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Jeff Nunokawa: Tame Passions of Wilde

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ONE

INTRODUCTION

The most brilliant of all is that story of Wilde's. . . .
Of course it's all paradox, don't you know. . . . it's so
typical the way he works it out. It's the very essence of
Wilde, don't you know. The light touch . . . Tame essence
of Wilde.

—James Joyce, *Ulysses*

SYMPATHY WITH HELLENISM

AT THE HEART of this book is an abandoned aspiration, a “longing” so “wild” that it is hard even to discern, except to dismiss, a scheme to alleviate the risk and pain of desire, an aspiration to lessen the damage it does by altering, without abbreviating, its nature.¹ The chapters that follow seek to excavate fragments, more or less submerged, of this grand project in the work of Oscar Wilde, a project utopian and anxious in equal parts, as optimistic as any plan of escape, and as frightened as any fear of what awaits in the case of its failure. This book finds Wilde hard at work cultivating and celebrating strains of passion, attraction, fascination, as absorbing as any, but freed—as if by the wave of a wand, a sudden cure, or the turn of night to day—from the hazards

¹ “Out of the unreal shadows of the night comes back the real life that we had known. We have to resume it where we left off, and there steals over us a terrible sense of the necessity for the continuance of energy in the same wearisome round of stereotyped habits, or a wild longing, it may be, that our eyelids might open some morning upon a world that had been refashioned anew in the darkness for our pleasure”: Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), edited by Donald Lawler (New York: Norton, 1988) p. 102. All subsequent citations of this text refer to this edition. On Wilde's proclivity for writing his name in his work, see Karl Beckson, “The Autobiographical Signature in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,” *Victorian Newsletter* 69 (Spring 1986): 30–32; William A. Cohen, “Indeterminate Wilde,” in *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction*, p. 208.

routinely regarded as part and parcel of such vicissitudes, like the menace to life and limb that give the edge to any thrill; the peril, say, that gives teeth to a feast with panthers.² Sometimes earnestly, sometimes not, the manageable desires that Wilde heralds approximate the depth of feeling attached to the more driven kind, with none of its darkness. There are, for starters, attractions powerful enough to threaten the progress of the wedding-march, but thin enough to evaporate before they ever actually do so. On the other hand, there are “life-long romances” that, constitutionally disinclined to end at the altar, end instead before dawn, and therefore long before those entanglements that draw the slave of a more persistent kind of such love to his doom, “staggering like an ox to the shambles.”³ There are incurable hungers of the heart as endurable—more than that, delightful—as they are enduring, yearnings quite unlike the kind of hunger bound to haunt an Irish man, no matter how far removed from the homeland, born in the century of the Famine, the ghost of starvation from which those more glamorous hungers take their form and take their flight. Finally, there is the casual eye for the crowd that displaces and disperses the gaze caught in the act of looking at someone dazzling enough she seems to draw within the compass of her own radiance everything about the crowd that the eye could care to see.

A vision of a desire both safe and sensational is surely worthy to be seated amongst the grand alliances that Wilde contrived with all his heart and mind to arrange. At its most audacious, this is a reconciliation of antinomies, a treaty of opposites no less ambitious, no less paradoxical, surely, than his more famous plans to make synonyms of truth and fiction,

² “People thought it dreadful of me to have entertained at dinner the evil things of life, and to have found pleasure in their company. But they . . . were delightful and stimulating. It was like feasting with panthers. The danger was half the excitement”; Oscar Wilde, “De Profundis” (1897), in his *Soul of Man and Prison Writings*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Isobel Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 132. All subsequent citations of this text refer to this edition. “Douglas was fascinated by young men who for a few pounds and a good dinner would prostitute themselves. He introduced Wilde to this world. . . . Wilde lavished money and cigarette cases and other gifts upon these boys, and cultivated a reputation for generosity and good will of which they took shameless advantage. This was the ‘feasting with panthers’ of which he spoke later”; Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 389. All subsequent citations of this text refer to this edition.

³ “De Profundis,” p. 46.

art and society, work and play, ethics and aesthetics: at its most audacious, this is a desire untouched by the long arm of what he called the “tyranny of Want.”⁴ The very idea: after all, the sense that the things that attract and excite us are beyond our control is as near as we have now to a truth universally acknowledged, so much so that it’s hard to imagine that a species of desire under the thumb of its subject as one worthy of the name. Falling in love without the fall: what could it be but a denial of the real thing, an evasion, an inversion, of the awful truth? What is the notion of a desire governed by its subject but a dream of departure from the strain of desire that we all know all too well, the strain of desire that bears all the force of necessity, the strain of desire that rather governs him?

Or comic relief: so immodest is Wilde’s proposal to remove the element of compulsion from the chemistry of the erotic that it could only be passed off as a joke. And, of course, Wilde himself phrased it as such in his most popular work, that “trivial comedy for serious people.” Consider how far he takes the gag in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, where the most basic law of desire is bent beyond recognition, the fundamental rule that we cannot help whom or how we love; that we may want what we choose, but that we never choose what we want. Here the government of desires by the subject who experiences them goes well beyond the usual tactic of the double-life, beyond the power of discretion that allows him to decide when, where, or even if he will submit to them; here the very character of the desire is concocted by the subject herself. There is the “irresistible fascination” for the name at the head of the play, less like the force of an inherent proclivity than the design of a fashion statement, an “irresistible fascination” that bears all the marks of the choice to be fascinated. There is as well the passionate romance that a young girl confesses to her diary before she even meets the object of her affections, a story of true love that, like Wilde’s best one-liners, according to one malicious rumor, is written out well in advance.⁵

But while deciding for oneself what one will find irresistibly fascinating and just how long one will find it so flouts a basic rule of the heart,

⁴ “The Soul of Man” (1895), in *The Soul of Man*, p. 3.

⁵ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *The Major Works*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Isobel Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 490. All subsequent citations of this text refer to this edition.

it keeps faith with an impulse to manage the heart as old as any assertion of its recalcitrance, driving to the end point—and who better to do that than one whose thirst for extremes (“Enough is as good as a meal; too much is as good as a feast”) he did so much to advertise?—a conviction that men can reform and refine their erotic lives, if not make them up out of thin air. The love of Earnest—pronounced first in words before it is established in fact, a love of the name, a love in the name that transgresses the proprieties of priority, a love in the name that reverses the relation between representation and referent—has proven easy to count as a prophecy of postmodernism, but it is also the final flourishing of what Wilde and others before and since have regarded as a classic virtue: the decadent and desperate phase of the age-old belief that, with wisdom and fortitude, we can bring the universe of our erotic urges under the influence of our own will.

The cult of Bunbury may be another name for one that dare not speak its own, but it describes a different club as well—“now that I know you to be a confirmed Bunburyist I naturally want to talk to you about Bunburying. I want to tell you the rules”⁶—a club, a broad school of thought, really, concerned to teach the methods and value of sexual self-management, a school of thought that Wilde himself, by means of his spokesman in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, calls, in keeping with a usage popular then, and now as well, by an ancient name:

“And yet,” continued Lord Henry, in his low musical voice, and with that graceful wave of the hand that was always so characteristic of him, and that he had even in his Eton days, “I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream—I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of mediaevalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal—to something finer, richer, than the Hellenic ideal, it may be. But the bravest man amongst us is afraid of himself. The mutilation of the savage has its tragic survival in the self-denial that mars our lives. We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us. The body sins once, and has

⁶ *Earnest*, p. 486.

done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure, or the luxury of a regret. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful. It has been said that the great events of the world take place in the brain. It is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place also.”⁷

Like a key to a paternity mystery buried in a book of army lists, a novel abandoned in a perambulator, or a baby in briefcase, the rules of Bunbury that Algernon never has a chance to expound upon are discovered here, filed under the heading of “Hellenic ideal” in a didactic tome, far away from the comedy where the mention of them is dropped. Of course Lord Henry’s Hellenic oration can hardly evade the suspicion that it addresses first of all, a specific species of desire, and of the species “confirmed” by it, those that monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful, but they apply more generally to the category of desire, *tout court*. If his speech admits the implication that those whose desires monstrous laws make monstrous and unlawful have special reasons to acquire the *savoir faire* necessary to contain them; if his hedonistic calculus pertains most urgently to those, it nevertheless covers all others as well. Like an eye for color or couture, the genealogy of the aim to manage the erotic advertised here is no more than the regional origin of a fashion that comes to cover the globe.

This *savoir faire* begins by conceding the very point on which *Earnest*, like the most dogged defendant, even in the face of all the ocular proof and common sense in the world, refuses to give an inch. Lord Henry’s brief *Bon Usage* on the proper handling of desire admits, after only the slightest haggling, its irresistible power at the outset. Managing passions is merely a matter of giving them form or expression, just as the speaker’s musical voice, the gesture of his hand, the turn of his phrase together comprise the elegant vessel that carries the burden of his argument. Of course, to speak of form or expression as if it only reflects some content distinct from it is hardly the thing on the premises of the premier

⁷ *Dorian Gray*, p. 20.

spokesman for the other side. It's no surprise then that the work of fashioning desire Lord Henry urges on his pupil nears the midpoint between making and finding it, the midpoint where the difference between giving form to feelings and forming them more thoroughly would be impossible to tell, but this familiar mission disbands long before it comes to the wholesale fabrication of fascination staged by *Earnest*.

