

Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation

Author(s): Ed Cohen

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Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation

Oh! It is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read.

Algy to Jack in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

. . . every reader of our columns, as he passed his eye over the report of Wilde's apology for his life at the Old Bailey, must have realized, with accumulating significance at each line, the terrible risk involved in certain artistic and literary phrases of the day. Art, we are told, has nothing to do with morality. But even if this doctrine were true it has long ago been perverted, under the treatment of the decadents, into a positive preference on the part of "Art" for the immoral, the morbid, and the maniacal. It is on this narrower issue that the proceedings of the last few days have thrown so lurid a light. . . . But this terrible case . . . may be the means of incalculable good if it burns in its lesson upon the literary and moral conscience of the present generation.

The *Westminster Gazette* (6 Apr. 1895) assessing the Marquis of Queensbury's acquittal on charges of criminal libel.

Prologue: A Trying (Con)text

DURING THE LATE spring of 1895, the trials of Oscar Wilde erupted from the pages of every London newspaper. The sex scandal involving one of London's most renowned popular playwrights as well as one of the most eccentric members of the British aristocracy titillated popular opinion. And why not? For it had all the elements of a good drawing-room comedy—or, in Freudian terms, of a good family romance. The characters were exact: the neurotic but righteously outraged father (the Marquis of Queensbury), the prodigal and effeminate young son (Alfred Douglas), and the degenerate older man who came between them (Wilde). Wilde was portrayed as the corrupting artist who dragged young Alfred Douglas away from the realm of paternal solicitude down into the London underworld, where homosexuality, blackmail, and male prostitution sucked the lifeblood of morality from his tender body. How could such a story have failed to engage the public imagination?

Yet the widespread fascination with Wilde's trials should not be viewed solely as the result of a prurient public interest, nor should it be seen only as the product of a virulent popular desire to eradicate "unnatural" sexual practices. Rather, **the public response must be considered in the light of the Victorian bourgeoisie's larger efforts to legitimate certain limits for the sexual deployment of the male body and, in Foucault's terms, to define a "class body."** The middle-aged, middle-class men who judged Wilde—both in the court and in the press—saw themselves as attempting **not merely to control a "degenerate" form of male sexuality but also to ensure standards for the health of their children and their country.**¹ To this end, the court proceedings against Wilde provided a perfect opportunity to define publicly the authorized and legal limits within which a man could "naturally" enjoy the pleasures of his body with another man. The trials, then, can be thought of as a spectacle in which the state, through the law and the press, delimited legitimate male sexual practices (defining them as "healthy," "natural," or "true") by proscribing expressions of male experience that transgressed these limits.² The legal proceedings against Wilde were therefore not anomalous; rather, they crystallized a variety of shifting sexual ideologies and practices. For what was at issue was not just the prosecution of homosexual acts per se or the delegitimizing of homosexual meanings. **At issue was the discursive production of "the homosexual" as the antithesis of the "true" bourgeois male.**

In Britain during the late nineteenth century, "the homosexual" was emerging as a category for organizing male experience alongside other newly recognizable "types" ("the adolescent," "the criminal," "the delinquent," "the prostitute," "the housewife," etc.).³ Coined by the Swiss physician Karoly Benkert in 1869 and popularized in the writings of the German sexologists, the word (along with its "normal" sibling, "the heterosexual") entered English usage when Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* was translated during the 1890s. The shift in the conception of male same-sex eroti-

cism from certain proscribed *acts* (the earlier concepts “sodomite” and “bugger” were identified with specific legally punishable practices [see Trumbach; Gilbert]) to certain kinds of *actors* was part of an overall transformation in class and sex-gender ideologies (see Weeks, *Coming Out*, esp. chs. 1–3). If we think of the growth and consolidation of bourgeois hegemony in Victorian Britain as a process whereby diverse sets of material practices (“sex” and “class” among others) were organized into an effective unity (see Connell), then we can see that “the homosexual” crystallized as a distinct subset of male experience only in relation to prescribed embodiments of “manliness.” This new conceptualization reproduced asymmetrical power relations by privileging the enactments of white middle-class, heterosexual men (see Cominos for the classic description of this privilege; see also Thomas).

In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explores the range of “maleness” in English literature between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries and proposes that the normative structuring of relations between men established other male positionings within the larger sex-gender system.⁴ Investigating the strategies whereby literary texts (primarily nineteenth-century novels) constructed a “continuum of homosocial desire,” she illustrates that these texts articulate male sexuality in ways that also evoke asymmetrical power relations between men and women. Hence, she suggests that we must situate both the production and the consumption of literary representations depicting male interactions (whether overtly sexualized or not) within a larger social formation that circulates ideologies defining differences in power across sex and class.

This suggestion seems particularly applicable to Wilde’s texts, which embody an especially contradictory nexus of class and sexual positionings. As the son of a noted Irish physician, Sir William Wilde, and a popular nationalist poet, Lady Jane Wilde (also called “Speranza”), Wilde was educated in a series of public schools and colleges before attending Oxford. After receiving a double “first” in 1879, Wilde “went down” to London, where, owing to his father’s death and his family’s insolvency, he was forced to earn his own income. From that time until his imprisonment in 1895, Wilde consciously constructed and marketed himself as a liminal figure within British class relations, straddling the lines between nobility, aristocracy, middle class, and—in his sexual encounters—working

class. The styles and attitudes that he affected in his writing and his life creatively packaged these multiple positionings; “I have put all my genius into my life,” Wilde observed in his famous remark to André Gide; “I have only put my talents into my work.” Typically, literary critics have explained this overdetermined positioning by situating Wilde among the nineteenth-century manifestations of decadence and dandyism, thereby emphasizing that his aesthetic paradoxically signified his dependence on the prevailing bourgeois culture and his detachment from it.⁵ Yet his literary and personal practices also embodied a more contradictory relation to sexual and class ideologies.

