted by the Canterville Ghost. The story enacts a number of themes, such as the clash of old-world England and new-world America, or the pure maiden whose innocence brings salvation and happiness at the end of the story. The salient points here, however, have to do with the nature of the ghost and his clashes with the American family. The Canterville Ghost haunts the estate ostensibly because he is guilty of murder and is cursed until he is forgiven by an innocent girl, who must cry over his sins. Quite quickly, however, one of the

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23 'Simulacra and Simulations', p. 177. Emphasis is Baudrillard's.

points of the story becomes who is haunting whom. The American family proves remarkably resistant, even unhelpful, when it comes to the ghost's attempts at haunting. The father steadfastly attempts to remove a phantom blood stain with American detergents, the mother is simply inspired to join the 'Psychical Society', and two of the sons rather enjoy taunting the ghost, even to the point of calling the ghost's uniqueness into question by tricking him with a fake ghost that scares him because, 'never having seen a ghost before, he naturally was terribly frightened' (p. 192). Upon further investigation he even finds a placard with the fake ghost which reads 'YE OLDE GHOST. Ye Onlie True and Originale Spook. Beware of Ye Imitationes. All Others are Counterfeite' (p. 192). In an almost hyperreal turn, the children bring into doubt the ghost's status as the real thing. This is Wilde very actively setting up expectations which he can then, in a postmodern way, play with. Those expectations are linked here with what Tzvetan Todorov has called the Fantastic, which

> is characterized by the hesitation that the reader is invited to experience with regard to the natural or supernatural explanation of the events presented. More precisely, the world described in these texts is indeed our own world, but within that universe an event occurs for which we have difficulty finding a natural explanation.[24]

More important, though, is that the respective natures of reality, crime, and punishment are comically blurred in the story. First of all, the characters of the narrative – with the exception of the pure daughter, Virginia – refuse to act out the

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24 Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 24.

stereotypes otherwise associated with their roles in a typical haunting story. The American family is not afraid of the ghost; rather than the ghost haunting them, they end up haunting the ghost instead. The ghost himself approaches his curse more like an actor, portraying his various ghastly personae as roles: he plays, for example, the character of "Dumb Daniel, or the Suicide's Skeleton," a *rôle* in which he had on more than one occasion produced a great effect, and which he considered quite equal to his famous part of "Martin the Maniac, or the Masked Mystery"' (p. 191). The actor's approach to haunting that the ghost takes, and the haunting itself as a kind of performance, bring these matters into the realm of art and representation. Immediately reality – insofar as it can be present in a ghost story – becomes lost. At the very least, in the play expected to be enacted at Canterville Chase, none of the principal actors are fulfilling their role: the family is not scared, the ghost is not scary. On another level, the events taking place in the story are a particular kind of hyperreality: the story itself models the humorous reactions of the main characters on the template of a ghost story, projecting the expected reactions in fiction onto practical everyday life. In either case the original situation, the ghost being cursed for a crime, has receded to the background, and the story's transgressors become instead the family, whose crimes are not the expected kind, like murder, but transgressions against the 'proper' behaviour towards the ghost.

In this situation, what is real has become hopelessly lost within a set of prescribed roles – victim, family member, ghost, actor – which all blur together. This happens within the structure of a story which otherwise follows a predictable pattern, with a traditional opening and an almost fairytale ending. Moreover, it

leaves none of the characters with any power over the course of events until the final phases of the story, when Virginia redeems the ghost. The central segment of the story consists of a situation that is essentially circular: the ghost continues failing to scare the family and the family continues failing to be victims. This situation could go on forever, especially given the ghost's seemingly inexhaustible roles and methods of scaring people. This problem of power is similar to a problem in hyperreality, also to do with the exercise of power. Regarding the danger for society of hyperreal events, Baudrillard notes:

> On the contrary, it is as hyperreal events, no longer having any particular contents or aims, but indefinitely refracted by each other (for that matter like so-called historical events: strikes, demonstrations, crises, etc.), that they are precisely unverifiable by an order which can only exert itself on the real and the rational, on ends and means: a referential order which can only dominate referentials, a determinate power which can only dominate a determined world, but which can do nothing about that indefinite recurrence of simulation, about that weightless nebula no longer obeying the law of gravitation of the real – power itself eventually breaking apart in this space and becoming a simulation of power (disconnected from its aims and objectives, and dedicated to *power effects* and mass simulation).[25]

Power loses its effect – joins, in effect, the hyperreal – because what it attempts to

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25 'Simulacra and Simulations', p. 179. Emphasis is Baudrillard's.

hold power over is not itself real. This fits the situation of the American family and their ghost. Neither has power in the narrative, because each denies the other's reality: the ghost refuses to accept that the American family is not going to cooperate with being haunted, the American family does not accept that the ghost expects the proper reactions to being haunted. Of course this state of affairs ends as soon as the daughter does find the underlying truth of the ghost; the realm of the hyperreal is left behind, the ghost laid to rest, and the daughter marries a beautiful English man. The ending is fairytale, almost too much so – and in being in this sense unreal, the conclusion turns out to be that there is no escaping the hyperreal after all. Reality, in 'The Canterville Ghost', is deferred through its representation as picture-perfect. Again Wilde's writing shows remarkable similarities with the postmodern theory on hyperreality.

Such picture-perfection is satirized again by Wilde in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. There, too, Wilde defers reality in the ending by creating an end that is unlikely in its perfection: all of the characters end up reunited and happy in some form or another, sometimes in the most implausible manner. Critics such as Christopher Craft and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have read the ending of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in the context of Wilde's same-sex desires, reading the joking perfection of the play's oddly sterile heterosexual resolution as an explicit comment on Victorian restrictions on the matter: 'in lieu of "serious" closure, and as if to deride even the possibility of formal solution to the fugitivity of Bunburying desire, Wilde terminates his play, farcically and famously, with an impudent iteration of his farce's "trivial" but crucial pun'.[26] Such representations

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26 Christopher Craft, 'Alias Bunbury: Desire and Termination in The Importance of Being Earnest', *Representations*, 31.3 (1990), 19-46 (p. 34).

are another kind of Wildean hyperreality, as Wilde very much questions the hyperreality of a picture-perfect heterosexual ending in much the same way as he questions the picture-perfect ending of 'The Canterville Ghost'.

Additionally, *The Importance of Being Earnest* again confirms that Wilde's thought follows the development of hyperreality as defined by Arva. Wilde subverts the genre of the play – specifically the late-Victorian social comedy – by actively playing with its generic conventions, or as Todorov has stated, 'we would have to say that a given work manifests a certain genre, not that this genre exists in the work'.[27] The manifestation is where Wilde employs the stages of hyperreality, starting with normal human beings who reflect reality; then with the men attempting to resemble fictitious people, such as Ernest; finally with the confusion between a human and 'a three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality' (p. 413). These are the first three steps, with only the complete loss with reality still to come. The ending of *Earnest* seems to suggest a return to normal reality, but the ridiculously picture-perfect ending is in effect so artificial – especially considering the normal endings of other plays in the genre – that it resembles much more the final stage of hyperreality, the loss of all connection with reality.

Magical Realism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Baudrillard argues that power is not entirely defenceless against the nullifying effects of hyperreality. 'The only weapon of power, its only strategy against this deflection', he writes, 'is to reinject realness and referentiality everywhere, in order to convince us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and

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27 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 21.

the finalities of production. For that purpose it prefers the discourse of crisis, but also – why not? – the discourse of desire'.[28] And the topic of desire signals some additional ways in which Wilde's writing resembles writing on hyperreality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the story of the man who fell through the fulfilment of his every desire.

The Picture of Dorian Gray's hyperreality is in part linked to the critical term 'magical realism'. Magical realism is a postmodern narrative mode closely linked to hyperreality, which is to say that 'magical realist representation and hyperreality are, in fact, mutually inclusive'.[29] The key here lies in the need for magical realism necessarily to try and represent reality, meaning that 'magical realism, a postmodern phenomenon *par excellence*, does not so much create new realities as re-create our own reality – often by pushing its limits, true, but even more often by enhancing its black holes, its inaccessible spaces'.[30] Thus magical realism is a specific and artificial representation of reality, just as hyperreality is.

Perhaps the most well-known novel that employs magic realism is the Booker of Bookers, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980). Like *Dorian Gray*, it is a work of magical realism, in the sense that it introduces a supernatural or magical effect into an otherwise mundane setting. The story is told in a realistic manner, but with the introduction of fantastical elements: in the case of Dorian, a magical portrait that will bear his ageing and sins, while in the case of *Midnight's Children's* protagonist, Saleem Sinai, a supernatural gift of telepathy or smell due to a birth close to the hour of India's independence on the night of August 15th, 1947, their powers dependent on the exact moment of birth: 'the closer to

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28 'Simulacra and Simulations', p. 179.
29 Arva, p. 70.
30 Arva, p. 69.

midnight our birth-times were, the greater were our gifts'.[31] The objective tone of Wilde's novel coupled with its logical progression suggest that *Dorian Gray* is a suitable example of the genre; in addition, it may be classed as magical realism due to the nature of its storyteller, the events and distinct shift in narrative at the end, and the nature of the portrait. All of these resemble hyperreality in conjunction with magical realism.

Dorian's portrait itself has already been described as a simulacrum: with its detachment from Dorian's appearance early on in the novel, the portrait essentially loses its connection with its original and a step is made towards hyperreality. This happens when Dorian and his portrait move farther and farther apart in terms of appearance. The reader must trust the portrait – which is no longer a direct physical representation of Dorian – to provide information on the depth of Dorian's downward spiral. To make matters worse, when Dorian reveals the portrait to Basil, the figure in the portrait has aged horribly despite Dorian being thirty-eight years old. This is described first in chapter thirteen, where the portrait is observed by Basil, who notices 'there was still some gold in the thinning hair and some scarlet on the sensual mouth. The sodden eyes had kept something of the loveliness of their blue, the noble curves had not yet completely passed away from chiselled nostrils and from plastic throat' (p. 115). Then in chapter twenty it is described through Dorian's eyes: 'He could see no change, save that in the eyes there was a look of cunning and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite […] And why was the red stain larger than it had been? It seemed to have crept like a horrible disease over the wrinkled fingers' (p. 158).

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31 Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage, 2006), p. 275.

Clearly the portrait has aged considerably – it could be said excessively – and this brings into question the accuracy of the portrait: the reader is left to determine for themselves whether Dorian has aged more quickly because of his debauched lifestyle, or whether the portrait is simply giving an exaggerated or stylized representation of Dorian's decay. And these are just two of the many options. The portrait does not allow itself to be accurately perceived. Nor is Dorian himself trustworthy: his corruption is constantly hinted at by the narrator, and his name is rumoured, though never connected, throughout the narrative with scandal. Nevertheless he remains beautiful, perhaps the kind of beauty that Wilde describes in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', that true beauty which inspires. What the actual state of affairs is, however, remains clouded, shielded from the reader. The portrait should be the reality, with Dorian the lie, but under closer consideration these two collapse into something less definite. There is a single thing: Dorian, the pure, beautiful, corrupt, ugly man and/or portrait, neither truth nor lie, neither real nor illusionary.

The book shares this feature with *Midnight's Children*. Here, too, there is a portrait that bears sins – although in the case of Rushdie's novel, the protagonist is himself the portrait, incorporating within his body the unification of India. This is meant both literally – Saleem and India both enter the world at the exact same moment, and Saleem seemingly disintegrates as India does when it cedes, for example, Pakistan – but also figuratively, as the narrator envisions the story, a uniquely intimate view on Indian independence, as blood seeping from a disintegrating body: 'history pours out of my fissured body'.[32]

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32 Rushdie, p. 45.

There is another magical reality element to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* at the end of the novel, which conforms to the way magical realist narratives represent traumatic events: a hyperreal occurrence called 'traumatic imagination'.[33] This traumatic imagination entails the deferral of reality, as previously mentioned by Baudrillard. Rather than render whatever the traumatic event is, it is transferred into the imagination. In short, the event is constructed in imagination rather than produced directly. There are specific types of moments during narrations where such deferral manifests itself: 'as a process of traumatic imagination, magical realist writing keeps alive the illusion and the mystery inherent in phenomenal knowledge, particularly when the object of that knowledge is pain or death.'[34]

This narrative technique is found several times in the novel, but the most striking example comes at the end, when Dorian impulsively attacks his portrait. He has just found out that the remorse and the subsequent new beginning, which he was trying to claim for himself, amount to nothing but another ugly twist in the portrait's appearance, and another fresh bloodstain. At the moment of the attack, the narrator pulls away to focus on the reactions of others to the murder, most notably the things heard by Dorian's servants. The moment is deferred at exactly the point where the death takes place. Wilde in this way 'keeps alive the illusion and the mystery', and moreover does so at the moment of death, which is singled out by the quotation as an important defining feature. Furthermore, with this disappearance from the narrative Dorian in a sense becomes

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33 Arva, p. 61.
34 Arva, pp. 73-74.

the hyperreal, the constantly vanishing real: a world void of original

referents either because extreme events have rendered them inaccessible,

or because they have become too familiar and too trite, blurred by the

successive layers of simulacra that pervade all too much of contemporary

discourse.[35]

Dorian's fate indeed becomes inaccessible; the reader is told some things through the words and reactions of others, but Dorian himself has departed from the narrative.

Again there is a parallel with *Midnight's Children*, where the narrator is also doomed. This death, too, is deferred – and must be, as Rushdie's suggestion is that Saleem's final disintegration on the eve of 31 years will simultaneously be the disintegration of India. Saleem's final words ring before his own death, an event constantly foretold in the book, but averted as a traumatic event – after all, Saleem describes his own death as 'cracking now, fission of Saleem, I am the bomb in Bombay, watch me explode, bones splitting breaking beneath the awful pressure of the crowd' – a rather gruesome anticipation, indeed.[36]

Finally, the novel's ending provides another link between Wildean writing and hyperreality in the role played by deterrence. According to Baudrillard, 'hyperreality and simulation are deterrents of every principle and of every objective; they turn against power this deterrence which it so well utilized for a long time itself'.[37] This allows an ending for the novel in which the painting is considered to be hyperreal. Following Baudrillard's quotation, this explains

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35 Arva , p. 81.
36 Rushdie, p. 647.
37 'Simulacra and Simulations', p. 179.

Dorian's rashly impulsive act in terms of an attempt to reassert his power. Manifesting power's desire to reinject reality into an uncertainty (a portrait that seems to twist whatever good intention he might have), Dorian tries to destroy the painting. The painting, however, can be said to 'turn against power this deterrence' quite literally. Dorian has not been exposed to reality, but his attempt to attack the painting causes the painting to turn it against him. Crucially this riposte on the portrait's behalf is not to return Dorian's 'true' appearance to him, but to manifest the fact that their beings are blurred, confused. Dorian and his portrait, in the hyperreal sense, cannot be told apart, and so Dorian's attack on the canvas is also an attack upon himself.

Thus, Wilde's work explores representation in similar ways to Baudrillard's simulacrum and hyperreality. There is more, however, in Wilde's discussion of representation, especially considering the many ways in which portraiture of one sort or another plays a part in his many works. This further exploration of representation is the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter VI   Portraiture, Reading and the Surface

Curiously enough for someone whose complete works evoke only a few photographic portrait but at least six painted portraits, Wilde never had himself painted – that is to say, never by anybody but himself, through his own words. Instead there are the posed photographs that pervade editions of the biographies and collected works: Wilde, here with short hair, here with long; here posing as a dandy, here as a Victorian gentleman; here an artist, here a man of rich commercial and theatrical success. Richard Ellmann captured this part of Wilde's life well when he wrote of him:

> Wilde had long been concerned with images. He had painted self-portrait after self-portrait: at Trinity College he experimented with a beard, then shaved it off; he let his hair grow long at Oxford and had it waved, then in Paris had it cut and curled Roman-style, then let it grow long again. […] No wonder he spoke often about poses and masks. 'The first duty in life is to assume a pose,' he said, 'what the second duty is no one yet has found out.'[1]

The pervasive concept of portraiture suggests an opposition of surface and depth. After all, Wilde cryptically states that 'all art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril'.[2] This statement conflates surface

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1 Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), pp. 293-294.
2 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), p. 17. Further references to Wilde's work from this edition are given after quotations in the text.

and symbol, with the symbol being the suggested depth. Wilde's warning about going beneath the surface is ambiguous: either the depth beneath the surface is full of peril, or the notion of going beneath the surface is perilous in itself, because Wilde states there is no such thing as depth beneath the surface, only an amalgamation of the two, the surface and symbol at once. The first indicates a classic signifier – signified relationship in the Saussurian tradition, while the latter is along the lines of deconstruction's collapsed binary – as established in Chapters I and II. Thus it would be a tenuous assumption to attribute an automatic other half – depth – to Wilde, simply and only because he shows great interest in image and surface.

Wilde's interest in foregrounding the problem of depth and surface is something he has in common with postmodernism. This common link shows in his strong interest in portraiture: in Wilde's portraits there is often the suggestion of depth where there actually is nothing – an element shown, for example, in 'The Sphinx Without a Secret', or in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where Dorian confuses depth and surface in his wish to become ageless like the portrait. The problematic issue of depth is there throughout Wilde's writing.

Surfaces

The distinction between depth and surface originates in the idea of meaning – the very idea undermined by the disappearance of the stable self in postmodernism. The complication of surface and depth is basically the move from structuralism to post-structuralism and the complication of the Saussurian binary relationship between signifier and signified. Previously any surface – be it a poem, a statue, a

painting, or any such thing – had encoded within it, somehow, its meaning, which is to say that the meaning was inherent in the thing itself, so that careful analysis would decode the meaning of such things hidden beneath the surface; there was, in other words, a clear distinction between the signifier and the signified. With the advent of postmodernism, however, the idea of something intrinsically carrying meaning – the 'natural' meaning encoded into it – became suspect (see Chapter III). As post-structuralists pointed out, signifiers ultimately point only to other signifiers. Previously there had been depth; now there is only surface. The reader is left 'on a surface which seems happy to be nothing *but* surface, without the depths of significance which a literary education trains us to seek out'.[3] Crucially, this is not to say that meaning becomes impossible in postmodernism. There is still meaning – and plenty of it – but it is engendered within the observer, or rather, the reader. With meaning thus becoming the responsibility of a reader, the text is left with only one aspect: the surface.

It is perhaps more accurate to say, however, as some critics have argued, that depth has not simply disappeared, but rather that the binary opposition of surface and depth has been collapsed. Thus it is possible to view the collapse of depth and surface in light of a similar collapse of other binaries with similar suggestions of separated appearance and content, as sketched by Gerd Gemünden:

> Conflation of inside and outside is indicative of the disappearance of other oppositions that are at the core of modernism, including the dialectics of essence and appearance; the Freudian model of latent and manifest, of

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3 Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002). p. 86. The emphasis is Barry's.

repression; the existential model of authenticity and inauthenticity (alienation and disalienation); and the great semiotic opposition between signifier and signified. The disappearance of these oppositions has radically changed our understanding of the relation of art to politics. Culture can no longer claim an autonomous or semi-autonomous sphere in the practical world.[4]

To say that things are only surface is to be too literal; the capability of generating meaning is after all still there, somewhere. The distinction is no longer possible because meaning is not intrinsically present in the text, be it a poem, statue, or building. Thus the binary opposition regarding surface and depth becomes meaningless in this regard. The attention to 'surface', then, must be seen as an attention to the text after the 'depth' of intrinsic meaning has been stripped away. The emphasis on the collapse of this particular binary is a key postmodern idea:

> Attention to surfaces has, of course, always been important to modernist thought and practice (particularly since the cubists), but it has always been paralleled by the kind of question […] about urban life: how can we build, represent, and attend to these surfaces with the requisite sympathy and seriousness in order to get behind them and identify essential meanings? Postmodernism, with its resignation to bottomless fragmentation and ephemerality, generally refuses to contemplate that question.[5]

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4 Gerd Gemünden, 'The Depth of the Surface, or, What Rolf Dieter Brinkmann Learned from Andy Warhol', *German Quarterly*, 68.3 (1995), 235-250 (p. 235).
5 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990), pp. 58-59.

This quotation also illustrates a problematic point in postmodern theory: the apparent disappearance of depth. This disappearance arguably entails a misreading of the surface versus depth argument, which does not so much get rid of depth, but, as stated before, transfers it to the realm of the subject, who is not the focus of the analysis. An example is the work of historical fiction, which presents the surface of a fictional account set in the supposed depth of actual historical circumstance. Wilde himself wrote two historical works, his two plays *The Duchess of Padua* and *Vera, or the Nihilists* (a third, *A Florentine Tragedy*, was never finished and remains only a small fragment). Of these two, *Vera* entails historical events, based as it is on the actions of Vera Zasulich in Russia in 1878. In general terms, the collapse of the specific surface/depth binary conflates both fictional narrative and historical circumstance into a single story, rather than fiction being overlaid on fact. In this way 'postmodern fiction involves both the "installation" and the "subversion" of the history/fiction divide.'[6] The work, presenting itself specifically as *historical* fiction, calls upon the concept of history, but proceeds to undermine, through the 'subversion of the history/fiction' opposition, that concept as part of its postmodern process. In *Vera*, for example, Wilde picks up several facts from Vera Zasulich's story – her involvement in a plot that led to an assassination, the Russian Nihilist's plot (and eventual success) to murder Tsar Alexander II, Vera's own resistance against such ideas – but very emphatically constructs his own story, choosing to read history as inspiration rather than fact. Thus Zasulich's murder of a Russian colonel becomes a meeting with a colonel in the play's prologue as well as her assignment to assassinate

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6 Michael McKeon, 'The New Novel, the Postmodern Novel', in *Theory of the Novel: a Historical Approach*, ed. by Michael McKeon (London: John Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. 803-808 (p. 808).

Alexis; the Nihilists become the driving motivation in forcing Vera to attempt the assassination; and Vera's reluctance translates to a story of love and self-sacrifice when she stabs herself in order to save Alexis from his impending death.

The disappearance of the distinction between surface and depth is not limited to text. In photographic portraits, for example, it is impossible to find meaning beneath a surface because of a lack of determinable intent on the part of the photographer. 'The body holding the camera can never be known by touch or sound but only by the photograph's depiction of what was in front of the photographer's eyes when the picture was taken.'[7] Everything – including any conclusion about the person taking the photograph – must be observed in the surface of that photograph. The 'reader' of such a photograph has no intrinsic tools, no 'touch or sound', but must bring their own reading of the surface to bear on the photograph to be able to make any kind of conclusion, even about something as simple as the photographer responsible for the photograph.

Frederic Jameson has been vocal in proposing this collapse of the surface/depth binary. Though he is by no means the only one to explore this issue, he treats that collapse extensively in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Here the foregrounding of surface is at the heart of his theoretical argument (though in Jameson the argument later takes a turn towards the textuality of perceived reality). Like other critics, Jameson argues that 'depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces (what is often called intertextuality is

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7 Laura Mandell, 'Imaging Interiority: Photography, Psychology, and Lyric Poetry', *Victorian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Social, Political, and Cultural Studies*, 49.2 (2007), 218-227 (p. 223).

in that sense no longer a matter of depth)'.[8] Like other critics, he locates the disappearance of the surface-depth model in the context of the disappearance of binaries in general:

> In the shrinking world of the present day, with its gradual levelling of class and national and racial differences, and its imminent abolition of Nature (as some ultimate term of Otherness or difference), it ought to be less difficult to understand to what degree the concept of good and evil is a positional one that coincides with categories of Otherness.[9]

This quotation echoes earlier points by Wilde on the disappearance or falsehood of the natural, as well as introducing several political points on Jameson's part. The conflation of surface and depth, in the context of the binary in general, leads attention away from the text's depth, its intrinsic meaning.

A Wildean interest in the surface has been remarked on by several critics, most notably by Jonathan Dollimore, who states that Wilde's 'transgressive aesthetic anticipates post-modernism to the extent that it suggests a culture of the surface, the decentered and the different'.[10] Wilde cryptically stated his own position as art being 'at once surface and symbol'. In the same preface, following his remarks on surface and symbol, he also states that 'it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors' (p. 17). This suggests that the reader, the observer of

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8 Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 12.

9 Frederic Jameson, 'Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism', in *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. by David Duff (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), pp. 167-192 (p. 174).

10 Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 73.

the mirror's surface, is really the one responsible for generating meaning. In just the same way, postmodern critics must ask where the interpretation of text comes from. In this regard, Jameson's theoretical thought leads into another central approach: the rise, in the 1970s, of reader-response criticism. It is here that the strong correlations with Wilde resume.