Any doubt entertained by the first part of Lord Henry's exhortation—that the desires he pictures have a life quite apart from the imagination of the subject who experiences them, a force all their own that quite eludes his will—is discouraged by the distinction admitted in the language that follows: thoughts and dreams, as opposed to the forms into which they are translated. And it is dispelled utterly as Lord Henry's advice for their regulation shifts from an active strategy of owning one's impulses to a passive submission to them: "Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us. The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure of a regret. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it." But if to acknowledge the irresistible force of temptation, as Wilde famously did, is to relinquish one method of controlling desire, it does so only to prosecute the project by other means, this time a tactic rather like the martial art by which one exhausts and confuses an enemy force by first yielding to it. The containment of desire proposed by Lord Henry is a matter of embracing it, an embrace that begins by the act of encircling it within the artful arms of form and ends with the more prosaic act of taking it to bed and thus putting it there.

And while the subject who obeys the call to regulate his desires thus stops short of fabricating them, he ends up fabricating something else instead, namely himself: for a man to "give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream," is to "live out his life fully and completely." To take on the task of managing one's desires is the royal road to the only accomplishment that really matters in Wilde's book, the good work that is its only holy order—"What Jesus meant was this. He said to man, 'You have a wonderful personality. Develop it' "⁸—indeed, its

⁸ "The Soul of Man," p. 10. "As his supreme artist Wilde ingeniously named Christ. For Christ urged others to live artistically, and lived artistically himself. 'His entire life is the

only order: “The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has as yet discovered.”⁹ This is the design for living that Wilde, through all his costume changes, sustained as his signature style, the design that labors above all to make oneself a thing of beauty, such as the one that the teacher hails when he sees his student for the last time, his being swayed to music, the perfection of his life, the perfection of his art: “Ah Dorian, how happy you are . . . I am so glad that you have never done anything, never carved a statue, or painted a picture, or produced anything outside yourself! Life has been your art. You have set yourself to music. Your days are your sonnets.”¹⁰ To learn the ancient arts, which, according to Lord Henry, requires no more exertion than the paradoxical practice of indulging them at every turn, is to eschew “the self-denial that mars our lives,” the violent regression to the “mutilation of the savage,” the “renunciation” that would “spoil” what is otherwise the “perfect study.”

Thus while the “Hellenic ideal,” whose renaissance the pattern-aesthete supports with a fervor so unusual for him, may invite a happy view of a perfect world where all passion, and especially the one with which the phrase had become most associated by the end of the nineteenth century, is permitted, it is more accurately identified with a vision richer and more rigorous.¹¹ The prescription the teacher delivers here for the disposal of desire, as well as the optimism of the will that underwrites this prescription, and then, beyond that, the sense that the exercise of this capacity is the means by which the self can realize himself recalls the project for regulating the passions elaborated by the ancient world and taken up most

most wonderful of poems,’ Wilde said. He is just like a work of art himself”; Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 359.

⁹ “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young,” in *Major Works*, p. 572.

¹⁰ *Dorian Gray*, p. 165.

¹¹ On the specific relation between Hellenism and homosexuality in nineteenth-century England, see Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); and Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980). For an important consideration of this association in Wilde, see Lawrence Danson, “The Portrait of Mr W. H.,” in *Wilde’s Intentions: The Artist in his Criticism*, pp. 102–26. On the general subject of the legacy of ancient Greece in Victorian England, see Frank M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981). On other modes of Victorian asceticism, see James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

famously in recent years by Michel Foucault, who came to embrace it as the first chapter in the history of sexuality, or perhaps, as we will see, better to say the last.

No telling what the grand theorist of sexuality, the grandest of our time, had in mind exactly in the embrace of the ancient near the end of his: “I think there is no exemplary value in a period that is not our period . . . it is not anything to get back to,” Foucault remarks in a late interview, but the austere glamour of sexual self-regulation shines through his wishful vision of a contemporary sexuality, or one to come, in which the erotic domain is gathered more completely within the sway of the will.¹² This is the happy ending that he permits himself for a page or two as he brings the history of sexuality to a close and in which humanity has awakened from the nightmare imposed by what he calls “that austere monarchy of sex.”¹³ Thus, the civic-minded cheerfulness he indulges in the popular gay press: “Sexuality is something we ourselves create,” like “works of art,” such as the virtually medieval rituals of courtship it was his pleasure to perceive in West Coast S and M bars, where, under his admiring gaze, the worship of the fetish—a man in a uniform, say, or soccer shorts—is all the more thrilling for the knowledge that, like the invincible appeal of a military title, it is all decided in advance.¹⁴

Again, though, the agency of the sexual subject according to the Hellenic vision that Foucault entertains defines itself against the field of its opposite, the “irrepressible force of desire and the sexual act,” a specter of *ananke* that, by his heroic account, inspired the ancients to articulate tactics for the regulation of the erotic, tactics that lead to a “technique of existence”:

¹² “On The Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress” (1983), in *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984, Volume I: Ethics*, edited by Paul Reuben. (New York: The New Press, 1997). p. 259. All subsequent citations of this text refer to this edition.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction—Volume I*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p. 159. All subsequent citations of this text refer to this edition.

¹⁴ “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity,” interview in *The Advocate* 400 (7 August 1984); republished in Foucault, *Ethics*, p. 163. David Halperin quotes Foucault on the celebration of Sadomasochism as something analogous to the ethics of ancient Greece. Both, according to a sentence Halperin quotes from an interview of Foucault in *Gai pied*, are a “purposeful art of freedom perceived as a power game.” Quoted by Halperin in *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 111.

This technique did not require that the acts be divested of their primordial naturalness; nor did it attempt to augment their pleasurable effects; it sought to distribute them in the closest conformity with what nature demanded. The material it sought to elaborate was not, as in an erotic art, the unfolding of the act; nor was it the conditions of the act's institutional legitimation, as it would be in Christianity; it was much more the relationship between oneself and that activity "considered in the aggregate," the ability to control, limit, and apportion it in the right manner. This *techne* created the possibility of forming oneself as a subject in control of his conduct; that is, the possibility of making oneself like the doctor treating sickness, the pilot steering between the rocks, or the statesman governing the city—a skillful and prudent guide of himself, one who had a sense of the right time and the measure. . . . Because it was the most violent of all the pleasures, because it was more costly than most physical activities, and because it participated in the game of life and death, it constituted a privileged domain for the ethical formation of the subject: a subject who ought to be distinguished by his ability to subdue the tumultuous forces that were loosed within him, to stay in control of his store of energy, and to make his life into an *oeuvre* that would endure beyond his own ephemeral existence. The physical regimen of pleasures and the economy it required were part of a whole art of the self.¹⁵

When it comes to orchestrating "the most violent of all the pleasures," what might be called the "arts of existence" . . . those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria,"¹⁶ are less like what they are in Wilde's rendering, experimental pursuits of pleasure akin to "the exquisite taste shown in the decoration of [a dinner] table, with its subtle symphonic arrangements of exotic flowers, and embroidered cloths,

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), pp. 138–39. All subsequent citations of this text refer to this edition. For another recent encounter with the spirit and material in ancient philosophy that Foucault takes up in the second two volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, see Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁶ *The Use of Pleasure*, pp. 10–11.

and antique plate of gold and silver,”¹⁷ than the valor and cunning shown in an endless war against the most terrible enemy, all the more so, since this is an enemy within. By no means gentle in Foucault’s account, such art is a “domination of oneself by oneself,” that can only be achieved by active duty: “The Athenian of the Laws reminds Cleinias of this: if it is true that the man who is blessed with courage will attain ‘only half his potential’ without ‘experience and training’ in actual combat, it stands to reason that he will not be able to become moderate (*sophron*) ‘if he has not fought triumphantly against the many pleasures and desires. . . . his merit will be greater in proportion as his desires are strong.’ ”¹⁸

The dust of all this combat renders distinct a difference between the ancient art that Foucault has in mind and the flag of Hellenism that Lord Henry flourishes “with that graceful wave of the hand that was always so characteristic of him, and that he had even in his Eton days,” a difference between “those athletes of self-restraint . . . well known in pagan antiquity . . . who were sufficiently masters of themselves and their cravings to be able to renounce sexual pleasure,” or the “virtuous hero . . . a familiar figure in Christianity . . . who is able to turn aside from pleasure, as if from a temptation into which he knows not to fall,” and the listless attitude of the semirecumbent dandy well known to anyone who has read a word of Wilde, or taken part in the world that he illuminated: the effete swell barely able to get himself together for his own wedding—forget the Draft Board—the quiescent aesthete whose only plan to seize control of his desires is to give in to every last one of them, whose only idea of a diet is to indulge any appetite that comes his way.

Quite unlike the loose program of Wilde’s easy hedonism, the ancient technology that Foucault studies, like the constant battle-readiness that underwrites most classic models of political power, while supple and patient enough for more peaceful methods of regulation, certainly doesn’t shy away from the blunter instruments of renunciation, wars against desire, either in a single act or as an ongoing struggle with no end in sight:

¹⁷ *Dorian Gray*, p. 100.

¹⁸ *The Use of Pleasure*, pp. 66, 65.

Sexual austerity can be practiced through a long effort of learning, memorization, and assimilation of a systematic ensemble of precepts, and through a regular checking of conduct aimed at measuring the exactness with which one is applying these rules. It can be practiced in the form of a sudden, all embracing and definitive renunciation of pleasures; it can also be practiced in the form of a relentless combat whose vicissitudes—including momentary setbacks—can have meaning and value in themselves; and it can be practiced through a decipherment as painstaking, continuous, and detailed as possible, of the movements of desire in all its hidden forms, including the most obscure.¹⁹

At first glance—especially through the prism of the moralism against which Wilde himself waged one of the great losing battles of modern times—the discrepancy between the asceticism that Foucault describes and the updated version of it that Wilde fashioned for himself appears as a difference as simple as the distance between the severe and the sybaritic, between a character strong enough to resist, when the task of self-regulation demands it, any temptation, and the type who, by his own proud asseveration, could resist anything but. The difference, though, between the weakness of will that Wilde wore like a badge of glory, and the strength of the one required and achieved by the austere art that Foucault studies, measures more a decisive shift in the history of desire itself. If the will, as Wilde tells it, is insufficient to stand now against the incursions of desire, this has more to do with the expanded powers of passion that define the modern world he inhabited and helped to characterize than any failure of mettle on the part of the subject that it invades, more to do with forces of desire grown fine enough to insinuate themselves without the consent, or even the consciousness of their subject, like the changes in her blood wrought by virus or vampire.