As Regenia Gagnier demonstrates, these contradictions became evident in the contemporary reviews of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

One is struck by the profusion of such terms [in the reviews of *Dorian Gray*] as “unclean,” “effeminate,” “studied insincerity,” “theatrical,” “Wardour Street aestheticism,” “obtrusively cheap scholarship,” “vulgarity,” “unnatural,” “false,” and “perverted”: an odd mixture of the rumors of Wilde’s homosexuality and of more overt criticism of Wilde as a social poseur and self-advertiser. Although the suggestion was couched in terms applying to the text, the reviews seemed to say that Wilde did not know his place, or—amounting to the same thing—that he did know his place and it was not that of a middle-class gentleman. (59)

In Gagnier’s analysis, the immediate critical response to *Dorian Gray* denounced the text’s transgression of precisely those class and gender ideologies that sustained the “middle-class gentleman”: the novel was seen as “decadent” both because of “its distance from and rejection of middle-class life” and because “it was not only dandiacal, it was ‘feminine’” (65). Thus, the *Athenaeum* would refer to the book as “unmanly, sickening, vicious (although not exactly what is called ‘improper’), and tedious and stupid” (Mason 200). And the *Scotts Observer* would remark:

Mr. Wilde has again been writing stuff that were better unwritten and while ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray,’ which he contributes to *Lippincott’s*, is ingenious, interesting, full of cleverness, and plainly the work of a man of letters, it is false art—for its interest is medico-legal; it is false to human nature—for its hero is a devil; it is false to morality—for it is not made sufficiently clear that the writer does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health and sanity.

(Mason 75–76)

Emphasizing that Wilde's novel violated the standards of middle-class propriety, these characterizations illustrate the intersection of Victorian class and gender ideologies from which Wilde's status as the paradigmatic "homosexual" would emerge. For, in contrast to the "manly" middle-class male, Wilde would come to represent—through his writing and his trials—the "unmanly" social climber who threatened to upset the certainty of bourgeois categories.

To situate Wilde's emergence as "a homosexual" in late nineteenth-century literary (con)texts and thereby explore the ways that sex-gender ideologies shape specific literary works, I focus first on *Teleny*, a novel widely attributed to Wilde and one of the earliest examples of male homoerotic pornography, whose encoding of sexual practices between men moves athwart those ideologies that sought to "naturalize" male heterosexuality. Then by analyzing the better-known and yet manifestly "straight" text *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I illustrate that even in the absence of explicit homosexual terminology or activity, a text can subvert the normative standards of male same-sex behavior. In considering how these works challenge the hegemonic representations of male homoerotic experience in late Victorian Britain, I suggest how textual depictions of male same-sex experience both reproduce and resist the dominant heterosexual ideologies and practices.

Through the Revolving Door: The Pornographic Representation of the Homoerotic in *Teleny*

In *The Other Victorians*, Steven Marcus states:

The view of human sexuality as it was represented in the [late Victorian] subculture of pornography and the view of sexuality held by the official culture were reversals, mirror images, negative analogies of each other. . . . In both the same set of anxieties are at work; in both the same obsessive ideas can be made out; and in both sexuality is conceived of at precisely the same degree of consciousness. (283–84)

While Marcus's analysis suggestively projects the "pornotopia" as the underside of bourgeois society, it fails to consider the ways that Victorian pornography not only reflected but refracted—or perhaps, more specifically, *interrupted*—the assumptions and practices of the dominant culture.⁶ In other words, since Marcus relates the production of the pornographic only to institutionally legiti-

mated forms of the sexual and the literary, he obscures the degree to which such an unsanctioned (and hence uncanonized) genre could provide positive articulations of marginalized sexual practices and desires.

One such textual affirmation can be found in *Teleny: Or, The Reverse of the Medal: A Physiological Romance*. Written in 1890 (the same year "The Picture of Dorian Gray" appeared in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*), *Teleny* is reputed to be the serial work of several of Wilde's friends (who circulated the manuscript among themselves), with Wilde serving as general editor and coordinator.⁷ Even if this genealogy proves apocryphal, the unevenness of its prose styles suggests that the novel was the collaboration of several authors and possibly a set of self-representations evolving out of the homosexual subculture in late Victorian London.

Chronicling the ill-fated love between two late nineteenth-century men, *Teleny* unfolds as a retrospective narrative told by the dying Camile Des Grieux to an unnamed interlocutor. Prompted by his questioner, Des Grieux unfolds a tale of seductions, sex (homo- and hetero-, oral and anal), orgies, incest, blackmail, rape, suicide, death, and love. Aroused by his passion for the beautiful—and well-endowed—young pianist René Teleny, Des Grieux opens himself to the varied possibilities of male sexual expression only to find himself drawn back again and again to a single object of desire: the male body of his beloved Teleny. Thus, Des Grieux's narrative represents an explicit set of strategies through which the male body is ensnared in the passions and excesses of homoerotic desire.

Introducing the image of its fatal conclusion, the novel's opening sentence directs us immediately to the body on which the narrative is inscribed: "A few days after my arrival in Nice, last winter, I encountered several times on the Promenade a young man, of dark complexion, thin, a little stooped, of pallid color, with eyes—beautiful blue eyes—ringed in black, of delicate features, but aged and emaciated by a profound ailment, which appeared to be both physical and moral" (21). The novel's conclusion can be initially "read off" from Des Grieux's degenerate condition only because his body serves as the "recording surface" for the story.⁸ The narrator underscores this relation between body and narrative: "The account that follows is not, then, a novel. It is rather a true story: the dramatic adventures of two young and handsome human beings of refined temperament, high-strung, whose brief ex-

istence was cut short by death after flights of passion which will doubtless be misunderstood by the generality of men" (22). Here the generic "human beings" distinguishes the protagonists from the "generality of men" who will doubtlessly misunderstand them, introducing a fundamental opposition "fleshed out" in the text: by juxtaposing male same-sex passion with a cultural concept of "manliness" that seeks to exclude it, the novel deconstructs those definitions of human nature that deny the homoerotic as unnatural. Thus, even before its pornographic plot begins, the text attaches itself to the male body as the surface on which its markings will become legible and simultaneously undertakes to use this legibility to validate same-sex desire.

