

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE GLASS CLOSET:  
OSCAR WILDE'S PHILOSOPHICAL AESTHETICS AND THE QUEERING OF  
MODERNITY

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## Abstract

What are the aesthetic categories and epistemologies available within modernity? Does shifting one's orientation away from the cultural centers of modernity change the answers? Does it change the question? Is it only proper to shift away from political centers towards their geographic margins, or could an analogous shift be made with respect to social position, namely, to the social margin of the queer? This thesis takes these questions and the broad framework of "marginal modernity," particularly as formulated by Leonardo Lisi, to help answer the question, what difference does Oscar Wilde make? My hypothesis is that Oscar Wilde responds from his position as a queer subject straddling the uniquely discursively charged historical faults of the *fin-de-siècle* to the challenges of modernity by practicing a distinctly queer philosophical aesthetics. I argue that his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is structured according to these aesthetics within what I call, drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the "glass closet." This structure navigates away from the binary options of autonomous aesthetics demanded by aestheticism and fragmentary aesthetics demanded by the avant-garde through a particular usage of intertextual allusion that structures the text as legible across multiple non-identical registers. Ultimately, it is only in relation to the reader and the particular knowledge they bring that the text solidifies as on one or another of its possible manifestations. In *Dorian Gray*, these registers are determined with reference, first, to the works of Plato, and then to the Bible. After describing in more detail the structure of the glass closet, I explore each reading in turn, before finally concluding with a brief meditation of Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and suggesting that Wilde's queer aesthetics at their limit gesture beyond art towards religious faith.

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All art is at once surface and symbol.  
Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.  
Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. (DG 239)

## I. Introduction

I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art...I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram. (DP 1017)

Oscar Wilde wrote in *De Profundis*, his great epistle from Reading Gaol, “I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age” (1017). In what sense is Wilde symbolic of his moment? What difference does Oscar Wilde make? In this thesis, I wish to answer these questions through a careful examination of Wilde’s literary practice and engagement with aestheticism as exemplified in his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.<sup>1</sup> I will argue that the aesthetic structure of the novel is distinctly queer, and that this aesthetic structure, in turn, stands upon a distinctly queer epistemology. Specifically, I will argue that the novel manifests aesthetically the epistemology of what I call, following the influence of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the “glass closet.” That Wilde’s aesthetics are queer and imply a queer philosophical position is a more heterodox proposition than it may at first appear. In proposing and describing Wilde’s queer philosophical aesthetics and aesthetic philosophy, I aim to bring together two dominant and consistently opposed figures of Wilde: Wilde the queer cultural hero and homosexual martyr, and Wilde the innovative, provocative, and yet emblematic figure of *fin-*

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this essay, I am taking the text of *The Uncensored Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Nicholas Frankel, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012 as authoritative. This text is, based on Wilde’s typescripts and the emendations in his own hand, that were submitted for publication by *Lippincott’s Magazine* in 1890. I will not repeat Frankel’s arguments, which I take to be very strong, for the superiority of the text—for that, see his “Textual Introduction,” 35-54. I prefer this text, primarily, for its not being the “expanded” version 1891. The additional material in that version is primarily depictions of heterosexual romance and drug use which obscure—though I do not think by that means contradict—the textual strategies with which I am concerned. All references to *Dorian Gray* will be to the chapters and pagination of this edition.

*de-siècle* aestheticism. In insisting that these two visions of Wilde, rather than opposing one another, inform and determine one another, I hope to show further that Wilde's queering of aestheticism represents a unique solution to modernity taken as a problem or a crisis, one which operates outside the established categories of modernism studies. It is, indeed, a queering of modernity itself. At stake in understanding Wilde's position relative to his age, that is, is our understanding of the expanse of aesthetic and philosophical possibilities present to modernity, and how the queer stands in relation to those possibilities.

This articulation places the thesis between two rival trends in Wilde studies. There is, on the one hand, a large body of work, building particularly upon the interventions of Eve Sedgwick, Linda Dowling, and Jonathan Dollimore in the early 1990s, which attempts to situate and problematize Wilde's relationship to queer discourse. Readings like theirs, in turn deeply indebted to Michel Foucault's work in *The History of Sexuality*, place Wilde against the backdrop of a late Victorian moment which represents the "sudden, radical condensation of sexual categories" along the "homo/heterosexual" binary (*Epistemology* 9). These theorists have powerfully argued that it is, moreover, precisely the "Wilde catastrophe" as Dowling calls it (134)—that is, Wilde's extraordinarily public trial and conviction on charges of sodomy under the Labouchere Amendment of 1885—which is the "moment of cultural discontinuity or rupture" at hand in Sedgwick's analysis (*Epistemology* 2). Taken as an established figure for a particularly discursively dense historical moment—"a largely empty, almost arbitrary name onto which law and journalism, medicine and theology, prejudice and ignorances would so ceaselessly project their theories and loathing and fears" (Dowling 153)—cultural historians and queer theorists have attempted to reclaim Wilde such that he may be "audible once again as a cultural hero rather than

merely a homosexual martyr” (*ibid.*). Without necessarily following the readings these theorists offer fully, I take their broader project as, to use a Sedgwickian turn of phrase, axiomatic

Against the backdrop of these powerful historical narratives has emerged a distinct interpretation movement similarly determined to reclaim Wilde as an active and productive historical figure in his own right. Specifically, a number of readers have attempted to reclaim Wilde as a significant philosophical figure within a tradition of idealism and aestheticism “that stretches from Kant and Schiller, through Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, to the preeminent cosmopolitan artist-critics of this [the twentieth] century, Benjamin and Adorno” (Brown xviii). Reaching its fullest expression in Julia Prewitt Brown’s *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde’s Philosophy of Art*—the only book-length study of Oscar Wilde to date<sup>2</sup>—this movement has drawn inspiration especially from the 1989 publication of the *Oxford Notebooks*, which demonstrated for a wide readership the, to many, surprising extent of Wilde’s engagement with philosophical work, Classical, British, and Continental. While Brown herself duly emphasizes that such an assessment of Wilde as philosophically important has deep historical precedent in figures as prominent and diverse as André Gide, George Bernard Shaw, and Thomas Mann (xiin1)—not to mention her own favorite reference point, Walter Benjamin (77n14)—the *Oxford Notebooks* philosophical reassessment of Wilde is distinctive in its insistence on distinguishing Wilde the philosopher from Wilde the homosexual. In order to argue that “Oscar Wilde’s most important but also...most elusive legacy” is “his philosophy of art” (Brown xiii), such readings stress Wilde’s philosophical productivity as distinct from his queerness. Brown, in fact, concedes Wilde’s queerness only as a contingent effect of his philosophical-aesthetic endeavors chosen for