Her blood? The modernization of the libido, an improvement in technology as decisive in its own sphere as those innovations in manufacture that render the human factor obsolete, a modernization that removes all possibility of contest, even of confrontation, between desire and its subject, is easiest to tell by the figure of a certain and an uncertain female

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

sexuality that, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, casts its shadow across the path of the strict and strictly male one we have been tracing: the suddenly sexual woman invoked by the techniques of science and the charms of the supernatural, the woman whose sexuality always drives, even as it eludes, her, or, for that matter, the New One who, insisting on driving herself, challenges the agency of a male sexuality whose self-control somehow always seems to require, one way or another, the subjugation of hers.²⁰

²⁰ Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897), edited with an Introduction and Notes by Maurice Hindle (New York: Penguin, 1993). All subsequent citations of this text refer to this edition. Sigmund Freud, *Dora: Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1905), edited with an Introduction by Phillip Rieff (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963); and Freud, *Collected Works*, *passim*. Carol A. Senf, "Dracula: Stoker's Response to the New Woman," in *Victorian Studies* 26 (1982). Phyllis Roth, "Suddenly Sexual Women in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," *Literature and Psychology* 17:3 (1977). Bran Dijstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990).

The association of femininity and an overwhelming erotic I am remarking here seems an appropriate place to make explicit what I have sought to imply throughout this introduction. The versions of desire that are the focus of my study here cannot be completely collated with this or that sex, sexual preference, or, indeed, as will become clear with chapter 5, with erotic desire at all. This is not to say that these forms of desire do not tend to associate themselves with easily, even ostentatiously, specifiable categories of sexuality. Thus, as I have suggested, there are good reasons why homosexuals would feel especially taxed by the forces of desire that surpass the volitional compass of its subject, and especially attracted to a form of desire that would fall within the confines of that compass. But while such a desire may be especially appealing to the homosexual, it is not his or her exclusive property.

Similarly, while the versions of desire that are the focus of my study are sometimes consonant with the operations of this or that historical regime or aesthetic philosophy, sometimes they are not. I wish to be as explicit as possible here because it will help make clear where I seek to part company from a habit of thinking, a school of thought, really, that has been as influential as any in literary and cultural studies in recent years. What I have in mind often goes by the name of "queer theory," and I will define it only in the broadest terms as a not always coherent convergence of two tendencies. First is a tendency to link sexual practices and proclivities with identity—even when this identity is that which is not one: an identity that transcends the strictures of identity. Then there is the further tendency to link this identity with political and aesthetic positions. Somewhat more specifically, I refer to the tendency to link socially marginal sexual identities with politically progressive positions and an aesthetic avant-garde.

This book seeks to describe a complex of desires that elude identification with forms of identity, political postures, and representation, identifications that have become mind-numbingly familiar, at least to those trained in the fields of literary and cultural studies. As eager as I am to suggest that the complex of desires that I attempt to trace may be detached

Clambering down to the rag-and-bottle-shop vulgarity he is generally fond of disdaining, Wilde's sophisticate falls in with the gauche misogyny that takes pleasure and comfort in the thought that the distaff side is especially (or exclusively) engulfed by the passions that drown the agency of the subject who experiences them. Fond as he is of the case study—"he was pleased by . . . the lad's mad adoration . . . it made him a more interesting study"²¹—the aesthete might be less self-satisfied than usual to see this aspect of his own character show up as one, less pleased to see his own rude attitude toward women cast as an illustration for an entry on the narcissism of small differences, or his derision of them as "slaves looking for their masters" who "love being dominated,"²² exhibited to illustrate the banal pathology by which a general terror that implicates everyone is passed off as a particular possession that lets him go scot-free.

Those of Wilde's contemporaries inclined to look for a woman at the center of this stormy sexual weather, the hurricane erotic endowed with all the power to blow away any settlement of the conscious will, were typically less composed than his dandy, whose dismissal of her appears as complete as it is cold-blooded. Were it not for the afterthought of her brother, we may be sure that Dorian Gray would have kept his promise to the girl he coaxed to suicide, and never given her another thought himself, not like that physician of the psyche whom all the scientific distance in the world couldn't save from the specter of the female sexuality that got away. And Freud himself is cool by comparison to others, where something like the fever that marks conversion attends the anxiety of infection or affliction by female sexuality that courses through the more lurid literature of the fin de siècle—*Dracula*: " 'Arthur! Oh my love, I am so glad you have come! Kiss me!' "; "my eyes opened involuntarily. . . . I felt in my heart a wicked burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips."²³

The anxiety exhibited here, the male anxiety in which the fear of feminization merges with the fear of pacification, is hardly new to the

from those particularities with which they have been most often spotted by recent criticism, I am no less eager to make clear the connection between this complex and another particularity: namely, the historical epoch that social theorists call modernity.

²¹ *Dorian Gray*, p. 48.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²³ *Dracula*, pp. 53, 208.

late nineteenth century. Thus Roland Barthes can observe on the broad category of modern love: “there is an odd turnabout here: in the ancient myth, the ravisher is active, he wants to seize his prey, he is the subject of the rape (of which the object is a Woman, as we know, invariably passive); in the modern myth (that of love-as-passion), the contrary is the case. . . . the lover [is] the one who has been ravished . . . captured and enchanted . . . always implicitly feminized.”²⁴

No doubt, though, that the fear of female sexuality was especially gaudy in the late nineteenth century and that this fear signifies a constitutional crisis for the male subject, whose sexual self-management has been our concern so far. While the armies of desire the ancients confront in Foucault’s history—awesome always, sometimes overpowering—always leave the subject they assault with resources to respond, the brand of desire Wilde was obliged to admit into the work, into the life (we may know it better by its more authoritative cognates: libidinal instinct, sexual drive), annuls altogether the margin of volition by which he can determine at least how to dispose of it. Listen to the Hellenic orator change his tune by the time he is done in *Dorian Gray*, relinquishing even the light hold over desire afforded by his curriculum when he first introduced it. Scorning Dorian Gray’s resolution at the end of the novel to forgo despoiling a nearby milkmaid, he begins with the same theme as before—the futility and uglifying effects of renunciation—but this time leaves off the happy hygienic ending, in which the inevitable giving-in to impulses turns out to be the means of getting over them. This time, there is only the helplessness of the self, ambushed by passions that were supposed to be spent, but, as it turns out, were only playing possum after all:

Dorian, don’t deceive yourself. Life is not governed by will or intention. Life is a question of nerves and fibres, and slowly built-up cells in which thought hides itself and passion has its dreams. You may fancy yourself safe, and think yourself strong. But a chance tone of colour in a room or a morning sky, a particular perfume that you had once loved and that brings subtle memories with it, a line from a forgotten poem that you had come across again, a cadence from a piece of music that you had ceased to play—I tell you, Dorian,

²⁴ Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), p. 188–89.

that it is on things like these that our lives depend. Browning writes about that somewhere, but our own senses will imagine them for us. There are moments when the odour of lilas blanc passes suddenly across me, and I have to live the strangest month of my life over again.²⁵

With the light touch of a casual addendum, Lord Henry pulls down the single pillar of his Hellenic ideal: the sole measure of discretionary control held by its subject of desire—the power to punctuate it—slips through his fingers here: he is as helpless now to end it as he was to refuse it in the first place. Thus the entire kingdom of temptation now joins the lingering spirit of the renounced impulse; no less than those that we sought to resist, the memories of those we didn't keep their hold over us, or rather, the invisible traces of them—the memory of experiences carried and characterized by a perfume you once loved, a line from a poem you forgot, a cadence from a piece of music you had ceased to play. More than that, desire—thoughts and passions kin to those for the milkmaid, only too deep or disgraceful for words—is concealed now in “nerves and fibers, and slowly built-up cells,” a crypt from which the subject who bears it is quite shut out. And now the life realized as a work of art by the subject who submits to the exercise of embracing his desires passes away, leaving in his place a diminished thing, as exposed as an open vessel to the influences exerted by the work of art, but no longer one himself. At least, and we will return to this qualification a little later, it is no longer one that he has made himself, since the disposition of his desire is now decided elsewhere entirely, decided by the thought and passions associated or identified with it; the thought that “hides itself,” the passion that “has its dreams.”

Of course, there is nothing exceptional about the measure Wilde takes of a world where one's desires are beyond his control: his assessment is quite in line not only with the alarm of contemporary sensibilities, but also the abstract conceptions of contemporary science, and of course one in particular. It seems to me that no one who has ever heard of it can help but hear in the great aesthete's final confession the basic language of psychoanalysis, which assigns the disposition of our desire to agencies as removed from our own conscious intention as the most distant planet, all

²⁵ *Dorian Gray*, p. 165.

the while dwelling nearer than what is closest to home, agencies that, along with the “ideational presentations” of the “instinctual impulses” that they regulate, perform their operations under the cover of the unconscious.²⁶ What Lord Henry calls the “thought [that] hides itself” is divided in Freud between the hidden thought and the hidden things that hide it, a government no less foreign for the fact that it dwells within, an occupying force that renders the ethos of self-control as obsolete as devotion to a pagan deity: or, to recall the analogy that Freud himself preferred, a vision of our own little world as the center of the entire solar system.²⁷

If there is nothing exceptional about the measure Wilde takes of a world where one’s desires are beyond his control, if such a conception of desire is the most common sense of the world we know, what about his obvious pleasure in announcing it? The moralistic misprision that would take Wilde to task for malingering, even though strenuous exertion has ceased to be relevant, might be on stronger ground with the sense that his concession of defeat by the forces of desire is really a celebration of it, a gleeful embrace rather than a grim admission. Again, though, Wilde is hardly the only one: for whom is the surrender he celebrates not, at least

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, “The Unconscious,” in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, edited with an Introduction by Phillip Rieff (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 126.