Within the novel's narrative logic, this validation derives from the irrationality of the attraction uniting Des Grieux and Teleny, in spite of their manifestly masculine (and hence ideologically rational) positioning. In the first chapter, positing their almost mystical affinity, Des Grieux recalls their "predestined" meeting at a London charity concert. On stage, Teleny, the pianist, senses the presence of a "sympathetic listener" who inspires him to incredible heights of virtuosity. In the audience, Des Grieux responds to Teleny's performance by visualizing a set of extravagant and exotic scenes—portraying classical European images of non-European sexualized otherness—which, we soon learn, are the same visions that Teleny conjures as he plays. Indeed, these images are so distinct that Des Grieux experiences them physically: "a heavy hand [that] seemed to be laid on my lap, something was hent and clasped and grasped, which made me faint with lust" (27). In the midst of this masturbatory incantation, Des Grieux succumbs to the novel's first stirrings of priapic ecstasy. Thus, when the young men meet and their first touch (a properly masculine handshake) "reawakens Priapus," Des Grieux feels that he has been "taken possession of" (29). The ensuing conversation leads the men to recognize their affinity and, at the same time, foregrounds the irrationality underlying their erotic connection. Describing the music that has brought them together as the product of a "madman," Teleny hints at "insanity" and "possession," enmeshing the two in a web of superstition and "unreason." By violating the dominant Victorian associations of masculinity with science and reason, the first encounter between the lovers casts their attraction as an implicit challenge to the normative ideologies for male behavior.

Following this initial highly charged meeting, the next four chapters elaborate the deferral of its sexual consummation, recounting Des Grieux's emotional turmoil as he comes to recognize, accept, and ultimately enjoy his physical desire for Teleny. The sexual content of this portion of the novel depicts primarily illicit—if not taboo—heterosexual practices. All these manifestly straight incidents, however, portray the heterosexual as a displacement of the true affection of one man for another; they juxtapose the universal acceptability and "naturalness" of heterosexual passion (even if accompanied by incest or violence) to the execration and "unnaturalness" of homoerotic desire.

As Des Grieux begins to make sense of his obsession with Teleny, he realizes that this natural-unnatural distinction is itself learned (i.e., cultural): ". . . I had been inculcated with all kinds of wrong ideas, so when I understood what my *natural* feelings for Teleny were I was staggered, horrified . . ." (63; my emphasis). This inverted use of the word *natural* deconstructs the mask of ideological neutrality and underscores the moral implications it attempts to conceal. Once he accepts that he "was born a sodomite," Des Grieux can remark that "I read all I could find about the love of one man for another, that loathsome crime against nature, taught to us not only by the very gods themselves, but by all of the greatest men of olden times. . . ." Thus the text mocks the culture's pretensions in defining as a "crime against nature" that which *his* nature demands and which the "very gods themselves" and the "greatest men of olden times" have practiced. By subverting the claims to "natural" (read "ideological") superiority by "honorable [heterosexual] men," the narrative's logic opens the possibility for a counterhegemonic representation of homoerotic desire.

The first sexual encounter between Des Grieux and Teleny inaugurates this new representation of same-sex desire by reviving the "fatedness" of their relationship. As Des Grieux, convinced of the hopelessness of his passion for a man, stands on a bridge over the Thames and contemplates "the forgetfulness of those Stygian waters," he is grabbed from behind by the strong arms of his beloved Teleny, who is drawn to the spot by supernatural premonition (explained by Teleny's "gypsy blood"). This charmed meeting culminates in a scene of extravagant and abandoned lovemaking through which the two men form an inseparable bond that sustains them for many climaxes and an unforgettable orgy.

The charm is broken, however, when Teleny—through a combination of boredom, irrepressible lust, and economic necessity—is led into an affair with Des Grieux’s mother. The shock of discovering that his mother has usurped his place in Teleny’s bed sends Des Grieux into a decline from which he never recovers, and the shock of being found out causes Teleny to take his own life.

This summary can only hint at the profusion of sexual representation the novel engenders. Despite its tragic ending, its depiction of male homoerotic desire and practice insists on not only the possibility but the naturalness of same-sex eroticism. Thus, in reflecting on the story of his first night with Teleny, Des Grieux offers one of the most articulate defenses of same-sex love to be found in late Victorian fiction. Responding to his interlocutor’s question, “Still, I had thought, on the morrow—the intoxication passed—you would have shuddered at the thought of having a man for a lover?” Des Grieux asks:

Why? Had I committed a crime against nature when my own nature found peace and happiness thereby? If I was thus, surely it was the fault of my blood, not myself. Who had planted nettles in my garden? Not I. They had grown there unawares from my very childhood. I began to feel their carnal sting long before I could understand what conclusion they imported. When I had tried to bridle my lust, was it my fault if the scale of reason was far too light to balance that of sensuality? Was I to blame if I could not argue down my raging motion? Fate, Iago-like, had clearly shewed me that if I would damn myself, I could do so in a more delicate way than drowning. I yielded to my destiny and encompassed my joy. (119)

By juxtaposing his homoerotic “nature” to a Victorian definition that criminalized it, Des Grieux’s statement foregrounds the moral-ideological concerns implied in this naturalizing terminology. In so doing, he articulates a theory of “innate difference” similar to the third-sex theories first proposed by the late nineteenth-century apologists for same-sex desire (Edward Carpenter, J. A. Symonds, and Havelock Ellis).⁹ Since these formulations assume the opposition between intellect and passion—or between male and female—found elsewhere in late Victorian discourse, they necessarily encode the implicit bias on which these dichotomies depend. Here, however, the polarities are resolved through an alternative outlet, physical and moral: joy. In affirming the naturalness of Des Grieux’s homoerotic experience, this new joyous possibility undermines

the monovocalizing strategies the bourgeois heterosexual culture used to ensure the reproduction of its dominance and thus opens up the possibility of representing a plurality of male sexualities.