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<sup>2</sup> *Philosophy and Oscar Wilde*, edited by Michael Y. Bennett, is, at the time of writing this thesis, still forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan. When published, it will be the first collection of essays dedicated solely to Oscar Wilde and philosophy.

its transgressive value.<sup>3</sup> Wilde is in this philosophical reassessment desexualized for the sake of intellectualizing, a questionable move at best.

The binary opposition that here appears between Oscar Wilde the cultural hero of queer history and Oscar Wilde the de-sexualized aesthetic philosopher, heir to and critic of both Victorian criticism and German Idealism, is, I believe, both unnecessary and fundamentally harmful to a complete understanding of Wilde. I wish to propose, rather, a vision of Wilde in which the dilemma of philosopher and queer is resolved such that one can see how the one and the other determine each other against the backdrop of his uniquely discursively charged historic moment. To do so I will, first, describe the particular aesthetic structure of the “glass closet” I gestured to above as a queer refusal to opposed strategies of aesthetic organization, autonomy and fragmentation. Second, I will frame this strategy against modernity taken as a crisis or problem. Finally, I will outline the structure of the rest of the thesis.

#### A. The Epistemology and Aesthetics of the Glass Closet

Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with and in relation to them within over-all strategies...There is not one but many silences. (Foucault 27)

I understand Oscar Wilde’s aesthetics, in their queering of the standards and underlying epistemological assumptions presented by his moment, as navigating between two normative models. To fully unpack this situation would require a deeper historical analysis, which I will reserve for the next subsection. Briefly, however, the normative aesthetic models available to

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<sup>3</sup> For Brown’s brief and perplexing analysis of Wilde’s “incipient homosexuality,” see Brown 10-16. Most prominently, Brown flagrantly misappropriates Linda Dowling’s research in *Hellenism and Homosexuality* to insist that Wilde’s homosexuality was a performative imitation of a Platonic ideal of spiritual love (15).

Wilde and to which I understand his aesthetics to represent a queer challenge, are the “aesthetics of autonomy” and the “aesthetics of fragmentation.” Both models arise as distinctly modernist strategies for organizing artworks, and are determined relative to one another. Within the aesthetics of autonomy, often associated with “modernism” generally but here associated more particularly with “aestheticism,” the artwork is taken as an organically organized, self-delimited whole. Leonardo Lisi helpfully directs his readers to the articulation of “*integritas*” in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as exemplary of these aesthetics(2):

But, temporal or spatial, the esthetic image is first luminously apprehended as self-bounded and selfcontained upon the immeasurable background of space or time which is not it. You apprehend it as one thing. You see it as one whole. You apprehend its wholeness. (230)

In opposition, the aesthetics of fragmentation posit the artwork as inorganic, composed of parts that do not come together to form a coherent whole. Underlying the former is a conception of truth and experience indebted to Kantian transcendental idealism and insistence upon an autonomous subject; underlying the latter is

an important shift in the normative assumption of the nature of experience...from one that views it as containing positive necessary relations between representations, to another that can allow only for negative and anarchic differentiation between terms. (Lisi 24)

If Wilde’s queer aesthetics are to represent a challenge and alternative to these normative aesthetic models and their underlying epistemologies, they must escape the binary of positing *either* coherence *or* incoherence, of the artwork or of the subject and their world. That is, Wilde’s aesthetics must be shown somehow to determine a text which, while not organized



organically as an aestheticist text would be, is not therefore disorganized, as an avant-gardes text would be.<sup>4</sup>

Representing how Wilde's aesthetics do or do not subvert this binary would, ideally, entail an expansive structural analysis of his *œuvre*. Such a broad project would, however, be well beyond the scope of this thesis. Rather, I propose instead to follow Eve Sedgwick's lead in *Epistemology of the Closet*, where she suggests that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is "a perfect rhetorical distillation of the open secret, the glass closet" (165). Like her, I take the novel as my exemplar of Wilde's queer aesthetics. While Sedgwick doesn't seem to have in mind quite the same network of philosophico-aesthetic and historic questions as I do, her analysis of *Dorian Gray* on the grounds of an "epistemology of the closet" nonetheless points directly to my thesis, that *Dorian Gray*'s queer aesthetics is at once a queer epistemology.

As Josephine Guy and Ian Small have argued, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,

derives its suggestive power not from any simple expressive transparency, but rather its opposite—a highly contrived and self-consciously 'literary' style which alternately suggests and insinuates by allusion...It follows that the most fruitful way of unlocking the novel's subversive secrets is...by patiently explaining Wilde's allusions, and spelling out the values which they encode. (193)

As they argue it, this reorientation to the text of *Dorian Gray* away from the life of Oscar Wilde invites a marginalization of the queer within the work, relegating it to a theme rather than the organizing principle it is for Sedgwick. I intend in this thesis to show that, while the methodology Guy and Small advocate is entirely correct, it is precisely the "suggestive power" and lack of "expressive transparency" which marks the text as aesthetically queer. That is, if we take note of the techniques of allusion central to Wilde's novel and perform "an analysis of the

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<sup>4</sup> This articulation of the aesthetics of autonomy and the aesthetics of fragmentation as opposed categories dependent upon opposed epistemologies draws strongly on the framework offered by Leonardo Lisi, see particularly 1-6 and 23-40.

function of those techniques in an aesthetic whole” (Lisi 3), we will find that the epistemological structures implied by the aesthetic structure align closely with those identified by Sedgwick as the “glass closet” or “open secret.”