²⁷ “In the course of centuries the naive self-love of men has had to submit to two major blows at the hands of science. The first was when they learnt that our earth was not the center of the universe but only a tiny fragment of a cosmic system of scarcely imaginable vastness. This is associated in our minds with the name of Copernicus. . . . The second blow fell when biological research destroyed man’s supposedly privileged place in creation and proved his descent from the animal kingdom and his ineradicable animal nature. This revaluation has been accomplished in our own days by Darwin, Wallace and their predecessors, though not without the most violent contemporary opposition. But human megalomania will have suffered its third and most wounding blow from the psychological research of the present time which seeks to prove to the ego that it is not even master of its own house, but must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind”; Lecture XVIII in Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1917), edited and translated by James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 284–85. In the years since Freud wrote, the gap between the will of the self and the determination of what he wants has only seemed to widen as the shadow of the conscious ego that can be discerned in Freud’s account of the unconscious agency charged with the conduct of desire dissolves into structures even more aloof from the subject—the inhuman mechanisms of the linguistic, according to a well-known train of thought within psychoanalysis itself. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978); *Écrits*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977).

sometimes, a thing of joy, surrender like the submission to an involuntary memory, as irresistible as the rapture it recalls, induced by the fragrant odor or the fine line?

REACTION FORMATION AS SOCIAL FORM

Except when he feels like it, of course, Wilde is the last person in the world to take all this lying down. The chapters that follow study the methods and materials by which Wilde seeks to counteract forces of temptation formidable enough to make the very idea of resistance to them a farce, the ideal of managing them a self-flattering illusion. There is first of all the categorical denial of these forces in *Earnest*, the dramatic reversal we have already reviewed that subordinates the power of attraction to the character who suffers it, the practically Ptolemaic rationalization—leaving aside rationalizations closer to hand—by which desire is actually decided by the subject who would appear by the lights of the naked eye to be compelled by it. (As we will see in the next chapter, this conception of malleable desire shows up in the oddest places on the cultural map that Wilde helped to illuminate: the subject keen enough to design her own desire takes her cue from a vision of the Orient that Wilde, among others, regards as a work of art.)

But like the grief we remember when we laugh, the familiar figure of a desire out of our control bleeds through the inverted image of the spectacular character who, in his triumphant comedy, has all his proclivities well in hand.²⁸ Like everyone else who lives in the world we know, Wilde is in no position to restrict his relations with the tyranny of want to the simple super-power foreign policy of nonrecognition. The art of desire that would script the shape of our passions, or even the art of the self that would cast our management of more obdurate yearnings as the

²⁸ “A steady course of Balzac reduces our living friends to shadows, and our acquaintances to the shadows of shades. His characters have a kind of fervent fiery-coloured existence. They dominate us, and defy scepticism. One of the great tragedies of my life is the death of Lucien de Rubempre. It is a grief from which I have never been able to completely rid myself. It haunts me in my moments of pleasure. I remember it when I laugh.” Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, edited by Richard Ellmann (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 299.

currency of a personal style, are as trivial as the merest whim in a world where our attractions have assumed the magnetism and magnitude of a hidden god or a law of nature.

No less legible as a means of escape from a universe where people are helpless to resist or regulate their attractions than a fictional world where this law of desire is annulled is a certain stylization of the self that Wilde famously celebrated. Giving Caesar his due, ceding the ground that the ancient ideal held out as the field of play where one fashions oneself to the rule of forces beyond our control, Wilde pictures another labor of self-fashioning instead, the labor of self fashioning which appears at its most glamorous in the labor of fashion itself. Those who have most famously studied this art of the self categorize it as the fruit of the freedom that attends modernity—the loosening of the traditional bonds that once constituted our identity, the style of life that bears the mark of a personal signature rather than an imposed status.²⁹ It is Wilde, of all people, who discerns the shades of an iron cage in the midst of all this freedom, an iron cage that somehow eluded graver thinkers: if the flowering of such style is grounded in a freedom attached to the modern world, its flourishing is aided by the pressure of a tyranny attached to modern times as well. The art of personal expression that Wilde advocates provides, amongst other things, a distraction from the tyranny that assigns the power to determine the expression of desire to agencies quite alien to the self—the offices of repression, in all its fine and intricate aspects, the complex transformational grammars Freud called by various names: distortion, condensation, reversal, displacement, sublimation, negation, to mention a few. The niceties of this masquerade might draw a look of admiration from even the most studied character in the society play, were it not that such brilliant society is accustomed to give credit for these accomplish-

²⁹ Georg Simmel, “The Style of Life,” in *The Philosophy of Money* (1900), edited by David Frisby, translated by Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (New York: Routledge: 1991). Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1968). Georg Simmel, *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* (1907), translated by Helmut Loiskandl (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986). Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985). On the general relation of modernity and personal autonomy, see Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) (New York: Free Press, 1984).

ments to the conscious contrivance of a player consciously inspired, at least apparently so, by it—all the style of flirtation, say³⁰—rather than an array of intricate operations concealed from him: “In this matter a delicate balancing takes place, the play of which is hidden from us.”³¹

Consider the damage done to the “art of the self” we have been studying, whose student, by the practice of suspending, seizing, shaping, and sublimating his erotic passions, sets his life to music and makes his days into sonnets. Taken out of his hands now by new management, this drama of self-realization by which, in the words of Wilde’s very own Lord Henry, he is “elevated and made keen” is thus abruptly closed down.³² There is the arrest of his development, and then, of course, there is his possible arrest. The beautiful life of a Dorian Gray is menaced by hazards more pressing than those that would blunt, like the sudden case of nerves that spoils the dance step, the fine style of self-regulation. Listen one last time to the Hellenic oration, this time with the caveats restored:

The aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for. People are afraid of themselves, nowadays. They have forgotten the highest of duties, the duty that one owes to one’s self. . . . Courage has gone out of the race. Perhaps we never really had it. The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion. These are the . . . things that govern us. . . . And yet I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream—I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of mediaevalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal.³³

³⁰ On flirtation as a performance determined by the conscious labor of the subject who performs it, see Simmel on “Sociability,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, translated, edited, and with an Introduction by Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), pp. 40–57. All subsequent citations of this text are from this edition.

³¹ Freud, “Repression,” in *General Psychological Theory*, p. 108.

³² “There come [occasions] . . . from time to time . . . in which the thoughts of men draw nearer together than is their wont. . . . Here, artists and philosophers and those whom the action of the world has elevated and made keen, do not live in isolation, but breathe a common air, and catch light and heat from each other’s thoughts”; Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (1873), edited with an Introduction and Notes by Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xxxiii.

³³ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 20.

Who better to appreciate the perilous state of a life that has lost control over the form and expression of desire than Wilde: “To be despised, mocked, abandoned, sneered at—to be an outcast! To find the door shut against one, to have to creep in by hideous byways, afraid every moment lest the mask should be stripped from one’s face, and all the while to hear the laughter, the horrible laughter of the world, a thing more tragic than all the tears the world has ever shed.”³⁴ At the heart of this terror, of course, is the love that dare not speak its name—or perhaps, by now, the love that need not. If we are ever disinclined to mention it now when Wilde’s name comes up, or more broadly, for that matter, whenever the topic arises of any desire sufficiently troubling to society that those implicated expose themselves to all sorts of trouble for it—“The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it”³⁵—this may be less because we dare not speak it than that we may be weary of speaking about so little else.

In any case, though, it’s hard not to hear a note on the author through the speech of his melodramatic heroine however powerful the urge of this author to detach himself from the subjection of women—manifestly hard for Wilde himself, who, in the letter from prison, takes the sentences he ascribes to her to describe his own.³⁶ It’s hard not to hear the charge of the love that dare not speak its name in all the circuits of passion that run through the novel that helped to make those charges stick: the “day-dreams and sleeping dreams” of a boy, whose mere memory might stain his “cheek with shame.”³⁷

It may be worth noting that the subject whose helplessness to determine the form and expression of his desires has a kind of revenge in the diminished epistemological capacity of those who would read her:

CECILY: You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love someone whose name was Ernest . . .

³⁴ Wilde, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, in *Major Works*, p. 367.

³⁵ This is a sentence from Wilde’s famous speech on the “love that dare not speak its name” at the first trial. Quoted in Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 463.

³⁶ “De Profundis,” pp. 129–30.

³⁷ *Dorian Gray*, p. 20.

ALGERNON: But my dear child, do you mean to say you could not love me if I had some other name?

CECILY: I might respect you . . . I might admire your character, but I fear that I should not be able to give you my undivided attention.³⁸

Were it not for the fact that it's the merest whim to begin with, dropped on the way to the altar as easily as it was picked up in the first place, Cecily's stated preference would keep her from reaching it, for a simple reason easily missed in the mass movement toward it in the end: that her own partner doesn't actually possess that certain something necessary to generate a love good enough to get her there. Were it not for that, her lot would be a life of "passionate celibacy"³⁹ like the one for which a Don and a Cardinal felt pressed to apologize,⁴⁰ as distant from the nuptial bar as the train-station indiscretion that Lady Bracknell attributes to Ernest, as distant from the matrimonial union as the ones that take place on the train platform where she almost inexplicably fears that she will be subjected to comment: "Come, dear . . . we have already missed five, if not six, trains. To miss any more might expose us to comment on the platform."⁴¹—as distant from the canonically approved alliance as Algernon arranges to be when, by the alibi of his false friend Bunbury, he pursues intrigues quite removed from the dull spectacle of married couples washing their clean linen in public, as distant as the pursuits of pleasure whose souvenirs include tellingly inscribed cigarette cases that find their way into the hands of blackmailers out for fun or money.