Reader Response

One of the consequences of Jameson's logic is that the surface becomes readable text: he concludes that 'everything can now be a text in that sense (daily life, the body, political representations)' and as a result 'objects that were formerly "works" can now be reread as immense ensembles or systems of texts of various kinds, superimposed on each other by way of the various intertextualities, successions of fragments'.[11] The disappearance of the surface-depth model transfers the emphasis to the role of the reader. With everything having become text, the observer – the reader of that text – is now seen to be responsible for constructing meaning.

The change foregrounds the approach of reader-response criticism, a critical approach that has its origins before the advent of postmodernism with thinkers such as Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. It concerns itself with the reader of literary works as much as, if not more than, with the work itself. It does so in light of its assumption that 'literary works do not function as self-contained, autonomous objects, but rather as realities that become established by the readers

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11 *Cultural Logic*, p. 77.

who consume them'.[12] One of its most recognized proponents is Stanley Fish, who is most representative of a postmodern tradition that places the responsibility of generating meaning, much like Wilde, most emphatically with the reader.

Fish's contribution to the debate is his assertion that it is not simply the reader in isolation who manifests meaning, but rather that such meaning is generated by groups of readers and in the context of a shared agreement of what a text can mean. As he puts it:

> It is the reader who 'makes' literature. This sounds like the rankest subjectivism, but it is qualified almost immediately when the reader is identified not as a free agent, making literature in any old way, but as a member of a community whose assumptions about literature determine the kind of attention he pays and thus the kind of literature 'he' 'makes'. […] Thus the act of recognizing literature is not constrained by something in the text, nor does it issue from an independent and arbitrary will; rather, it proceeds from a collective decision as to what will count as literature, a decision that will be in force only so long as a community of readers or believers continues to abide by it.[13]

First of all, Fish himself points out his problematic position, in that his approach seems to open the field to anyone, and to come up with any reading of any work, thus abandoning literary criticism to anarchy (something which, to a degree, is

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12 Julian Wolfreys, Ruth Robbins and Kenneth Womack, *Key Concepts in Literary Theory*, 2nd edn (Edingburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 149.
13 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (London: Harvard University Press, 1982) p. 11.

less of a problem with Wilde, whose emphasis is partly on an elaborate, intensive process of art and criticism). However, in general readers do not manifest extremely varying readings of certain texts, and readings tend to be moderately stable, so that, for example, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is often read as a novel about sexuality, or reading, or morality, but is unlikely to be read as an allegory of space travel or as addressing the problems of slavery, to name two outlandish examples. To account for this fact, Fish locates the reader within a community, which enforces certain types of reading while rejecting others. These various communities have varying, rather than set, rules for interpretation. This prevents readers from being entirely 'free agents', but still leaves a very considerable amount of freedom to the reader.

In the above passage, Fish stresses that interpretive communities are changeable: a way of reading is valid 'so long as the community of readers or believers continues to abide by it'. This is his account of the changing nature of literary criticism: change happens simply because readers stop abiding by a previous interest and move on to the next. In order to account for changes in approaches to reading, strong readers (like, for example, Derrida or Jameson) persuade others of their approach: they 'persuade by pointing to the aspects of the work that have not been pointed out before. Interpretation is thus inescapably descriptive, and what we describe is the way the work appears to us, the shape it has for us'.[14] Others have since contributed other ways of explaining how interpretative approaches might change, suggesting, for example, a focus on connectivity. This solution requires an emphasis of the connection between

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14 Reed Way Dasenbrock, 'Accounting for the Changing Certainties of Interpretive Communities', *MLN* 101.5 (1986), pp. 1022-1041 (pp. 1034-1035).

communities (for example, the connections between structuralism and post-structuralism) rather than viewing communities as self-reliant islands, or deconstruction appearing as though out of nowhere. This is valid for both literature and criticism, as Reed Way Dasenbrock notes: 'something similar is involved in the reading of criticism. No reader is ever as dominated or passive in the act of persuasion as Fish's conversion model suggests. There is a general connection between our old position and our new'.[15]

Because of these problems, however, the idea of interpretive communities remains problematic. One critic summarizes the problems with Fish's theoretical approach as follows:

Can Fish be right, for example, in arguing that interpreters 'create' meanings without prompting from any preexistent text? Can it be true, as Fish argues in 'How to Recognize a Poem When You See One,' that the 'act of recognition' is not 'triggered' by the features of texts or other objects, but itself 'produces' or 'creates' those features that we then imagine to exist independent of us? (325-7). And can the fact that interpreters come in subcommunities sufficiently explain how they change their minds? Don't we necessarily assume that our readings are answerable to something outside our orbit of expectations?[16]

In addition, readers can subscribe to theories but maintain their own variations on what they accept or reject in a theory. Such minor variations are also hard to

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15 Dasenbrock, p. 1035.
16 Gerald Graff, 'Headnote to 'Is there a Text in This Class?'', in *The Stanley Fish Reader*, ed. by H. Aram Veeser (Oxford: Balckwell Publishers, 1999), pp. 38-40 (pp. 38-39).

account for in this theory; readers will have a hard time to determine 'precisely what constitutes an interpretive community, how one enters such a community, how subgroups of individuals can be said to share meanings, truths, and so forth, within such a community', which ultimately means that 'for different individuals, everyone [forms] his/her own interpretive community of one'.[17] This last point is extremely important, since rather than entailing a fatal criticism of interpretive communities, it instead points to the logical end-point of the critical journey. Readers are part of an interpretive community in a broad sense, but on an individual level, minor variations in the critical positions that the reader holds ultimately result in individual opinion. In other words, the more finely the community is defined, the more individual it becomes – and the closer, also, to a principle of Wildean individualism.

The emphasis on the problems with Fish's theory of reader-response criticism presented above is important, because the same sorts of problems are contained in Wilde's work. Fish's arguments are persuasive but at times vague and, as seen above, do not always work when taken to logical extremes; Wilde's arguments often suffers the same fate.

Wilde overlaps with the idea of interpretive communities in his strong awareness of the communal nature of approaches to reading and art – though for Wilde this often takes a negative form – and in the resulting emphasis on how meaning is generated. Wilde's hostility to the public is obvious and apparently contradicts the idea of an interpretive community, as he seems to reject the idea of a communal approach to art and criticism as undesirable. So, for example, he

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17 Hogan, pp. 145-46.

bitingly remarks that 'The public imagine that, because they are interested in their immediate surroundings, Art should be interested in them also, and should take them as her subject-matter' (p. 1077). He sees this as a bad influence that the 'public' has on art. Yet in the acknowledgement of the fact of that influence, Wilde confirms that groups, rather than individuals, form such readings. Elsewhere he confirms clearly both that a group – in this case, a theatre audience – can hold communal views and that such views change. Speaking on the movement in theatre that seeks to introduce archaeological theory into artistic representation, he notes:

> The public have undergone a transformation; there is far more appreciation of beauty now than there was a few years ago; and though they may not be familiar with the authorities and archaeological data for what is shown to them, still they enjoy whatever loveliness they look at. (p. 1169)

Wilde may not agree with the ways of reading promoted by these interpretive communities, but he clearly sees such communities at work, even when he does not explicitly name them.

This reading does go against the individualism that Wilde espouses elsewhere. In *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, after all, Wilde argues that the quintessentially collectivist movement would ultimately lead to more and stronger individualism; and in *The Critic as Artist*, when Ernest protests that 'the world's greatest poems, great poems of the early world, the primitive, anonymous collective poems, were the result of the imagination of races, rather than of the

imagination of individuals', Gilbert counters this by reducing the number of the group back to one: 'Not when they became poetry. Not when they received a beautiful form. For there is no art where there is no style, and no style where there is no unity, and unity is of the individual' (p. 1119). This last quotation, however, shows a process that Wilde has in common with Fish's interpretive communities: like those communities, which go from many down to one depending on the specifics, Wilde emphasises that the sort of style he considers best is one of unity, 'and unity is of the individual'. Even in that fragment there is a move from the larger to the singular. And in any case, Wilde has already reserved the right for an artist to contract themselves, as explored in this thesis' chapter on deconstruction.

Reader-response criticism, including the idea of interpretive communities, requires that the attention shifts to the reader. As Wilde puts it, criticism

does not confine itself—let us at least suppose so for the moment—to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final. And in this it is right, for the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it. (p. 1127)

Rather than paying attention to only the artist's intention (in the above quotation Wilde's speaker has not quite worked up the courage to argue that those intentions are irrelevant) it is worthwhile to look at the observer's reaction, at 'him who looks at' the beautiful works of art.

In 'The Critic as Artist' Gilbert comments that 'people sometimes say that

actors give us their own Hamlets, and not Shakespeare's; and this fallacy – for it is a fallacy – is, I regret to say, repeated by […] the author of *Obiter Dicta*. In point of fact, there is no such thing as Shakespeare's Hamlet' (p. 1131). The ideal portrayal of Hamlet on stage signals that what the critic is looking for is, in other words, not within the text, but within themselves. Or, as Fish points out, 'the reading or hearing of any play or poem involves the making of judgments, the reaching of decisions, the forming of attitudes, the registering of approval and disapproval, the feeling of empathy or distaste, and a hundred other things'.[18] Wilde and Fish agree on interpretation, even as it is being played out on stage.

In terms of the role of the reader, Wilde goes one step further in 'Pen, Pencil and Poison'. Here he introduces into the consideration of reading and morality a point that is quite similar to Fish's concept of interpretive communities. At the end of the essay, after having narrated the events of Thomas Wainewright's death, there is a short consideration on art, sin, and morality. Wilde, in this case, is writing in defence of sin, insofar as he feels that it should not preclude the artist's work from being considered, if that artist has committed some kind of sin or crime. In fact Wilde can imagine 'an intense personality being created out of sin' – the personality that is, as argued earlier, the source of interpretation (p. 1106). However in doing so, Wilde acknowledges the weight of public morality that is against him. He protests against this, arguing that 'there is no essential incongruity between crime and culture' in an attempt to keep the consideration of Wainewright's art a possibility, and follows by suggesting that 'we cannot re-write the whole of history for the purpose of gratifying our moral sense of what should

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18 Stanley Fish, 'With the Compliments of the Author: Reflections on Austin and Derrida', *The Stanley Fish Reader*, ed. by H. Aram Veeser (Oxford: Balckwell Publishers, 1999), pp. 56-113 (p. 68).

be' (p. 1106).

In this suggestion Wilde acknowledges the idea of an interpretive community, in that he envisions such a community at work judging Wainewright's art in view of his life. The community is one that favours moral elements in interpretation. Crucially Wilde's objection is not against this communal sense, but rather against the – in his eyes faulty – critical assumptions made by that group, the prioritization of morality over artistic appreciation. This is a common move in Wilde, who often speaks in a demeaning manner about the English public or other such group, but the fault always lies in that group's moral decisions. In fact Wilde is not opposed to groups banding together if they share a common interpretative goal. In one of the essays, there is even a name for one of these: the ironically named 'tired hedonists' of 'The Decay of Lying', whose stated goals are both 'a sort of cult for Domitian' – presumable Wilde's reference to the Roman emperor instituting a cult of personality – and boredom, which 'is one of the objects of the club' (p. 1073). And in his two essays 'The Decay of Lying' and 'The Critic as Artist' the speakers are attempting to sway others to join them in their style of criticism, showing that the theoretical idea of individualism does not exclude the sharing of the practice (all approaching the text by foregrounding one's subjective approach). After all, both Vivian and Gilbert could have excluded their conversation partners from the full brunt of their argument, thus manifesting true individualism; but rather they work to include them in their interpretive community. Or, to phrase it differently: at the smallest level the work may be individual, but the theory requires a group of people espousing it, an interpretive community.

It would be too far-reaching to suggest that Wilde champions the idea of the interpretive community, and with good reason; after all he is a proponent of the personal, and of personal freedom, and, as noted, is repeatedly hostile to larger groups of people (even if that hostility is directed more to their unthinking nature than to their unification). Wilde is undeniably aware of the effect, though, and acknowledges it even as he sees it as fraught with danger. That danger, however, is inherent in many of the ways in which he explores theories or puts them into practice in his fiction, poetry, and theatrical work. After all, when he relates the incident of life following art in 'The Decay of Lying', it is a story of the downfall of a woman through art's influence. Similarly Dorian Gray meets his doom when he misattributes meaning to a portrait, where meaning is actually not inherent in the work of art, but rather in the observer. And, as will be shown, the attribution of meaning, the searching for depth beneath the surface, is repeatedly a very dangerous activity in Wilde's fiction.

Portraiture and the Surface

Wilde's short story 'The Sphinx Without a Secret' deals with portraiture as a theme playing on the distinction between surface and depth. It presents Lady Alroy, a woman who is surrounded by an air of mystery. She is desired by Lord Murchison, who follows her one day to unknown rooms, where she spends a few hours. Thinking he has found out some terrible secret she is attempting to hide, perhaps having caught her at an affair, he confronts her. She denies that anything went on, but he does not believe her and leaves England for a month. When he returns she is dead, and he goes to the rooms that she visited, only to learn that the

woman came to them a few hours every so often, and took tea there and read – nothing else. The story's narrator, who has just heard this account from the man in question, then guesses at the facts of it all: the woman was after all speaking the truth, and she had just rented the rooms to add to her air of mystery. She is the titular Sphinx without a secret.

In this very short story, Wilde is playing with depth and surface, as is first signalled by the way in which Lady Alroy is introduced: through her photographic portrait. Here immediately Wilde brings the surface to the foreground, first in the nature of the photograph being only a surface, but also in it being the only physical representation of Lady Alroy, who by the start of the story has already died. The man who loved her literally has nothing but her surface left to him.

Upon observing the portrait, the narrator describes his reaction, first by noting how she appears: 'She was tall and slight, and strangely picturesque with her large vague eyes and loosened hair. She looked like a *clairvoyante*, and was wrapped in rich furs.' Immediately, however, the narrator picks up on something more in the photograph:

> It seemed to me the face of some one who had a secret, but whether that secret was good or evil I could not say. Its beauty was a beauty moulded out of many mysteries – the beauty, in fact, which is psychological, not plastic – and the faint smile that just played across the lips was far too subtle to be really sweet. (p. 205)

This description, coming naturally after the introduction of Lady Alroy as all

surface – a photograph – seems to enact the depth-surface binary rather than collapse it, and furthermore it seems to suggest some inherent meaning in the photograph; after all the narrator glimpses Lady Alroy's obsession for secrets just from looking at the photograph, without a word about her having been said to him by anyone. However, there is neither depth under the photograph's surface, nor inherent meaning in the thing itself, as it turns out.

First of all, the idea that there is somehow inherently a kind of meaning in the photograph turns out to be, upon closer examination, due to something else entirely. Earlier in the story, the narrator and Lord Murchison have been talking about women, with Murchison admitting that he does not understand them; his enigmatic replies and obviously anxious state cause the narrator to remark 'I believe you have a mystery in your life, Gerald' (p. 205). The concept of mystery appears again when Gerald tries to steer the conversation away from Lady Alroy. The narrator refuses: '"I want to hear about you first," I said. "Tell me your mystery"' (p. 205). In response to this, the narrator is given the photograph that he then describes as mysterious. This can be no surprise, though, and the mystery hardly lies in the photograph itself; it is clearly very much in the narrator's mind, who has referred to mystery twice just before being handed, in mute (and enigmatical) response, Lady Alroy's picture. He is thus not responding to something inherent in the photograph, but rather to something within himself that is drawn out by his 'reading' of the photograph, namely 'the forming of attitudes, the registering of approval and disapproval, the feeling of empathy or distaste' that Stanley Fish has noted accompany the act of reading.[19]

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[19] Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), p.50.

The rest of the story can almost be read as a parable in terms of Wilde's warning, in the introduction to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that one can only go beneath the surface at one's own peril. For this is exactly the error that Lord Murchison makes. When he confronts her, Lady Alroy rightly tells him that she has done nothing at the mysterious rooms where she spent a few hours. Although she does not tell him that she goes there only to create a sense of mystery about her, she is not lying to him at all, and perhaps is unable to relate to him exactly what it is she does, for fear that it will drive him away. However, Lord Murchison does not choose to take the image as it is – the surface only – and assumes that there is something beneath the surface. He concludes that she must be hiding it from him, and leaves her. Murchison is then appropriately punished for this mistake (much like Dorian will be punished for his) by losing the woman he loves. It is an essential moment where the course of the story may be taken in a fairly straightforward manner to follow the contrast between surface-only and surface-depth models, with the negative development in the story bound to the wrong choice of models.

This suggests a necessary revisiting of the lines on surface and symbol in the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The surrounding lines are as follows:

> All art is at once surface and symbol.
>
> Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.
>
> Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.
>
> It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors. (p. 17)

In the context of 'The Sphinx Without a Secret', where the danger of assuming depth where there is none is made clear, one way of reading these lines becomes immediately obvious. The line 'all art is at once surface and symbol' could entail a collapsing of the surface-depth binary, with the next line warning about the dangers of it. 'The Sphinx Without a Secret' clearly signals that danger. The next line, 'those who read the symbol do so at their peril' then links together the concepts of going beneath the surface, and reading the symbol, by their association with peril, thus suggesting their similarity. This again combines the idea of depth with the idea of danger, and again in the context of the Sphinx suggests the absence of depth. But now the following line also becomes important. Wilde's claim that 'it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors' already confirms what was argued earlier: that he views the burden of meaning to be on the shoulders of the reader or 'spectator', rather than that burden being intrinsically there in an art that carries within itself some fact about 'life'. Now, in the context of these other lines, this suggestion becomes even stronger, as Wilde provides exactly the reason why it is the spectator who is mirrored. It is precisely because there is only the surface – a point reinforced also because Wilde combines, in this short passage of four lines, the words 'surface' followed by 'mirrors'.

However, a few instances in Wilde's work seem to suggest that he does believe in a clear distinction between depth and surface, many of which are to do with various kinds of representation. There is, for example, the line in 'The Truth of Masks' where Wilde writes on a speech in Shakespeare that it 'shows us the depth of feeling that underlies Rosalind's fanciful wit and wilful jesting' (p. 1158).

In every instance there is something that complicates this apparently straightforward presentation of surface and depth. The best example of a story that seems to introduce this distinction clearly is 'The Model Millionaire', from *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories*. In this story, a distraught gentleman, Hughie Erskine, a 'delightful, ineffectual young man with a perfect profile and no profession', comes face to face with a modelling vagrant in a painter's studio (p. 209). Hughie is distraught because he is in love, but does not have the money to be allowed to marry the girl. He does, however, give some of it to the vagrant out of pity. The vagrant then turns out to be one of the richest men in Europe, a millionaire who is having himself painted as a beggar on a whim; touched by Erskine's kindness, the millionaire gives him the £10,000 required to marry.

The problems in this story, in terms of surface and depth, become immediately obvious. Like Lord Murchison and Dorian Gray, the main character mistakes the surface and depth – but rather than those two characters, he immediately assumes the surface is all there is, and acts accordingly: he is faced with a beggar, and therefore gives him money. He is not punished for his misreading, like the other two characters. Furthermore there seems to be a clear distinction here between the appearance of the beggar (surface) and his actual nature as a millionaire (depth).

However, in reading the story like a parable (much like 'The Sphinx Without a Secret') it actually turns out to be an endorsement of reading the surface rather than assuming the depth. Hughie Erskine follows all the rules of a good Wildean critic. His interpretation of the figure in rags as a beggar comes from the man's appearance; furthermore, it fits in the context of the narrative for Erskine to

assume the figure to be an unfortunate man in need of some money, because that is exactly what is on Erskine's mind as he enters the painter's studio: Hughie 'looked very glum in those days' on account of lacking the money to be allowed to marry his love (p. 209). His response to the man is based on his own reading, which is informed by his state of mind when he first sees him. It would rather have been a problem if Erskine had somehow picked up on the 'true' nature of the man as being a millionaire – but there is no trace of that in the narrative; indeed Erskine is surprised when the true nature of the vagrant is revealed to him. It is also important that Erskine is actively rewarded for this version of reading. He takes things to be as they appear on the surface and, as a result, ends up with the money he needs to marry. In this sense, too, the millionaire's appearance being distinguished through either surface or depth becomes unimportant: it is the acknowledgement of what he is projected to be, and not the search for something hidden behind that appearance, that is rewarded in the story.

It was shown in the previous chapter that, in 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.', Wilde presents meaning as transmitted through the portrait – or rather that the Willie Hughes theory of the Sonnets was transmitted through the portrait. Though the theory did not originate from the portrait itself, but had to be supplied in the portrait's presence for the effect to occur, this still leaves some impression that there is something inherent in the portrait that causes this conversion or re-enchantment with the Hughes theory.

It becomes possible now, after the discussion on surface and reading, to clarify exactly how the portrait achieves its effects. The forgery in 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' consists of surface only – much like the postmodern historical novel, it

is a representation that suggests a surface (Hughes's portrait) and a depth (Hughes having existed) with that depth essentially missing, since Hughes never existed. It does gain power in the presence of the Hughes theory, but it is utterly dependent on that theory for its power, having none of its own. The portrait-effect that the painting has is very similar to the effect of the photograph of Lady Alroy: where the Sphinx's photo gained mystery and power because of prior mentioning of mystery and distress, the forgery gains power and influence exactly because it is presented to the narrator after a long discussion on forgeries, and with a certain air of importance: the owner of the portrait refers to it, before its unveiling, as 'the only legacy I ever received in my life' (p. 302). Additionally death surrounds the portrait as much as it does the photograph, and in the same way as Murchison is punished for confusing surface with the hint of depth, so is there a similar succession of deaths in 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.': first Erskine loses Graham in the first misreading (mistaking the portrait as carrying truth about the Hughes theory), and then the narrator loses Erskine in a repetition of the first situation. Indeed all meaning is attributed to and through the portrait, and resides in the minds of its observers, or spectators, or readers; and the penalty for misreading, for assuming depth where there is only surface, is grave indeed.

(Auto)biography as Portraiture

Another aspect of portraiture, especially portraiture in text, is the (auto)biography. Traditionally the field has been very strongly delineated, with biographers being a particular category of writers and academics: not quite literary critics, not quite historians (though in many instances those critics and historians do engage in

biography). As with other (literary) fields, however, this has changed, and the status of biography is less clearly demarcated than it previously was. The unified whole of biography used to include such things as truthfulness, for example; but as it turns out, such assumptions are being questioned with the move of biography into the field of the literary.

Biography is also a theme in literature, however, and that is the starting point. One writer who is also a critic, and whose creative work touched on (auto)biography, is David Lodge. Though Lodge was always a writer, he was simultaneously also an academic, holding a position at the University of Birmingham. There he taught most notably in Victorian literary subjects until his retirement in 1987, after which he became a full-time novelist. His work frequently deals with academics and the world of the university; thus, Lodge writes from a position that is uniquely suited to Wilde's ideal as the critic-artist producing both criticism and fiction.

Lodge's use of academics in fiction can be seen in what has been dubbed Lodge's 'critifiction', a term suggested by Siegfried Mews and meant to describe writing 'that is penned by critics and professors of literature who consciously endeavor to combine (critical) theory and (fictional) practice by engaging in the production of both sorts of texts'. One of the main authors 'of the novel that is both inspired and informed by critical theory is David Lodge'.[20] Such 'critifiction' might well be another term for the work of a critic-artist, if the requirement was loosened that it is only done by critics 'and professors of literature', a restriction that does not necessarily correspond with Wilde's approach.

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20 Siegfried Mews, 'The Professor's Novel: David Lodge's *Small World*', *MLN*, 104.3 (1989), 713-726 (p. 714).

More specifically, there is a correspondence between Wilde and Lodge in the treatment that both authors give to the concept of the autobiography: Lodge in *Author, Author* and Wilde in 'The Critic as Artist'. This latter work presents a rather poor opinion of autobiography; indeed, Wilde's opinion of autobiography in general is not very high. In the opening paragraphs of the dialogue, one of Wilde's speakers notes of biographers: 'we are overrun by a set of people who, when poet or painter passes away, arrive at the house along with the undertaker, and forget that their one duty is to behave as mutes. But we won't talk about them. They are the mere body-snatchers of literature' (p. 1109). Elsewhere, Wilde allows for a little more variation, though even there the position is all or nothing: in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* he writes that 'the highest, as the lowest, form of criticism is a mode of autobiography' (p. 17). The lowest form mentioned by Wilde here is one that both biography and autobiography have in common. That form deals with facts, with the representation of a life in dry, inartistic tones. It is that 'highest' mode, rather than the lowest, that is relevant here: it pertains to how Wilde believes the personality needs to be incorporated.