Two tasks of immediately at hand. First, to articulate, with Sedgwick, what the structure of the glass closet might be. Second, to outline how an aesthetics grounded upon such an epistemology would function as transcending the aesthetics of autonomy/aestheticism without positing their dialectical negation in the aesthetics of fragmentation/the avant-gardes.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick draws our attention to Michel Foucault’s articulation of the discursive power of silence as grounding her own project:

in the vicinity of the closet, even what *counts* as a speech act is problematized on a perfectly routine basis. As Foucault says: “there is no binary division between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things.... There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.” (3; emphasis original)

She goes on to describe the closet as a “performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence” (*ibid.*) While Sedgwick does not proceed to articulate precisely the epistemological structure of this silent performance—it is an irony of *Epistemology* that it broadly outlines yet never articulates an actual epistemology—she points to a sense in which the gay male or queer subject relates to their world through a series unresolved and unresolvable—or only contingently resolvable—truth valuations. The post-Victorian sexual regime under which we live, and which takes hold in the generation of Oscar Wilde, is marked by a “pointed cognitive *refusal* of sexuality between women, between men” (73; emphasis original). In the interface between queer subject and world, the content of that subject’s identity is not made invisible, but rather made visible as invisible. It is admitted, even declared, only through its refusal to declare. The glass

closet is the fullest manifestation of this epistemological structure, in which the truth of the subject is acknowledged precisely through the silence which accrues around them.

This structure will be articulated as an irresolvable liminality between a singular, autonomous subject and a multiple, fragmentary subject constituted through speech acts of silence arising from a social injunction to such silence. The subject is resolvable in this position as neither, but is rather held in a suspension between them. It is, finally, a determinate indetermination, made determinate through reference to an external other who, through their act of silent naming both brings the subject's indeterminacy forward and determines it as such. To unpack what I mean by this, I will articulate here how such a structure arises for the queer subject over three distinct moments.

To begin, the queer subject is taken as autonomous. In the first moment, however, that autonomy is destabilized, and the fragmentary, bifurcated subject of the closet is determined. From the social injunction to silence surrounding homosexuality, a division between the public self and the private self of the queer subject emerges. This is the liminality of the closet, between hidden and exposed version of the same subject. In the second moment, this distinction becomes reflected *within* the queer subject, as they become incoherent to themselves. Within the epistemology subtending the aesthetics of autonomy—which is negated for the bifurcated subject of the closet—the Hölderlinian statement “I am I,” “expresses the most certain form of identity that we possess” (Lisi 37). Like a Cartesian clear and distinct perception, the truth of Hölderlin's “I am I” is both irresistible and certain. For the queer subject, to the contrary, “I am I” is an incoherent statement. The meaning of the sentence is entirely uncertain, as the reference point “I” becomes indeterminately diffuse. The closeted subject cannot state “I am I” without clarifying: Which “I” is which “I”? Am “I” my public or private self? Is there, perhaps, even a

third “I,” which “is” the “private I,” or perhaps the “public I”? The “I” which is the object of the sentence becomes indeterminate, and in turn, so does the “I” which is the subject of the sentence.

Now, in the third moment, the originating performative silence which produces the queer subject to begin with returns to name the subject as queer. Still beholden to the social discursive refusal of the queer, the other cannot explicitly name the closeted subject as queer. Even so, performative silence is discursively powerful. On the one hand, this return of the naming silence renders the queer subject coherent, as the system of relations which determines their pseudo-schizoid fragmentation of identity is itself made visible and delimited in the eye of the beholder. On the other, what is acknowledged is by the same motion refused, as the acknowledgement is a silent one. A fourth dialectical moment would seem here to threaten. It seems possible that the queer subject might become caught in a loop, returning to the fragmentation of the second moment. An Hegelian bad infinity looms, as the subject, at every moment they appear to cohere, appears to be automatically subjected once again to a fragmenting motion.

This would be a repetition *without* difference, the progression from active silence to fragmentation simply repeated. The return of the closeted subject to the social other who acknowledges them with silence is, however, a repetition *with* difference. The queer subject standing in the third moment is not constituted in the same manner as when standing in the first moment. There is no simple repetition, and as such no repetition of the reflective fragmentation of the second moment. Rather, constituted in and addressed by the other, the dialectical negation of the subject is forestalled. The subject is by no means returned to themselves, reinstated as an autonomous identity. Yet, in being acknowledged as closeted, they likewise cannot resolve to simple fragmentation. The constant social injunction to name the queer through the very discursive act of silence means that the queer subject is always being called forward as queer.

Whether by the actual presence of another subject or by the mere fact of sociality, the queer subject is always undergoing the dialectical motion from the second moment of internally reflective fragmentation to the third moment of determinate indetermination before the other. The ambiguity of silent naming determines this ambiguous position of the queer subject, irresolvable either to the organic coherence of the autonomous subject or the incoherence of the fragmentary subject.

Essential to this epistemological structure is the dependence of the subject on the other for particular determination. There are, to be precise, three possible positions relative to the closeted subject. In the first instance, the queer subject is confronted by an other that is entirely ignorant. They have none of the prior knowledge or understanding to recognize that the queer subject is closeted, and takes the public self of the queer subject as it is given. Relative to this other, the queer subject appears to be autonomous, even if relative to themselves the queer subject is fragmented by the closet door. In the second instance, the queer subject is confronted by a partially cognizant other. This other is aware enough to recognize an incoherence in the superficial, public self of the closeted subject, but brings to bear insufficient knowledge. They cannot perceive the structure of the closet internal to the queer subject, and therefore cannot secure the relative coherence of that subject of themselves. Relative to this other, the queer subject appears merely fragmentary. In the third instance, the queer subject is confronted by a fully cognizant other. This other is able fully to fully perceive the homoerotic subtext of the silences which surround the queer subject, and name that subject as queer. Relative to this other, the closeted subject does not have an internal, organic coherence. Rather, they appear to occupy a glass closet: on their own terms indeterminate, yet in relation to the knowing other coherent in that indeterminacy.