Behind the Closet Door: The Representation of Homoerotic Desire in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

What if someone wrote a novel about homosexuality and no body came? To what extent is *The Picture of Dorian Gray* this book? And what does it mean to say that a text is “about” homosexuality anyway?

While *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has generated much speculation and innuendo concerning its author’s sexual preferences, the aftermath of Wilde’s trials has left no doubt in the critical mind that the “immorality” of Wilde’s text paralleled that of his life. Yet this critical reflection has never directly addressed the question of how Wilde’s “obviously” homoerotic text signifies its “deviant” concerns while never explicitly violating the dominant norms for heterosexuality. That Wilde’s novel encodes traces of male homoerotic desire seems to be ubiquitously, though tacitly, affirmed. Why this general affirmation exists has never been addressed. To understand how “everyone knows” what lurks behind Wilde’s manifestly straight language (i.e., without descending to a crude biographical explanation), we must examine the ways that Wilde’s novel moves both with and athwart the late Victorian ideological practices that naturalized male heterosexuality.¹⁰

The Picture of Dorian Gray narrates the development of male identity within a milieu that actively subverts the traditional bourgeois representations of appropriate male behavior. While it portrays a sphere of art and leisure in which male friendships assume primary emotional importance and in which traditional male values (industry, earnestness, morality) are abjured in favor of the aesthetic, it makes no explicit disjunction between these two models of masculinity; rather, it formally opposes an aesthetic representation of the male body and the material, emotional, sexual male body itself. In other words, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* juxtaposes an aesthetic ideology that foregrounds representation with an eroticized milieu that inscribes the male body within circuits of male desire. To understand how this opposition operates, we

must first consider the components of the male friendships in the novel.

The text of *Dorian Gray* develops around a constellation of three characters—Lord Henry Wotton, Basil Hallward, and Dorian Gray—who challenge the Victorian standards of “true male” identity. Freed from the activities and responsibilities that typically consumed the energies of middle-class men, they circulate freely within an aestheticized social space that they collectively define. As inhabitants of a subculture, however, they still use a public language that has no explicit forms to represent (either to themselves or to one another) their involvements; hence, they must produce new discursive strategies to express concerns unvoiced within the dominant culture. In producing these strategies, the novel posits its moral and aesthetic interests. By projecting the revelation, growth, and demise of Dorian’s “personality” onto an aesthetic consideration of artistic creation, Wilde demonstrates how the psychosexual development of an individual gives rise to the “double consciousness” of a marginalized group.¹¹ Dorian Gray is to some extent born of the conjunction between Basil’s visual embodiment of his erotic desire for Dorian and Lord Henry’s verbal sublimation of such desire. From this nexus of competing representational modes, Dorian Gray constitutes his own representations of identity. But who then is Dorian Gray?

Within the narrative structure, Dorian is an image—a space for the constitution of male desire. From the time he enters the novel as the subject of Basil’s portrait until the moment Wilde has him kill himself into art, Dorian Gray provides the surface on which the characters project their self-representations. His is the body on which Basil’s and Lord Henry’s desires are inscribed. Beginning with an interview between these two characters, the novel constructs Dorian as a template of desire by thematizing the relation between the inspiration derived from Dorian’s “personality” and the resulting aesthetic products. For Basil, Dorian appears as an “ideal,” as the motivation for “an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style.” Dorian’s mere “visible presence” enables Basil to represent emotions and feelings that he found inexpressible through traditional methods and themes: “I see things differently now. I think of them differently. I can recreate life in a way that was hidden from me before” (150).

But what gives Basil’s relation to Dorian this transformative power? In describing his friendship

with Dorian to Lord Harry, Basil narrates the story of their meeting:

I turned halfway round, and saw Dorian Gray for the first time. When our eyes met I felt I was growing pale. A curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating, that if I allowed it to do so it would absorb my whole nature, my very art itself. . . . Something seemed to tell me that I was on the verge of a terrible crisis in my life. I had a strange feeling that fate had in store for me exquisite joys and exquisite sorrows. (146)

Dorian’s “personality” enchants Basil and throws him back upon himself, evoking a physical response that is then translated into a psychic, verbally encoded interpretation. As an artist, Basil resolves this crisis by experientially and aesthetically transforming his representations of this experience. His fascination with Dorian leads him to foreground their erotic connection (“We were quite close, almost touching. Our eyes met again.” [147]) and at the same time to legitimate it in the sublimated language of aesthetic ideals (“Dorian Gray is to me simply a motive in art.” [151]).

This symbolic displacement of the erotic onto the aesthetic is reiterated by the absent presence of the “picture” within the novel. While homoerotic desire must be muted in a literary text that overtly conforms to dominant codes for writing—which have historically excluded same-sex desires as unrepresentable—it is nevertheless metonymically suggested by a verbally unrepresentable medium, the painting, whose linguistic incommensurability deconstructs the apparent self-sufficiency of these representational codes. Since the portrait stands outside the text and evokes an eroticized tableau transgressing the limits of verbal representation, it establishes a gap whereby un verbalized meaning can enter the text. In particular, its visual eroticism suffuses the dynamic between Dorian and Basil, thereby foregrounding the male body as the source of both aesthetic and erotic pleasure. The portrait provides the space within which, in contemporary psychoanalytic terminology, the phallic activity of “the gaze” encroaches on the dominant linguistic unrepresentability of male same-sex eroticism.¹² Thus, the picture’s absent presence (which motivates the narrative development) interrupts the novel’s overt representational limits by introducing a visual, extraverbal component of male same-sex desire.