Thus the symptoms of the homosexual are all over the whole category of desire that opposes what, in certain circles, now goes by the name of "heterosexual normativity," symptoms masked by a cultural censorship—the regulative agency of repression writ large—that requires that any expression of such desire that passes into general circulation, even amidst those who call their own "family values"—does so as always deniable subtext. Why, even Basil Hallward's confession wouldn't stand up in

³⁸ *Earnest*, p. 514.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 532.

⁴⁰ On the implications of homosexuality attached to the "passionate celibacy" of Pater and Newman, see Richard Ellmann and Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁴¹ *Earnest*, p. 533.

court, followed as it is by the most familiar formula for the denial of sexuality: “He is never more present in my work than when no image of him is there. He is a suggestion, as I have said, of a new manner. I find him in the curves of certain lines, in the loveliness and subtleties of certain colours. That is all.”⁴²

In recent years all the liveliest essays given over to the study of the homosexuality expressed under the pressure of homophobic persecution locate it in the underground semiotic network that one critic felicitously deems “the shadow kingdom of connotation.”⁴³ Not content to insinuate itself here and there in this and that double entendre, this or that uncertain reference, homosexual desire, by the measure of what has come to call itself “queer theory,” takes over the categories of insinuation and uncertainty, entirely. Thus, Christopher Craft: “That Wilde achieves these critical effects without the slightest breach in heterosexual decorum—that *Earnest* remains for ‘our’ critical tradition a readily consumable straight play—is not the least measure of a genius whose wile it was to broadcast homosexual critique into the gay interstice of a pun.”⁴⁴ Made lustrous now by all the muted lighting of indeterminacy, homosexual desire cannot be contained for the very reason that it cannot be confirmed: thus, for example, as much as Basil Hallward’s arrested gaze falls short of grounds for any actual arrest, in Wilde’s work no incident like it, that moment when someone can’t stop looking at another no matter what the risk, can ever be definitively removed from the shadow of the doubt that falls on his. Take the gaze fixed on Salome—“How beautiful is the Princess Salome tonight!”⁴⁵—how to avoid, anymore than the breathless young Syrian can the vision of grace that holds him, the wild surmise that the eye that loiters

⁴² *Dorian Gray*, p. 15.

⁴³ D. A. Miller, “Anal Rope,” *Representations* 32 (Fall 1990) (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 119.

⁴⁴ Christopher Craft, “Alias Bunbury: Desire and Termination in *The Importance of Being Earnest*,” in *Another Kind of Love: Male Homosexual Desire in English Discourse, 1850–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 4. See also Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). For an especially precise and persuasive reading of the association of indeterminacy and sexuality in Wilde, see William A. Cohen, “Indeterminate Wilde,” in *Sex Scandal* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

⁴⁵ Oscar Wilde, *Salome* (1894), in *Major Works*, p. 302.

here—like the one taken with the spectacle of Juliet until she steps off the stage and too near the nuptial bar: “‘When is she Sybil Vane?’/ ‘Never’ ”—is somehow the very same as the one whose homosexual desire is never quite named? In this way, the helplessness of the homosexual to determine the form and expression of his desire is avenged by the echo of his helplessness in the audience who hears—or is it hallucinates?—it.

Cold comfort though for the “exposed” heart that the “shallow prying eyes” who see him are no more able to decide how to receive it than he is how to present it. The multivalence of this involuntary spectacle does nothing to repair the fact that the figure whom it spotlights has no say over its production, and whose artistic powers of self-expression are paralyzed by the spell of the erotic, a sight “fascinating” enough to “absorb” his “whole nature, [his] whole soul, [his] very art itself.”⁴⁶ The work of art is thus obliged to go elsewhere: the subject stripped of all his powers in the field of desire, which Hellenism had instructed him to make a thing of beauty, retreats from that field where he is compelled to concede defeat before the first shot, to a separate sphere, where, fueled by the energy of compensation, he redoubles the efforts of his will to cultivate the sense of self-mastery. Thus a paragraph in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that places the hero on the waterfront, where he is seen, or almost, Bunburying with the gloves off—“moments . . . at night, when . . . in the sordid room of the little ill-famed tavern near the Docks, which under an assumed name, and in disguise, it was his habit to frequent”; “moments” of “mad hungers that grew more ravenous as he fed them”—is closely followed by a vision of the connoisseur whose orchestrated tastes are the very form of his own one art:

Yet he was not really reckless, at any rate in his relations to Society. Once or twice every month during the winter, and on each Wednesday evening while the season lasted, he would throw open to the world his beautiful house and have the most celebrated musicians of the day to charm his guests with the wonders of their art. His little dinners, in the settling of which Lord Henry always assisted him, were noted as much for the careful selection and placing of those invited, as for the exquisite taste shown in the decoration of the table,

⁴⁶ *Dorian Gray*, pp. 11, 15.

with its subtle symphonic arrangements of exotic flowers, and embroidered cloths, and antique plate of gold and silver. Indeed, there were many who saw, or fancied that they saw, in Dorian Gray the true realization of a type of which they had often dreamed in Eton or Oxford days, a type that was to combine something of the real culture of the scholar with all the grace and distinction and perfect manner of a citizen of the world. To them he seemed to be of the company of those whom Dante describes as having sought to make themselves perfect by the worship of beauty.⁴⁷

Small wonder, given the lingering odor of the waterfront that clings to him—“For while he fascinated many, there were not a few who distrusted him. . . . Curious stories became current about him . . . he had been seen brawling with foreign sailors”⁴⁸—that his author would, with all the intentions of the artist, prepare Dorian Gray to face the society that wouldn’t know what to make of the odor, or wouldn’t know not to make too much. It is no surprise that in the book filled with the threat of social extermination that arises from uncontrollable desire, the work of art that can no longer take passion for its subject should take shape instead as the artfulness of a social being who knows better than to get caught with his pants down amongst his “mad hungers,” preferring to exhibit for the consumption of society the more admirable tastes of the connoisseur; no surprise that a character so pressed would know how to translate the worship of beauty, which in Wilde’s book—the passage is nowhere to be found in Dante’s—is the grammar of ascent in the classic project of self-perfection into an aesthetic of social appearance. The portrait of the artist in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is that of a young aesthete who takes for his medium the beau monde that Simmel calls the “art form of society,” “the impersonal freedom of a mask,”⁴⁹ rather than those desires over which he has no artistic control in any case and which would land him in a state of exile as far removed from the graces of the brilliant company he keeps here as the coldest depths of Hell from the bright lights of the divinest comedy.

As this passage indicates, the armies of the will, after they lose the field of desire, do not restrict their exercises to the forces of reserve that would simply mask what they cannot control. A losing proposition anyway:

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 100.

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 110.

⁴⁹ Simmel, “Sociability,” p. 46.

as we already have sufficient grounds to appreciate, no poise in the world could be worldly enough to master a language of desire that quite circumvents the subject's own mechanisms of consent or consciousness, the language of desire that, in Freud's own phrase, annuls the hold of the ego over his own house,⁵⁰ the language of desire that gives the color element to the picture of Dorian Gray—"sin is the only color element left in the modern world"—the picture that leaves him as exposed as the woman who walks the streets not far from his own stately home: "Yet he was afraid. Sometimes when he was down at his great house . . . entertaining the fashionable young men of his own rank who were his chief companions . . . he would suddenly leave his guests and rush back to town to see that the door had not been tampered with, and that the picture was still there. What if it should be stolen? The mere thought made him cold with horror. Surely the world would know his secret then. Perhaps the world already suspected it."⁵¹

The subject, powerless to conceal, or to choose how he reveals, the passions that course through him, a subject pitiful for all his fear even at his most enfranchised—and how much more so in the vivid abjection she is elsewhere cast—"You don't know what it is . . . to be . . . afraid every moment lest the mask be stripped from one's face"—rises to heroic versions of self-stylization, what Simmel's keenest heir called the presentation of the self in everyday life.⁵² Making aesthetic virtue of social necessity, this subject manages not only to meet the expectations of propriety, but to welcome them with open arms; not merely to avoid the exile or imprisonment that is the fate of those who, by the practice of their bodily proclivities, violate social law, but the softer extermination that is the fate of those who, by virtue of their bodily defects, fail to make the social scene. Like the exhausted or terrified soul who knows to redouble the labors of gladness before those who expect nothing less, the grace of what we will call the "social body beautiful" is the finest development of the subject trained to feel a social demand as relentless as any law of gravity or psychic agency.

⁵⁰ "[T]he ego . . . is not even master in its own house"; Lecture XVIII in Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, p. 285.

⁵¹ *Dorian Gray*, p. 110.

⁵² Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959). See also Goffman's remarks on "passing" in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963), pp. 73–90.