Aesthetically, a text structured in terms of the glass closet would stand similarly as determinate in its own indetermination as n/either fragmentary n/or autonomous. Such a text would, further, be open to manifesting three different apparent aesthetic structures according to three different readers, one fully ignorant, one partly cognizant, and one in full possession of the necessary prior knowledge to constitute the text as a glass closet. In the particular case of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I will argue that the novel is constituted structurally though a system of literary allusions—that is, performative silences—which place the reader in a determinative position with respect to the aesthetic significance of the text. Wilde’s use of intertextual allusions, I will argue, render the text legible according to multiple, distinct hermeneutic registers producing non-identical texts. These registers, in turn, unfold progressively in accordance with the degree of cognizance the reader brings to the text. Nonetheless, this unfolding is not predicated upon a demand at any point internal to the readings; one register does not demand its negation in the next. Rather, it is entirely dependent on the given reader and the content of the knowledge that reader brings to the text to determine which version of the text and which aesthetic structure solidifies.

In the first place, this is manifest with relation to the queerness of the text: there will be readers for whom the text is coherent without any insinuation of homoerotic subtext, readers for whom the text is clearly queer, and readers in between for whom the text, while not cohering as queer, does not cohere with itself.<sup>5</sup> In the second place, for readers cognizant of the queer text, the garden scenes which open the text become legible as seduction. In turn, a set of those readers bringing with them the necessary external knowledge, the garden reads as an allusion to the

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<sup>5</sup> For a thorough account of the reception of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a “non-homosexual” text and argument for the possibility of reading the text productively without any reference whatsoever to Dorian Gray’s homosexuality, see Guy and Small, 31-39.

sacred grove sacred grove in which Socrates seduces Phaedrus into philosophy. From this, an entire, “Platonic” reading of the novel takes shape. In turn again, for a smaller set of readers with yet more epistemic privilege, the garden becomes legible as an allusion to the Garden of Eden in which the serpent seduces Adam and Eve to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Oriented in this way, a “Biblical” reading of the novel takes shape in which every feature of the Platonic reading is retranslated from philosophy to theology. This final position, only available by passage through all previous positions, is clearly privileged. Nonetheless, this privilege does not negate the previous readings as possible. As with the subject within the glass closet, there may be one perspective which yields the fullest truth, yet this does not mean it is the only truth.

The strategy of allusion to the *loci classici* of the Western canon unavoidably calls to mind the prolific use of intertextuality in such prototypical modernist authors as James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound. Eliot himself referred to this as the “mythical method,” and located it within the Irish modernist tradition, most prominently in Joyce but with antecedents in William Butler Yeats. One exceptionally insightful reader of Wilde I will turn to later in the thesis, John Paul Riquelme, takes note of this lineage and suggests *The Picture of Dorian Gray* may be taken as the origination of the “mythical method” in literary high modernism (617). I want to insist, however, on an important distinction between Wilde’s technique and the more general practices of intertextuality employed by later modernists. While they may have learned—directly or indirectly—this “mythical method” from Wilde, authors like Joyce, Eliot, and Pound employ intertextuality in the service of very different aesthetic ends. In the case of, e.g., *The Waste Land*, the literary allusions call attention to themselves. One cannot read *The Waste Land* without being aware of the poem’s constant reference to other texts—even if one has no idea what the references are. Wilde’s allusions function entirely differently. The allusions in Wilde are evasive and often

entirely unstated; they are available only to the reader for whom the references are intimately familiar. The allusions within *Dorian Gray* do not thrust themselves upon the reader, either as impediments or as a key to disentangling the text, but rather invite the attention of the reader who is aware of their significance while allow the reader who is not so aware to continue on their way unperturbed. As such, whereas the only possibility of accounting for sense in a text like *The Waste Land* is a careful elucidation of each and every allusion, with *Dorian Gray* it is up to the intervention of the reader, and dependent upon the degree of their particular epistemic privilege, whether some, all, or none of the allusions come into play.

Guy and Small are correct that “the most fruitful way of unlocking the novel’s subversive secrets is...by patiently explaining Wilde’s allusions, and spelling out the values which they encode” (193), but they are only correct that this is the *most* fruitful approach. The fullest possible reading of the novel may be available only with respect to reader for whom the novel is a glass closet, but the novel does not itself demand such a reading. Oscar Wilde writes in the preface to *Dorian Gray*, “All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril” (239). I believe this is what Wilde had in mind, that the novel is at once what it is on its surface, and what it is when one reads its allusion. To remain at the surface or to go below it, to ignore the symbols or to read them, is entirely up to the reader. Wilde will not absolve the reader of that final responsibility to determine the significance of the text which he has constituted as, in itself, indeterminate: “It is the spectator, and not life, that are really mirrors” (*ibid.*). It is only in the encounter between the text and what the reader demands of it that the novel takes shape.



## B. Modernity as an Aesthetic and Philosophical Problem

Dandyism is the assertion of the absolute modernity of Beauty. (“Maxims” 1242)

In understanding Oscar Wilde’s significance as a queer intervention in philosophical aesthetics—and aesthetic philosophy—at a particular moment in the history of modernity, three principal problematics are brought to bear: 1. “modernity” as such as a problem or crisis; 2. Oscar Wilde’s particular moment relative to the historical unfolding of that problem; 3. Oscar Wilde’s relationship as queer to that problem. I will attempt here to treat these three points as systematically as possible.

That modernity may be conceived of as a “problem” or in “crisis” is hardly innovative. It belongs, rather, to the discourse of modernity itself. Robert Pippin very helpfully and thoroughly elucidates the contours of that crisis, both for philosophy as a discipline and the arts, in his *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*. Therein, Pippin proposes that “modernity” aggregates philosophically and aesthetically around the positing of subjective autonomy, and the positing of that autonomy *as a problem* (3). That modernity is an issue of autonomy is itself, again, hardly innovative; to quote Lisi, “Whatever else there might be disagreement about with respect to modernism, a consensus exists that ‘autonomy’ is central to it” (Lisi 1). What Pippin does offer that is different is an understanding which, through a hermeneutic shift that centers the historical progression of the autonomy problem on its philosophical manifestations, takes modernism to be a wrestling with the *disatisfaction* of the grounds of autonomy. Modernism is not a particular solution to the positing of autonomy, it is itself the positing of autonomy as a problem. A problem, that is, both of the positive attempt to articulate a subject and artwork which is the grounds of its own justification, and the negative dissatisfaction which arises in the face of all such attempts.