Wilde's main objection to the biographers he so dismissively describes in 'The Critic as Artist' is that they focus on others' personalities rather than their own. Here again the central matter is art through intensified personality. The 'body-snatchers of literature' do not follow this tenet; they write colourlessly on other literary personalities without projecting any of their own. Wilde would rather have it the other way: the inward eye is the best. As was already noted in Chapter III, Gilbert reminds Ernest:

> If you meet at dinner a man who has spent his life in educating himself—a
> rare type in our time, I admit, but still one occasionally to be met with—
> you rise from table richer, and conscious that a high ideal has for a
> moment touched and sanctified your days. But oh! my dear Ernest, to sit
> next to a man who has spent his life in trying to educate others! What a
> dreadful experience that is! (p. 1140)

It is better, for Wilde, to increase your own personality rather than focus on that of others. It is, after all, through one's own personality that others might be understood: 'As art springs from personality, so it is only to personality that it can be revealed, and from the two comes right interpretative criticism' (p. 1132). Here as in the rest of Wilde's work, the focus is on the personal and the personality.

Perhaps the best example of Wilde's idea of a biography is presented in *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, where his portrayal of Willie Hughes centres on personality. Rather than giving a straightforward account of Hughes's life as it might be gleaned from the Sonnets, Wilde has him presented through personality, or, to put it more clearly, has him created through strong individual acts. Hughes is a construct of the various characters in the story – including, crucially, the story's narrator – and he is glimpsed only when they tease him out of the various details in Shakespeare's Sonnets. Even the forged portrait is, in that sense, a manifestation of strong personal will, a criminal act undertaken to reinforce a highly personal assumption about a literary work.

In *Author, Author* Lodge undertakes a biography of a real person, Henry James – an act that ought to damn him in Wilde's eyes. However, Lodge's project

is a fictional autobiography. The book makes use of historically accurate facts, of existing characters and even the actual words of books, novels, and so forth. This might only make matters worse, except that Lodge does more with James than merely hide behind the Victorian's life and present a possible version of facts enhanced with some imaginative guesswork. Lodge's treatment of James also contains Lodge's own thoughts on the literary world and on being a writer, thoughts that come quite close to himself:

> David Lodge's own writing, including fiction, drama and criticism, has of late frequently dealt with the literary marketplace and the issue of literary reputation. One sometimes senses — for example, when reading *The Year of Henry James* — that he feels he has never quite received his due as a writer. This topic informs *Author, Author* in a profound way, and the novel is an often moving reflection on the passions of the literary life.[21]

Author, Author is primarily a book on Henry James, but through it, Lodge also explores the nature of authorship, of literary success and failure; and he does so through his own personal interpretation of it. In other words, the book gives its reader not simply Henry James, but James through the lens of David Lodge.

This, after all, is what autobiography – and criticism – is to Wilde, in the end. It is both autobiography and criticism (if the two could be kept separate) that rest on exactly this element on personality: as far as Wilde is concerned, it

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21 J. Russell Perkin, 'Imagining Henry: Henry James as a Fictional Character in Colm Tóibín's *The Master* and David Lodge's *Author, Author*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 33.2 (2010), 114-130 (p. 123).

is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's own soul. It is more fascinating than history, as it is concerned simply with oneself. It is more delightful than philosophy, as its subject is concrete and not abstract, real and not vague. (p. 1125)

Additionally, that is really where autobiography is to be found: 'It is the only civilised form of autobiography, as it deals not with the events, but with the thoughts of one's life; not with life's physical accidents of deed or circumstance, but with the spiritual moods and imaginative passions of the mind' (p. 1125). These are apt words for Lodge's *Author, Author*, which engages with the same 'spiritual moods and imaginative passions of the mind' in examining Henry James's life. With its decidedly postmodern narrator, the book touches the same points on autobiography as the proto-postmodern Wilde.

Lodge, however, is far from being the only writer who has worked with the concept of autobiography. A.S. Byatt, like Lodge, is an academic who in later life turned to a writing career. She lectured in English at various academic institutions (mostly in London) from 1962 until 1983, at which point she was already a well-known novelist. Byatt's subsequent work retains a strong interest in the world of the university, including two novels set expressly within academic worlds: *Possession* (1990) and *The Biographer's Tale* (2000). As such, she is another good example of the kind of artist-critic that is described by Wilde in *Intentions*.

In general, her writing achieves the same kind of blend of critical and creative thinking that also characterizes Lodge's 'critifiction'. Byatt shares these interests:

Like David Lodge, she has tended to produce novels which reflect her

literary and theoretical interests. This tendency can be seen as part of a

more general postmodernist movement towards a self-reflexive, knowing

'critical creativity' in Derrida, Hartman *et al.*, as they erase the divide

between *Dichter* and *Denker*.[22]

Byatt herself has stated as much: 'I have myself always felt that reading and

writing and teaching were all part of some whole that it was dangerous to

disintegrate.'[23] As such she represents a good example of those proto-postmodern

ideas that are present in Wilde – in this case, the blending of literature and

criticism.

As with Lodge, the specific point of interest with Byatt lies in her use of

biography. Biographical information forms the basis for the two aforementioned

books, *The Biographer's Tale* and *Possession*. Byatt's approach to the former is to

make use of an actual blend of fact and fiction: her protagonist becomes the

biographer of a fictional biographer called Scholes Dentry-Scholes, but along the

way learns a few things about that fictional biographer's very real subjects, such

as Ibsen and Linnaeus. Here, Byatt is not afraid to lie, in the Wildean sense of

lying as (literary) art: some of these facts are true, some are false – or, at least, are

true only within the world of the novel. It represents a playful attitude towards

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22 Chris Walsh, 'Postmodernist Reflections: A.S. Byatt's Possession', in *Theme Parks,
Rainforests and Sprouting Wastelands: European Essays on Theory and Performance in
Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by Richard Todd (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 185-194 (p.
186).
23 A.S. Byatt, 'True Stories and the Facts of Fiction', in *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*
(London: Random House, 2000), pp. 91-122 (p. 92).

biography, where the biographer tells her readers that the work is fiction, but then introduces fact in order to blur boundaries between the two.

More clearly biographical in a Wildean sense is *Possession*. The literary subjects of the book's biographer protagonists are themselves constructs; none of these figures or works exist, with the exception of a slight name or reference here and there, meant to believably fit these characters into their otherwise real literary period. In this regard the book is less playful than *The Biographer's Tale*. Its only attempt at blurring boundaries between reality and fiction is the extent to which its invented literary characters and their works are brought to life. In *Possession*, Byatt presents the reader with two sets of parallel characters: a pairing of Victorian-era poets and their postmodern-era biographers. One clear way in which these characters are linked is through their biographical treatment, which starts out as typically impersonal. The main character Roland Michell's work on the poet Randolph Henry Ash is portrayed as monotonous, grey, and leading him down what appears to be a dead end. Likewise academic Maud Bailey appears very stifled in the narrative, trapped, as it seems, in a rigidly determined, unquestioningly feminist way of life – her problem being neither her subject nor her place as a feminist, but a too-narrow, dogmatic adherence to working within the lines of that approach (rather than a (Wildean) blurring of boundaries). Roland and Maud's respective biographical pursuits have not led anywhere. It is not until they start making a series of choices for themselves, and against the established grain, that their personal stories come alive for them, and ultimately the successful conclusion of their story – both biographically and romantically – hinges to a large degree on a sense of having found their own versions of the historical

literary figures they had been studying. Personality must be added to biography before it becomes worthwhile.

Byatt is also a storyteller. Some of the narratives of *Possession* are academic, but just as many are simply stories. Byatt's interest in biographers is closely tied to an interest in storytelling in this respect; two other novels, *The Children's Book* and *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* revolve centrally around it, and it is one of the main subjects of one of her collections of essays, *On Histories and Stories*. Once again taking *Possession* as an example, that interest in stories translates into an interest in the intertextual, in the various ways in which they may be told. In the novel, the reader gains information not merely from the main narrative following the character of Roland Michell, but from letters, journal entries, and poems, to name a few things. This is a typical way in which Byatt explores the possibilities of storytelling, and 'intertextuality in her fiction works organically: her probing of the processes of narrative illuminates, and is inseparable from, the stories she tells'.[24] This returns to the same point made earlier on Wilde's own verbose storytelling. It also makes the point that this aspect in itself is not Victorian or dated, if such might be thought.

Byatt shows that a rich storyteller allows the exploration of intertextual elements. This, too, is the (proto-postmodern) Wildean storyteller, who digresses into vast descriptive passages; the critical voice that appears inconsistent within the span of a single critical volume; the narrator whose descriptions of a particularly seductive theory may or may not be given under influence of a strangely influential portrait. Moreover, the intertextual exploration points to

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24 Jane Campbell, 'Confecting Sugar: Narrative Theory and Practice in A.S. Byatt's Short Stories', *Critique*, 38.2 (1997), 105-122 (p. 106).

another way in which Wilde's writing resembles postmodernism: the approach of intertextuality itself, and the crossover of academic disciplines that is in some way the result.

Part 3   Crossing Boundaries

Wilde's writing straddles many boundaries. The attempt to erase the lines between art and criticism signals a tendency in his work to cross boundaries of any kind. Wilde is constantly bringing elements into different genres: there is theatre in his essays, just as those essays contain lengthy visual descriptions, there is music in his poetry and his plays, and there are deliberate and clear lies in his truth. The author who moved from poetry to prose and criticism, and finally crowned that list with playwriting, did not limit himself to the idea that one thing should not be another.

In this vein, Wilde's work strongly resembles postmodern critical practice and ideas. Whereas previous approaches emphasized the isolated domain – isolating the study of language and meaning in, for example, formalism and structuralism – postmodern theory increasingly pays attention to combination, on the assumption that outlines of fields are always constructed and never 'natural' delineations of inherently stable, unified theoretical positions. This development had not only led to prominent theorists such as Derrida and De Man being able to move freely between diverse fields such as sociology and literary studies; it led to new theoretical factions. For example, no longer is the study of words and images strictly divided between literary and art criticism; now ekphrastic theory is entitled to speak for both.

Chapter VII starts this discussion by examining the roots of fragmentation in postmodernity with a study of postmodern ideas of intertextuality, coupled with

Wilde's own intertextual (and sometimes plagiarist) practice. Chapter VIII

combines an overview of the newly emergent discipline of word and music

studies with a survey of Wilde's use of musical themes and techniques in his

poetry, prose and in *Salome*. Finally, Chapter IX compares Wilde's great attention

and frequent invocation of the visual arts to the postmodern theoretical study of

images represented in words, a recently re-developed critical field called

ekphrasis.

Chapter VII   Intertextuality and Plagiarism

In 1881, in a well-known incident early in his career, Oscar Wilde sent a copy of his poems to the Oxford Union Library. The librarian had ordered the book from Wilde after it had appeared earlier that year. It was a standard move in the budding career of the young Wilde, who had yet to go to America, and who was at that time working to establish a reputation as a poet. Unfortunately for Wilde's poetic aspirations, the Oxford Union was not to assist him in this particular literary ascent: in a narrow vote, the Union rejected the book and levelled an allegation of plagiarism against it, noting that the poems were 'in fact by William Shakespeare, by Philip Sidney, by John Donne, by Lord Byron, by William Morris, by Algernon Swinburne, and by sixty more […]. The Union Library already contains better and fuller editions of all these poets'.[1]

The charge of plagiarism, while a disappointment, was not one that Wilde actively sought to avoid. Rather he acknowledged it, and indeed seemed to have made it part of his literary technique. This tendency has been noted by many Wildean scholars such as Josephine Guy and Ian Small in *Oscar Wilde's Profession*. Wilde's stance towards plagiarism is neatly summed up in this way:

> Over the course of his literary career, he was repeatedly charged with plagiarism, and in at least one case he clearly practiced it: his 1886 Chatterton lecture, the bulk of which he purloined from two other writers. In 1893 he boasted to Max Beerbohm: 'Of course I plagiarise. It is the

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1 Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), p. 140

privilege of the appreciative man. I never read Flaubert's *Tentation de St Antoine* without signing my name at the end of it. *Que voulez-vous*? All the Best Hundred Books bear my signature in this manner.[2]

Indeed the charge of plagiarism is at the forefront of Wildean scholarship and its undeniable presence in the works of Oscar Wilde creates a problem for those scholars seeking to affirm Wilde's place among English writers being read today. Arguably, interest in plagiarism has always been at the forefront of Wildean scholarship; before his partial rehabilitation by gender or queer studies in the 1980s, Wilde was seen as derivative, and even today discussions of Wilde's poems seldom escape the charges of imitation of poets such as Keats or Coleridge. The discussion also frequently arises with works such as *An Ideal Husband* or *The Importance of Being Earnest* – not to mention *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. These critical discussions often see Wilde's plagiarism as a problem in the corpus that needs to be addressed, and offer various explanations before analysing Wilde's frequent borrowings. Even a book as recent as Florina Tufescu's *Oscar Wilde's Plagiarism: the Triumph of Art over Ego* (2008) seeks to 'settle the last remaining dispute in the field of Wilde studies, to remove the last objections to Wilde's canonization' by devoting a whole chapter ('Plagiarism: A Decadent Tradition') not to Wilde's plagiarism, but rather to traditions of plagiarism itself, seeking to exonerate the tradition in order to exonerate the perpetrator.[3] Another particular strategy has been to attempt to place Wilde's plagiarist tendencies in the context of

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2 Paul K. Saint-Amour, 'Oscar Wilde: Orality, Literary Property, and Crimes of Writing', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 55.1 (2000), 59-91 (p. 61).
3 Florina Tufescu, *Oscar Wilde's Plagiarism: the Triumph of Art over Ego* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008), p. 1.

political rebellion, as an act of appropriation on the part of an Irish writer targeting the English language. This particular reading of Wilde's work may be too easy, however – even if Wilde, in this case, may very well be a criminal by choice.

In fact Wilde's (self-)plagiarism has seen attempts to explain it in ways ranging from criminality through orality to his Irish upbringing – all of which have seen ample critical attention and should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with scholarship on Wilde. However, there is one reading – a proto-postmodernist reading – which has not been attempted: that of seeing Wilde's plagiarism as an anticipation of the intense postmodern interest in intertextuality. It is entirely possible to put the Wildean 'problem' of borrowing and plagiarism into that different context, and to show a kind of justification for these literary crimes. When taken as proto-postmodernism, it becomes possible to read the instances of plagiarism as an intense interest, on Wilde's part, in experimentation with intertextuality.

Theories of Intertextuality

The intertextuality under discussion here is of a specific kind. Intertextuality and borrowing in general have a long history, and it would be a mistake to claim that they manifest only in postmodern times. Literature has contained various degrees of intertextuality during different phases in literary history; for example, Anglo-Saxon and early modern English literary tradition placed great emphasis on retelling rather than inventing stories, while the Renaissance saw a strong focus on imitation of the classical period, and the writer Sir Phillip Sidney wrote around

1579 in his *Defense of Poesy* that 'Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation'.[4] Originality and plagiarism as they are viewed currently are more recent terms, introduced later in literary history. The variation discussed here is specifically the keen critical interest that arose in the late twentieth century, signalled by critics like Barthes and Jameson, in the status of texts as interwoven with other texts, rather than being unique, autonomous works.

The basic concept of intertextuality thus focuses on relationships between texts. As with any critical term used in delineating postmodernism, there is some debate about its exact nature; but the following standard definition gives a good impression:

> Intertextuality is the process whereby meaning is produced from text to text rather than, as it were, between text and world. The relationship between criticism and literature, for example can be seen to be of this kind. Elements from one text are offered to legitimate elements of another. The process though does not stop there, for many critical essays proceed from earlier essays, and it is a common critical play to legitimise a reading by way of such reference. The point is that this effort at meaning is vertiginous, and at no point arrives at a position of stability. The whole process cannot at any point insist upon 'truth'.[5]

The deferral of meaning links this particular concept of intertextuality very

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4 Phillip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy, otherwise known as An Apology for Poetry*, ed. by Albert S. Cook (Boston: Ginn & Company, 2011), p. 15.
5 Rick Rylance, 'Introduction', in *Debating Texts: Readings in 20th Century Literary Theory and Method*, ed. by Rick Rylance (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), pp. 110-114 (p. 113).

strongly with postmodern approaches, primarily through its association with post-structuralism. Thus there is a way in which the attention to signs and their unstable relationship is foregrounded in the postmodern take on intertextuality through an emphasis on textual relationship: 'Thinking in Post-Structuralism […] tended to emphasize the ways in which signs, and their more complex relations – texts – depend upon each other for their meaning within the structures and frameworks of genre and discourse.'[6] The whole of the system is interdependent, with a text's only point of reference being other texts. In this way it becomes impossible to find a beginning, and the reader is left with only a mass of text. Within this postmodern – rhizomatic – mass, a concept of origin is meaningless: 'Every text, being itself the intertext of another text, belongs to the intertextual, which must not be confused with a text's origins: to search for the "sources of" and "influence upon" a work is to satisfy the myth of filiation.'[7] Postmodern intertextuality thus represents a greatly varied collection of signs without external reference points or, indeed, any form of escape.

The discussion on intertextuality links up, in this way, to discussions in Part 1 of this thesis relating to post-structuralism and deconstruction. This is not the only way in which it builds on subjects discussed earlier, however. Returning to the discussion on reader-response, there is a clear common element in intertextuality and reader-response theory, in that knowledge of particular intertextual elements strongly determines what any given reader will pick up on. In this way

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6 Peter Child and Roger Fowler, *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 121.
7 Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text', in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. by Johué V. Harari (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 73-81 (p. 77).

intertextuality tends to privilege the reader as indispensable to the creative process. […] The "meaning" that is derived from any given text (whether it be a novel, a poem, a film, a sitcom, an advertisement) depends upon the reader's prior encountering of the intertexts that are invoked – without the necessary semiotic exposure the reception of the work would inevitably bring forth different, but equally valid interpretations.[8]

Key here is that intertextuality should not be treated as presenting pieces of a puzzle; the point is not that texts can only be understood if the reader has knowledge of all of the particular intertextual references and is capable of placing them correctly, but rather that different readers will pick up on different intertextual references (and might even create their own), thus creating a unique assembly upon every reading.

In this vein, the concept of intertextuality is similar to another postmodern phenomenon discussed in Part 2: the (erroneous) juxtaposition of surface and depth. Again this is due to a shared element, in that intertextuality occupies a theoretical space similar to that of the surface – at least according to Frederic Jameson, who argues that 'depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces (what is often called intertextuality is in that sense no longer a matter of depth)'.[9] Jameson's attention to intertextuality, linking it among other things to postmodernism, brings up another point – that of scope: given the overlapping qualities of intertextuality and the surface, he posits (as quoted in the previous

8 Child, pp. 122-123.
9 Jameson, p. 12.

chapter) that 'everything can now be a text'. The most important point here is that 'objects that were formerly "works" can now be reread as immense ensembles or systems of texts of various kinds, superimposed on each other by way of the various intertextualities, successions of fragments, or, yet again, sheer process'.[10] Also reinforced in this way is the notion that intertextuality represents a postmodern mass without beginning or end, rather than a logical, organic whole.

Two radically opposite ends of the critical spectrum illustrate the range of critics who have investigated intertextuality. These are brought up by M.H. Abrams in a survey of critical approaches to literature. At one end he situates Harold Bloom, who, despite his agreement with some postmodern elements in literary criticism, has made no secret of his resistance to notions of deconstruction. Abrams invoked Bloom's end of the spectrum by noting that 'Harold Bloom's theory of reading and writing literature centers on the area that […] structuralists call "intertextuality." Bloom, however, employs the traditional term "influence"'.[11] In juxtaposition to this, there is Derrida, whom Abrams also marks as distinctly intertextual, albeit in a different way: 'The apocalyptic glimpse, it would seem, is of a totally textual universe whose reading is a mode of intertextuality whereby a subject-vortex engages with an object-abyss in infinite regressions of deferred signification.'[12] Derrida is at the other end of that spectrum as the foremost figure in deconstruction. Widely different critics as Bloom and Derrida, then, both have a keen interest in intertextuality, illustrating the scope of that interest in postmodern critical thinking.

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10 Jameson, p. 77.
11 H.M. Abrams, 'How to Do Things with Texts', in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. by Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), pp. 436-451 (p. 445).
12 Abrams, p. 441.

Finally, intertextuality also allows approaches to critical material much like the ones presented in Part 1 of this thesis, in that it allows critics a less restrictive approach to criticism. With an abundance of references and options comes the chance for critical freedom: 'Intertextuality and the proliferation of choices need not present added weight to wearied minds but an invitation to consider the claims of reason as coextensive with the pleasures of imagination, both of which seek the good.'[13] This is another way in which the postmodern part of intertextuality is highlighted – the reader is allowed a selection of choices, none of them presented as objectively more truthful or valid than the others. And, through the arguments Wilde presents in *Intentions*, it will become clear that this is precisely where Wilde shows another side of proto-postmodernism.

Wilde and Intertextuality: *Intentions*

To understand Wilde's arguments regarding intertextuality, it is necessary to return to the earlier discussion on the priority of life and art. Earlier it has been noted that Wilde insists on suggesting that life follows art, rather than the other way around. Where that argument served to show the suggestive power of simulacra, here it sheds light on another aspect. For if art does not gain its material from life, then the question becomes what the source of art is. Wilde argues quite clearly that 'Life' draws on art, but where, then, does art come from? As it turns out, Wilde's preferred source for art is other art.

This is demonstrated when the discussion in 'The Decay of Lying' runs

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13 Leroy Searle, 'Afterword: Criticism and the Claims of Reason', in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. by Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), pp. 856-872 (p. 872).

into the problem of where art comes from. Wilde, as usual, brings in a whole

range of examples before generalizing to conclude that 'the whole truth of the

matter is this: The proper school to learn art in is not Life but Art' (p. 1080). What

he is suggesting here is that art looks to other art as an example – the same

practice that underlies postmodern notions of intertextuality. There is still an

implied hierarchy in the way Wilde writes these words: for some reason or other

he capitalizes the 'Art' juxtaposed to 'Life', but does not capitalize the other

mention of art; and yet in both cases the subject under discussion is still basically

that: art. If he instils a hierarchy into different types of art, with some of them

more inspiring than others (and this is entirely possible, given that he glorifies

some artists just as he ridicules, say, Wordsworth), the fact still remains that it is

one type of art looking to another type of art.

However, Wilde then moves to produce an example of the intertextuality

that he has just conjured up, by referring to the art of medieval England. In the

following fragment, Vivian is responding to Cyril's claim that, despite higher arts

being abstract, nevertheless 'for the visible aspect of an age, for its look, as the

phrase goes, we must of course go to the arts of imitation.' Vivian objects to this

notion of imitation and its suggestion of following the natural world:

> Surely you don't imagine that the people of the Middle Ages bore any
>
> resemblance at all to the figures on mediaeval stained glass, or in
>
> mediaeval stone and wood carving, or on mediaeval metal-work, or
>
> tapestries, or illuminated MSS. They were probably very ordinary-looking
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> people, with nothing grotesque, or remarkable, or fantastic in their

appearance. The Middle Ages, as we know them in art, are simply a definite form of style, and there is no reason at all why an artist with this style should not be produced in the nineteenth century.[14]

Thus Wilde is here cancelling out the idea of some kind of higher/lower distinction in art, with the one following art and the other merely following life. The suggestion here is that of, again, a uniform field, of a kind of art that a reader, observer or critic may have preferences about, but which does not possess a kind of natural hierarchy.

Additionally, by noting that 'there is no reason at all why an artist with this style should not be produced in the nineteenth century', Wilde's attitude towards this kind of intertextuality is shown as positive – indeed, encouraging. Wilde also presents intertextuality as a large homogeneous field, a theoretical position made clear in his review of Whistler's lecture. Here Wilde speaks on the distinction between the different arts, saying that

there are not many arts, but one art merely; poem, picture, and Parthenon, sonnet and statue – all are in essence the same, and he who knows one, knows all. But the poet is the supreme artist, for he is the master of colour and of form, and the real musician besides, and is lord of all life and all arts. (p. 949)

There is again that problematic notion that Wilde suggests a hierarchy of

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14 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), p. 1088. Further references to Wilde's work from this edition are given after quotations in the text.

preference at the same time as he argues a kind of intertextual equality. However, Wilde's phrasing actually suggests otherwise. The poet is 'the supreme artist', but attains that status by being a 'master of colour and of form', which seems to suggest painting; and 'the real musician besides', thus moving into the realm of the instrumentalist and the composer. Rather than simply claiming these for poetry, then, Wilde lists the many aspects that a poet must have mastered to be a poet. So Wilde seems to suggest that poetry is simply art that is most honest about its intertextuality.