THE TAMING OF DESIRE

“I must confess that I am much more interested in problems about techniques of the self and things like that than sex . . . sex is boring.”⁵³ No less striking than the proposition itself, that *sex*, rather than this or that easily, or best forgotten, encounter, is boring, is the subject that he prefers instead: “techniques of the self and things like that.” Once again, in other words, “those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria.”⁵⁴ Striking, to say the least, Foucault’s sense that sex ceases to be interesting once it spins out of the orbit of our will, this settled preference for the subject of intentionality over the erotic drama of its decline, since, for “We Other Victorians,” what compels us about sex is what compels us about it. For those of us who dwell in the shadow of the regime whose dimensions Foucault takes, whose laws Freud was busy codifying as science at the same time that its most fantastic aspects were told in the supernatural tales of libidinal horror no less exciting now than they were at the end of the last century, when they had their debut—including of

⁵³ “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” in Foucault, *Ethics*, p. 253. Here I want to remark upon a difference between my own sense of the relation between the sexual and the volitional in Foucault’s study of the ancients and that of David Halperin. In Halperin’s reading of Foucault, the volitional character of the ancient project that animates the last two volumes of *The History of Sexuality* is quite consonant with his conception of the erotic. I think that Foucault’s vision of “those intentional and voluntary actions” by which individuals and collectives “not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves” is purchased at the expense of the erotic, which is the ground where the will of the individual or the collective is annulled. There is a difference between the styles of life that are defined in relation to powers of sexual desire and discharge, and those powers themselves, and Foucault was interested in the first of these and not the second. This preference is apparent not only in his off-hand remark about his boredom with sex, but also in his Introduction to the second volume of *The History*. See Halperin, “The Queer Politics of Michel Foucault,” in *Saint Foucault*, pp. 15–125; and his *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love*, (New York: Routledge, 1990). See also Joel Black, “Taking the Sex Out of Sexuality: Foucault’s Failed History,” in *Rethinking Sexuality: Foucault and Classical Antiquity*, edited by David H. J. Lamour, Paul Allen Miller, and Charles Platter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 42–60.

⁵⁴ Foucault, *Uses of Pleasure*, pp. 10–11.

course those written and lived by Wilde himself—in which forces of desire make slaves of their subjects, the melodrama whose apparently eternal afterlife is available in mass cultural redactions ranging from the scary movie where the dark places to which characters are led by their sexual desires is matched by the force of the drive that leads them there, to the popular contemporary cult that arraigns all matter of attraction as so many manners of addiction.⁵⁵

Anyone who knows the first thing about him knows that Wilde was no stranger to the thrill that Foucault claimed to have gotten over, no one less so, and yet this character whose desires in the life, in the art, were so famously out of his hands was attracted to the same ancient light that the great philosopher hailed in the end. As well as he told the story about the slave of love, and no version better than the one about the high-roller whose life was “staked on a passion,” Wilde was attracted nonetheless—who isn’t?—to the possibility of avoiding the damages done to the self by passions, hungers, needs quite out one’s control. The final three chapters of this book seek to unearth elements of Wilde’s schemes to reckon with this contradiction by his usual method of having it both ways: schemes, stoic and self-indulgent, to amend a law of desire grown powerful enough to count by modern calculations as absolute; to perform, but also to ameliorate, the melodrama of the mortified will; to offset, or, more often, altogether remove its tragic tone; the last three chapters of this book seek to reconstruct the paths by which Wilde strove to be as near as he could to touching, in an age too late to grasp it, the fruit of his Hellenic ideal.

Such schemes involve not the seizing of desire but rather a vision of its softening, not a subject strong enough to control his passions, but rather species of passion that, by their very nature, are slight enough to be as good as managed. Modest by Wilde’s standards, such schemes imagine

⁵⁵ In “Epidemics of the Will,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes the Manichaean drama in which the absolute power of the will comes to grief at the hands of an even more absolute power of desire. Sedgwick renders explicit the confusion of what attracts and what compels and traces the career of this condensation from the dream-like fantasies of the *fin de siècle* to the feet-on-the-ground panegyrics of contemporary self-help sensibilities. I am glad to express my gratitude to Sedgwick for taking the dimensions of the *donnée* where from the drama that I seek to study begins; for provoking my sense of the tyranny of desire that Wilde devotes so much *moxie* to evade, counteract and ameliorate. See her *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 130–142.

no radical realignment that would put the subject back in the driver's seat of desire, but rather program the engine for a landing as soft as the ones brought about in *Earnest*, the sudden death, explosion and disappearance—all in good fun—of the various distractions to the marriage-plot orchestrated by characters who are themselves enough orchestrated by that plot to drop even their “irresistible attractions” if they ever actually get in its way. Leaving behind the athletic rigors of the ancients, Wilde gathers nearer a more recent plan for managing the drives, finely illustrated by a train of thought in political theory definitively described by Albert O. Hirschman in *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before its Triumph*, a train of thought which by an “astounding” change of mind over the course of many centuries ceased to condemn and came instead to approbate the love of monetary gain as a gentle motive, whose sweet temperament—Hirschman: “There was much talk, from the late seventeenth century on, about the *douceur* of commerce”—would counteract and calm other more ferocious hungers.⁵⁶

The softer strains of passion that Wilde envisions, as we will have occasion to appreciate, at times bear a more than passing resemblance to “the *douceur* of commerce,” a concept that accommodates not only the paleness of monetary interest, but also the polish of a cultivated detachment that knows to never value anyone as if he were the only one. But if the milder strains of passion in Wilde's book draw from the economic sentiments of an earlier century, the menace that is thus avoided, the threat attached to those that the softer ones are slated to supplant, is not exactly what the original framers of this psychological constitution had in mind, where the violence to be contained threatens first and foremost

⁵⁶ Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 11, 59. For a depressing coda to the conception of economic interest as a calm and calming passion, see the conclusion to Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, where he remarks its transformation into another form of drive: “In Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the ‘saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment.’ But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.” According to Weber's influential history, the irresistible urge for acquisition thus merges with the compelling passions they were once slated to contain and counteract. See his *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons (Los Angeles: Roxbury Publications, 1995), p. 181. Subsequent citations of this text refer to this edition.

the social order. The scheme of sublimation that Hirschman studies was concerned to defend that order, much like the celebrated symmetry of the Constitution in which this balance of powers, transposed from individual psyche to social polity, is writ large. For Wilde, on the other hand, whose sole interest in social schemes consisted in their value as a means by which the individual might be released from bothering about social schemes altogether—“The chief advantage that would result from the establishment of Socialism is, undoubtedly, the fact that Socialism would relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others”⁵⁷—the clear and present danger posed by the corrosive effects of desire has everything to do with the marring of the self rather than the upsetting of society, unless, of course, if the second brings about, say in the form of a stretch in prison, the first.

Or the terrors of starvation: one of the appetites that is displaced by a softer one is so fearful that the anxieties that attend sexual desire can feel comforting by comparison to it, the appetite of appetite itself. Except for a few letters from prison, a fairy tale or two, a passing joke about a pressing need for cucumber sandwiches or tea cake, hunger is mentioned in his writing hardly at all. Why would it be? And yet like all sorts of barely mentioned things, the fear of starvation is deep at the heart’s core in Wilde; it is central to the exodus story this book aims to reconstruct, the passing from forms of wanting that cannot be borne to those that, even when they bear signs of doom, can be sustained with élan, even pleasure; after all, even those drawn to feast with panthers are bound to be better off than those with nothing to eat at all, the “great many people . . . always on the brink of sheer starvation.”⁵⁸ Like the vengeful brother in *Dorian Gray*, who appears, as if from out of nowhere, to spoil the perfect life, or the debt collector expurgated from *Earnest*, the specter of starvation casts its shadow on Wilde’s work, or, more exactly, the work of idleness that he recommends, the “doing nothing” whose “importance” he labors so warmly to assert.⁵⁹ It is as if the author had been suddenly called home to a hungry nation from the happy country he preferred, the utopia of indolence where, relieved of duty, men and women

⁵⁷ “The Soul of Man,” p. 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵⁹ “The Critic as Artist,” in *Critical Writings*, pp. 341–407.

might do what they want and therefore what matters; as if for all his ingenious devices to escape it, Wilde is harrowed by the ghost of a Protestant ethic, one that Weber describes—“even the wealthy shall not eat without working”—a puritanism whose arm proves long enough to arraign him after all.⁶⁰

Less virulent than the hunger that leads to starvation are strains of desire that bring consequences no less dire in their own way. The attraction exerted by a charismatic figure, the attraction powerful enough to arrest the heart and the eye of those who admire him, an attraction that renders that subject helpless to look away vulnerable to the range of penalties reserved for those caught looking, from the mild but decisive discipline of the knowing, belligerent, or discomfited counterglance to more severe modes of mortification. These are passions impossible to disentangle from the homosexual. It goes without saying by now, I think, that, just as in his life, after its stop in Reading Gaol, Wilde could never have hoped to extricate himself from the subject charged with them, the feelings that he writes of in a novel used to make those charges stick could never dwell far from the species of yearning to which he gave up his name. For reasons that hardly require repeating here, this confusion of clandestine and dominant cultures of desire has been spun by interested parties to affirm the persistence of the homosexual in enemy territory, the nimble acts of circumlocution by which a kind of survival is accomplished, a survival no less miraculous, more so, really, considering all the breathtaking self-denial and deformation that is part of the package. It is time now to ponder briefly the obvious corollary—since what is not homosexual can never be rid of what is, therefore what is homosexual desire can never be rid of what is not—timely to ponder this, if only to recall that homosexual desire in Wilde, like sexual desire in general, is mingled with affairs that are in themselves quite removed from the dramas of the erotic.

If, as Miss Prism remarks when she instructs her charge to omit the chapter of her Political Economy given over to the Fall of the Rupee, “it is somewhat too sensational. . . . Even these metallic problems have their melodramatic side,”⁶¹ it stands to reason that the problems of even the

⁶⁰ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 159.