In establishing dissatisfaction with grounds of autonomy as inherent to modernism as a movement, Pippin aims to defang “postmodernism,” his catch-all for critical attempts to undermine the Enlightenment and German Idealist projects. Their dissatisfaction with modernity is, in Pippin’s genealogy, “largely repetitive” (xi). Specifically, it is largely repetitive of “widespread nineteenth-century suspicions” (xii), which culminate in Oscar Wilde’s near-exact contemporary, Friedrich Nietzsche. As much as the crisis of modernity, then, is coeval with modernity itself, it reaches its peak precisely in the *fin-de-siècle* moment shared by Nietzsche and Wilde. While Pippin traces the genealogy of the problem to Nietzsche, he does not elaborate why this particular moment, understood in the terms of intellectual history, should be so productively challenging for modernity.<sup>6</sup>

Marxist historian Peter Bürger however, helpfully elucidates precisely the significance of this moment for a history of aesthetics. In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger frames modernism within aesthetics as the progressive historical assertion of the autonomy of art within society beginning with the Renaissance and culminating in “Aestheticism” (47-49). It is in aestheticism as the absolute assertion of the autonomy of art such that art becomes its own subject matter, that the “historical dynamics” to which “art” as a praxis and an institution have been subjected reach their “terminal point” (49). That is, in aestheticism we find the historical terminus and absolute assertion of the principle of autonomy. What follows dialectically from

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Dollimore proposes a very similar framework for considering modernity in his *Sexual Dissidence*, published in the same year as Pippin’s *Modernism*. Approaching the problem of modernity from within the then only burgeoning field of queer theory—Sedgwick’s *Epistemology* and Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* were published only one year prior—Dollimore writes, in language strongly evocative of Pippin, “Theories of the post-modern are typically premised on either a simplified conception of the modern, or a suspect retrospective reconstruction of it. The more adequate the history of the diverse modernisms, the less plausible is the representation of the post-modern as a break into the radically new or different” (22). In his motivation to pluralize modernism, Dollimore’s framework is in fact closer to my own than is Pippin’s. What Pippin offers that makes him particularly productive, however, is his formulation of modernity as a *philosophical* problem, and the precise genealogy he offers of that problem, culminating in the generation of Wilde.

aestheticism in Bürger's account is the avant-garde, which opposes formally the principle of the fragment to that of organic autonomous unity (69), and which opposes functionally—in order to reject the autonomy of art from life absolutely—the distinct institution of art as such (49). This move constitutes a “break in the development of art” and an “historical discontinuity” which radically shifts the grounds of all theoretical analysis of aesthetics (88). The transition from aestheticism to the avant-garde is therefore, following Bürger, the single most important moment in aesthetic history between the Renaissance and the present. This moment at the end of the nineteenth century when a fulcrum appears between the fulfillment of autonomy in aestheticism and its utter rejection in the avant-garde, is precisely the moment into which Oscar Wilde enters.

Julia Prewitt Brown strikes a similar note when she attempts to disassociate Wilde's aestheticism from that of Walter Pater and the Pre-Raphaelites (xvii-xviii). As she articulates it, “Wilde was never an *absolute* aesthete” (60-61; emphasis original). Rather, he was always “conscious of the limitations of *l'art pour l'art*” (61). Indeed, the main thrust of her reading is to argue that Wilde's most substantial contribution to philosophical aesthetics is the development of an “ethical aesthetic” (51), that is to say, of an aestheticism in which a productive dialectic of “Life” and “Art” recognizing their paradoxical mutual exclusion and mutual dependence is maintained. This would be an aestheticism that attempts to move beyond the unsustainable absolute autonomy of the “Aestheticism” defined by Peter Bürger without yet resolving into the fragmentation of the *avant-garde*, as he defines it. Without adopting Brown's analysis *per se*, we may adopt this conclusion, that Wilde's project from its beginning is not, as many continue to believe, mere aestheticism. Wilde's work engages, rather, in a radical reappraisal of the project

of aestheticism and attempts to define a new position beyond its horizon without yet abandoning its promise of a way out of the crisis of meaning in modernity.

While not framing the issue quite as I have, Brown does recognize the historical significance of this project and Wilde's historical moment. Comparing Wilde to Nietzsche, Brown elaborates:

Wilde stood at a point in history on which all the contradictory influences of the nineteenth century were brought to bear, and he was as conscious of representing this position as his contemporary on the continent was, to whom he was compared by both Gide and Thomas Mann. In fact, Wilde and Nietzsche inherited the same situation in philosophy: what earlier in the century Engels had called the 'despair of reason,' its confessed inability to solve contradictions with which it is ultimately faced. (57-58)

There is, in other words, in this moment shared by Nietzsche and Wilde, the coming to maturity of the problem of modernity as the problem of aestheticism. To quote Wilde himself, "Dandyism is assertion of the absolute modernity of Beauty" ("Maxims" 1242). Without necessarily conceding to Bürger that aestheticism represents the terminus of the history of aesthetics, it is possible to agree with him that aestheticism is a climaxing of a particular socio-political and philosophico-aesthetic trend towards the assertion of the absolute autonomy of art and the subject. It is an "historical rupture" within the history of aesthetics, one I do not believe merely coincidentally simultaneous with "moment of cultural discontinuity or rupture" Sedgwick associates with the emergences of queer identities and contemporary post-Victorian sexual discourse (*Epistemology* 2). That is, we can understand Wilde, insofar as he pushes the boundaries of aestheticism towards the point of transcending them—without resorting thereby to the dialectical negation of aestheticism that would in following generations arrive with the avant-gardes—as precariously straddling a philosophico-historical fault line.