Since Wilde defines painting as an active expression of personal meanings, Basil's "secret" infuses Dorian's picture with a vitality and passion that fundamentally change its "mode of style." Yet this secret does not lie in the work of art itself but rather grows out of Basil's emotional and erotic involvement with Dorian Gray, thereby establishing a new relation between the artist and his subject. As Basil eventually explains to Dorian:

. . . from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I was dominated soul, brain, and power by you. You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream. I worshipped you. I grew jealous of everyone to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. When you were away from me you were still present in my art. . . . (267–68)

The emotional intensity with which Wilde describes Basil's passion for Dorian belies the Platonic invocation of "the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal," since this verbal interpretation merely echoes the available public forms of expression. That Wilde displaces Basil's physical domination onto a dream (albeit exquisite) indicates that there is no publicly validated visible reality to express male homoerotic desire. But because painting can only occur in the nonlinear, and hence extralinguistic, space where Basil synthesizes the visual elements of his emotional and aesthetic inspiration, this visual expression and its verbal analogue are necessarily disjunct. **Thus, although Basil's painting is entirely exterior to the text, it provides the reference point for a mode of representation that admits the visible, erotic presence of the male body.**

Nowhere is this disjunction made more obvious than in Wilde's distinction between Basil's visual and physical involvement with Dorian and Lord Henry's detached, ironic, and self-conscious verbal stance. In contrast to Basil, who has surrendered his "whole nature," his "whole soul," his "very heart itself," to the immediacy of Dorian Gray, Lord Henry first becomes interested in Dorian through the story of Basil's passion. As a consummate aesthete, Lord Henry derives his passions not from direct engagement with his object but through mediated representations. By separating "one's own soul" from the "passions of one's friends" (153), Wilde opposes Lord Henry's self-objectifying archness to Basil's passionate engagement with his in-

spiration's embodiment. To the extent that Basil, as a painter, seeks to create a spatialized frame that synthetically mirrors his emotional and erotic reality, Lord Henry, as a conversationalist, segments this aesthetic space into the paradoxes and conundrums that characterize his linguistic style. Basil himself exposes the logic behind this verbal analytics when he says to Lord Henry: "You are an extraordinary fellow. You never say a moral thing and you never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose" (144). It is precisely this cynical posture that distinguishes the two modes of representation the characters engender. For while Basil registers his passion in expressive forms, Lord Henry maintains an autonomous "pose" by detaching himself from his own passions. He never does a wrong thing because he distances himself from the material world of activity by representing reality, both to himself and to others, as an ongoing conversation in which he never says a moral thing. This discursive maneuver, which collapses the physical plenitude of bodily reality into abstract conceptualization, interrupts the visual inscription of Basil's picture and thereby opens the space from which "Dorian Gray" emerges.¹³

Chronologically, this emergence coincides with Basil and Lord Harry's rivalry for Dorian's attention. In recounting his story to Lord Harry, Basil initially hesitates to introduce Dorian's name for fear of violating his "secret." He pleads with Lord Henry not to "take away from me the one person who gives my art whatever charm it possesses," yet his plea merely confirms their competition for the same "wonderfully handsome young man." Though the motives behind this competition are left unspoken, it unfolds during Dorian's final sitting for his portrait. Here, in Basil's studio, the conflict plays itself out as a seduction: Lord Henry woos Dorian away from the adoring gaze of the painter to awaken him to a new, symbolic order of desire—an order at the very heart of the narrative.

Responding to Dorian's complaint that Basil never speaks while painting, Basil allows Lord Henry to stay and entertain Dorian. While Basil puts the finishing touches on the canvas, Lord Henry charms Dorian with a discussion of morality:

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 all duties is the duty that one owes

to oneself. Of course they are charitable. They feed the hungry and clothe the beggar. But their souls starve and are naked. Courage has gone out of our race. Perhaps we never really had it. The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, and the terror of God, which is the secret of religion—these are the two things that govern us.

(158)

As Lord Henry's words provide Dorian with new vistas on the moral prejudices of their era, his "low musical voice" seduces the younger man, who becomes transfigured: ". . . a look came into the lad's face . . . never seen there before." Simultaneously, Basil inscribes this "look"—the object of both his artistic and erotic gaze—onto the canvas, thus doubly imbuing his aesthetic image with the representations of male homoerotic desire.

By dialectically transforming Lord Henry's verbal and Basil's visual representations, Dorian enters into the circuits of male desire through which these characters play out their sexual identities. He inspires both Basil and Lord Henry to new heights of expression, but only by internalizing and modifying images through which the older men would have themselves seen. Thus, the development of Dorian's "perfect nature" underscores the disjunction between male homoerotic experience and the historical means of expressing it, so that his strategic mediation between them enables desire to enter the novel explicitly. Lord Henry continues his moral panegyric, once again voicing the problem:

The body sins once and has done with 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 those things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful. (159)

Temptation resisted, Lord Harry suggests, gives rise to the image of a desired yet forbidden object. This overdetermined representation, in turn, mediates between the active body and the reflective mind by forbidding those desires that the soul's monstrous laws proscribe. Thus, these laws—the social representations of self-denial—separate the body as a source of pleasure from the interpretation of that pleasure as sin. By negating pleasure, the natural expression of the body, society (introjected here as "soul") inhibits the body's sensuous potential and circumscribes feeling within established moral codes.