⁶¹ *Earnest*, p. 502.

most melodramatic sensation are themselves indexed to the conditions of currency. If these melodramatic sensations are never more pressing than when no image of them is present, the strains of the dismal science make themselves felt in the midst even of the most thrilling passions. Thus even where the desire in question bears the unmistakable signature of the male homosexual—"It was such love as Michael Angelo had known, and Montaigne, and Winckelmann, and Shakespeare himself"⁶²—such amatory tenderness,⁶³ as much as it might discomfit a regime of heterosexual masculinity, impinges as well on the push and shove of an economy based on a tender not amatory, but legal, a market economy whose turnover demand has as little time for eternal devotion as space for the eternal object that would merit it: "[I]t was really love—[it] had nothing in it that was not noble and intellectual. It was not that mere physical admiration of beauty that is borne of the senses, and that dies when the senses tire."⁶⁴ Such persistent desire runs counter to the imperatives of consumption that came to be regarded as critical by the late nineteenth century, when, at least according to the prevailing school of neoclassicism,⁶⁵ scarce supply had given way to insufficient demand as the specter that haunted the economy, and when, in Simmel's words, "the seller" was obliged "to call forth new and differentiated needs."⁶⁶ The noble love that "Michael Angelo had known, and Montaigne, and Winckelmann, and Shakespeare himself" is a risible atavism by the calculations of the sophisticated aesthete whose spirit covers so much of Wilde's novel. It is an adolescent idealism by the calculation that reduces all passionate investments to the common denominator

⁶² *Dorian Gray*, p. 136.

⁶³ The phrase is from *The Times* review of *In Memoriam* (quoted in Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson* [New York: Macmillan, 1972], p. 219). See also Benjamin Jowett's remark that Tennyson's affection for Shakespeare's sonnets stopped just short of an alarming "sympathy with Hellenism" (quoted by Ricks, p. 215).

⁶⁴ *Dorian Gray*, p. 93.

⁶⁵ See Lawrence Birken, *Consuming Desire: Sexual Science and the Emergence of a Culture of Abundance 1871–1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988). See also Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); for an account of Wilde that places him generally in a critical relation to market capitalism while also engaging its forms, see Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Marketplace* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986).

⁶⁶ Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *Sociology*, p. 420.

of their inevitable and ultimate expenditure—“the only difference between a caprice and a life long romance is that a caprice lasts a little longer,”⁶⁷ and no less out of place in the rush of up-market commodity consumption that occupies as much of its plot as any more transgressive desire.

The fit between the economic and erotic elements of Wilde’s project is as fine as can be. Like the docile bodies and the investments of faith that sponsor, and are in turn sponsored by, the operations of capitalism, the lighter brands of desire that Wilde labors to produce not only work to serve the demands of market society, they also take their forms from its material.⁶⁸ Thus, for example, what Simmel calls the philosophy of money dwells at the heart of the urbane passion that displaces the tyrannical magnetism of the charismatic spectacle: the cosmopolitan eye that knows better than fix itself on any single person, but rather loves the entire expanse of the social horizon; the devotion of the aesthete, whose vision of art is a comprehensive history of all the passionate attitudes in the world, attitudes glamorous enough to attract us both as an infinite company of models and objects for our own; the turn-on-a-dime impermanence of the one-night stand, the transitory states of interest in an other that leave us ready for countless more; the scrutiny of the social scientist that dwells near the aesthete’s in more books than those of Wilde, the eye whose attraction to this or that personal instance is always the means of lighting the way to the vision of society that he loves more dearly.

Such society, the one that Simmel appreciated as its art form—“Sociability is the game in which one ‘does as if’ all were equal, and at the same time, as if one honored each of them in particular. And to ‘do as if’ is no more a lie than play or art are lies because of their deviation from reality”⁶⁹—is the flower of the market culture he describes in *The Philosophy of Money*:

While at an earlier stage man paid for the smaller number of his dependencies with the narrowness of personal relations, often with their personal irreplaceability, we are compensated for the great quantity of our dependencies by the

⁶⁷ *Dorian Gray*, p. 24.

⁶⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Pantheon, 1977); See also Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*.

⁶⁹ Simmel, “Sociability,” p. 49.

indifference towards the respective persons and by our liberty to change them at will. And even though we are much more dependent on the whole of society through the complexity of our needs on the one hand, and the specialization of our abilities on the other, than are primitive people who could make their way through life with their very narrow group, we are remarkably independent of every specific member of this society.⁷⁰

A greater care for society as a whole, an ultimate indifference toward any individual; this “peculiar leveling of emotional life that is ascribed to contemporary times” has aspects as various as the two pictures of Dorian Gray. There is, on one side, “the ease of intellectual understanding which exists even between people of the most divergent natures and positions;” the elegant international style of thought, the moral elegance that Wilde hails as “the cosmopolitanism of the future.”⁷¹ On the other hand, there is the “blasé attitude,” the final finding of a worldview dominated entirely by a money economy, where all differences in quality have been reduced to differences in quantity:

Whereas the cynic is still moved to a reaction by the sphere of value, even if in the perverse sense that he considers the downward movement of values part of the attraction of life, the blasé person . . . has completely lost the feeling for value differences. He experiences all things as being of an equally dull and gray hue, as not worth getting excited about, particularly where the will is concerned.⁷²

How wonderful is this world as Wilde sees it, though; all the wonder of the visible world rather than a single “dull gray hue,” a gorgeous spectrum in which each episode of color is all the richer for the fact that, at the end of the day, or the night, or the briefest glance, it finally fades into the light

⁷⁰ Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, p. 298. See also Durkheim, *Division of Labor*.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 432. See Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” p. 294. On the complex structure of detachment in and beyond Wilde, see Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Anderson’s account of the category of detachment, and of the correlative character of the cosmopolitan, has helped me to understand elements of light desire that I would have been otherwise disposed not to see. It isn’t feasible for me to explicate those things here, except to say that I must credit Anderson with prompting me to recognize these desires as positive virtues as much as they are defensive ruses.

⁷² Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, p. 256.

of commonness, no more than an instance, a single showing of the social mosaic. Like the art form of society that Simmel himself so brilliantly illuminates, the party (*gesellschaft*) that makes the pedestrian fiction of equality that is the most ordinary assumption of market society (*gesellschaft*) into a form of grace, the act of discernment accomplished by the fine eye of Wilde's cosmopolitan delivers that society from a dullness worse than death. And if this vision of urbanity raises the world that it sees from the depression endemic to the philosophy of money, it is indebted in turn to that blasé attitude for providing the model by which it may fashion itself as a mode of interest that cures by displacing the terror of the arrested eye. If the joyful vision of the *flâneur* is more excited than the dull one trained on the monotony of market values, it is calmer than the eye so compelled by the sight of the charismatic figure who seems to draw within his single person all that is attractive about people in general, the eye so compelled that it cannot turn away to save its life.

But it is the investments of art rather than money, aesthetics and not economics, upon which Wilde's project most depends. There is no more prominent or pervasive source and paradigm for light, lightened desires than the experience of the aesthetic as Wilde takes it up.⁷³ "Art does not hurt us," he famously declares: "The tears we shed at a play are a type of the exquisite sterile emotions that it is the function of Art to awaken. We weep but we are not wounded. . . . It is through Art and Art only . . . that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence"⁷⁴—sordid perils, such as those represented by the sudden appearance of the police. Beneath the elevated regions of disinterestedness, there is the prosaic stratagem practiced by the figure of the painter in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and by Wilde himself in *Old Bailey*, the basic ruse by which passion is defined as a work of art in the hopes of escaping prosecution for it. We hear this claim of aesthetic immunity in Lord Henry's

⁷³ As we will see, Wilde borrows and bends the conception of the aesthetic promulgated most significantly by Kant. See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, translated with Analytical Indexes by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952). See also Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments, or, An Essay Towards an Analysis of the Principles by Which Men Naturally Judge Concerning the Conduct and Character, First of Their Neighbors, and Afterwards of Themselves* (Edinburgh: Printed by J. Hay & Co. for W. Creech, 1813).

⁷⁴ "The Critic as Artist," p. 274.

final confession, or rather, by what is excluded from it. “Life is not governed by will or intention. Life is a question of nerves and fibres, and slowly built-up cells in which thought hides itself and passion has its dreams.” The thought of what inhabits these cells may put us in mind of a dormant malignancy suddenly spelled out one fine day in a positive diagnosis, or, related to that, but surely closer to the doom on Wilde’s own mind, the image of the author himself, the one who a few years later came to occupy cell C. 3.3. during his sentence of hard labor for passions that he felt unable to contain. Before that one, though, Lord Henry’s sentence sounds the depths discovered in a portrait of a lady definitively appreciated by his famous teacher: “The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all ‘the ends of the world are come,’ and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions.”⁷⁵

The sordid perils of existence from which art shields us extend beyond those embodied in a figure of the law. In Wilde’s book, they include as well those of embodiment itself. By his lights, the disinterestedness of aesthetic interest is a matter of its abstractness; by his rendering, the realm of need from which Kant’s canonical account detaches the aesthetic becomes a bodily need in particular, and a particular bodily need—the one that ends in starvation. And in his story of aesthetic salvation, those who dwell under the shadow of starvation as punishment for their indolence are led away from worry as bodily appetite gives way to the “subtle susceptibilities,” “wild ardours,” and “impossible desires” instilled by the work of art, forms of borrowed passion that, whatever their terrors, are as distant from the prospect of famine as the pang of the heart that makes us know we’re alive from the attack that makes us know we will not be for long.⁷⁶ On rare occasions, desire is shielded from the sordid perils of existence not by the resort to art, but rather a flight from it. Thus Wilde’s theory of the boredom that alleviates a desire that mortifies its

⁷⁵ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, edited by Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 80.

⁷⁶ “The Critic as Artist,” p. 276.

subject by terminating it before the horror starts draws on the model of the “merely” sensuous passion, which, in contrast to the metaphysical achievements of its aesthetic counterpart, suffers the exhaustion that is the fate of all flesh. An exception that proves the rule: no doubt that the work of art is the brightest star of the light desires that Wilde heralds.