How might Oscar Wilde's *difference* in how he straddles this fault line—relative, say, to a Nietzsche—be understood? This is the question here at stake; it is one thing to describe the

significance of a moment, another to describe significance of a figure within that moment. In this, I am indebted to the hermeneutic strategies outlined by Leonardo Lisi's *Marginal Modernity*. Lisi suggests therein that critics of the modern reorient themselves from the "center" to the "margins of modernity." Namely, he suggests the redirection of attention from the geographic center of the canon of literary modernity in France, Germany, and England to its European peripheries in order to identify alternative aesthetic responses to modernity which operate outside the traditional modernist/avant-garde binary of autonomous and fragmented aesthetics, and the underlying philosophical commitments to autonomous and fragmentary subjectivities. Lisi notes that the "very neatness" of the dichotomous construction of autonomous and fragmentary aesthetics is, "for all its prevalence," "suspicious" (1). Proposing that if "the autonomy of modernism and the fragmentation of the avant-gardes are responses to the transformations of modernity in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, then surely alternative aesthetic structures must be possible, unless these two responses are somehow all-exhaustive" (1), he directs his readers to the Scandinavian margin to identify such an alternative aesthetic structure in the writing of Henrik Ibsen and Søren Kierkegaard. The structurally analogous move I propose here is a reorientation to the internally described social margin of modernity that is the queer. From this perspective, I aim to show that in pushing through and past the limits of aestheticism and the modernist aesthetic of autonomy, Wilde offers just such an alternative aesthetic structure in the glass closet, one whose strategies navigate the challenges of modernity in an identifiably and specifically queer way.

This hermeneutic strategy offers two intertwined, immediately apparent benefits in approaching Oscar Wilde. First, Lisi's methodology "grounds its discussion in a reconstruction of the philosophical issues underlying the aesthetic categories that we use" (7). That is to say,

Lisi directs us to the philosophical substantiality of choices made with respect to aesthetic structure, an essential hermeneutic orientation if we are with loyalty to the text to read a figure who writes in all sincerity, “I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art” (*DP* 1017). While it is a later passage from *De Profundis* that is more widely admired—“while Metaphysics had but little real interest for me, and Morality absolutely none, there was nothing that either Plato or Christ had said that could not be transferred immediately into the sphere of Art, and there find its fulfillment” (1027)—it is this assertion of the mutual transformation of art and philosophy in his work that is more accurately expressive of Wilde’s program and commitments. Wilde attempts in every aesthetic choice to realize a philosophical project, and in every philosophical project to realize particular aesthetic commitments. As such, reading Wilde philosophically demands close aesthetic analysis, as much as an aesthetic analysis must be attuned to the philosophical principles informing it. Peculiarly, while Wilde’s uniquely prodigious genre-bending is well acknowledged by essentially all of his critics, none, including Julia Prewitt Brown, actually perform the attention to aesthetics and aesthetic structure as philosophical praxis that Wilde’s entirely translucent self-analysis demands.

Second, Lisi’s methodology orients us to the philosophical valances of socio-historic categories. Specifically, if it is true that “the aesthetics of dependency” as a strategy is “the outcome of the reception of German idealist aesthetics at the periphery of European culture, where it was able to develop and succeed largely because it emerged under a different perspective on the problems of modernity” (8-9), then perhaps it is true that Wildean aesthetics and their strategy of negotiating the problematic of modernity, are the outcome of a queer perspective, or even a queer epistemology. If the connection I have suggested above between a queer epistemology and a queer aesthetic structure under the terms of the glass closet holds, then

a strong bridge will have been established between the queer and the philosophical commitments implicit in Wilde's aesthetic choices. That is to say, the queer can be determined as a *philosophical* category in this way.<sup>7</sup>

Before proceeding, however, we must address a potentially intractable problem that arises in attempting to transcribe Lisi's reorientation to the margins from the geopolitical to the sexual. Namely, the queer as a category inherently problematizes the very notions of center and margin. If the queer is constituted as marginal, it is only as the margin which defines the center, a point well and thoroughly argued by a long line of theorists from Michel Foucault to the present. This does not necessarily imply, however, that the queer, once posited as marginal, dissolves immediately into the center. Rather, it is that the center is conditioned upon the positing of the margin, and in turn that an analysis of the margin must inform us in some way of the structures of the center. Indeed, Eve Sedgwick's radical hypothesis is precisely that it is the liminal structures of the queer imaginary which centrally structure modernity (1, 33-34). Queer epistemology or, in Sedgwickian terms, the epistemology of the closet and the imaginary which attends it, should not, it is true, be understood as marginal to modernity in the way that the Scandinavian imaginary is. Rather, queer marginality should be understood as determinative of, not contingent

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<sup>7</sup> There is a strong parallel between the project I am outlining here and that outlined by Heather Love in her essay, "Forced Exile: Walter Pater's Backward Modernism," published in her collection *Feeling Backward*. Situating herself, similarly to Lisi, within a "drive to the margins" of modernist studies, Love frames her critique of Walter Pater's modernism in terms of critical race theorist Clyde Taylor's suggestion that "we think of all modernism as a response to the experience of alienation and exclusion" (55). However, where Taylor, draws a functional identity between the marginalizing experience of African American and European modernists of the early twentieth-century, Love insists upon the "important differences between structural forms of domination and a generalized alienation" and demands "attention to the specific forms of exclusion" (*ibid.*). In a move strongly resonant with mine, she suggests directing our attention to the specificity of Walter Pater's marginalization as a queer subject in order to determine "a link between his aesthetics of failure and his experience of bearing a marginalized sexual identity" (56). I find her model, while clearly productive and deeply sympathetic, however, fundamentally flawed. Namely, "modernism," while remaining somewhat obscure with Love, seems with her to mean precisely what I am calling with Peter Bürger the "avant-garde," that is, the twentieth-century movement towards fragmentation in aesthetics. That is to say, what appears as one possible solution for modernism as a problem of autonomy within the theorists I have considered, appears with Love as modernity itself. This fully obscures the historical and philosophico-aesthetic problematic I believe to be at work.

upon, the center, and therefore, perhaps, uniquely informative of the center.<sup>8</sup> As such, it is of absolute importance to bear in mind that the hermeneutic move here is analogous to but by no means identical with that suggested by Lisi.