It is worthwhile to refer back to the quotation by Frederic Jameson in this light. Jameson had written that 'everything can now be a text', and this seems the natural destination of the argument that Wilde is presenting in 'The Decay of Lying'. And indeed one example even goes so far as to embody this completely: the story, told by Vivian, of the woman who is doomed to follow the example set out by a French serial. (This part of the essay was already explored in Part 2, but bears repeating here.) Vivian tells of an acquaintance of his who seems very susceptible to suggestion. She will fall under the power of simulacra as the story progresses, but there is already some interest in how her character is described: Vivian notes, for example, that they 'became great friends […] yet what interested me most in her was not her beauty, but her character, her entire vagueness of character. She seemed to have no personality at all, but simply the possibility of many types' (pp. 1084-85). Already present here is a kind of negative intertextuality – a void in the woman's personality that is waiting to be filled up not by one thing, but by fragments of many things: 'sometimes she would give herself up entirely to art […] then she would take to attending race-meetings […].

She abandoned religion for mesmerism, mesmerism for politics, and politics for the melodramatic excitements of philanthropy' (p. 1085). Ready as she is to be a vessel of intertextuality, she becomes the victim of a serial running in a French magazine on account of the resemblance between herself and the story's protagonist; in other words, when she is offered intertextual elements that fit easily into her personality and life (and this is life as written by the author who championed that living life was a type of art in itself), she takes in these fragments, no matter what the cost.

Nor does Wilde limit his discussion on intertextuality to 'The Decay of Lying'. There are also references to it in 'The Critic as Artist', where Wilde again engages with the idea over the course of discussing something else entirely. In this essay, Wilde's speaker has the goal of convincing the other person that critics are like artists, and in doing so he engages in a little showing as well as telling. At various stages during this essay, the speaker diverges from his main argument to go into long monologues on art. It seems very likely that the speaker at these points wants to be taken as an artist-critic himself. So, for example, when Gilbert is talking on the point of emotional responses to books, his example is a description of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. That description is very long, going far past the amount required to establish the point. Instead, it becomes a little passage of artistic description in and of itself – another intertextual fragment. Wilde borrows without qualms the references and effects created by Dante, perhaps aware all the time that the Divine Comedy itself does the same in regards to its source material, the Bible.

Crucially Wilde is bringing material from a poem into his critical or

theoretical text, thus making two points: one, that, as his characters have been arguing, criticism and art are one and the same, and two, that in this intertextual field there is no textual hierarchy. This last point is visible again in 'The Critic as Artist' when Gilbert brings up the list of requirements, however jokingly, to study Shakespeare. Again two things happen: by ridiculing the serious, arduous study of Shakespeare, Wilde is again levelling the field towards a more egalitarian one; but more importantly, in creating the list Wilde is acknowledging the highly intertextual nature of literature. So the reader finds that textual fragments that can be put alongside Shakespeare include Elizabeth and James's historical periods, various forms of theatre and their rivalries, the concepts of the Renaissance and Reformation, literary criticism in Shakespeare's day, theatrical technique and practice, and so forth. Clearly, even as Wilde drives home the point perhaps a little too far for comfort, the main emphasis is on showing the many different intertextual elements that could be brought into a consideration of a given literary text. It is easy to mistake this intertextual focus with a plea for bringing the author into consideration of the work; but this is both going against Wilde's greater project in 'The Critic as Artist' and misreading the list of factors that can be considered in relation to Shakespeare's work, where, for example, the call to study 'the connection between the art of the creator of Agamemnon and the art of the creator of Macbeth' is actually a comparative exercise rather than strictly looking at Shakespeare's influences (p. 1130).

The Plagiarist's Game: Wilde's Intertextual Poetry

The essays of *Intentions* are not the only place where Wilde's treatment of intertextuality comes to the forefront. There is some indication that his discussion of these matters in the essays merely constitutes a crystallization of what Wilde had already been practising in earlier work. As indicated in the opening of this chapter, it is particularly Wilde's poetry which has suffered from accusations of plagiarism. These are problems not just of too-obvious inspiration, but of what appears to be outright imitation. And where Wilde does not seem to plagiarise others, there is still the matter of an abundant self-plagiarism.

Criticism of Wilde takes into account this plagiarism usually in a problematic way. Critics normally do not view the plagiarist's act with approval, such as when Josephine Guy discusses Wilde's self-plagiarism in 'The Decay of Lying' in the following way:

> When faced with cases like the reuse of the passage on Balzac […] it is hard to avoid the conclusion that, lacking inspiration and under pressure to produce copy, Wilde expanded new works by incorporating passages from old ones, presumably in the hope that his readers would not notice.[15]

In a similar but much more damning vein, criticism of Wilde's poetry, which has traditionally been seen as marginal, suffers from the same antipathy towards his borrowing tendencies. Even the latest edition of Wilde's poems only defines their quality positively in relation to Wilde's other work:

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15 Josephine Guy, 'Oscar Wilde's "Self-Plagiarism": Some New Manuscript Evidence', *Notes and Queries*, 52.4 (2005), 485-488 (p. 485).

To judge Wilde's poetic achievement against that of contemporaries such as Thomas Hardy and W.B. Yeats, who made poetry their central creativity activity, inevitably tends to reflect poorly on him. It is much more appropriate to evaluate Wilde's poetry in relation to his *own* development as a writer – to see it in the context of the successful author he became in his criticism, fiction, and drama.[16]

In its own right, then, the poetry is not seen as remarkable. In fact, a review of critical work on Wilde's poetry could tempt the reader to go as far as to conclude that an unqualifiedly positive evaluation of a poem of Wilde's has yet to be made; it certainly appears that way. In that vein, the following evaluation of 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' is both typical and telling: 'Despite its intermittent bathos and too-obvious looting of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner", the ballad does not fail to live, being if not exactly a great poem, then at least one which has the whiff of greatness about some of its stanzas.'[17] The use of terms such as 'bathos' and 'too-obvious' (let alone 'whiff of greatness') clearly signals a dismissive attitude, and the appearance of the word looting does nothing to allow any consideration as to why Wilde engages so clearly in the appropriation of other texts. In both instances here, there is a typical move in the criticism of Wilde's work: ignoring the possibility of some kind of intention on Wilde's part, the possibility that a small part of his work may be perceived as an intentional choice,

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16 Ian Small, 'Introduction', in Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, vol.1*, ed. by Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. ix-xxvi (p. x).
17 Declan Kiberd, 'Introduction to the Poems', in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, by Oscar Wilde (London: HarperCollins, 2003), pp. 739-743 (p. 742).

or as outstanding, rather than an inevitable result of his circumstances. This is not to say that the charge of plagiarism and self-plagiarism out of some kind of economic standpoint holds no merit; but it also obscures a far more interesting approach that Wilde may have taken.

When it comes to the poetry, there is no point at which it becomes truly haphazard, as would be expected if Wilde's poetry consisted of measured copying and pasting. The poetry is familiar, but also of considerable quality: 'The derivative quality of his verse is unquestionable, but there is also nothing inept about it.'[18] The poet whose verse has only a 'whiff of greatness' to it also wrote 'On the Sale By Auction of Keats' Love Letters' and 'Requiescat', to name but two of the many poems that are hard to dismiss as second-rate. The latter was written in memory of Wilde's sister Isola, who died at the age of nine, when Wilde was twelve years old. The poem 'was most likely written in his early Oxford years', supposedly at Avignon; Wilde 'may have visited Avignon while en route to Italy in 1875 […]. His Roman Catholic preoccupations during that period may have inspired the poem.'[19] It contains a beautifully restrained evocation of grief, presented in words and echoed in the poem's rhythms and structure. Thus, for example, the poem's first stanza evoked the buried girl: 'Tread lightly, she is near | Under the snow, | Speak gently, she can hear | The daisies grow' (p. 748). The image of snow is used to conjure up frost and thus stasis, linked here to a kind of preservation in death; 'Under the snow' evoked both the sense of burial and the sense of preservation in cold. Although it seems that the reader is presented with a

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18 Anne Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde* (London: Longman, 1998), p. 76.
19 Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson, *Commentary*, in Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Volume I: Poems and Poems in Prose*, ed. by Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 219-316 (p. 221).

description of a winter burial place, the stanza actually places them in the speaker's imagination, something that becomes clear when he states that the buried girl 'can hear the daisies grow'. As a symbol of innocence, the flower represents not the girl, but the mourner's image of her, still young and innocent when she died. This youthful death is made all the more poignant when considering that, already during Victorian times, the daisy was being used for that practice of tearing off individual petals of the daisy, alternating 'he loves me, he loves me not' while doing so; the girl can hear these daisies grow, but will never herself experience the love that they represent. It is this sense of unfairness that pervades the entire poem, which expresses a desire to gain peace with the death. In this sense the title is very telling: translatable as 'may he/she rest', it could, on one level, refer to the girl; but on another it refers to the mourner, who is continually afflicted by a deep sense of loss, as when he states that 'All my life's buried here, | Heap earth upon it' (p. 749). These closing lines may go so far as to suggest a despair so painful that it would lead to suicide, judging by the mourner's wish to have his life buried with the girl. For all its simplicity and solemn pace, then, the poem goes beyond that first level to engage on a second, being a portrayal not just of a lost girl, but of a grieving mind.

It is true that Wilde's inspiration lies with other poets; for 'Requiescat', for example, 'the similarity between [Wilde's] poem and Thomas Hood's "The Bridge of Sighs" has often been noted' and 'Matthew Arnold's "Requiescat" may also have been an inspiration'.[20] Another possible source could be Ben Jonson's 'An Elegy', which contains the following lines:

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20 Fong and Beckson, p. 221.

His falling temples you have rear'd,

The wither'd garlands ta'en away;

His altars kept from that decay

That envy wish'd, and nature fear'd:

And on them burn so chaste a flame,

With so much loyalty's expense,

As Love to acquit such excellence

Is gone himself into your name.[21]

Wilde's great early influence, however, is Keats, and in his early poetry 'Wilde plays upon themes which, though largely unoriginal, clearly are close to his heart. […] His penchant for mythmaking and his zest for sensuous paganism remind one inevitably of Keats's early poetry'.[22] It is fitting that 'On the Sale By Auction of Keats' Love Letters' reflects Wilde's obvious love for Keats, while at the same time being an example of a very good later poem by Wilde. The sonnet neatly opens with the selling of the letters: 'These are the letters which Endymion wrote | To one he loved in secret, and apart. | And now the brawlers of the auction mart | Bargain and bid for each poor blotted note' (p. 870). These first four lines very precisely and strikingly establish the situation, not merely rarefying the love letters themselves, but at the same time evoking a sense of frenzied, philistine

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21 Ben Jonson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by George Parfitt (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 156.
22 James G. Nelson, '"The Honey of Romance": Oscar Wilde as Poet and Novelist', in *Redefining the Modern: Essays on Literature and Society in Honor of Joseph Wiesenfarth*, ed. by William Baker and Ira B. Nadel (London: Associated University Presses, 2004), pp. 130-147 (p. 133).

buyers, more or less evoking the image of pearls before swine. The lines that follow are some of the most succinct condemnations of economics over art: 'Ay! For each separate pulse of passion quote | The merchant's price. I think they love not art | Who break the crystal of the poet's heart | That small and sickly eyes may glare and gloat' (p. 870-871).

What these poems have in common is a restrained form. In both of the above examples of good Wilde poems, the writer works under strong restrictions in form and length, while at the same time communicating something close to the heart – the death of a sister in the one, the disgracing of an admired poet in the other. The same can be said for 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', which, though lengthy, limits the length and volume of each stanza through its ballad form. At the same time, many earlier poems, such as 'The Garden of Eros' or 'Panthea' are very long and, due to their many allusions to mythology, sometimes read more like an academic exercise than a striking poem. Like any poet, Wilde's poetic work has both its great moments and its weak moments – after all, as Walter Pater remarks in *The Renaissance* of Wordsworth: 'The heat of his genius, entering into the substance of his work, has crystallized a part, but only a part, of it; and in that great mass of verse there is much which might well be forgotten'.[23]

Though Wilde's allusions sometimes produce this sort of inflated poetry, at other times allows him to make a stunning point. In comparison, the name and image of Endymion appear several times in 'The Garden of Eros', where the very lengthy poem ultimately leads to an eloquent defence of art against material interests:

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23 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xxxi.

> Methinks these new Actaeons boast too soon | That they have spied on
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> beauty; what if we | Have analysed the rainbow, robbed the moon | Of her
>
> most ancient, chastest mystery, | Shall I, the last Endymion, lose all hope |
>
> Because rude eyes peer at my mistress through a telescope! (p. 850)

Here the numerous allusions to Endymion lead to the name becoming a shorthand for those people willing to look for mystery rather than dispel it, but the metaphor is almost exhaustively explored, including its links with the night-time as a time of inspiration. Much more powerful is Wilde's same use of the name Endymion in the two opening lines of the sonnet on Keats's love letters, 'These are the letters which Endymion wrote | To one he loved in secret, and apart', where the name is evoked only once, with no additional information, to sketch Keats himself. The allusion is all the stronger if the reader connects it to the earlier 'The Garden of Eros', allowing all of those connotations to seep into Wilde's one use of the name in the later poem.

While it would be unrealistic to view each and every moment of allusion, quotation or echoing in Wilde's work as a deliberate intertextual act, there is more at work here than literary thievery. Wilde discusses matters related to his poetic technique in *Intentions* when he deals with the role of the poet in relation to lying in 'The Decay of Lying'. In equating the lie and the poetic utterance, Vivian says: 'we need not say anything about the poets, for they, with the unfortunate exception of Mr. Wordsworth, have been really faithful to their high mission, and are universally recognized as being absolutely unreliable.' And a little later:

'Herodotus, who, in spite of the shallow and ungenerous attempts of modern sciolists to verify his history, may justly be called the "Father of Lies"' (p. 1080). Vivian contrasts the Victorian concept that poetry ought to be moral and in some sense 'true' with a kind of poet-criminal, who deliberately goes against traditional moral concepts such as truth. In fact Ellmann, in his biography of Wilde, suggests that Wilde looked to Chatterton, the famous poetic forger, as a possible model: 'In some ways Chatterton, whom Wilde had read carefully, was a better model for him than Keats, because of his criminal propensities, and a better model than the forger Wainewright, because of his artistic power.'[24] But another step is required, and it comes in the form of Wilde's reaction to the previous movements of Realism and Romanticism.

Many critics have noted that Wilde, finding himself at the receiving end of a long Victorian tradition of Realism, rebelled against it in a simultaneous move backward and forward: forward by developing Aesthetic or Decadent theories of art, backward by looking to Romanticism and earlier. The latter move was especially suited to Wilde, as his own individualistic aims were located in the Romantic period, where 'there was a glorification of the individual and the authentic artistic imagination as a source of truth'.[25] However the era that gave rise to Romanticism also gave the world plagiarism in its current sense, as 'plagiarism is in fact a modern Western construct which arose with the introduction of copyright laws in the eighteenth century'.[26] Michel Foucault has explored this idea in the context of an 'author' whose creative force manifests in a

24 Ellmann, p. 268.
25 Shelley Angélil-Carter, *Stolen Language? Plagiarism in Writing* (Edinburgh: Pearson, 2000), p. 19.
26 Angélil-Carter, p. 2.

unique product that can be owned. Such constructs of an author, he claims are misleading: the author-function 'is not formed spontaneously through the simple attribution of a discourse to an individual. It results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author.'[27] As such, the author is really a way in which the reader interprets the work, because despite such things as the creativity or intentions of an author,

> these aspects of an individual, which we designate as an author (or which comprise an individual as an author), are projections, in terms always more or less psychological, of our way of handling text: in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice.[28]

Such emphasis on an author has nevertheless generated a need for differentiation, and thus for the generation of unique material:

> What is of significance in the description of these shifts of creativity and authorship is the need to see a stress on 'new' meaning, on originality, on individual creativity, as very much an aspect of Western modernity, and thus both a very particular cultural and a very particular historical emphasis, albeit one with a great deal of salience in the world today. It is

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27 Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. by Donald F. Bouchard, trans. by Donald F Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), pp. 113-138 (p. 127).
28 Foucault, p. 127.

with the rise of such individualization that the history of literary plagiarism

started to emerge.[29]

This presents an apparent problem: Wilde's notion of individual freedom both

matches the Romantic ideal of the creative genius, and contrasts sharply with the

idea of creative property that originates from those very developments. This

element of creative property contrasts with Wilde's notion of freedom, which

includes the freedom to copy, sometimes verbatim, another artist's work; it is in

that sense much more radical than its Romantic counterpart. In fact there is a

sense of selective rejection of Romanticism, as illustrated in the above quotation

from 'The Decay of Lying' in which Wilde makes fun of Wordsworth. Crucially

this distances Wilde from the earlier artistic movement, in that he fully

appropriates certain issues while all the same rejecting a few of its core rules.

Thus in his sonnet on Keats's love letters, he is able to glorify the concept of an

artist's most personal work – love letters – and their individuality, as in the

opening lines, 'These are the letters which Endymion wrote | To one he loved in

secret, and apart' (p. 870). Here words like 'secret' and 'apart' signal a preference

for the individualistic; at the same time there is a rejection of the concept of

literary ownership in the few lines deriding those who would purchase Keats's

letters, to whom Wilde refers as men who 'love not art', with 'small and sickly

eyes' whose only goal is to 'glare and gloat' (p. 870-871). In a sense, then, the

poem can be read as a lament on the intrusion of literary ownership into artistic

individualism.

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29 Alastair Pennycook, 'Borrowing Others' Words: Text, Ownership, Memory, and Plagiarism',
TESOL Quarterly, 30.2 (1996), 201-230 (p. 205).

Corresponding to this stance against literary ownership, Wilde developed an intertextual literary technique. How this was achieved in his short stories and his plays will be discussed later in the chapter, but for Wilde's poetry, his last poem sheds additional light. 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' has very strong intertextual elements. In this long poem, with its already mentioned 'too-obvious looting of Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner''', the strong allusion to the other poem is – partly – something other than looting. That Wilde binds his poem strongly to Coleridge's is beyond doubt. Both are long poems in ballad form, divided up into several numbered parts – six for Wilde, seven for Coleridge – telling the story of a condemned man. Wilde's stanzas are also very similar formally and tonally to many of Coleridge's. Coleridge's poem contains stanza such as 'Like one that on a lonesome road | Doth walk in fear and dread, | And having once turned round walks on, | And turns no more his head; | Because he knows a frightful fiend | Doth close behind him tread'.[30] Wilde's, meanwhile, has lines like these: 'And never a human voice comes near | To speak a gentle word: | And the eye that watches through the door | Is pitiless and hard: | And by all forgot, we rot and rot, | With soul and body marred' (p. 898). Here the tone is quite similar, and the simple rhyme is another clear correspondence.

By incorporating such strong intertextual references to Coleridge's poem, the Ballad gains a distinct quality: one of exile and punishment leading to revelation – as in the poem's final, famous stanza: 'And all men kill the thing they love, | By all let this be heard, | Some do it with a bitter look, | Some with a flattering word, | The coward does it with a kiss, | The brave man with a sword!'

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30 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', in *The Major Works*, ed. by H.J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 48-87 (p. 63).

(p. 899). There is a certain half-confessional, half-revelatory element to this final stanza. In this sense Coleridge's poem goes much farther, outrightly invoking the idea of prophecy. This is never named in the 'Ballad'; its strong link to the 'Ancient Mariner' brings this aspect in silently in conjunction with the poem's final lines. The narrator of 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' tells his story, much like the Mariner tells his. It is important to be reminded here, too, that Wilde wrote letters on two occasions to a newspaper in an effort to enlighten the public on the unnecessary harshness of prison life, and in that regard this revelatory element to the poem, strengthened by the intertextual allusions to the Ancient Mariner, is convincing. Rather than looting a great literary work merely to pad his own, Wilde is making a literary choice that brings additional elements (such as the echo of the horrors faced by the Mariner) to his poem. Or, as Harold Bloom has remarked, 'Good poems, novels and essays are webs of allusion, sometimes consciously and voluntarily so, but perhaps to a greater degree without design'.[31]

So there is a move away from literary ownership that is manifest both in the content and the technique of some of Wilde's poetry. Through subversion and borrowing, Wilde is creating new things out of existing material. There is a certain irony to it, not least because Wilde will borrow from any source – including himself. 'He was as willing to plunder his own writing as that of other people: the sonnet "At Verona", "How steep the stairs within Kings' houses are" marks the beginning of his most characteristic of literary misdemeanours – self-plagiarism – for this is lifted from "Ravenna".'[32] It is this self-plagiarism that represents perhaps the greatest problem in Wildean scholarship: if the 'theft' of the words of

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31 Harold Bloom, 'Plagiarism – a Symposium', *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 April 1982, p. 413.
32 Varty, p. 76.

other poets make Wilde seem like a literary criminal, the reuse of his own material on several occasions runs the risk of making him simply look lazy. However, even this problem may be approached from two sides. The plagiarism problem can be seen as intertextual; and Wilde's notion of intertextuality in *Intentions* is, like that of postmodern thinkers, based on a non-hierarchical organisation. What is at work in Wilde's self-plagiarism, then, is simply an extension of this negation of a hierarchy; if there really is only text and everything can be read as text, then the self-plagiarism fits into a proto-postmodern model of the negation of textual ownership. It simply means that Wilde includes himself in the great intertextual field, available alongside all other great textual models and names such as Shakespeare, Keats, and Shelley. (If Wilde's individualism were to be followed, he would have to see his own individualistic achievements rank with theirs.)

It is important, however, not to overestimate the level of deliberation that goes into Wilde's intertextual trespasses. Many critics of Wilde have understandable issues with the intertextual explanation; it could be said, for example, that 'the idea that [Wilde's plagiarism] might be a form of intertextual play, a deliberate attempt to undermine normative expectations about authorial originality, holds weight as a credible explanation only when the repeated fragment is relatively small'.[33] While this need not necessarily be true, it shows the danger of reading too much into what seems to be, at times, sloppiness rather than deliberate choice.

It is also worth mentioning that Wilde never fully abandoned creative ownership, as might be expected if he was truly interested in furthering a theory

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33 Guy, p. 485.

of free intertextual play. Many letters survive that show Wilde asking for royalties, or to determine exactly how, and in what context, work of his was to be printed or displayed, as in letters to John Lane and George Alexander.[34] He even, in one instance, asks for royalties regarding a play for which he delivered none of the writing, but helped come up with its original idea. However, these are motivated by economic rather than artistic aims, and many of the letters stem from periods in which Wilde had financial difficulties – especially during the last part of his life, after he had left Britain. Rather than refute the idea that there was an intertextual element to Wilde's artistic thinking, these illustrate that Wilde was human, and that not all of his writing arose out of detached, purely theoretical considerations.

It is therefore important to find a balance. If one end of the spectrum there is an emphasis on plagiarism as just that, the other end would be to entirely overestimate Wilde's literary aims, and to view him as a sort of literary mastermind, for whom 'self-referentiality is an elaborate and self-conscious game, one played with only the most alert and discriminating reader'. It is this kind of a view of Wilde that 'in turn gives us a "Wilde"' who can once again be accommodated to a certain reading of the life. This time, however, the emphasis is not on the ordinariness of the apprentice or journeyman writer, but rather on the more traditional view of Wilde the supreme artist who is always in control.'[35] This is perhaps as seductive a reading as the purely plagiarist one, commonly practiced for about a hundred years now, that sees much of Wilde's literary achievement as unremarkable; neither way seems particularly enlightening. There is some middle

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34 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 617; and Complete Letters, p. 633.
35 Josephine Guy, 'Self-Plagiarism, Creativity and Craftsmanship in Oscar Wilde', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 41.1 (1998), 6-23 (p. 9).

ground, and it is there that Wilde's engagement with intertextuality is best considered: as an experiment with its concept and uses, and in a way that can be labelled proto-postmodern. Wilde is clearly interested in intertextuality; both *Intentions* and Wilde's poetry show this to be, at least in part, the result of thought rather than crime. Moreover Wilde's intertextual interests do not stop there; the things he experimented with in his poetry, he puts to more mature and playful use in his fiction.