And the artist? We have encountered him already. He is the figure Wilde casts as the alien agent of desire, the devious aesthete who actually instills the impulses that he claims only to bring out—“You, Mr. Gray, you yourself, with your rose-red youth and your rose-white boyhood, you have had passions that have made you afraid, thoughts that have filled you with terror, day-dreams and sleeping dreams whose mere memory might stain your cheek with shame”—to free them and thus to free the boy himself: “Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you.”⁷⁷ He is the better maker in *Dorian Gray* who, like the spirit of a subject named Power, manages to persuade us that the formula of our freedom is to call our own the sexuality it has implanted in us: “The irony of this deployment is in having us believe that our “liberation” is in the balance.” Here is Wilde’s portrait of the modern artist, whose medium, unlike that of his ancient ancestor, is the desires of another rather than his own:

Talking to him was like playing upon an exquisite violin. He answered to every touch a thrill of the bow. . . . There was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence. . . . To project one’s soul into some gracious form, and let it tarry there for a moment . . . to convey one’s temperament into another as though it were a subtle fluid or strange perfume. . . . He was a marvelous type, too, this lad . . . or could be fashioned into a marvelous type, at any rate. Grace was his, and the white purity of boyhood, and beauty such as old Greek marbles kept for us. There was nothing that one could not do with him. He could be made a Titan or a toy.⁷⁸

Lord Henry delighting behind the scenes at his knack for imposing the temperament that he claims only to observe, to form the subject whose self-determination is all he claims to care about, confirms a most paranoid vision of power, and a most appreciative one, as well. If this sight puts us

⁷⁷ *Dorian Gray*, p. 23.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.

in mind, say, of a suspicion about the work of modern psychotherapy that begins with Karl Kraus's bitter hunch—"psychoanalysis is the illness for which it claims to be the cure"—and continues with Foucault's full-scale prosecution, it puts us in mind, as well—more so, really—of the classic work of art: "To a large extent the lad was really his own creation."⁷⁹

Exit the hero of desire hailed as the artist of himself, "a subject . . . distinguished by his ability to subdue the tumultuous forces that were loosed within him, to stay in control of his store of energy, and to make his life into an oeuvre," vanished now "those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria." And in their place a new kind of artist, the one who insinuates foreign desires in a now passive subject, a figure called by many names in Wilde—"It comes to us, this terrible shadow, with many gifts in its hands. . . . And so it is not our own life that we live, but the lives of the dead, and the soul that dwells within us is no single spiritual entity, making us personal and individual. . . . It fills us with impossible desires, and makes us follow what we know we cannot gain"⁸⁰—but whom we know full well as the subject of homosexual seduction, most candid in the closet where Dorian Gray observes with "real pleasure" as the picture takes on the "moods and passions" that he projects there, "atom calling to atom in secret love or strange affinity."⁸¹

The deep character who makes the desires of others his own work of art will be familiar to those schooled in contemporary theory, and in particular the concept of power that makes its debut in Foucault's incalculably influential introduction to *The History of Sexuality*, the concept of power that makes a grim epilogue to the ancient adventure that he studies in the volumes that follow, a sad ending in which the management of desire ("the ability to control, limit, and apportion it in the right manner") has been confiscated by a modern regime as cunning as any in the history of the world. A force whose capacity to control the course of desire

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 49.

⁸⁰ "The Critic as Artist," p. 276.

⁸¹ *Dorian Gray*, p. 127.

in the subject that it thus governs mirrors and magnifies the grasp on his passions that the ancients sought to arrange for the subject himself: the hand that takes up the ancient scepter of desire is as sure as its ancestor's, but it is suppler now. Skilled in the classic style to manipulate its form and expression, its reach now extends further by a distance made familiar to us by the measure of the postmodernism disseminated in no small part through the very offices of Foucault's concept of power itself. While the ancient arts of sexual self-management confront the erotic desires they seek to place under their command, the flexuous forms of modern power that Foucault anatomizes constructs them: the censorship that incites what it officially prohibits, the interrogation that calls forth what it seeks out, the science that implants the perversions that it defines.

It's no surprise if, as I think, this modern agency is the alienated majesty of the ancient self as Foucault would have it, that it has been so routinely arraigned, despite the author's repeated denials, as the ghost of a subject in the poststructuralist machine, an infinitely ingenious and malevolent agent, at home in a Hegelian conspiracy theory, but quite unfit for a model of social determination, which, like its cognates in the sphere of language and psyche, claims to have done with the subject once and for all. And no wonder, then, that those practices that the ancients in Foucault's history assign the self to manage his own desires should bear such a striking resemblance to the tactics by which modern power came to manage it for him: the labor of constant inspection, first and foremost, stretching from the institution of confession to the sciences of sexology, a labor guided and fueled by a regulative principle of abstinence or normality, much as the self-accountings of asceticism get their wary eye for the least sign and the most hidden form of erotic yearning from the ideal of chastity that they putatively seek to enforce. No wonder that the policy of power toward the desire that it "harried"⁸² looks as much like that of the hedonist who aims to tune and refine his own pleasures—Alexander Nehamas: "The purpose of these complex exercises [is] . . . not only the repression of pleasure, it is the regulation of pleasure. Its objective is not denial, it is satisfaction."⁸³—as the silent eye of supervision that is trained

⁸² Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, p. 45.

⁸³ Alexander Nehamas, "Subject and Abject," *The New Republic*, 15 February 1993, p. 35.

on the pleasures of others: “Power operated as a mechanism of attraction; it drew out those peculiarities over which it kept watch. Pleasure spread to the power that harried it; power anchored the pleasure it uncovered . . . *perpetual spirals of power and pleasure.*”⁸⁴ And no surprise if their origin is the war within that Foucault’s ancients envision as the model of self-management—to struggle against “the desires and the pleasure” was to cross swords with oneself—that modern power should draw so close to the desire it regulates, that their commerce with one another should involve “not boundaries to be crossed, but *perpetual spirals of power and pleasure.*” No surprise that Foucault, despite his denials and despite the fact that neither the force of logic nor the evidence of history obliged him to do so, stresses the consolidation of power in his analysis of the game (rather say, than the competence of resistance, or both), since this stress echoes, only in a note turned tragic now, the strength that the ancient self gathers to himself in the battle with his desires.

And no wonder then, that Foucault’s model of modern power has leant itself so graciously to aesthetic appreciation in the years since he published it, that his introduction to the *History of Sexuality* should have inspired a movement in criticism that has, in the subtlest measures of those forms, seen all the charm of art.⁸⁵ No wonder, if the social forms that, by the lights of this criticism, are illuminated and even comprehended by aesthetic ones should be haunted, like the constellation of stars that projects the outline of the lone warrior, by the work performed by the hero of desire imagined by his ancients, the constant exercises of self-control through which he labored to be beautiful.⁸⁶ The portrait of the artist that

⁸⁴ *History of Sexuality: Volume I*, p. 45 (emphasis in original).

⁸⁵ Founding examples of this school of criticism include D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); and Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). For the spirit of power that subtends the aesthetic view of domination in recent criticism, see also Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

⁸⁶ No wonder as well that the most arresting criticism leveled against the way Foucault tells the ancient adventure of self-cultivation should take issue, first of all, with his disinclination to consider the external standards that, at least according to the scholar who started him on the subject, gives direction to this adventure. “It is quite true,” Pierre Hadot remarks, “that . . . the ancients did speak of an ‘art of living.’ It seems to me, however, that the description M. Foucault gives of what I had termed ‘spiritual exercises,’ and which he prefers to call ‘techniques of the self,’ is precisely focused far too much on the ‘self,’ or at

Foucault apprehends in the ancient practices of self-regulation has its shadowy afterlife—or is it the other way around?—in the picture he takes of the power behind these modern social forms, the power whose ambiguous undulations appear half of the time as the *savoir faire* of the finest hand. Never that of the King now—“we must imagine power without the king”—not any specifiable human being, of course, or even any specifiable social site where the instruments of domination are concentrated, but rather the ghost that arises from an ensemble of practices too dispersed to count as the property of this or that potentate, class, or social group.⁸⁷

The resemblance though between these installations of desire in Wilde and Foucault illuminates a deep difference between these two, elsewhere so close, that allows us near the presence of the spirit that animates the whole of my story here. For while Foucault sees no reason to cheer the implantations of sexuality that he seeks to expose, little good to come from an erotic universe polluted by these fictions, unless and until they are expunged, Wilde celebrates them as the means by which we escape all the risk of the hungers we can do nothing to control. What Foucault dismisses as a diet of propaganda that keeps us from a richer feast—the party of “bodies and pleasures” liberated from the discursive impositions of power⁸⁸—Wilde seizes as the golden ticket to a place at that blessed table where we can have our cake and eat it, too.

least on a specific conception of the self.” For Hadot, Foucault declines to recognize that the self—“the best portion of the self”—whose cultivation the ancients sought to inculcate shapes itself to the contours of universal reason: “The ‘best portion of oneself,’ then, is, in the last analysis, a transcendent self. Seneca does not find his joy in ‘Seneca,’ but by transcending ‘Seneca’; by discovering that there is within him—within all human beings, that is, and within the cosmos itself—a reason which is part of universal reason.” What is the “specific self” that, by Hadot’s lights, Foucault cares for too much but the microcosmic analogue to that familiar, indeed infamous, mode of power whose operations are quite indifferent to objective moral norms, except as an instrument of its own expansion? See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, edited with an Introduction by Arnold I. Davidson, translated by Michael Chase (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 206–7.

⁸⁷ Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume I*, p. 91.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 159.