### C. The Program of the Thesis

In order to elaborate precisely how the *The Picture of Dorian Gray* enacts the queer aesthetic structure I am proposing, the body of the thesis which follows is divided in four sections. In the first of these, Section II, I apply the glass closet to the opening pages of the novel. I do this for two reasons. First, in order to flesh out with a concrete and manageable example the still very abstract categories I have articulated, and second, because I understand the opening pages—really, the opening paragraphs—to contain within them already the full aesthetic dynamics of the novel. In particular, I will show a relationship between the opening paragraphs, which I read as functionally a distinct prose poem in themselves, and the epistemology of Basil Hallward. In the second of these, Section III, I first establish the garden scene of Chapter Two in which Dorian Gray is philosophically seduced by Lord Henry as the centrally important moment to the novel, before articulating the allusions to Plato I see at work in this scene and throughout the novel. This allows me to develop a “Platonic” reading of the novel, one that operates constitutes—fittingly—a philosophical dialogue with Greek author. This section is the longest and meatiest of the thesis. In Section IV, having done most of the necessary leg-work unpacking the text in Section III, I transpose the garden of Dorian Gray’s philosophical seduction by Lord

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<sup>8</sup> Beyond obscuring the historical and philosophico-aesthetic problematic, it is this move that Heather Love unfortunately does not make. While she rightly insists upon attending to the specificity of the queer margin, she treats that specificity as being qualitatively akin to any other specific margin, e.g. the African American or the Scandinavian. In this sense Love is again, despite what is in itself an original and compelling reading of Walter Pater’s marginal queer aesthetic, less helpful to the aim of this thesis than might be hoped.



Henry, which in Section III read as the sacred grove in which Phaedrus is seduced by Socrates, to a Biblical context, where it may be read as the Garden of Eden in which the serpent seduces Adam and Eve with the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This transposition allows me to unpack the philosophical dialogue as having a theological significance one which, however, I will argue Wilde refuses to resolve. This is in keeping with the queer aesthetics of the novel and, indeed, while I will argue that even in this final, Biblical register the novel is structured according to the determinate indeterminacy of the glass closet, Wilde gestures towards a further, Christian epistemological position and aesthetics not made available in *Dorian Gray*. This brings me, finally, to Section V, in which I offer a brief meditation on Wilde's final published work, the scandalously underappreciated *Ballad of Reading Gaol*. I suggest that the possibilities left open and unanswered in the final gesture of *Dorian Gray* are responded to, if not necessarily answered, in the author's final poem through an invocation of a theology of the broken heart.

## II. The Glass Closet in Miniature

Likewise with pictures seen from too far or too near. And there is only one indivisible point which is the correct place. The others are too near, too far, too high, or too low. Perspective determines in the art of painting, but in truth and in morality, who will determine it? (Pascal S56/L21)<sup>9</sup>

The opening paragraphs of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contain already the aesthetic motifs, techniques, and ultimately structure of the novel. John Paul Riquelme, in his closely allied analysis of the novel in terms of “literary chiaroscuro,” makes much the same point (617-618). These paragraphs, which read less like narrative prose and more like a highly lyricized prose poem in the French Symbolist tradition, function both to establish the particular aesthetic strategies of the novel, and to establish the text as emerging from the project of aestheticism. They establish the novel as inviting a reader for whom, “Like Gautier... ‘the visible world existed’” (DG 160). Before moving on to the analysis of the structure of the novel as a whole in terms of the alternating intertextual appropriation of Greek and Biblical inheritance I suggested in the introduction, I will here briefly read these paragraphs as doing in miniature the work of the novel.

While the novel begins by establishing the setting—not unusual, especially for an author so accomplished as a dramatist—Oscar Wilde begins, notably, not with the visual, but with scent:

The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn. (57)

This is only then synaesthetically interwoven, first with taste (“honey-sweet”) and then with sight (“honey-coloured”) and finally touch (“tussore-silk”):

From the corner of the divan of Persian saddle-bags on which he was lying, smoking, as usual, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of the laburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flame-like as theirs; and now and

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<sup>9</sup> The “S” number stands for the Sellier edition and the “L” for the Lafuma edition; my translation.

then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of Japanese effect, and making him think of those pallid jade-face painters who, in an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion. (*ibid.*)

Here Wilde moves sensually from the most ephemeral to the most determinable of the senses, from that sense, scent, which most refuses determination, to sight, which allows the greatest degree of discursive articulation. However, this progression determines the latter senses always in terms of the former. “Honey-sweet” is a description of the scent of the laburnum flower, and the golden color of the flower is itself described in terms of the honey which is sweet. Rather than concrete and localized, the studio, “filled with the rich odour” and seen by the reader only through the smoke of Lord Henry’s “innumerable cigarettes”—his, the reader finds out no much later, “opium tainted” cigarettes (58)—is rendered ephemeral. Scent, as a sense, especially the overwhelming scent which fills a room rather than the evasive scent caught off the perfume of a passerby, is both sensed as immediately at hand yet unable to be localized and grasped. “Burdened” by perfume and smoke, this is an aesthetic of inaction and stillness.

In the second half of the sentence just quoted, separated only by a semicolon, Wilde immediately contrasts the heavy stillness of scent with “the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitting.” These shadows, however, do not for Lord Henry—who has shifted rapidly and seamlessly from an object within the image of the studio to the stand-in for the reader, through whom the studio is described—constitute a successful disruption of the aesthetic of stillness. Rather, their shadows piercing the studio from outside create a “momentary Japanese effect” which “in an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion.” Not a disruption of the stillness, its transformation into motion, but a tension between the stillness of the aesthetic and the motion it would convey. Perhaps echoing John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”—whose “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye

need to know” (49-50), is a profoundly concise manifesto of philosophical aestheticism if ever there was one—with its own abundance of “Sylvan” (3) and “flowery” (4) imagery, Lord Henry’s aesthetic experience is of an irresolvable tension between the mobility and temporality of the world and the immobility of the aesthetic which would portray it.