Intertextuality in Wilde's Fiction

The critical reception of Wilde's fiction has been much less marked by problems of plagiarism than his poetry. In part this is remarkable, because the nature of the plagiarism in Wilde's short stories is quite similar to that in the poems. This is perhaps due to the nature of the genres, with originality being more highly valued in poetry than in fiction; but the fact remains that for every poem of Wilde's that echoes the voice of Keats or Coleridge, there is a story that reproduces the stock elements of its particular genre (though reproduction in itself is not plagiarism). And so it is that readers can find traces of the sensation novel in 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime' and 'The Canterville Ghost', and perhaps even in 'The Sphinx Without a Secret'; likewise remnants of a vibrant magic picture tradition have their echoes in 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' and of course *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. All of these things have been commented on by many critics, but the intertextual, proto-postmodernist argument has not surfaced yet.

The years directly after Wilde's American tour were those during which early unsuccessful works such as *The Duchess of Padua* and *Vera, or The Nihilists*

were created. Those years are marked by an increasing engagement of Wilde with the popular literary genres of his day. One direct result of this is that Wilde turned to writing children's tales, which, as a result of writers such as Hans Christian Andersen, were very popular during Wilde's time. Yet Wilde's children's tales are, aside from the choice of genre, not very derivative, and especially the later *A House of Pomegranates* is a very original work that is hardly even suitable for children.

Much more telling are the collection *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories*, the short story 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, of which one critic has noted that 'One thing is clear: careers can still be made in the hunt for originals of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'.[36] Of these, the collection of short stories is the most intertextual in terms of popular genres, whereas the two tales of portraits tap immediately into a (now mostly lost) tradition of stories about magical portraits. The origins of these stories have all been explored, and it suffices here quickly to touch upon the similarities to illustrate the deeply intertextual nature of the works.

During the middle of the nineteenth century, author Wilkie Collins had pioneered a genre that would later become the detective novel. This type of story, called a 'sensation novel', revolved around themes such as crime, adultery, scandal, and other such aspects. Many such novels had hints of the supernatural in them, which in the end were explained rationally. There are two stories in *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* that refer to this tradition: the titular 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime' and, to a lesser degree, 'The Canterville Ghost'. In

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36 Jerusha McCormack, 'Wilde's Fiction(s)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 96-117 (p. 110).

the former, Wilde plays with the concept of crime, scandal, and infidelity. Naturally these are turned on their head as the story's protagonist is also the 'supernaturally' destined criminal, and the infidelity is turned into a problem of that same protagonist who feels it would not be honourable to marry until he has murdered. The story also subverts at least one other facet of the sensation novel: its setting. Novels such as Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) were typically set in domestic surroundings rather than exotic locations. In Wilde's story the ironic suspense affects ordinary people, such as the bomb-maker, who is oddly polite, offers tea to his visitors, and babbles on quite affably; or the supposed victim of the bomb, a very ordinary clergyman in the countryside. The 'Canterville Ghost' also works in this vein, turning the sensation of a ghost story around by contrasting the servants' fearful reactions to the American family's inappropriately down-to-earth attitude towards hauntings.

In addition, 'The Canterville Ghost' picks up on the tradition of the Victorian gothic novel. Gothic, though preceding the Victorian era, was still very popular during Wilde's lifetime (illustrated for example in the penny dreadfuls) and would culminate in Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), which is referred to twice in 'The Decay of Lying'; and ultimately in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), although that book came out after Wilde's imprisonment. Wilde himself drew heavily on previous Gothic stories for some of his works, in part due to their subject matter: he was drawn to the 'central technique of focusing on a strong-willed central protagonist whose goals are not narrowly defined'.[37] These can be located in the protagonist of Charles Maturin's

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37 Lewis J. Poteet, '"Dorian Gray" and the Gothic Novel', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 17.2 (1971), 239-248 (p. 244).

Melmoth the Wanderer, in 'Ambrosio (hero of *The Monk*, 1794) and even Manfred (*The Castle of Otranto*, probably the first Gothic novel)' whose key characteristics are 'both their self-absorbed, narcissistic egomania and the fluidity of their aims'.[38] While those traits of personality are more appropriate for Wilde's later novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, these Gothic tales also influence the stories, though here Wilde is more interested in subverting than following the generic tropes. In 'The Canterville Ghost' Wilde's subversion lies in the interaction between the American family, and in introducing fairytale elements towards the end by giving the later heroine a prince to marry; and additionally in portraying the ghost as a vain actor looking back on his many hauntings as successful theatrical parts.

In a similar way 'The Sphinx Without a Secret' and 'A Model Millionaire' have their origins in detective fiction, but the point is clear: as a collection, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* plays a highly intertextual game with other existing genres of Wilde's day. The collection is remarkable not because one of the stories engages with an existing trend, or because they all do; it is remarkable because each story plays with different trends, even as it forges its own unique space for itself. Wilde does not settle for modelling the book on a particular type of literature, but rather creates his own unique approach from the various available models by picking not one, but many of them at once. Just as Wilde's poetry does not settle on imitating only Keats or only Coleridge, his book of short stories does not settle for one style merely. (This Wildean technique also conforms to the postmodern rhizome, discussed in Chapter 3.)

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38 Poteet, p. 244.

A similar case of following a literary trend intertextually occurs in both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.', which follow a Victorian tradition of magic pictures. The novel's debt to that tradition becomes apparent when considering just one of its many sources, which is 'a long-ignored story called *Ashes of the Future (A Study of Mere Human Nature): The Suicide of Sylvester Gray* (1888), written by Wilde's friend Edward Heron-Allen and featuring a hero of Dorian's own surname, with a sister named Sybil, who kills himself at age thirty after a career of unrepentant hedonism'.[39] The similarities are striking, and indicative of a much broader way in which Wilde approaches the telling of Dorian's tale in much the same way as he did those of Lord Arthur Savile, the ghost of Canterville, and the others in that collection of short stories. In fact a search for sources for the novel 'among the detritus of popular literature' is likely to yield 'a thriving subgenre of fiction in which the props, the themes, and even to some degree the dialogue and characterization of *Dorian Gray* are anticipated.' This is not to downplay the book's qualities: 'despite its extraordinary reliance on previous fiction, *Dorian Gray* remains a brilliantly original novel – by any just estimate, the most successful work of its kind'.[40] This evaluation shows the result of Wilde's intertextual technique brought to bear on his only novel: rather than producing evidence in a case against literary theft, it delivers a piece of literature worthy of the individualistic genius envisioned by Wilde. And the novel is not without self-plagiarism either, as when one of Wilde's favourite phrases makes an appearance: commenting on a woman who has been married several times, Lord Henry says 'When her third husband died, her hair

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39 Kerry Powell, 'Tom, Dick, and Dorian Gray: Magic-Picture Mania in Late Victorian Fiction', *Philological Quarterly*, 62.2 (1983), 147-170 (p. 147).
40 Powell, pp. 147-148.

turned quite gold from grief' (p. 129). That phrase will make at least one other appearance, as in *The Importance of Being Earnest* the character of Algernon says, in a rather similar situation: 'I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief' (p. 364).

The magic picture tradition also influenced 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' where another portrait appears, this one, too, with a strange but subtle influence. The portrait's powers of conversion have already been discussed; and even without the more subtle point of how belief in the Willie Hughes theory of the Sonnets moves in conjunction with the portrait's presence, the portrait's influence is made clear in the opening few pages of the story. There, even though he has just seen it, the narrator confesses that the portrait 'had already begun to have a strange fascination for me' (p. 303). Immediately Wilde is incorporating the same sort of reference that he used for Dorian Gray by putting a kind of power into the portrait. But even more interesting is that 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' incorporates criticism into its main narrative – and it is criticism that remains entirely unreferenced. The only name that is attributed is Shakespeare's own; the rest of the criticism, existing as it does in a supposed work of fiction, is presented as all the three characters' own. In the ideal fictional world where art has the power to inspire and transmit theory and life itself, criticism is spontaneous; it is the result of a personal engagement with a work of art. Wilde returns here to the intertextual idea of not owning text, except in this case he has made the next step he proposed in 'The Critic as Artist' and has equated criticism and art.

Wilde's Theatre as Intertextual

So far intertextuality has been either a prominent element or an important undercurrent in all of Wilde's literary genres and forms: poetry, criticism and fiction. His career took off when he became a playwright primarily, but he did not abandon his artistic theories, and indeed intertextuality remains at the forefront of his work in the theatre as much as it did previously in his other work.

For several of his social comedies, Wilde made subversive use of an existing theatrical tradition, much in the same way that he drew on literary traditions for *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories*. The tradition employed here is 'the popular dramatic form inherited from the French playwrights, Eugene Scribe and Victorien Sardou, of the "well-made play" with its four-Act structure comprising exposition, complication, obligatory crisis scene and dénouement'.[41] Even as he follows its formula at some length, Wilde introduces crucial subversions in at least two of his plays.

In *Lady Windermere's Fan* Wilde plays with the traditional distribution of roles in a well-made play. The role of the 'raisonneur', traditionally an older man, was to resolve the mysteries and crises at the heart of the play and to make a happy ending possible. Yet, there is no such older man in this particular play; or if there is, he comes in the form of Lord Augustus, who allows himself to be fooled by the end of the play, thus providing Mrs. Erlynne a way of escape. Rather, the closest the play comes to a 'raisonneur' is Mrs. Erlynne herself, the supposedly fallen woman. She holds the knowledge of the play's secrets, and it is within her power alone to set things right and allow a happy ending. Thus, 'because Wilde places Mrs Erlynne in this unique position of knowledge, authority and power, the

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41 Varty, p. 159.

outcome is technically unconventional and thematically unpredictable'.[42] As with the short stories, Wilde is achieving his effects by intertextual play upon previous traditions or, in this case, plays. Another such example is *An Ideal Husband*, where Wilde again turns things on their head. The play features a corrupt politician – another stock character of Victorian plays at the time – but contrary to the traditional treatment of such themes, the politician, Sir Robert Chiltern, is allowed to succeed at the end. 'The terms on which resolution is based are in fact radical, pointing to far-reaching social and moral change, while the exaggerated manner in which Wilde fulfils the demands of the well-made play suggests a burlesque of the very form deployed.'[43] Again there is the subversion, and again it is based on intertextual play.

But surely the most radical intertextuality is to be found in *The Important of Being Earnest*. Before *Earnest*, Wilde worked to incorporate references to, and subversions of, previous theatrical traditions; in his last play, he takes a drastic next step. As explored in the two chapters on *The Importance of Being Earnest* in Kerry Powell's book *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, the play essentially does two things in intertextual terms. Firstly, it takes its intertextual cue not merely from the well-made play tradition, but freely begs, borrows and steals from the myriad stock elements of the range of Victorian plays in theatres at the time of Wilde's writing *Earnest*.[44] Secondly, Wilde undertakes a much more radical intertextual project – one that once again uncomfortably strides into the realm of possible plagiarism – when he takes the material for *The Importance of*

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42 Varty, p. 160.
43 Varty, p. 186.
44 Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1990), pp. 124-139.

Being Earnest almost entirely from a play that ran almost simultaneously. The play is called *The Foundling*, which Wilde might have seen around September 1894 (when he was writing *Earnest*, and a few months before it was performed in February 1895) and which contains almost all of the ingredients that make up Wilde's play.[45] For a full exploration of how this is done, Powell's book is very enlightening; it suffices here to highlight that, even in the theatrical phase of his career, Wilde did not shy away from his earlier intertextual approach, but rather seems to have embraced it as never before.

Theories and concepts of intertextuality at work in Oscar Wilde's body of writings, either as conscious choice or unconscious reflex, have been explored at length, especially in more recent critical work. Criticism and analysis regarding this has spawned many debates, articles and books, ranging from dismissive accusations of plagiarism to politicized postcolonial defences. And so the idea of Wilde's intertextuality is not new. What is striking is that this radical intertextuality, starting at poetic (self-)plagiarism and ending in the ironic near-copying of an entire play, has hitherto not been seen as a very postmodern technique in and of itself. Moreover, it opens the door to various interdisciplinary approaches, each proto-postmodern in the way that Wilde deals with them. One such interdisciplinary approach, which has been gaining much critical attention in the second half of the twentieth century, is the study of words and music, to which the next chapter turns.

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45 *Theatre of the 1890s*, pp. 108-123.

Chapter VIII   Words and Music

The main speaker in one of the two major essays on art and criticism plays the piano. It is, in fact, where the reader finds Gilbert as he is approached by Ernest in 'The Critic as Artist'. The latter has to urge him to get away from the piano in order to discuss art and criticism; Gilbert in turn spends most of the early part of the essay trying to get back behind the piano, offering to play Ernest 'some mad scarlet thing by Dvorák'.[1] Only by repeated cajoling can Ernest keep him on track.

This is a sentiment echoed in many different parts of Wilde's work. *The Importance of Being Earnest* has Algernon playing piano at two separate moments during the first act. Whenever courts come up in any of the short fiction, musicians are named. The Nightingale uses it to create the perfect red rose in 'The Nightingale and the Rose', and music wakes the Selfish Giant when spring has returned to his garden. The cheiromantist Mr. Podgers in 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime' declares one of the ladies at the party to have the hands of 'an excellent pianist, but perhaps hardly a musician' (p. 162). Dorian Gray himself is introduced to Basil as someone who plays either the violin or the piano (like Gilbert, it is the latter). Even Vivian, main speaker of 'The Decay of Lying', repeatedly finds himself describing language, poetry and art in musical terms or simply music altogether.

Clearly music and the performance of music form a central theme in much of Wilde's work. In part, this has to do with the interest Wilde had in music as an

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1 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), p. 1114. Further references to Wilde's work from this edition are given after quotations in the text.

art form. It has also to do with thinking that was current during Wilde's time.

Wilde himself refers to Walter Pater on occasion, and Pater's *The Renaissance* had

already engaged the topic of music, art, and the essence of art forms. As a topic,

music had also been widely discussed in the French tradition that Wilde admired –

Baudelaire and Mallarmé had both written extensively on the topic as part of a

larger group of poets and musicians doing thinking on the matter. Wilde had

certainly read both Baudelaire and Mallarmé and had met the latter in Paris.

Writing on music, and writing as music as a discourse in nineteenth

century Britain and France has been extensively explored, for example by Ruth

Solie in *Music in Other Words: Victorian Conversations* (2004) and Helen Abbot

in *Between Baudelaire and Mallarmé: Voice, Conversation and Music* (2009) – to

name but two.[2] The topic has also, however, become a distinct field of criticism in

the second half of the twentieth century. Critics such as Roland Barthes wrote

with an interest in the combinations of words and music, for example in Barthes's

collection of miscellaneous essays, entitled *Image, Music, Text* (1977).[3] This is an

interest arising from structuralism but continuing after Barthes and others had

moved on. The critical discipline of words and music studies has arisen over the

last forty years or so, primarily (though hardly exclusively) within the French

critical tradition. Its interest varies from investigations of song settings to opera to

the formal and systematic comparison of music and language. Familiar names

include Peter Dayan and Werner Wolf, whose theories feature prominently in this

chapter; Delia da Sousa Correa, who has worked on Victorian fiction and music;

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2 Ruth A. Solie, *Music in Other Words: Victorian Conversations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Helen Abbott, *Between Baudelaire and Mallarmé: Voice, Conversation and Music* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).
3 Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977).

and Steven Scher, who has worked on German subject matter and the field of words and music theory in general. Broadly speaking, recent interest in word and music studies has moved away from detailed analysis seeking to show the underlying theoretical similarities between words and music, in favour of an investigation of how each of the two subjects illuminates the other. In this way, words and music studies has entered postmodernism not merely in being contemporary with it, but also in moving away from strictly objective theory, as will be shown in the discussion on Peter Dayan's work, below.

It is in that distinction that Wilde comes in as a proto-postmodernist. Wilde's intertextual interests coupled with his use and discussion of the theme of music combine into an approach that resembles current practices in word and music studies. This is an approach that culminates in *Salome*, and that presents both formal aspects in making use of musicalized fiction, and postmodern ideas on overcoming the inherent otherness and incompatibility of words and music. And while these ideas combine most clearly in *Salome*, the theoretical strands of it are to be found throughout Wilde's earlier work.

Wilde: Rhythm, Poetry, Music

Ideas on music, at first, may seem scattered and sporadic in Wilde's works, with little consistency in their use. Certainly it is one of the aspects that Wilde does not talk about as directly as, say, originality in artistic work or powerful imagery. Music is discussed in no central place; rather, the discussion on words and music, more so than with any other Wildean critical idea, has to be pieced together from the entire body of work. Wilde's ideas eventually do come together in *Salome*, but

the interest in music is present, in some scattered form or another, in most of his creative and critical work, starting with his poetry.

That references to music appear in Wilde's earlier poetic efforts is in itself hardly surprising, given the traditional use of musical terms in poetry. Thus music appears in very early poems, such as in the titles of 'Chanson' and 'Nocturne', and in 'Endymion', which is subtitled 'for music'. Wilde writes in one of the earlier poems, 'Charmides': 'Those who have never known a lover's sin | Let them not read my ditty, it will be | To their dull ears so musicless and thin | That they will have no joy of it' (p. 800). These lines suggest the place that music holds in Wilde's view: firstly, that music and poetry share something – the lengthy work itself is called by Wilde a 'ditty' in an odd combination of musical identification and self-deprecation – and secondly, and tellingly, that the enjoyment of music has as one of its necessary components an element of 'sin'. Another poem, 'Humanitad', which follows 'Charmides' quite closely chronologically, shows the other end of this spectrum: 'The minor chord which ends the harmony, | And for its answering brother waits in vain | Sobbing for incompleted melody, | Dies a swan's death; but I the heir of pain, | A silent Memnon with blank lidless eyes, | Wait for the light and music of those suns which never rise' (p. 818). Here music is presented as a healing force, the antidote to pain and blindness, a 'light' that will likely not arrive. In the lines from 'Charmides' it is a measure of experience, while in 'Humanitad' it is linked strongly to death, comparing as it does the swan's death of a melody with the death of Memnos at Troy. Life, in other words, is music, but it must be lived.

The idea inherent in these thoughts is one that Wilde would later develop

in *Intentions* as the concept of music as an art with strong, often overriding links to all other types of art. Thus in 'The Critic as Artist' Wilde speaks of Life and Literature: when asked what the two supreme and highest arts are, the answer is 'Life and Literature, life and the perfect expression of life' (p. 1114). A large section speaking specifically about literature as poetry, and here music – or at any rate, audible elements of literature – features strongly:

> I have sometimes thought that the story of Homer's blindness might be really an artistic myth, created in critical days, and serving to remind us, not merely that the great poet is always a seer, seeing less with the eyes of the body than he does with the eyes of the soul, but that he is a true singer also, building his song out of music, repeating each line over and over again to himself till he has caught the secret of its melody, chaunting in darkness the words that are winged with light. [...] When Milton became blind he composed, as every one should compose, with the voice purely, and so the pipe or reed of earlier days became that mighty many-stopped organ whose rich reverberant music has all the stateliness of Homeric verse, if it seeks not to have its swiftness, and is the one imperishable inheritance of English literature sweeping through all the ages, because above them, and abiding with us ever, being immortal in its form. (p. 1115)

Wilde is alluding here to formal features that strongly link music and the literary discipline of poetry: rhythm, metre, rhyme and the sound of poetry – those elements that came to the fore when poetry is read aloud. The link between music

and poetry is emphasized when the poet is described as a singer, using words such as 'music', 'chaunting' and 'melody'. In these passages of poetry and essay, Wilde is asserting that, as one modern critic puts it, 'when we speak of the music of poetry, we tend to mean prosody: the rhythm or meter of syllables, the harmony of rhyme. Such musical elements are of course not marginal to the poem. They are fully subsumed by it, proper to it'.[4] Such an emphasis is not uniquely postmodern in any sense, but bears pointing out here, as it shows Wilde's strong association of poetry with music.

Furthermore, Wilde takes this musical element of poetry and takes it one step farther. There is, to name one example, the line in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* where Lord Henry describes a particular woman by saying: 'When her third husband died, her hair turned quite gold from grief' (p. 129). As discussed in the previous chapter, this is a well-known instance of self-plagiarism, where Wilde later lifts the line for use of Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: 'I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief' is what he says of Lady Harbury, who is thought by Aunt Augusta 'to be living entirely for pleasure now' (p. 364). There is a change in the later line, where Lord Henry's 'when her third husband died' is replaced by Algernon's 'I hear', thus introducing an extra element of alliteration into the line, so that 'gold from grief' is now accompanied by 'I hear her hair'. It highlights the already poetic nature of the sentence in the novel's version. This, in turn, shows how poetry is an element that occurs beyond poetry in Wilde's other literary writing, one condition of the musicality of literary language – or, as another modern critic reminds readers of poetry and music, 'one should also take

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4 Katherine Bergeson, 'A Bugle, a Bell, a Stroke of the Tongue: Rethinking Music in Modern French Verse', *Representations*, 86 (2004), 53-72 (pp. 56-57).

phonological recurrences (rhythm, rhyme, metre) into consideration. In this respect metrical literary language can also be said to have more affinities with music'.[5]

To return to the earlier point of literature as 'the perfect expression of life', it now becomes clear that Wilde's literary language contains a sustained musical element. As shown above, modern literary criticism or theory acknowledges this theoretical position. In his poems, Wilde demonstrates this idea, but still only in the roundabout way of using musical terms in poetic description – a practice that is as prevalent in Shakespeare and the Bible as it is in Victorian literature. The step beyond this poetic conceit comes when Wilde writes critically on art. In the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde writes that 'from the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician' (p. 17). This is a critical step that takes the poetic usage of words related to music one step farther, in that it broadens the range of music. Just as literature is the expression of life, so is music the type of all art; it must therefore follow that since life is in all arts including literature, so is music. There exists, in other words, a strong link between literature and music, and that link is simply that, from an artistic standpoint, both are inseparable from life. The question then becomes what, exactly, this link entails.

The link is intimated in a number of places in *Intentions*. It surfaces, for example, in a passage where Gilbert discusses what happens to him after playing a few passages of Chopin. He very clearly references not simply the effect of music on life, but also the tendency of music to create stories: 'After playing Chopin, I

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5 Werner Wolf, *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), p. 27.

feel as if I had been weeping over sins that I had never committed, and mourning over tragedies that were not my own. Music always seems to me to produce that effect. It creates for one a past of which one has been ignorant, and fills one with a sense of sorrows that have been hidden from one's tears' (p. 1110) Note that in this passage, too, music is also linked to sin – another mark of life and experience. Additionally, the passage contains a direct reference to literature in the use of the word 'tragedies'.

Another passage links music even more clearly to life and literature. Comparing lying and poetry, the essay's main speaker Vivian describes the technical requirements of both:

> Indeed, they have their technique, just as the more material arts of painting and sculpture have, their subtle secrets of form and colour, their craft-mysteries, their deliberate artistic methods. As one knows the poet by his fine music, so one can recognise the liar by his rich rhythmic utterance, and in neither case will the casual inspiration of the moment suffice. (p. 1073)

Two key words appearing in the final sentence of the passage are again very telling. First there is the word 'music', linked as it is to the poet; then there is the word 'rhythmic', linked to the liar. Wilde will go on to have Vivian argue, in the essay, that lying is the foundation of good art; here he is already linking it to music and rhythm, elements that already had a strong connection to literary language (and thus poetry) from Wilde's earlier work. Musical elements come into

play anywhere that literature does. In this light, it is also significant that the passage mentions painting, sculpture and poetry in a single thrust: given Wilde's earlier remarks on music as, formally, the type of all arts, this can only reinforce the idea that Wilde's theoretical position incorporates music into any verbal act.

Wilde's ideas on literature and music are defined clearly in *Intentions*, but they already went beyond musical-poetic word use in Wilde's poetry. For example, the names and arrangement in *Poems* point to a kind of thinking on words and music that goes beyond poetic device. As Peter Wagner has noted, the book itself is ordered along intermedial lines:

> The edition [of Wilde's *Poems*] of 1881 can be cut down into four 'movements': in addition to the lyrics in the section entitled 'The Fourth Movement,' a term that immediately introduces the notion of musicality and of musical composition […], we find three sections or 'movements' separated by five larger poems. [...] The very context of the poem introduces the important issues of synesthesia and intermediality (i.e. the mingling of music, painting, and writing).[6]

Leaving the mention of painting aside for the discussion of ekphrasis in the next chapter, it is clear that this quotation highlights musical elements not just in the poems themselves, but in the way in which they are distributed throughout the book.

Wilde does not clarify the exact nature of the relationship between words

6 Peter Wagner, 'Oscar Wilde's 'Impression du Matin' – an Intermedial Reading', in *Icons – Texts – Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality*, ed. by Peter Wagner (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), pp. 281-306 (pp. 283-284).

and music. Beyond the terms set out in *Intentions* (and incorporated in the other works), the relationship remains positively vague. It is exactly this element, however, that introduces the proto-postmodern factor of this part of Wilde's literary theory.