Responding passionately to Lord Henry's critique of this interdictive morality, Dorian senses "entirely fresh influences . . . at work within him [that] really seemed to have come from himself." Since the older man's words counterpose the social to the personal, the desiring associated with self-development to the interdictions of culture, his influence on Dorian emphasizes the sensual as a strategy for resisting society's limitations. "Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul." Although Lord Henry speaks only of the body's sensual possibilities, Dorian uses these words to formulate a new self-image: "The few words that Basil's friend had said to him—words spoken by chance, no doubt, and with willful paradox in them—had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses" (160). By defining Dorian's formerly inchoate feelings and sensations, Lord Henry's language creates a new reality for Dorian (" . . . mere words. Was there anything so real as words"), and Basil's canvas records Dorian's changing self-image—but only as expressed through Basil's desire. The rivalry between the two older friends for Dorian's affection vitalizes the surface of Basil's painting by attributing an erotic charge to Dorian's body itself. And as this body becomes the object of male attention and representation, the young man's concept of his own material being is transformed—he is "revealed to himself."

Looking on his completed portrait for the first time, Dorian encounters himself as reflected in the "magical mirror" of Basil's desire. This image organizes the disparate perceptions of his body into an apparently self-contained whole and reorients Dorian in relation both to his own identity and to his social context. He begins to conceive of his beauty as his own, failing to understand it as the product of the images that Basil and Lord Harry dialectically provide for him. Wilde describes this change as a physical response, thereby foregrounding the connection between psychic representation and somatic perception while indicating that this seemingly coherent internal representation synthesizes a complex nexus of social relationships. Hence, Dorian's identification with the painted image constitutes a misrecognition as much as a recognition, leading him to confuse an overdetermined set of representations with the "truth" of his experience.

Within these (mis)representations Dorian comes to view his body as distinct from his soul and misrecognizes the certainty of his aging and death. Splitting his self-image into two, Basil's visual representation and Lord Henry's verbal portrait, Dorian internalizes an identity that excites his body only to make it vulnerable to the passage of time. The transitivity of this new self-recognition manifests itself as physical experience: "As he thought of it [his body's aging] a sharp pang of pain struck through him like a knife and made each delicate fibre of his nature quiver" (167). To avoid aging, Dorian inverts the imaginary and the real and thus conceptualizes the painful disjunction between the image of his body and his body itself as a form of jealousy:

How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will always remain young. It will never be older than this particular day of June. . . . If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that—for that—I would give everything. Yes there is nothing in the world I would not give! I would give my soul for that. (168)

In voicing this statement, Dorian executes a linguistic schism—dividing the "I" against itself—which repositions him within the narrative flow. As the "I" of the speaking character is projected against the visual image of the "I," his body is evacuated and thereby removed from the flow of time.

Dorian stakes his soul for the preservation of his physical beauty, of his body image, and Wilde makes the motive for this wager clear: Dorian fears that time will rob him of the youth that makes him the object of male desire: "'Yes,' he continued [to Basil], 'I am less to you than your ivory Hermes or your silver faun. You will like them always. How long will you like me? Til I have my first wrinkle, I suppose. I know now, that when one loses one's good looks, whatever they may be, one loses everything. Your picture has taught me that'" (168–69). In portraying Dorian's self-perception as a function of Basil's erotic and aesthetic appreciation, Wilde fuses the artifacts of homoerotic desire and the representations that Dorian uses to constitute his identity. The classical images of male beauty and eroticism make Dorian jealous because he fails to understand that the body can have simultaneous aesthetic and erotic appeal. His focus on visual and sexual desirability emphasizes the importance that

culturally produced representations have in the construction of male identity.

In describing Dorian's identity as a product of aesthetic and erotic images, Wilde locates "the problem" of male homoerotic desire on the terrain of representation itself. Since his characters encounter one another at the limits of heterosexual forms, they produce multiple positionings for articulating different desires, evoking possibilities for male same-sex eroticism without explicitly voicing them. Instead, Wilde posits many uncovered secrets (Basil's "secret," Dorian's "secrets," Lord Henry's continual revelation of the "secrets of life," even the absent portrait itself), thereby creating a logic of displacement that culminates in Dorian's prayer for eternal youth. Standing outside the text and yet initiating all further narrative development, the prayer is marked only by a caesura that transforms the relation between representation and desire. In a moment of textual silence, Dorian—misperceiving the true object of Basil's feeling—defends his idealized self-image by invoking the magical aspects of utterance. To maintain his identity as the object of another man's desire, he prays to exchange the temporality of his existence for the stasis of an erotically charged visual representation. Inasmuch as Basil's secret—his "worship with far more romance than a man usually gives a friend" (in the 1890 edition)—radiates from the canvas reflecting its subject's beauty, Dorian's profession, "I am in love with it, Basil. It is part of myself. I feel that," underscores the degree to which his male self-image reverberates with the passion of same-sex desire. And this passionate attachment inspires the supplication that makes his portrait perhaps the most well-known nonexistent painting in Western culture.

Not coincidentally, then, the famous reversal between the character and his portrait first appears to stem from the failure of the novel's only explicitly heterosexual element. By introducing the feminine into a world that systematically denies it, Dorian's attraction to the young actress Sibyl Vane (a vain portent?) seems to violate the male-identified world in which Basil and Lord Henry have "revealed [Dorian] to himself." Yet, Sibyl's presence can never actually disturb the novel's male logic, for her appearance merely shows how much an overtly heterosexual discourse depends on male-defined representations of female experience. For Dorian, Sibyl exists only in the drama. Offstage, he imbues her with an aesthetic excess, so that her reality never pierces his fantasy. His remarks to Lord Henry

demonstrate that Dorian's passion is the passion of the voyeur, whose desiring gaze distances the viewer from the possibility (necessity?) of physical consummation:

"Tonight she is Imogen," [Dorian] answered, "and tomorrow she will be Juliet."

"When is she Sibyl Vane?"