Vagueness and the Difficulty of Musical Description

At the start of 'The Critic as Artist' a curious line appears. Turning down the offer of being played to because he wants to hear Gilbert talk instead, Ernest remarks: 'No; I don't want music just at present. It is far too indefinite' (p. 1109). This is a remark that echoes Wilde's entire critical treatment of music. One critic puts it in the following way: 'Wilde's references to music, although frequent, are generally lackadaisical and, at their most deliberate, rise only to the provocatively impressionistic;' and a little farther on, there is talk of 'the consistently uninspiring quality of Wilde's musical acumen'.[7] These critical notes may be fair in some sense, but they miss the larger theoretical point: that precision and close, objective description of music is neither the goal of Wilde nor, as it turns out, modern critics working in word and music studies.

This may at first appear contrary, as Wilde states on several occasions in *Intentions* that there is a problem with vague art and criticism. Thus he writes of criticism that it emerges from the soul, and as such 'is more delightful than philosophy, as its subject is concrete and not abstract, real and not vague' (p. 1125). Put into contrast with abstract, vague philosophy, criticism is real and

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7 David Wayne Thomas, 'The "Strange Music" of Salome: Oscar Wilde's rhetoric of Verbal Musicality', *Mosaic: a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 33.1 (2000), 15-38 (pp. 18-19).

concrete, giving the impression that Wilde feels criticism must be as precise as possible. However, as it turns out, Wilde is talking here of the subject matter of both, not the method, for he continues: 'It is the only civilised form of autobiography, as it deals not with the events, but with the thoughts of one's life; not with life's physical accidents of deed or circumstance, but with the spiritual moods and imaginative passions of the mind' (p. 1125). Criticism is precise because it knows what it deals with: thoughts, moods and passions of the mind; and these matters in themselves, though more clearly defined than those things studied by philosophy (at least in Wilde's terms), are in themselves in no way precise.

Much clearer is Wilde's rejection of vagueness a little later on in the same essay – and far less ambiguous too: he states clearly that 'to the aesthetic temperament the vague is always repellent' (p. 1137). Again, however, the context of the discussion clarifies much. Wilde has been talking about subjects for art and criticism. The contrast here is between concepts such as heaven or Plato's philosophy and tangible, visible things such as daffodils. 'Art is mind expressing itself', he states, 'under the conditions of matter, and thus, even in the lowliest of her manifestations, she speaks to both sense and soul alike' (p. 1137). The vagueness that Wilde abhors is not the vagueness of subject matter, but the tackling of big, formless, intangible things rather than more concrete subjects. So rather than engaging in an analysis of art in general, Wilde negates the need for that analysis (partly by turning its core activity, criticism, into a subjective, individual act) and talks instead about the concrete manifestations of art: writing, painting and music. These things in turn are discussed not in generality, but in

concrete points, so that it is not music that creates the sense of sin, but Chopin specifically – as Gilbert notes in 'The Critic as Artist' when he says: 'after playing Chopin, I feel as if I had been weeping over sins that I had never committed' (p. 1110).

Personality plays a pivotal role in music as always, further adding to the aforementioned vagueness or 'impressionistic' approach in Wilde. This personality element has already been explored in previous chapters, but one of the examples used there engages with music, and so bears returning to. Gilbert is talking about the role of personality in interpretations when he notes:

> When Rubinstein plays to us the *Sonata Appasionata* of Beethoven he gives us not merely Beethoven, but also himself, and so gives us Beethoven absolutely – Beethoven reinterpreted through a rich artistic nature, and made vivid and wonderful to us by a new and intense personality. (p. 1131)

This puts into practice what had already been gathered from Wilde's writing on music throughout the rest of the essays: that the key lies not in the objective knowledge of it, but in subjective approach – through the personal. In this sense, Wilde's approach to music is the same as it is to the text: words and music are to be approached from the same angle.

This exact comparison was also made by one of the early postmodern critics commenting on words and music. Barthes writes, also on Beethoven, about the reading of a musical score: 'Just as the reading of the modern text […]

consists not in receiving, in knowing or in feeling that text, but in writing it anew, in crossing its writing with a fresh inscription, so too reading this Beethoven is *to operate* his music, to draw it (it is willing to be drawn) into an unknown *praxis.*'[8] Just as Wilde wants Beethoven to be presented afresh through a vivid personality, so does Barthes suggest that a personal approach is necessary when thoroughly engaging with – 'operating' – Beethoven's work.

Barthes, however, does not comment on the other Wildean component: there is personality, but the vagueness resulting from such personality is only hinted at. That element is brought into words and music studies much more clearly with Peter Dayan's *Literature Writing Music*. The book, which is a study of words and music in a series of French artists and/or critics ranging from Georges Sand to Jacques Derrida, identifies the heart of word and music studies by looking at the way the two can be studied in combination. In his conclusion, Dayan makes the point that there is no way to establish a set of rules for the interpretation of words and music. Here is the passage that conveys the essence of that conclusion, quoted almost in its entirety for the sake of showing how Dayan reaches his exact point:

> Literature writing music […] shows how and why we see representations
> in music, and consider them determined by the music; it demonstrates that
> they are never as determined as we think they are, and starting from that
> demonstration, it corrodes, evaporates, or expands them towards a
> generality which empties them of all localized sense, so that each equation

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8 Roland Barthes, 'Musica Practica', in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 149-154 (p.153).

between music and extra-musical meaning becomes, not the legitimate view of an interpretive community, but an error […], a betrayal of music's true character. This writing of music pushes it inexorably towards the point of an absolute singularity, which requires both that each musical experience be different from every other, and music as such and in general be considered to exist as a singular entity beyond the reach of any science […]. This singular music is never 'entendue', never understood as it is heard; it remains unspoken. Music returns the favour to literature.[9]

What is most notable here is that Dayan's point of departure is the single work, both for music and literature. It is the singular work that is different for every listener, just as the interpretation of a given work is different for every Wildean critic. As the interpretation moves outward towards a more generalized consideration, it becomes an error, 'a betrayal of music's true character'. This is, of course, strikingly similar to Wilde's approach in the essays of *Intentions*, where the general and vague is to be rejected in favour of the manifestation itself – not to be objectively described, but, as Wilde and Dayan here agree, to be 'never understood as it is heard'; 'to deepen its mystery, to raise round it, and round its maker, that mist of wonder which is dear to both gods and worshippers alike' (p. 1130).

Another influential critic in the development of the field of word and music studies is Werner Wolf, who has approached word and music studies from a different direction – the more exact, structurally-oriented approach often

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9 Peter Dayan, *Music Writing Literature, from Sand via Debussy to Derrida* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006) 131.

associated with German critics. Wolf writes, with an eye towards such structural analysis of words and music, that '"musicalization" can at best exist in literature, let alone fiction, in an implicit and "indirect" mode'.[10] In addition to this implicit descriptive practice, Wolf finds the approach to music functions along the lines of an aesthetic that closely matches Wilde: 'In fact, the musicalization of fiction is often […] a means of revealing non-intellectual, sensory qualities of literature'.[11] This is strongly reminiscent of the basis of Wilde's own aestheticism, which emphasizes in part sensations and the senses as a basis for art. It is worth noting here, too, that Wolf foregrounds the non-intellectual, or in other words the vague, that which is 'never understood as it is heard'.

It may be hard to imagine that the aforementioned approaches represent a way to practice criticism, on the part both of Wilde and of postmodern critics such as Dayan and Wolf. After all, it would be problematic to study something which does not allow itself to be generalized beyond the singular, and which in singular form remains open only to individual approach – something that was already touched upon in Chapter VI's discussion of interpretive communities. Wilde's solution to the problem is to turn criticism into an art form in itself, and thus to allow it to speak a kind of personal truth through self-expression. Dayan's position is similar: he sees such criticism as 'a difficult mission for the critic. It would never be enough to describe music or literature objectively. […] If I may be allowed a comparison from the nineteenth century: we would aim to tell the truth, but in a way that only our own invented fiction can make possible'.[12] For Dayan, as for Wilde, the truth is entirely personal.

10 Wolf, p. 1.
11 Wolf, p. 34n.
12 Dayan, p. 132.

The 'Puerile'

All of the above approaches share one crucial step: that the perception of words, music and the link between the two cannot be seen as absolutely objective. This, however, presents an obstacle. If these elements cannot be studied in some kind of conjunction – if, as Dayan seems to conclude, the step of getting away from a single work through generalisation eventually means arriving at something empty and meaningless – then how can word and music studies be justified?

Postmodern critics have their own positions, and they are aided by the general attitude of postmodernist criticism, which is naturally suspicious of set, objective positions at any rate; the contention that words and music may be fruitfully studied from a more subjective position is generally acceptable partly for that reason, and has consequently yielded a body of results that places the field's right to exist beyond structural reproach. Wilde is similarly beyond such a critique because of the central role of the personality and the singular in his critical approach. However, Wilde and Dayan share another aspect in their theoretical consideration, one that Dayan uses to further justify the non-objective study of words and music: the puerile.

The idea of being 'puerile' relates specifically to how the connection between words and music might be approached. To Dayan, there exists a kind of reaction to music which desires to represent the music in some way, to translate it into directly definable things; his example is the idea that a certain piece of music could represent raindrops. This he posits as the normal reaction to hearing music: 'we see representations in music, and consider them determined by the music.' Yet

'they are never as determined as we think they are'.[13] It is this error, perhaps one of oversimplification, that Dayan identifies (following a term used in one of George Sands's books) as the 'puerile'. In Dayan's own example, the music may express a complex concept of raindrops, but never just the raindrop in and of itself.

Yet the impulse is inescapable:

We long to hear the confirmation that there can be a correspondence between music and letters, an overlap, a common cause of the signified; and we cannot express that longing […] without looking for ways to translate. But at the moment of translation, we stumble; we see that translation is puerile, offensive, ridiculous, or simply unconvincing. What passes between, and reciprocally validates, music and letters, escapes the industrial, and escapes translation.[14]

Dayan here emphasizes two aspects: firstly, that the reader/listener is continuously drawn into looking for meaning in music, and secondly that this meaning cannot be easily put into words or writing. In other words, a listener wanting to put music's meaning into words quickly runs into trouble, as any description that goes above the level of the individual piece (such as the sound of raindrops, a general thing) quickly runs into the problem that description at that level becomes general and therefore meaningless. This is not entirely hopeless, as the appearance of music in literature allows for it to be given descriptions that, while not musical in

13 Dayan, p. 31.
14 Dayan, p. 75.

themselves, allow the critic to describe music literarily: 'music without literature may be given specific meanings, but can possess no general meaning. Within literature, on the other hand, music is endlessly emptied of its specific meanings; but it is rewarded by being allowed to acquire a general meaning, to become a distinct category and type of meaning.'[15]

The resulting problem is that, paradoxically, in order to describe music in literature, the critic must first accept that what is being described in literature is not music, but a literary representation of music. It is different from the musicality of language, the rhythmic and formal aspects of it usually associated with poetry. In other words, a gap opens between music and literature, and in order to speak meaningfully about music in any other way than to ask for silence as it is being listened to, the critic must find a way to bridge that gap. It is here that Dayan's term of the puerile comes to rest – it represents the stance of the author towards the problem of that gap. The normal reaction perhaps should be to note the technical impossibility of the undertaking of writing on music. The puerile reaction is to change that reaction to a personal one. In order to bridge the gap generated by the general approach to music necessitated by literary description, a critic in the puerile mode accepts straight off that their reaction may only be personal, thus making it easier to speak of music by avoiding generality wherever possible. Dayan seems to have picked the term for its association with an attitude both of wonder and of a certain kind of egocentrism.

There are two ways in which this concept of the puerile, and its centrality to Dayan's link between words and music, resembles Wilde. In the first sense, it is

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15 Dayan, p. 95.

very close to how Wilde himself hoped that his second book of children's tales would be read. In the second sense, it is very close to the wilfulness and moods that play a central role in Wildean criticism.

The reception of Wilde's fairy tales is an interesting story all on its own. When he had *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* published in 1888, Wilde was still very much at the start of his prose career. *Intentions*, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* were still all to come; Wilde was read at that point mostly as a poet – as shown from Walter Pater's comments on the fairy tales: he called them 'genuine little poems in prose'.[16] When Wilde had *A House of Pomegranates* published, things had changed considerably. By this point he had published his novel, and his theatrical career was well under way. The difference shows: the two books, both fairy tales and thus ostensibly meant for children, could not be less alike. Whether this has anything to do with its intended audience is a matter of debate – one that is still ongoing. Some believe that the classification of *A House of Pomegranates* as fairy tales is the result of Wilde miscalculating his audience, while others feel that he really did intend the later book for a different readership.[17] However, whether or not Wilde wrote the stories with an audience of children in mind, there remains an idea behind them – explained by Wilde in his letters – that is valid despite economic arguments.

It is evident, from the stories themselves and from remarks in Wilde's correspondence, that there is a theoretical element of the childlike at work here.

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16 Walter Pater, 'Walter Pater, letter to Wilde', in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Karl Beckson (London: Routledge, 1970), pp. 59-60.

17 Michelle Ruggaber, 'Wilde's The Happy Prince and A House of Pomegranates: Bedtime Stories for Grown-Ups', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 46.2 (2003), 141-153 (p. 142).

Wilde himself states as much when he writes, in one of his letters, that they were 'written, not for children, but for childlike people from eighteen to eighty'.[18] There is an immediate overlap here with Dayan – the puerile and the childlike seem very close. However, Wilde's 'childlike' attitude is not the same as just being a child: Wilde was very aware of the audience he was writing for, and it was comprised of adults. As Michelle Ruggaber puts it, 'Although Wilde's life is a lesson in paying attention to an audience, a response he wrote to a review of *A House of Pomegranates* suggests disgust at the idea that he had any intention of writing to a particular audience, much less to one audience rather than another.' To reinforce this point, she draws attention to some of Wilde's correspondence: 'Wilde wrote in the Pall Mall Gazette in late 1891, "Now in building this House of Pomegranates I had about as much intention of pleasing the British child as I had of pleasing the British public."'[19] There may have been some manoeuvring on Wilde's part, as this quotation is from a direct response to reviews that had called *A House of Pomegranates* unsuitable for children. However, the important point is that Wilde was not writing for one particular audience, but rather for a particular attitude in an audience, which was available to children but apparently often lost in adults. This shows from yet another passage in Wilde's letters, where he describes his fairy tales in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* as 'studies in prose, put for Romance's sake into a fanciful form: meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy, and who find in simplicity a subtle strangeness'.[20] The comment seems to contradict his previous

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18 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 388.
19 Ruggaber, pp. 142-142.
20 *Complete Letters*, p. 352.

statement regarding audiences, but it is important to note that the first quotation reflects Wilde's later thinking, after publishing the vastly different volume of fairy tales. What happens between *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and *A House of Pomegranates* is a refinement of Wilde's approach to the concept of childlike: it is no longer seen as belonging to children, but rather as an attitude that is desirable in adults.

This attitude is found in some of the stories, with the notable early example being 'The Nightingale and the Rose' from *The Happy Prince*. In that story, the concept of the childlike is associated directly with words and music – the story, after all, is about love being expressed in words and in music. Two of the story's main characters represent these aspects. The student is highly textual: in his own garden he engages in a monologue about his frustrated love; his object of desire is the daughter of a professor; and following one of the Nightingale's beautiful songs, he breaks out into quite verbal critical analysis: 'the Student got up, and pulled a note-book and a lead-pencil out of his pocket. "She has form," he said to himself, as he walked away through the grove—"that cannot be denied to her; but has she got feeling? I am afraid not. In fact, she is like most artists; she is all style, without any sincerity"' (p. 280). By contrast, the Nightingale is quite musical: her birdsong contains the power to make a rose bloom in winter. Music is the Nightingale's prime contribution to the story, and her death while singing is what ultimately allows the Rose-tree to create the rose that will – supposedly – allow the Student to win his love's heart. "'If you want a red rose," said the Tree, "you must build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with your own heart's-blood"' (p. 279). The result of this combination of the verbose Student and the

musical Nightingale results in death for love and the creation of the great romantic symbol of the single red rose.

This is an obvious combination of words and music, but it links up with the childlike in another way. After all, from reading the story, the reader may conclude that romance is a bad thing. The story may be read as suggesting that romance has no place in the world. It is, in other words, childish to think that a rose will outweigh jewels and silver buckles on shoes, just as it is only in children's stories that a Nightingale can sing with such power and beauty as to make roses bloom in winter. Yet with Wilde's urge to see the story in a childlike way – in a puerile way – the eyes are opened to the contrast of a magical, beautiful reality of romance, which is placed as an ideal against the grim reality where winter roses are run over by cartwheels, and the power of music, imbued into the rose, is unable to make the words of love strong enough.

There is one other effect of critics being puerile in words and music that Dayan emphasizes. In his introduction to *Literature Writing Music*, he mentions the following:

> Meanwhile, however, a small number of writers, usually occupying eccentric positions within or without the academy, to a greater or lesser extent, and with variable degree of success, resisted the trend [of objective modern reading]. Among them, for me, two stand out. Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, quite explicitly in both cases, revived the nineteenth century tradition of using music to push criticism towards literature […]. They showed how, if we know how to admit music, to introduce

musicality, we can enable a truly literary critical discourse to survive in

our postmodern thoughtworld – provided we are brave enough.[21]

It is immediately clear from this quotation that the effect of bringing criticism

closer to literature can be traced back to Victorian times. Dayan here writes about

the French nineteenth century (the book focuses on French critics, authors and

composers, at any rate), but the same effort was present in author-critics such as

Pater and Wilde: Wilde, in his 'The Critic as Artist', and Pater, for example,

whose criticism of a Giorgione painting calls for something other than purely

critical reason: 'the "ideal" meaning of Giorgione's paintings is intimated rather

than indicated, suggested rather than described. It is addressed neither to the

intellect nor to sense but to the imaginative reason'.[22]

The concept that Dayan links so closely to the 'postmodern thoughtworld'

is already very closely linked to specifically what Wilde does. Again the path

leads ultimately to Wilde's individualist approach to criticism. However, now a

new element has been added: the possibility that it may be childish to think that

criticism should not be general or that it need not present a generally acceptable

reading or explanation of a work of art; the kind of childishness that Wilde and

Dayan promote in their work; the kind that leads Wilde's criticism, as it does

Barthes's and Derrida's, to an unusual 'postmodern thoughtworld'.

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21 Dayan, pp. ix-x.
22 Patricia Herzog, 'The Condition to Which All Art Aspires: Reflections on Pater on Music',
British Journal of Aesthetics, 36.2 (1996), 122-134 (p. 128).

Salome

If there is any work that is the culmination of Wilde's efforts to marry words and music in an artistic and theoretical sense, then it must be *Salome*. The play comes at what appears to be the end of Wilde's critical (if not artistic) interest in words and music; after its publication, the theme of music, or a possible discipline to be blended into verbal work, recedes from Wilde's writing. (*The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband* were still to come. Obviously 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' also follows and its use of the term 'ballad' might suggest some interest in music, but, as shown in Chapter 7, it is much more likely a reference to the poetic forms of Wordsworth and Coleridge.) The Biblical tragedy had, as Wilde wrote in the famous letter to Alfred Douglas, '*refrains* whose recurring motifs make *Salome* so like a *piece of music* and bind it together as a *ballad*'.[23] Kerry Powell spends some time on the perception, both by Wilde and his contemporary critics, of *Salome* as a verbal approximation of music.[24] Music had not appeared in previous works of Wilde as a structuring device, or indeed as anything other than a theoretical point to be touched upon only fleetingly. Now it had taken centre stage.

Music as a theme returns in *Salome*. As in previous works, it is associated with love and power. Just as the Nightingale's song emerges from romantic love, Salome's desire for Iokanaan emerges from her in musical description: 'Speak again, Iokanaan', she urges, 'Thy voice is as music to mine ear' (p. 589). When he has finally been beheaded, she laments: 'when I looked on thee I heard a strange music' (p. 604). Moreover, the play's centrepiece is the 'Dance of the Seven

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23 *Complete Letters*, p. 740. Emphases my own.
24 Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1990), pp. 37-40.

Veils', as a result of which Salome can convince Herod to have Iokanaan executed. Here, again, it is a musical activity that ultimately carries the power of convincing.

Thus music is infused into the narrative, yet the most notable instances of music in the play are not accompanied by words at all. Crucially, the Dance of the Seven Veils is never described: the stage direction simply reads 'Salome dances the dance of the seven veils' (p. 600). Herod's reaction is no more descriptive: 'Ah! Wonderful! Wonderful! You see that she has danced for me, your daughter' (p. 600). The rest of the passage is primarily about the dance's reward. Additionally, when Salome is cradling Iokanaan's head a little later on, she is partly lamenting his silence when she says 'I heard a strange music' in the past tense. At these moments where the pairing of words and music should produce their ultimate peak, Wilde takes a step back. Words cannot finally unify in a description with music, nor is music present during the verbal description or reaction. In this, Wilde links up with Dayan's puerile assumption that music and words may be expressed in one another, as well as with Wolf's assertion that the musicalization of fiction may only occur in an indirect mode.

An additional musical element of *Salome* can be found in the pattern of its dialogue. As discussed earlier, poetic language is in and of itself also musical. There are certainly poetic elements to the language use in *Salome*: aside from the musicality introduced through poetic language, '*Salome* also suggests a kind of musicality in its elaborately artificial, highly mannered patterning of dialogue'.[25] While the language of the play is also obviously biblical, this repetition, viewed

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25 Thomas, p. 21.

from Wilde's interest in words and music, and supported by the way in which music is incorporated in his other work, points clearly to a sustained effort on the part of Wilde to structure *Salome* partly on musical principles.

Once again, the music, as an art form penetrating into the text, centres around influence and control. Thus at the start of the play, the repetition is introduced as the soldiers speak about Salome, and Narraboth's infatuation with her is introduced. Throughout the opening movements of the play, Salome (and, linked with her, the moon) is continuously linked with this repetition. As others fall under the princess' influence, so too do they engage in this particular kind of language.

There are only two characters throughout the play who (partially) resist this influence, namely Herod and Iokanaan. The latter uses language in a very straightforward, biblical way, and the language can really not be called anything but biblical. Herod, however, shows a clear change in that he moves from controlling Salome to being controlled by her, and his language changes accordingly. The point of change is Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils. Before that, Herod speaks more like a typical Wildean cynic, much like Lord Illingworth or Darlington. During this part of the play, the only repetition occurs when he speaks of the moon or Salome. As soon as he is forced to give Salome something in return for her dance and she has demanded Iokanaan's head, he grows repetitious, as in this speech where he attempts to get her to accept an emerald instead:

Hearken to me. I have an emerald, a great emerald and round, that the

minion of Caesar has sent unto me. When thou lookest through this emerald thou canst see that which passeth afar off. Caesar himself carries such an emerald when he goes to the circus. But my emerald is the larger. I know well that it is the larger. It is the largest emerald in the whole world. Thou wilt take that, wilt thou not? Ask it of me and I will give it thee. (p. 601)

There is a lot of repetition in this section. The word 'emerald' appears very frequently, as is the invocation of a name of authority and power, 'Caesar'. Additionally, some sentences are constructed simply of a repeated statement, such as 'Thou wilt take that, wilt thou not?'. This particular part of the speech is thick with recurrence and, in that way, indicative of the influence that Salome now has over Herod. It is an amplified version of Salome-related repetition that has already occurred earlier in the play, when Herod enters and notices the Young Syrian's corpse.

> HEROD: […] It is strange that the young Syrian has slain himself. I am
> sorry he has slain himself. I am very sorry. For he was fair to look
> upon. He was even very fair. He had very languorous eyes. I
> remember that I saw that he looked languorously at Salome.
> Truly, I thought he looked too much at her.
>
> HERODIAS: There are others who look too much at her.
>
> HEROD: His father was a king. I drave him from his kingdom. And of his
> mother, who was a queen, you made a slave, Herodias. So he was

here as my guest, as it were, and for that reason I made him my

captain. I am sorry he is dead. Ho! why have you left the body

here? It must be taken to some other place. I will not look at it,–

away with it! (p. 592)

In this passage, Herod's first speech and second speech differ markedly. The first

has a lot of repetition, where the second has only one small instance – the word

'it' in the last line. In the first speech, Salome (through her connection with the

Young Syrian) plays a substantive role, while in the second, the connection is

marginal; Herod is simply speaking of royalty and obligation. Salome is on

Herod's mind in the first speech, and thus the repetition is present; in the second,

neither makes an appearance.

Thus Herod, who has verbally dominated the play the moment he enters

(from his entrance, Salome speaks very little until just after she has danced for

him) is brought into rhythmic submission by Salome. Here music, specifically

through the influence of Salome, sets the play's pace: 'like music, then, the play

imposes a stylized and even metronomic procession.'[26] In this way, the musical

element functions as a structuring device; Wilde utilizes it as a fusion of words

and music.

That Wilde's *Salome* in some ways stands for an achievement in the

combination of words and music is reinforced through Richard Strauss's choice of

the play for his opera *Salome* (1905). After reading a libretto adaptation of the

play by Viennese poet Anton Linder, which Strauss did not like, he turned to a

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26 Thomas, p. 21.

German translation of Wilde's original text. 'The original prose of Wilde offered all the "poetry" Strauss demanded for the opera. He denied typical operatic construction and used an abbreviated version, about one-third, of Wilde's prose for his libretto.'[27] While this is not the place for an in-depth analysis of the opera alongside the play, Strauss's preference for the Wildean text itself – albeit in German translation – over an adaptation must clearly signal the musicality that Wilde employed in his play.

Structure, then, is one of the ways in which Wilde puts a theory on words and music to use; and this theory, as explored in the current chapter, is decidedly proto-postmodern. It resembles postmodernism not just in this structural use, however, but also in its ultimate unwillingness to accept the other – words to music, music to words – as anything but unalterably other, never to be combined, even as it childishly combines these art forms:

> Even when it is possible to identify features of Wilde's *Salome* that enter the terrain of verbal musicality – features that evoke the structural, even phenomenological aspect of music – Wilde's own biases bring him inevitably back to music not just as a structure but as a figure, not just as a self-sufficient formalism but as the signal art of opposition, difference and otherness.[28]

As both Dayan and Patricia Herzog have pointed out, musicality in fiction, and the musicalization of fiction, may have been familiar aspects of Victorian literary

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27 Carmen Trammell Skaggs, 'Modernity's Revision of the Dancing Daughter: The Salome Narrative of Wilde and Strauss', *College Literature*, 29.3 (2002), 124-139 (p. 133).
28 Thomas, p. 19.

thinking, with critics such as Carlyle and Pater writing on the topic. However, Wilde's approach again shows a proto-postmodern aspect. Music, however, was not the only interdisciplinary subject that interested Wilde. In his frequent, and sometimes painterly use of imagery – and perhaps in ultimately finding his way into theatre, that type of literature where the visual is so much more important – Wilde crossed into territories which are, in postmodern theoretical terms, the purview of ekphrasis.

Chapter IX   Ekphrasis

One of the most remarked-on facets of Wilde's work is his verbosity. Whether it be poetry, short story, novel or essay, Wilde often makes great effort to describe images or scenes, or to conjure passages from other literary works. In fact, recent studies of Wilde's manuscripts have shown that editors frequently cut a lot of extra descriptive material from the works that were to be published.[1] Description quite simply takes centre stage in his work. At times this is caught up in ways of approaching music or intertextuality, as shown in previous chapters. However, it has another result: it sheds light on Wilde's critical ideas regarding the description of images and words. Additionally, since many of the visual images described by Wilde are artistic – such as portraits – these descriptions in turn become ekphrastic.

The term ekphrasis has now come to stand for descriptions of images in words; its precise definition varies according to the debate and critics involved, and will be addressed in more detail below. The term originates from Greek, where it simply meant any type of description. As it progressed through time, it came to stand more and more for (sometimes poetic) descriptions of works of art. Finally, in the era of postmodern criticism, it came to its current definition. In reaching this late development, two names are of consequence: Gotthold Lessing and Murray Krieger. Lessing, a philosopher of the Enlightenment, created much of the theoretical framework for thinking on ekphrasis in his work *Laocoön: An*

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1 Josephine Guy, 'Introduction', in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Volume IV: Criticism*, ed. by Josephine Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. xix – lxxxv.

Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry.[2] Here he argues against the classical

tenet of the sister arts, which stated 'as painting, so poetry'. Lessing instead

argued that the two are based on fundamentally different principles: poetry

spreads across time, while painting spreads across space.

Modern debate on ekphrasis started in 1967 when Murray Krieger

contributed an essay to a volume called *The Poet as Critic*, entitled 'Ekphrasis and

the Still Movement of Poetry: or, *Laokoön* Revisited'.[3] This essay, which argued

against the clear divide that Lessing had introduced, linked into interest in

structuralism and semiotics, and propelled ekphrasis into the foreground of

theoretical discussion. Much as with word and music studies, the critical

discipline of ekphrastic theory moved in two different directions from its

reinception in 1967 to present day. One branch, represented by critics such as

Krieger, Claus Clüver and, to a degree, Tamar Yacobi, approaches ekphrasis very

much as an analytic tool, complete with a technical vocabulary and classifications

of types of ekphrasis. The other branch, represented by critics such as James

Heffernan, chooses a different focus by emphasizing the way in which things like

'art', 'text' and 'description' are not neatly contained terms, but rather bleed over

into one another, thus complicating, for example, the difference between a poem

on a painting and that same painting's description in a museum catalogue. The

distinction is not quite so black and white, but this is roughly what is at stake in

current discussions on the matter. The different sides of the debate have recently

been gathered by Valerie Robillard in the collection entitled *Pictures in Words*,

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2 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).
3 Murray Krieger, 'Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry: or, *Laokoön* Revisited', in *The Poet as Critic*, ed. by Frederick P. W. McDowell (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), pp. 3-26.

from which some of the discussion in this chapter is drawn.[4]

Ekphrasis: Some Definitions

In order to clarify the debate and accurately point out how Wilde's thinking relates to it, it is necessary to look a little more closely at a crucial point in the definition of ekphrasis. To do so requires a turn to three distinct ways of looking at ekphrasis as a term. These ways will function as a model within which the spectrum of approach is (very broadly) conveyed. This spectrum runs from a narrow view of ekphrasis as mostly poetic representation of painting and, to a degree, photography; passes through a broader description of ekphrasis as really any verbal description of the visual; and ends in a view of ekphrasis as something almost analogous to intermediality.

Representing the first of these is John Hollander, whose 1995 book *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* undertakes an examination of ekphrasis through the analysis of numerous examples. The following passage illustrates Hollander's view of ekphrasis:

'Ecphrasis' (frequently spelled in the directly transliterated form, *ekphrasis*) has been until the last decade or so a technical term used by classicists and historians of art to mean a verbal description of a work of art, of a scene as rendered in a work of art, or even of a fictional scene the description of which unacknowledgedly derives from descriptions of scenes. In recent literary theory, considerations of ecphrasis have

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4 *Pictures into Words: Theoretical and Descriptive Approaches to Ekphrasis*, ed. by Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1998).

concerned the ways in which space and time are involved in the various

mutual figurations of actuality, text, and picture. Classicists are frequently

concerned with the relation between the ecphrasis of a picture and the

question of scenic description in fiction generally; of central interest there

is the relation between the vividness or liveliness (in Greek, *enargeia*) of a

painting, say, and the rhetorical vividness of the writing.[5]

Of particular note here are two things. First of all, there is the term 'enargeia',

which is frequently found in discussions on ekphrasis, but just as often seen as

problematic or even entirely out of place. As Hollander notes, it is a remnant of

the term's classical roots. Because attempts are often still made to give enargeia a

place in the contemporary list of critical terms, it is important to remain aware of

its participation in ekphrasis. Secondly, it is worth noting Hollander's emphasis on

the artistic. This book deliberately sets out to investigate ekphrastic poems, and

the definition given here mentions 'a verbal description of a work of art'.

Hollander's approach to ekphrasis focuses very clearly on the artistic. Indeed, the

book describes ekphrasis through the use of a number of pairings of poems and

paintings or photographs. This is not to say that Hollander primarily believes that

ekphrasis is only a matter of art – nowhere in the book does he make that claim.

However, the suggestion remains that, when looking at ekphrasis, the critic ought

to focus on poetic writing and visual arts.

This, then, is the most artistic, descriptive side of ekphrasis. Somewhat

farther down the line towards a purely theoretical, open interpretation of the term

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5 John Hollander, *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (London: The
University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 5.

is James Heffernan's definition, which has become the norm (mostly) in critical

debates on ekphrasis. According to this critic, ekphrasis is 'the verbal

representation of visual representation'.[6] This definition has the great advantage

that it follows the logical extension of the term to a point where it literally comes

down to any writing on any image – as long as that image is a representation.

Heffernan emphasizes this clearly: in the theoretical debate, it is necessary and

useful for critics 'to distinguish ekphrasis from two other ways of mingling

literature and the visual arts – pictorialism and iconicity. What distinguishes those

two things from ekphrasis is that each one aims primarily to represent natural

objects and artifacts rather than works of representational art'.[7] This focus on

representation rather than natural objects – the term 'natural' is problematic, also

for Wilde – is the same as in Hollander, in that, in the end, most representational

work is still artistic in nature; yet it also allows for a wider net to be cast.

Heffernan's main point, however, is to be found in the phrase 'verbal

representation'. What Heffernan's definition very clearly stakes out for ekphrasis

is the freedom to include any kind of verbal description. This emphasizes that

ekphrasis does not revolve around poetry, or indeed around any black-and-white

approach to 'high' artistic writing. Heffernan's main point, which he develops

throughout several 'Museum of Words' articles and one book, is that even

explicitly non-artistic descriptions may fall under the purview of ekphrasis: his

phrase 'museum of words' is a reference to the way paintings are displayed in

museums. They are often accompanied by titles, descriptions and relevant

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6 James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 3.
7 James A. W. Heffernan, 'Ekphrasis and Representation', *New Literary History*, 22.2 (Spring
1991), 297-316 (p. 299).

information in catalogues, or even stories told by tour guides; and this does not even take into account text that visitors themselves might bring from outside the museum to these paintings.

It is possible to follow this reasoning further along and reach the other end of the spectrum. Here arise discussions that focus not on any single manifestation of ekphrasis or even representation, nor on broad groupings of such; instead they base themselves entirely on the theoretical debate. Critics have long noticed that, in some ways, the tenability of the idea of the 'visual' is difficult to maintain, other than to determine arbitrarily that ekphrasis is limited to the visual. Originally the term related to rhetorical description in certain ways and the visual aspect was not very heavily emphasized. Additionally, as the ekphrasis debate drew more and more on disciplines such as semiotics, critics started to arrive at a definition of ekphrasis that seems close to, and at some moments blurs with, terms such as intertextuality and intermediality.

One such critic, Claus Clüver, started examining Heffernan's definition and introducing a number of objections. Building on critical ekphrasis discourse by Tamar Yacobi, Clüver eventually arrives at his own definition: 'Ekphrasis is the verbalization of real or fictitious texts composed in a non-verbal sign system.'[8] This definition is obviously quite far away from Hollander's starting point, which focussed very much on artistic matter on both the verbal and the visual side. Clüver is concerned solely with a critical vocabulary that allows the definition of ekphrasis with absolute precision. Heffernan's definition is too vague for him. It is also noteworthy that Clüver does not believe it is viable to have ekphrasis be

8 Claus Clüver, 'Quotation, Enargeia, and the Functions of Ekphrasis', in *Pictures into Words: Theoretical and Descriptive Approaches to Ekphrasis*, ed. by Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1998), pp. 35-52 (p. 49).

limited to images. As he states himself in the article where he arrives at it, his definition is open to anything non-verbal, including such things as music. While ekphrasis still covers images, the 'texts composed in a non-verbal sign system' essentially means that any intermedial activity would fall under the term of ekphrasis. At this end of the spectrum, the unique link with the visual is lost.

The move down the line of this spectrum goes from highly artistic-oriented, example-driven writing on ekphrasis to a strongly theory-oriented, open approach to the term, which drops even the purely visual element. This move is also the move from a more classical ekphrasis to a more postmodern ekphrasis. Wilde will come into this discussion somewhere around the middle of that range, in the vicinity of Heffernan. The openness of Heffernan's approach is – as will be shown – akin to Wilde's theories of personality-driven artistic freedom. Because Wilde never explicitly develops a theory on ekphrasis, the more purely theoretical discussion undertaken by critics such as Clüver cannot apply; the latter's focus on terminology makes this end of the spectrum the least fruitful to compare with Wilde's approach to ekphrasis. Additionally, a discussion on postmodern theories and words and images is best served by a theory that does focus on those images. Even with the focus on visual-based theory, however, there is another issue. The problem, familiar by now, is that Wilde's thoughts are spread throughout his work and need to be teased out before they can be clearly identified as critical thought. As always, Wilde's theoretical approach is consistent and identifiable in both critical and creative work (if, at this point, that distinction is still valid at all) and the starting point, once again, is *Intentions*.

Ekphrasis in *Intentions*

Though the term ekphrasis was available to Wilde (although not in its

(post)modern form), *Intentions* makes no mention of it. As a trained classicist with

a clear fondness for ancient Greece, and given that several essays make use of

original Greek, it must be assumed that Wilde had encountered ekphrasis, even if

only in its original rhetorical form. There is no use in speculating why the term

makes no appearance in any of Wilde's works and there really is no cause to do

so; the changes that make ekphrasis more of a postmodern element in critical

thinking, and thus suitable to the discussion of Wilde as a proto-postmodernist,

occur after 1970. The term as it existed in the latter half of the nineteenth century

is not as relevant to the present discussion.

Like music, visual art as a theme comes to the fore repeatedly in Wilde's

essays. Unlike music, visual art plays a large role in several of them. Discussion

of painting and representation is at the heart of 'The Decay of Lying' while 'Pen,

Pencil and Poison' is devoted to the life of a man who writes, among other things,

about works of visual art by famous painters such as Rembrandt. It is in this

particular essay that Wilde comes closest to defining terms for a critical discussion

on words and images. Describing how the essay's subject, Thomas Griffiths

Wainewright, deals with the description of painting, Wilde writes: 'he deals with

his impressions of the work as an artistic whole, and tries to translate those

impressions into words, to give, as it were, the literary equivalent for the

imaginative and mental effect.'[9] Moreover, Wainewright's work is indicative of a

type of writing on images: 'he was one of the first to develop what has been called

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9 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), p. 1098. Further references to Wilde's work from this edition are given after quotations in the text.

the art-literature of the nineteenth century, that form of literature which has found in Mr. Ruskin and Mr. Browning, its two most perfect exponents' (p. 1098). The list could easily have included Pater, whose book *The Renaissance* includes many such instances of 'art-literature'. This term of art-literature refers to a lively debate that was going on about verbal writing on art. The debate changed over the course of the nineteenth century, eventually serving to highlight how

> word and image are countersigns of each other, how the likeness or duplication initially disclosed by the verbal and visual representations is only apparent, and how, symbolically, the ekphrastic encounter testifies to the indeterminate and what Matthew Arnold writing to Clough called the general 'unpoetical' character of the modern world.[10]

(It would be worthwhile to survey the topic of art-writing and thus to track what theories had influenced Wilde, but that falls outside the space and scope afforded here – the aim, after all, is to show how Wilde's thinking is proto-postmodern, not where that thinking in turn may have come from.)

At any rate, the term 'art-literature' appears nowhere else in Wilde's essays. The two men mentioned – Ruskin and Browning – are both poets, suggesting that Wilde may have conceived of this approach as purely poetic, much like Hollander. However, in the essay itself, Wilde is describing Wainewright, who is a critic rather than a poet. This is emphasized by the fact that Wilde mostly discusses Wainewright's writings on art and his predilection for poisoning people.

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10 Lawrence Starzyk, '"Ut pictura poesis": The nineteenth-century perspective', *Victorian Newsletter*, 102 (2002), 1-9 (p. 9).

Wainewright is linked with Matthew Arnold's phrase 'to see the object as in itself it really is' (p. 1097). That Wilde should bring up the phrase in connection to Wainewright is telling, because it places the poisoner strangely between two positions. On the one hand, Wilde repeatedly refers to Wainewright's artistic nature, even going so far as to insist that the judgement on him should be artistic: 'Of course, he is far too close to our own time for us to be able to form any purely artistic judgment about him' (p. 1106). The implication is that Wilde finds it desirable for readers to form an artistic opinion, but that a general public – 'us' – is not quite capable yet. Clearly, however, Wilde does not view Wainewright as a perfect artist in terms of his artistic practices; what interests him are Wainewright's ideas, which allow Wilde to share some of his own thoughts with his readers: he sees his forerunner as an imperfect critic, not because the latter is wrong, but because his techniques do not yet go far enough.

Those ideas may be gleaned from the way in which Wilde describes them, as well as in the general remarks that Wilde makes about his artistic/critical craft. For one thing, he attributes a certain artificiality to Wainewright, since, 'like most artificial people, he had a great love of nature' (p. 1101). Here the juxtaposition of nature and artifice points to that greater Wildean assumption, explored in 'The Decay of Lying', of the constructed, artificial nature of life. In connection to Wainewright, the writer of art-literature, it also points to the same element as Heffernan: namely that the reader is dealing with representation and not the 'natural object' itself.

Wilde also writes of Wainewright: 'As an art-critic he concerned himself primarily with the complex impressions produced by a work of art, and certainly

the first step in aesthetic criticism is to realise one's own impressions' (p. 1096).

This is the recurring theme of personality and personal response being the

cornerstone of any artistic endeavour. Wilde returns to it later in 'The Critic as

Artist', where he writes: 'To the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a

new work of his own, that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to

the thing it criticises. The one characteristic of a beautiful form is that one can put

into it whatever one wishes, and see in it whatever one chooses to see' (p. 1128).

Here Wilde anticipates the idea that ekphrasis can be based on images that may

not necessarily be available for viewing. Hollander calls this idea 'notional'

ekphrasis, 'the verbal representation of a purely fictional work of art.' If the work

of art is itself fictional, it is 'Notional ecphrasis – or the description, often

elaborately detailed, of purely fictional painting or sculpture that is indeed brought

into being by the poetic language itself'.[11] This idea of the critical term of

ekphrasis and its scope is present – in its form of notional ekphrasis – in Wilde's

concept of the critic as artist as it is embodied here in Wainewright's art criticism.

The broad scope for ekphrasis, introduced by Heffernan, is another thing

that is already there in Wilde's critical thought. It may be found in the description

of Wainewright, especially when 'Pen, Pencil and Poison' is compared to 'The

Decay of Lying'. During the former essay, Wilde makes a point about

Wainewright's criminal acts having made his art more interesting: 'one can fancy

an intense personality being created out of sin' (p. 1106). Such an intense

personality will lead to better art, as 'The Critic as Artist' argues, but here it also

broadens the range of the artist: the addition of sin to the artist's personality is

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11 Hollander, p. 4.

what intensifies and adds interest. This is one of the essential points of 'The

Decay of Lying': art becomes interesting when the artist realises that truth and

morality have nothing whatsoever to do with art; that, in fact, there is no such

thing as 'Truth' with a capital T, so that 'Art, breaking from the prison-house of

realism, will run to greet him, and will kiss his false, beautiful lips, knowing that

he alone is in possession of the great secret of all her manifestations, the secret

that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style' (p. 1081). Artists and critics

cannot avoid a narrow definition involving things like 'Truth', but must assume a

broad range.

The comments Wilde makes in the essays are related directly to painters

and critics (though he writes with reference to all art and criticism), and two of

Wainewright's clearest characteristics are his art criticism and his painting. This in

turn allows for these points to be linked to Wilde's term of art-literature, the term

he gives to what is essentially ekphrasis. The point is especially relevant where

'The Critic as Artist' is concerned. Where Wilde claims criticism for the sphere of

art (and vice versa), he makes the same step that modern critics make in ekphrasis

in relation to critical writing and visual representation: 'If ekphrasis is "the verbal

representation of visual representation", a definition most experts now seem to

accept, the first part of that definition can only mean: all verbal commentary

writing (poems, critical assessments, art historical accounts) on images.'[12] This is

the same position, again, as Heffernan's, and it puts Wilde's critical thinking again

in the middle of that theoretical debate on ekphrasis.

The question then becomes whether ekphrastic writing includes not simply

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12 Peter Wagner, 'Introduction', in *Icons, Texts, Iconotexts : Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality*, ed. by Peter Wagner (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), pp. 1-40 (p. 15).

critical writing on visual representation, but theoretical writing in and of itself –

writing that is no longer the practice of linking theory to a visual work, but talks

about the theory for its own sake, as Clüver does. In other words, is ekphrasis, to

some degree, the result of itself – an act of theory on visual representation, and

therefore, as words on images, ekphrastic? The modern debate on ekphrasis tends

to lean that way, as exemplified in the following passage, which goes so far even

as to suggest literary theory as an active ekphrastic practice. In discussing

ekphrasis, critic Martin Gaughan sees

> a concern with contemporary issues in both the production and reception
>
> of visual art, but a visual art which increasingly consciously problematises
>
> its own status through its engagement with the verbal (and occasionally
>
> attendant literary theory), whether inside the frame of the work (on the
>
> surface) or outside (as title, often of almost textual proportions).[13]

Two things stand out here. The first is that, as said, the reference is specifically to

'attendant literary theory', which makes the article actively engage the suggestion

that (literary) theory can itself be ekphrastic. The second point of the above

quotation is that the production of certain kinds of visual representation (the

article makes no specific mention) represents challenges to verbal elements

'outside' of the frame of the work. This, too, indicates a kind of blurring effect,

whereby critical and theoretical writing on ekphrasis may in itself become

ekphrastic. This is not quite the point that Clüver was making; after all, the

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13 Martin Ignatius Gaughan, 'Textual Titles: Resisting Translation', in *Text into Image: Image into Text*, ed. by Jeff Morrison and Florian Krobb (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), pp. 257-266 (p. 257).

discussion here is still on the verbal and the visual, not the verbal and the non-verbal. It is, however, farther down the spectrum in his direction. It links to Wilde's view on the matter: again it concerns Wainewright's art-literature and the non-difference between art and criticism explored in 'The Critic as Artist'. When ekphrasis itself becomes the object of its study and when the theory becomes the ekphrastic act, we are left with very little difference between the critical and the creative act; as Wilde had been arguing all along, readers should see 'criticism as an essential part of the creative spirit' (p. 1120).

Paintings, Portraits and Imagined Images

In the previous chapters on simulacra and hyperreality, the power of images has already been discussed and the separate chapter on portraiture covered specifically how Wilde handled concepts of truth, lies and representation. Now, the topic of portraiture is taken up again, but here it appears in the context of a discussion on ekphrasis as a modern critical theory.

In light of ekphrastic theory, the two most important works that feature portraiture are *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' The striking thing about both these works is that they actively engage the concept of notional ekphrasis: they explore aspects of representing a fictional work of visual representation and its implications – directly in the case of *Dorian*, and indirectly in 'W. H.'.

In this respect, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is quite straightforward in one sense: it represents notional ekphrasis. Wilde's descriptions of Dorian's portrait are typical verbal descriptions of visual representation (in this case, the artistic and moral representation of Dorian Gray). What is interesting is the sense of

movement, or change, that Dorian's changing portrait introduces. The concept of movement in relation to ekphrasis has not been explored very extensively in theory. Yet there is no part of the definition 'verbal representation of visual representation' that should limit the visual to remaining static. In Wilde's case, the picture changes along with Dorian's state of mind, and the reader is given descriptions of that change throughout the book. In one sense there are several different portraits, as Dorian is never faced with the portrait as it is changing, but rather with the portrait that has already changed. The movement is implied in the writing, such as when the description reads:

> Yet it was watching him, with its beautiful marred face and its cruel smile. Its bright hair gleamed in the early sunlight. Its blue eyes met his own. A sense of infinite pity, not for himself, but for the painted image of himself, came over him. It had altered already, and would alter more. Its gold would wither into grey. Its red and white roses would die. For every sin that he committed, a stain would fleck and wreck its fairness. (p. 75)

First of all, the painting is given a certain sense of agency in this passage: it is 'watching him' and its 'blue eyes met his own'. The reader is presented with the impression that the portrait is alive and active (even if such fancy is, most likely, merely in Dorian's mind). Second of all, the language itself also suggests change, almost inevitably: the painting 'would alter more' and its 'red and white roses would die', suggesting a kind of future movement that is unavoidable. This aspect of movement, or kinesis, has not been fully investigated, save perhaps for the

attempts at defining the 'lifelike' qualities of the ekphrastic description – the rhetorical term known as enargeia. However, the lifelike and actual kinesis are not quite the same. Attention specifically to movement in ekphrasis is currently – at the time of writing this thesis – still quite young, happening with new scholars who are exploring the new topics of ekphrasis – one example being Elisabeth Bruinja, whose work on William Carlos Williams's ekphrastic poems on Breughel explores how 'the poet creates a kinetic effect by a skilful application of active and progressive verbs, by calling attention to the rhythmical aspects of the poetic medium, and by guiding the inner eye of the reader through the composition by imitating the dynamics of optical or saccadic movement'.[14]

Before continuing to discuss how 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' functions in the context of ekphrasis, it is necessary to clarify something about its nature. 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1889 and was incorporated in later editions of *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories*. From its inclusion in that volume, it may be concluded that this is a short story. However, 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' contains a great deal of literary criticism, mostly notably efforts in close reading of Shakespeare's Sonnets. It was this critical section that Wilde later expanded, though that second version was ultimately never published by Wilde. As a result, the work is normally classified as a short story. More recently, Josephine Guy also chose not to include it in the fourth volume of Wilde's works, dedicated to criticism, which does contain the essays from *Intentions* as well as 'The Rise of Historical Criticism' and 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism'. Bruce Bashford argues as much when he identified the

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14 Elisabeth Bruinja, 'Anything But Faithful Recordings' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Groningen, 2009), p. 64.

essay/story as an expression of Wilde's fears about his own theory of criticism as art, exposing its dark side by showing how it may go wrong when taken to extremes: 'The story represents an approach to ["The Critic as Artist"] by way of a wrong turn. [...] The theory of interpretation Wilde depicts in "The Portrait" has an implication that he finds disturbing.'[15] Bashford, however, chooses to situate the act of criticism as art within the confines of the story, where the critical theory on Shakespeare's Sonnets is the source of death and despair. In considering, instead, the whole story itself as Wilde's critical, artistic act, it becomes an act of criticism regarding Shakespeare's Sonnets, and the 'wrong turn' becomes a story, one of the creative elements that blur the boundary between the critical and the creative. In other words, 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' is as much a critical essay in the Wildean sense as it is a short story in the general sense.