"Never." (200)

When Dorian impassions Sibyl with a single kiss (the only physical [sexual?] expression that evades his aesthetic voyeurism), her own real passion renders her incapable of making a male-defined representation of female passion "real." Thus she fails to achieve the aesthetic standard he expects of her in the role of Juliet, and Dorian—unable to sustain his heterosexual fantasy—abandons her.¹⁴

This abandonment leads Sibyl to suicide and introduces the disjunction between Dorian and his portrait. Returning home after his final scene with her, Dorian finds the picture changed, marked by "lines of cruelty around his mouth as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing" (240). He senses anew that this representation "held the secret of his life, and told *his story*" (242; my emphasis). Where once the painting had been confined to the atemporality of the aesthetic moment, it now becomes the surface that records the narrative of his life, not only serving as a static reflection of the interiority of his soul but also telling his soul's story. A "magical mirror," it turns Dorian into a "spectator of [his] own life," thus creating a divided consciousness that initiates the remaining action in the novel.

As Dorian realizes the separation between self-representation and self-image, his behavior becomes ominous and degenerate. He enters into a world of self-abuse and destruction, through which he effects the downfall of many innocent men and women, and yet his body shows no sign of these activities. Only the picture—now locked away in an inaccessible room—reveals the depths to which he has descended. For, as the portrait tells his story, it graphically reveals the details of all he does. In time, the portrait's increasing grotesqueness begins to haunt Dorian. His awareness of the terrifying gap between the man whom others see and the representation that only he may view serves as the limit against which he conceives of his existence. He immerses himself in the life of the senses to test the absoluteness of this limit but finds that he cannot

break through it. So long as he remains inscribed within the network of representations—both verbal and visual—that the painting constructs, he can only embody the agonizing dichotomy that it engenders.

Ultimately, seeking to free himself from the images that have ensnared and "destroyed" him, Dorian kills the man who "authored" the "fatal portrait." This murder removes the one person to whom Dorian could impute responsibility for the portrait. The picture, which now also depicts the horror of Basil's death, remains only to remind Dorian of the monstrosity of his life. In the final pages of the novel, Dorian resolves to destroy the image. Standing before it, he faces both the material representation of his existence and the distance between that representation and himself. As he plunges the knife into the canvas that reveals his secret, he rends this disjunction, finally breaking free of its absolute limit. Yet, since the price of this freedom is the destruction of the complex configuration of images that motivate both the character and the narrative, the act that concludes the novel does so only by killing Dorian into art.

As his death brings the interplay between representation and the body full circle, the images that Dorian had reflected through his entry into the male-defined world presented by Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton are once again inscribed on his body. And so, in the end, Dorian's corpse becomes the surface that records his narrative, liberating Dorian in death from the consciousness divided between experience and representation that had marked his life.

Coda: Out of the Theoretical Closet

To the extent that Wilde and contemporaries like him were beginning to articulate strategies to communicate—both to themselves and to others—the experience of homoerotic desire, their texts enact and virtually embody this desire. But since these men were also writing within a larger culture that not only denied but actively prosecuted such embodiments, they were forced to devise ways to mediate their expressions of passion. While in certain uncanonized genres, like pornography and to some extent poetry (e.g., the "Uranian" poets), relatively explicit statements of same-sex eroticism were possible, these statements were still posed in relation to the social norms that enjoined them. Thus, although *Teleny* explicitly represents sexual practices

between men for an audience who either enjoyed or at least sympathized with such practices, it still reinscribes these representations within the (hetero)sexual symbolic order that it sought to interrupt. In a more canonized work, such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the mediations are necessarily more complex. **Wilde's text doubly displaces male homoerotic desire, thematizing it through the aesthetic production of a medium that the novel cannot represent.** Basil's portrait of Dorian can embody his desire for the eponymous character, and yet male homoerotic passion remains, in the dominant representational codes of the period, *peccatum illud horribile non nominandum inter christianos*—or, in a bad paraphrase of Lord Alfred Douglas, a love whose name the text dare not speak. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde problematizes representation per se to move athwart the historical limitations that define male homosexuality as “unnameable,” thereby creating one of the

most lasting icons of male homoerotic desire.

By approaching *Teleny* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as complex cultural artifacts, we recognize them not just as texts but as contexts. For, as Raymond Williams says, “If art is a part of the society, there is no solid whole, outside it, to which by the form of our question, we concede priority” (45). Instead of seeing these literary works as ideological reflections of an already existing reality, we must consider them elements in the production of this reality. In analyzing the textual strategies through which these two novels put male desire for other men into discourse, we begin to understand some of the historical forms that such relations between men took and thereby begin to suggest others that they can take.¹⁵

Stanford University
Stanford, California

Notes

¹ Press reports of the trials note that court attendance was exclusively male. The defendant, the prosecution, all the court officials, as well as the audience and press, were also male; hence all that transpired and all that was reported occurred within an entirely male-defined social space for the benefit of a male public.

² For the theoretical underpinnings of this argument see Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Here Foucault counters the post-Freudian notion that Victorian practice repressed natural sexuality and, instead, considers the positive strategies that enveloped the body within particular historical discursive apparatuses. He suggests that the bourgeoisie's concern with regulating its own sexual practices stemmed not from an interdictive moral ideology but rather from an attempt to define its materiality—its body—as a class:

The emphasis on the body should undoubtedly be linked to the process of growth and establishment of bourgeois hegemony: not, however, because of the market value assumed by labor capacity, but because of what the “cultivation” of its own body could represent politically, economically, and historically for the present and the future of the bourgeoisie. . . . (125–26)

³ That “homosexuality” stood in a negative relation to “heterosexuality” is metaphorically indicated by the term *invert*, which historically preceded *homosexual* and often served as a synonym (see Chauncey for a more precise explanation of these two terms). Since this essay attempts to explore two particular textual negotiations of the emerging heterosexual-homosexual opposition, the use of both these terms here seems anachronistic. Thus, I use them advisedly and often quarantine them between quotation marks to indicate that I am quoting from the larger cultural (con)text in which they have become common-

place. In a recent article Tim Calligan, Bob Connell, and John Lee note the enduring effects of this opposition (587). For details of the development of “the adolescent,” see Ariès; Gillis, *Youth*; Gorham; and Donzelot. On “the criminal,” see Lombroso's *Criminal Man* and *The Female Offender*. Judith Walkowitz details the emergence of “the prostitute.” For “the delinquent” see Foucault, *Discipline*, and Gillis, “Evolution.” On “the homosexual” see Weeks, *Coming Out*; Plummer; Faderman; Katz; and Chauncey.