Returning to the discussion of 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' as ekphrasis, the story is the closest Wilde comes to theoretically discussing notional ekphrasis and, additionally, ekphrasis theory as an act of ekphrasis. Central to this reading of the narrative is the state of the tale's titular portrait as a forgery. This imbues the portrait with a curiously two-fold status. It is an instance of notional ekphrasis in that its description by Wilde constitutes a description of a portrait that has never existed. It is also notional in that the theory presented within the story by Cyril Graham rests on W. H.'s actual existence – a fact negated, or at least made very unlikely, by his portrait's status as a forgery. With his existence unproven, the theory remains an evocation of a fictitious person – notional, in a way – and yet the portrait, within the confines of the story, is entirely real. Given the portrait's

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15 Bruce Bashford, 'Hermeneutics in Oscar Wilde's 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.'', *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature*, 24.4 (1988), 412-422 (p. 412).

existence, technically speaking the ekphrastic description taken from the Sonnets and derived from the theory is not notional at all, since it is verbal description of a visual representation (even if that representation represents, in fact, a lie).

Wilde makes use of the same critical ideas on visual representation and painting as he does in *Intentions*, namely that the distinction between the critical and the creative is a hard one to make. The use of Mr. W. H.'s portrait brings exactly that problem of the link between art and criticism into focus. In this way its function resembles a general theory of ekphrasis:

> Ekphrasis itself brings the relationship between the creative and critical components of the creative act into the sharpest possible focus. A poem about a painting is already a critical act [...]. Indeed ekphrasis is a form of writing in which multiple participants in the process of literary exchange are often more explicitly present and designated than elsewhere.[16]

Through the use of the (notionally ekphrastic) portrait, Wilde arrives at a point where the factors in ekphrasis – theory, verbal representation, visual representation – are indeed 'explicitly present and designated'.

The reading of the relationship between Graham's theory, Shakespeare's Sonnets, and the forged portrait as Wilde's incorporation of thinking on ekphrasis, allows for the portrait to become a site where theory and the act itself are blurred. The portrait's status as both notional ekphrasis outside of the story and actual ekphrasis within the story brings these relationships into the foreground. Fiction

16 David Kinloch, 'The Poet in the Art Gallery: Accounting for Ekphrasis', *New Writing*, 7.1 (2010), 19-29 (p. 20).

and facts mix – this is one of the story's main points – and this is shown most clearly in the portrait itself. It combines the states of being a critical act and being a verbal and visual representation. As a critical act, it is part of Cyril Graham's theory on Shakespeare's Sonnets and Hughes, establishing it as plausible for the general critical audience. As verbal and visual representation, it is a description of a portrait and thus a fairly straightforward instance of notional ekphrasis. Yet the two facets are present at the same time, and thus illustrate a blurring of the line between ekphrasis itself and theory on ekphrasis.

Photography and Ekphrasis

Though previously discussed in this thesis in conjunction with possibilities of truth, the discussion of photography is also a part of ekphrasis, one that has specific theoretical considerations. In terms of visual representation, photography differs from other kinds of images such as painting primarily in the expectations associated with it. Photography is, on the whole, conceived of as a more accurate representation of reality than painting or drawing; the assumption is generally that photography captures a moment of actual reality whereas other visual representations capture the impression of that image's creator. In tandem with a questioning of truth in general, that assumption about photography is being challenged, and many scholars now debate to what degree photographs are genuine representations of reality, and to what degree they are manufactured: 'recent poetry has been concerned with photographs as invented pictures in themselves – given the history in the twentieth century of various notions and

counternotions of "art" photography – as well as with their documentary status.'[17]

The possibilities today of altering photographic images through digital processing, and the ability to do this on a scale of detail that makes such alteration unnoticeable to the human eye, have further diminished photography's 'documentary status'.

It would be unfair to say that, in Wilde's time, views on photography were unequivocally of the simplistic kind: Victorians did not simply see photographs as unproblematic representations of reality. The nineteenth-century discussion did not focus as much on realism as it did on representation of form. This means that while the link between photography and realism was generally accepted, it was far from straightforward:

> Some nineteenth-century critics linked novelistic and photographic representation in terms of a shared realism. [...] Yet paradoxically, rather than focus on a shared devotion to objective representation, Victorian critics linked photography and the realist novel through a shared dilemma: a preponderance of details without a governing structure.[18]

The 'objective representation' was, then, certainly a factor in the thinking on photography in Wilde's time. Photography was deemed capable of objectivity, but also of distortion of form.

In postmodernism, the preoccupations changed. If the photograph is naturally capable of objectivity, then the discussion on form is important; if,

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17 Hollander, p. 67.
18 Daniel Novak, 'Photographic Fictions: Nineteenth-Century Photography and the Novel Form', *Novel*, 43.1 (Spring 2010), 23-30 (p. 23).

however, such objectivity must be called into question, the matter of form is settled as the whole discussion switches to subjectivity. That such a clear switch was made in terms of thinking on photography is clear, as in the quotation below, where critic Janice Hart discusses the difference between photography appearing in a Sherlock Holmes story and in a novel published in 2003:

> Writers no longer think of photographs in terms of 'transparency' and concepts of reality are now considered to be more complex than when Conan Doyle was writing ['A Scandal in Bohemia']. The 'truth value' of photography has also been systematically questioned by critics from a range of subject disciplines.'[19]

Noteworthy in these discussions are the words 'objectivity', 'transparency', 'truth value' and 'documentary status' – all indications that the centre of the critical debate on photography revolves around its capability to represent reality.

Wilde's discussion of photography arises from a single story. In 'The Sphinx Without a Secret' the reader finds the only instance of photography in Wilde's body of work: the picture of a mysterious woman. The story was previously discussed in Chapter VI in terms of portraiture and surface; it is now taken up again in terms of visual representation and description. Here is the passage where the photograph first appears, near the beginning of the story and while the reader knows nothing yet of the fate of Lady Alroy:

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19 Janice Hart, 'The Girl No One Knew: Photographs, Narratives, and Secrets in Modern Fiction', *Mosaic: a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 37.4 (2004), 111-126 (p. 114).

He took from his pocket a little silver-clasped morocco case, and handed it to me. I opened it. Inside there was the photograph of a woman. She was tall and slight, and strangely picturesque with her large vague eyes and loosened hair. She looked like a *clairvoyante*, and was wrapped in rich furs. 'What do you think of that face?' he said; 'is it truthful?' I examined it carefully. It seemed to me the face of some one who had a secret, but whether that secret was good or evil I could not say. Its beauty was a beauty moulded out of many mysteries - the beauty, in fact, which is psychological, not plastic - and the faint smile that just played across the lips was far too subtle to be really sweet. 'Well,' he cried impatiently, 'what do you say?' 'She is the Gioconda in sables,' I answered. (pp. 205-206)

It is clear from several instances in this passage alone that the story tackles the theme of reality and photography directly. The photograph is housed in a 'little silver-clasped morocco case' and is thus presented in the context of a piece of art – decorate art, as Wilde would have put it. The woman in the photograph looks 'picturesque', as though she herself is also a work of art. Her mysterious nature immediately clashes with the concept of photography as having a documentary nature, as she appears 'like a clairvoyante'. Crucially, the pertinent question that is then asked about the portrait is: 'is it truthful?'. These points make up only half the passage quoted above. During the rest of it, Lady Alroy's mysterious nature is firmly reinforced, culminating in a reference to the Mona Lisa, whose smile is one of the famed archetypes of mystery. The verbal representation of this

photographic portrait works predominantly to reinforce the air of mystery.

If Lady Alroy were mysterious, then the photograph would have reported matters truthfully. However, its documentary nature has already been made doubtful by its association with art – its decorative container and 'picturesque' subject – and the story will bear out that Lady Alroy's mystery is entirely constructed. The photograph turns out to be one of the many tools employed by Lady Alroy to create the false sense of mystery; in other words, it lies. In terms of treatment of photography, this is much closer to the postmodern view of photography: Wilde, in the story, is actively questioning the truth-value mentioned above by Janice Hart. This is emphasized even by the story's ending: while just having had the truth explained to him by the narrator, the character of Lord Murchison is again struck with doubt. 'He took out the morocco case, opened it, and looked at the photograph. "I wonder?" he said at last' (p. 208). The doubt is uttered while the character is glancing at the photograph: it continues the lie and mystery even as Lord Murchison is now aware of the true version of reality.

Photography, rather than documenting reality, represents whatever it is made to represent. This is all the more powerful because of the illusion of objectivity that photography exudes – a power made clear in the story. Wilde actively plays with this documentary status when he foregrounds the photograph's suggestion of mystery and shows its influence on Lord Murchison even in the face of truth. It is the proto-postmodernist Wilde at work, for postmodern critics have made the same, albeit much more detailed, observation. The description here is of the photograph itself:

> Its lack of continuous motion or explicit narrative duration (its stillness),
> its lack of an acoustic or verbal dimension (its silence), its conspicuous
> spatialization of visual experience (its deployment of three-dimensional or
> perspectival realism), its mechanical-chemical indexical relationship with
> the real that seems to exceed the intentionality of the image-producer (its
> status as the 'pencil of nature' rather than of 'man'): all these give
> photography the appearance of a pure visuality—and unlike painting, it is
> a visuality originating in the (referential) world rather than mediated by the
> (authorial) mind. Photography appears as the antithesis to verbal, textual,
> or even other pictorial systems that move in the noise of subjectivity and
> time.[20]

In other words, the fact that photography supposedly moves straight from reality
to picture without passing through a creator's mind is what gives the photograph
the 'appearance of pure visuality' which can be found 'originating in the world'
or, in even simpler phrasing, the idea that a photograph represents an unmediated,
'true' picture of the world makes it such a powerful form of ekphrasis.

Double Coding

One last phenomenon must be brought up in conjunction to Wilde and theory on
words and images. The theory originates with Emma Kafalenos (although she, in
turn, adopts it from the intertextual theories of others), who has investigated a
kind of embedding of images within words. In her essay 'The Power of Double

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20 Paul Frosh, 'Industrial Ekphrasis: The Dialectic of Word and Image in Mass Cultural
Production', *Semiotica*, 147.1 (2003), 241-264 (p. 245).

Coding' Kafalenos shows how this process is present in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, thus making her one of the critics who go as far as to associate a modern theoretical idea with Wilde. Kafalenos, however, does not locate thinking on the theory in Wilde's work; she instead points out the presence of double coding in Wilde's novel. That theoretical thinking on it can also be located there is the next step undertaken here.

Double coding is the encoding of one medium into another. In the case of Wilde, this means the placement of a visual representation within a verbal context, although Kafalenos sees a broader use for the term: 'a painting within a painting but, also, a painting within a novel and a television show within a film. My thesis is that double coding can enable representation of new forms of representation (art forms, genres, media) that at a given time cannot be represented except through the power of double coding.'[21] This last addition takes ekphrasis one step farther: it becomes allowed to represent something that cannot yet be represented. (This is different from Hollander's concept of notional ekphrasis: double coding includes an element of anticipation.) Kafalenos locates such specific use of ekphrasis in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: 'In the novel, the representation of the embedded image through ekphrasis—the verbal representation of a visually depicted scene—permits representation of a medium otherwise unavailable in 1891, when the novel was published: the moving image that we now call film.'[22]

The specific point of double coding here – the thing that makes it not simply another term for ekphrasis – is that last element of representing the

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21 Emma Kafalenos, 'The Power of Double Coding to Represent New Forms of Representation: The Truman Show, Dorian Gray, "Blow-Up," and Whistler's Caprice in Purple and Gold', *Poetics Today*, 24.1 (2003), 1-33 (p. 2).
22 Kafalenos, p. 7.

unrepresentable. No such theoretical element has been discussed in the context of ekphrasis. Yet Kafalenos foregrounds this aspect of double coding: 'double coding can enable representation of new forms of representation (art forms, genres, media) that at a given time cannot be represented except through the power of double coding'[23] That this is present in Wilde's novel is something that she points out; however, traces of it may also already be pointed to in 'The Decay of Lying'.

Wilde's playful juxtaposition of realism versus lying is essential in that discussion. By favouring lying, Wilde rejects representing reality strictly as it is. This, in turn, opens up the possibility that his approach to art – the imaginative lie rather than the Truth – allows exactly what Kafalenos is writing about. Indeed, it lies in the way in which Wilde subverts the binary oppositions of real and imaginary. He has Vivian put it this way:

> Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent. This is the first stage. Then Life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle. Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment. (p. 1078)

The reader can find in this passage the movement that leads towards the (as yet)

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23 Kafalenos, p. 2.

unrepresentable: they are told that art creates the 'purely imaginative work' dealing with the 'unreal and non-existent'. From this envisioning of what does not exist, the move is towards a state of what does not *yet* exist, as 'Life becomes fascinated with this new wonder'. Finally it may move from here to fact, just as Wilde's conception of a moving portrait anticipated what would later become the moving image of film (even if he, himself, does not anticipate film in and of itself). For Wilde, things are quite clear: 'The imagination is essentially creative, and always seeks for a new form' (p. 1083). That new form, coupled with the ideas of ekphrasis already explored in Wilde's work, is what makes for the anticipation of double coding. But at the same time this 'essentially creative' imagination, seeking 'a new form' is exactly what the discussion of Wilde's work has been about – not simply in ekphrastic terms, but in terms of postmodernism as a whole – for it shows that Wilde's form, firmly rooted in his own time, was nevertheless something essentially creative, and in its newness looked forward to the theoretical movements and approaches now known as postmodernism.

Conclusion

In Paris, on December 28th, 1895, Auguste and Louis Lumière premiered work that consisted of very short films showing everyday activities. Their Paris-based performance, one of the first showings of film that an audience could buy tickets for, would have delighted the francophone Wilde; he was unable to attend, of course, having already been arrested and imprisoned after the 1895 trials. Wilde's likely admiration would have lain in the fact that the brothers Lumière were projecting onto a screen what he had already been conceiving, in some form, in his writing.

The recording and projection of film was being pioneered during Wilde's lifetime. America had the lead with Thomas Edison, who had developed a camera, but 'where Edison concentrated on the camera, these French brothers put their inventive effort into a projector – as did other Europeans'.[1] In fact, in terms of performance, the brothers Lumière had been beaten by the brothers Skladanowsky by only a little under two months: they were preceded on 'November 1, 1895, when Max Skladanowsky – working together with his brother Emil – showed a fifteen-minute series of eight short movies as the main attraction in a vaudeville-like program at Berlin's Wintergarten theater', remarkable among other things because 'this was the first showing of a movie before a paying audience in Europe'.[2]

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1 Douglas Montgomery and Clara Pafort-Overduin, *Movie History: A Survey*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 13.
2 Stephen Brockmann, *A Critical History of German Film* (Rochester: Camden House, 2010), p. 13.

There is no evidence from Wilde's letters, or from the known activities of his associates, that he was particularly engrossed in the budding form of moving pictures. Yet his work shows the interest keenly: he is clearly captivated by the power of images, and ideas about moving, or at least changing, pictures are evident in some of the poems and in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Of the latter, critic Ronald Thomas notes that the novel features passages, in which Wilde imagines something like a moving picture, such as when the novel's narrator states: 'our eyelids might open some morning upon a world that had been refashioned anew in the darkness for our pleasure, a world in which things would have fresh shapes and colours, and be changed'.[3] Thomas remarks on this passage that 'it is worth noting that more than twenty different screen adaptations of Wilde's novel were produced in the first hundred years since its publication, as if to fulfil this prophecy in the most literal terms' and, to emphasize the point further, that 'six silent movie version of the novel from six different countries were made between 1910 and 1918 alone, more than any other single literary text in this seminal period for the development of narrative film'.[4]

Yet it must be said that Wilde's images remain static. They are powerfully suggestive – as in both of the paintings in 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* inspiring death, or Lady Alroy's photograph in 'The Sphinx Without a Secret' channelling profound mystery – but they are never described to the reader as actually moving. Instead, Wilde explores a number of ideas that are connected to film; there is, for one, Emma Kafalenos's assertion that

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3 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), p. 100.
4 Ronald R. Thomas, 'Poison Books and Moving Pictures: Vulgarity in The Picture of Dorian Gray', in *Victorian Vulgarity: Taste in Verbal and Visual Culture*, ed. by Susan David Bernstein and Elsie B. Michie (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 185-200 (p. 195).

Wilde anticipated the medium of film in his novel through the use of double coding. Part of this can be explained by Wilde tapping into the magic-picture tradition as mentioned in Chapter VII, but, as Kerry Powell mentions, one of the book's most remarkable features is Wilde's 'transformation of mostly dull and uninspired precedents into vivid fiction surviving the century which produced it'.[5] Wilde did not slavishly follow the preceding tradition, but used it, among other things, as a receptacle for his critical ideas. In short, his anticipation of film has been explored by a number of critics, but what it really illustrates here is Wilde's tendency to draw upon contemporary influences and to refine them into critical and philosophical ideas that very strikingly resemble postmodernism.

Wilde's use of language, particularly in epigrams, can be linked to the postmodern interest in binary oppositions, and from there to deconstruction and to a general postmodernist distrust of overarching concepts such as the 'natural' or 'truth'. His discussion on reality and its implications finds strong parallels in the very postmodern interpretation of reality as hyperreality, while his desire to place the burden of interpretation solely on the reader – to move it away from meaning (and obligation) inherent in the text – corresponds to ideas on reader response theory, the postmodern narrator, and biography. Even his treatment of particular subjects such as literary theft, music, or the representation of images resembles very closely the theoretical approaches to these in postmodernism.

This is why Wilde is relevant, and why he is still being read. Over the past decades, his reputation as a writer has been salvaged by a few dedicated critics, and brought back through the effort of gender studies and Irish post-colonialism.

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5 Kerry Powell, 'Tom, Dick, and Dorian Gray: Magic-Picture Mania in Late Victorian Fiction', *Philological Quarterly*, 62.2 (1983), 147-170 (p. 166).

Despite continuing mixed assessments of his work – including a pervasively negative attitude towards his poetry – these critics have managed to point readers to Wilde's brilliance. This thesis proposes that the underlying reason for Wilde's enduring, even rising, popularity among these postmodern readers is a shared foundation of ideas, which are Wilde's as much as they are key issues to postmodernism. Thus, when post-colonialism finds in Wilde someone who is willing to play with language and to subvert authority, this taps into Wilde's general attention to language, the same sort of attention which inspired Jacques Derrida to postulate deconstruction; when Alan Sinfield rightly acknowledges Wilde as a pivotal force for queer theory, this is also because Wilde consistently questions ideas of what it means for something to be called 'natural' in the same way that postmodernism as a whole must question such sweeping assumptions. Wilde, and more specifically, the literary, critical theory proposed by Wilde in his criticism and incorporated into his fiction, is apt now because it shares so much with the basic theoretical assumptions that inform many of the critical practices of the twentieth and twenty first century.

Such a reading of Wilde has several consequences. Firstly, it validates the various isolated hints in the critical literature, indicated in the Introduction of this thesis, of Wilde as apparently resembling postmodernist attitudes. As a result of the research and discussion presented here, such hints can now be replaced with the definitive statement that Oscar Wilde is a proto-postmodernist. Secondly, it frees Wilde's works from a necessarily historicist interpretation, which is not to say that they should no longer be interpreted in that way, but that additional avenues of interpretation have opened up.

For example, *The Importance of Being Earnest* has seen some variation, such as an all-male adaptation by director Hugh Hysell that casts all characters as male homosexuals, a move similarly made in one of the play's graphic novel adaptations by Tom Bouden and Gerrit Komrij.[6] These readings of the play are valuable interpretations clearly inspired by the queer interpretation of Wilde. However, *The Importance of Being Earnest* could go beyond an immaculate Victorian comedy and the comments it allows on gender roles; Wilde's subversion of authority and social roles in general could inform a modern setting of the play, especially when a director follows Wilde's advice of a personalized interpretation aimed at beauty. It is thus with all of Wilde's social comedies, which present barriers to performance in terms of their close link to time and place; yet recent scandals in British politics might easily call to mind *An Ideal Husband*, with its complicated, ambiguous treatment of morals in politics. Likewise, a reading of *Salome* that is open to Wilde's very active intertextual and interdisciplinary choices in the play might present new avenues for performance. *Salome* is certainly the most musical and poetic of Wilde's plays – more so, perhaps, than the experiments with blank verse that entailed *The Duchess of Padua* and the starting of *A Florentine Tragedy*. At present, Strauss's opera commands a better reputation than the play, the opera being commonly described as 'a work that is so manifestly popular' that it almost works against it being considered a serious artistic achievement.[7] The play, by contrast, is not quite so

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6 Oscar Wilde, *Het Belang van Ernst*, ed. and illustrated by Tom Bouden, trans. by Gerrit Komrij (Amsterdam: Atlas, 2004).
7 Derek Puffett, 'Introduction', in *Richard Strauss: Salome*, ed. by Derek Puffett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 1-10 (p. 8).

popular, as William Tydeman and Steven Price have shown.[8] By focussing on the powerful music within Wilde's text alone, and by taking a cue from Wilde's own original intentions – which even included an olfactory dimension to the performance – a performance that is interdisciplinary in its own right could be realized. No doubt some, or even all, of the matters presented above have been attempted, but they present an exciting additional direction for the performance of Wilde's work in the current century, and one that is validated by the proto-postmodern reading of Wilde.

Finally, there is the sense in which Wilde's critical ideas could inform the critical practices of today. This thesis has not explicitly explored what it would mean, in a twenty-first century sense, to be a Wildean critic. It has sought to place Wilde's criticism with Wilde himself and within his works, and moreover has done so, to some degree, ahistorically. This maintains the traditional division: Wilde's criticism is not divorced from the past, and is maintained as a version of his historical moment, tied as it is to Aestheticism, decadence, and late-Victorian thinking by philosophers and critics like Pater, Arnold or Carlyle, even as it resembles other, later modes of thought. More specifically, Wildean practice remains divorced from the present, where the names of Derrida, Baudrillard, Lyotard, Norris, and so forth, are representative of contemporary (literary) criticism. Yet Wilde's criticism has much to offer. It would need to be tempered by an understanding of his time and of the ways in which it is explicitly *not* for the twenty-first century – the way, for example, in which Wilde portrays some of his women, such as Lady Chiltern of *An Ideal Husband*. Given such caution,

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8 William Tydeman and Steven Price, *Wilde: Salome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

reading a text as a Wildean critic is as relevant as ever. He asks that his critics foreground their own carefully constructed interpretation – not as a path towards isolation, but in the sense that he presented in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*: as part of a group, but foremost as an individual within that group, neither imposing nor being imposed upon, but certainly not in unthinking anarchy. He asks that the critic reads with an eye for paradox, with a desire to upset (and sometimes ridicule) complacency, with humour, with dedication, and above all with a love for the pleasure and beauty of a text. And such a critic is not a relic of the late-Victorian period, but would be a welcome addition to the range of criticism available today.

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