⁴ The term belongs to Gayle Rubin, who initially defined it as “the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (159).

⁵ For a comprehensive survey of the critical appraisal of Wilde as “decadent” and “dandy,” see Gagnier, especially ch. 2, “Dandies and Gentlemen.”

⁶ I take the concept “interruption” from David Silverman and Brian Torode, who define it as a practice that “seeks not to impose a language of its own but to enter critically into existing linguistic configurations, and to re-open the closed structures into which they have ossified” (6). This notion of interruption as a critical refiguring of ossified linguistic structures—itsself a wonderful metaphor for ideological attempts to petrify historically constructed, hegemonically organized semiotic equivalences into timeless, natural usages—provides an excellent analytical tool for examining subcultural discourses that challenge a dominant culture's monovocalizing practices. I apply it to resistant or counterhegemonic textual strategies that reopen the polyvalence of linguistic practices—here specifically the homoerotic challenge to the conception of heterosexuality as natural.

⁷ This account is paraphrased from Winston Leyland's introduction to the Gay Sunshine reprint of *Teleny*. Leyland takes

most of his information from H. M. Hyde's introduction to the 1966 British edition, which Hyde derives in part from the introduction of a 1934 French translation written by Leonard Hirsch, the London bookseller whose shop was supposedly the transfer point for the various authors.

⁸ This terminology, which is implicit throughout my essay, derives from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. They develop the metaphors of "marking the body" and "recording surfaces of desire" to elaborate the mechanisms through which desire invests somatic experience as well as to consider the ways in which the socius "codes" the body. See especially their part 3, "Savages, Barbarians, Civilized Men."

⁹ For a discussion of these initial apologies for homoerotic behavior see Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out and Sexuality and Its Discontents*. On the body-mind dichotomy in nineteenth-century discourse, see Rosalind Coward.

¹⁰ For a selection of articles showing how the contemporary press responded to *Dorian Gray*, along with Wilde's replies to these criticisms, see Stuart Mason. Later explanations of the relation between Wilde's personal and textual sexuality include G. Wilson Knight's "Christ and Wilde," which attributes Wilde's "perverse pleasures" (138, quoting Wilde's *De Profundis*) to his "mother fixation," to his mother's having "dressed him as a girl until he was nine," and to his "love of flowers and of male and female dress." Knight reads *Dorian Gray* as the "subtlest critique of the Platonic Eros ever penned" (143)—without stooping to textual exegesis—and then justifies Wilde's "homosexual engagements" as "a martyrdom, a crucifixion, a self-exhibition in agony and shame" deriving from both "the instinct . . . to plunge low when disparity between near-integrated self and the community becomes unbearable" and "a genuine liking for the lower orders of society" (144–45). Richard Ellmann informs us that Wilde changes the date of Dorian's murder of Basil Hallward from "the eve of his own thirty-second birthday" in the original Lippincott's version to "the eve of his own thirty-eighth birthday" in the bound edition to mask the reference to his first sexual experience with Robbie Ross, which—according to a mathematical extrapolation from Ross's memoirs—must have occurred during Wilde's thirty-second year (11). Other critical works that acknowledge Wilde's homosexuality without analyzing the "homotextual problematic" include those by Philip Cohen, Jeffrey Meyers, and Christopher Nassaar. Meyers is especially interesting, given his explicit project of examining the homosexual "in" literature, but unfortunately his eclectic methodology quickly descends into the biographical and associational strate-

gies that characterize most criticism on *Dorian Gray*.

¹¹ My use of "double consciousness" derives largely from Jack Winkler's article relating the work of Sappho as a lesbian poet to the public discourse of the Greek polis. Winkler develops a concept reminiscent of W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of the "two-ness" of the Afro-American experience (16–17) to refer to the overdetermined conditions of Sappho's representations. Because of her "double consciousness," Winkler suggests, the marginalized poet can speak and write in the dominant discourse but subvert its monolithic truth claims by recasting them in the light of personal, subcultural experience: "This amounts to a reinterpretation of the kinds of meaning previous claims had, rather than a mere contest of claimants for supremacy in a category whose meaning is agreed upon" (73). Applying this theory of "reinterpretation," I conclude that Wilde repeatedly deals with heterosexual morality to deconstruct its social force through wit and witticism.

¹² On the connections between the construction of male sexual identity, visual eroticism, and desire see Jane Gallop's discussion of French feminist theory. Also see Toril Moi's suggestion, in her discussion of the readings of Freud in the texts of Luce Irigaray, that "the gaze [is] a phallic activity linked to anal desire for the sadistic mastery of the object" (134).

¹³ Gallop connects "phallic suppression" and the evacuation of the body (67).

¹⁴ Many of Sibyl's roles involve her cross-dressing as a boy, which further complicates the problematic construction of heterosexual desire within the novel. For example, playing Rosalind dressed as a boy, she stirs the desire of Orlando, who is saved from the "horror" of this same-sex passion by the underlying premise that the boy is indeed a girl. (Of course, in Shakespearean theater, where boys played the female characters, the complexities were redoubled.) Dorian's remark on Sibyl's "perfection" in boy's clothes and *Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, which argues for the homoerotic inspiration of Shakespeare's sonnets, would both indicate that Wilde intended this resonance.

¹⁵ I wish to express my gratitude to all those who have commented on the numerous successive versions of this article. I especially wish to thank Regenia Gagnier, whose enthusiasm and support have encouraged me to persevere; Mary Pratt, who has taught me by her example that care and concern are the most essential elements of good scholarship; and Mark Frankel, at whose desk in Lytton basement this essay was first begun and to whom it is dedicated.

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