As the passage continues, Wilde only heightens this tension between the aesthetic interior of the studio and the world of motion outside of it:

The sullen murmur of the bees shouldering their way through the long unmown grass, or circling with monotonous insistence round the black-crocketed spires of the early June hollyhocks, seemed to make the stillness more oppressive, and the dim roar of London was like a bourdon note of a distant organ. (57)

The garden just outside the studio, first with its flitting birds and then with its murmuring bees, echoes the inaesthetic world of London, at once held off at a distance and brought near. This association of the bees’ murmuring and London’s mundanity has a complex logic. On the one hand, he associates the murmuring of the bees with the hollyhocks that draw them, which he in turn associates with the spires of churches. On the other hand, he associates the distant sounds of life in London with the sounds of a church organ—which in turn he refers to by the somewhat archaic “bourdon note,” *bourdon* being French for both a droning musical tone and a bumblebee. Recapitulating the meandering and non-syllogistic logic of association which mobilizes the synaesthesia at the beginning of the passage, Wilde establishes a tension in which the studio is both in opposition to the world outside—first the more immediate garden, then the distant London mediated by that garden—and is itself that outside world.

The reader, that is, is left at this moment in a liminal position. Is this prose or is this poetry? Is the artist’s studio—the aesthetic—set in opposition to London—the world—or an echo of it, even simply a part of it? To describe the affect in terms of either/or questions is, however, itself misleading. On the one hand, this world has, gradually, become bifurcated, as first the

garden is drawn in distinction to the interior of the studio, and then the whole of London. The whole of the passage moves from a synaesthesia in which the objects of description, through the primacy of scent, are rendered fully immediate yet entirely unlocalizable through suspension in the heavy fog of indeterminacy, to the fully mediated distance of painting as objects gain more and more determination relative to one another and a geometric system of coordinates insists upon itself. On the other hand, this is produced only through the non-syllogistic logic of association which purposely confuses entities with one another and which produces the initial synaesthetic depiction of the studio. As the tension between oppositions grows through the passage, the depiction of the studio remains always tied to its original determination in terms of the ephemerality of scent. Rather than an articulated choice, the tension inherent in the ever-more oppressive stillness of the scene is a blurry one, wrapped as it is in the smoke of Lord Henry's "innumerable cigarettes."

This state of aesthetic and epistemological suspension between indeterminate options which at once determine themselves against and as one another, is brought at this moment to a sudden halt. Riquelme emphasizes that the novel, like chiaroscuro paintings, mobilizes an aesthetic which "provides an alternative and a challenge to visual representations that rely on general illumination, the appearance of a coherent Cartesian geometry, and a vanishing point" (18). For a brief moment, however, it is precisely a "Cartesian geometry" which comes into view. Following immediately on the lines quoted thus far, Wilde breaks the prose poetry of the opening with a dramatic, even theatrical, establishment of scene:

In the centre of the room, clamped to an upright easel, stood the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty, and in front of it, some little distance away, was sitting the artist himself, Basil Hallward, whose sudden disappearance some years ago caused, at the time, such public excitement, and gave rise to so many strange conjectures. (58)

Describing the studio as a delimited “room” with a “centre,” the use of such a forceful verb—in definition as well as sound—as “clamped,” and the description of the easel as “upright” accomplishes two motions: to jolt the reader from the lyrical, poetic register of the first two paragraphs and to establish precisely a “Cartesian” geometry of relations.

Not only, moreover, does Wilde force upon the reader a three-dimensional, delimited space with an emphatically determined center and an upright axis, he gives us within this field a trigonometric system of reference points: Lord Henry Wotton, the “full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty, and in front of it,” and the artist, Basil Hallward. There is, first, the object of admiration, Dorian Gray, distilled to his “extraordinary personal beauty”—that is, aestheticized. Then there is his admirer, who is simultaneously the creator of this aestheticization of Dorian, Basil Hallward. Thirdly, there is the audience, not only to the work, but to the relation between the work and its admiring creator, Lord Henry Wotton—who is, however, here unnamed, allowed to drop into the background of the scene as the reader’s attention is drawn instead to the line of force connecting Basil Hallward and Dorian’s portrait.

This neat triangulation and the Cartesian geometry of scene is itself, however, immediately interrupted—once again without so much as a sentence break. Reaching out of the moment’s temporal frame to call forward Basil’s past, his “sudden disappearance some years ago” which caused, “at the time, such public excitement, and gave rise to so many strange conjectures,” the spectre of society, of gossip and with it the ethical norms implicit already in the dim roar of London, is summoned. Cartesian geometric and, implicitly, subjective coherence have been called into focus only to be immediately problematized as the tension between the interior of the studio and the external world is reinstated. Even as aesthetic autonomy produces in Keats’s ode a suspension of temporality which allows the aesthetic object to “tease us out of

thought/As doth eternity” (44-45), so here the relentlessness of history, the incapacity to escape one’s past, invites the social to shatter the supposed autonomy of the aesthetic:

As he looked at the gracious and comely form he had so skilfully mirrored in his art, a smile of pleasure passed across his face, and seemed about to linger there. But he suddenly started up and, closing his eyes, placed his fingers upon the lids, as though he sought to imprison within his brain some curious dream from which he feared he might awake. (58)

At this moment, Lord Henry interjects with the first dialogue, and if the interjection of the portrait of Dorian clamped to the upright easel in the center of the room jolts the reader out of the heady lyrical seduction of the first two paragraphs, this imprisonment within the brain of an unacknowledgable pleasure and the dream-like narrative which it implies definitively moves the novel from what is an aesthetic of burdensome stillness to the action and motion of narrative. In the competition between the autonomous aesthetic of the studio and the impending social morality of London, this moment seems to mark the victory of the social in successfully disrupting Basil’s aesthetic experience of the portrait and the reader’s aesthetic experience of the text.

If this analysis were sufficient, this would mark the text as avant-garde in terms of the aesthetic categories I suggested in the introduction, with the fragmentary nature of the modern social-political subject rupturing and dialectically supplanting the autonomy of the aesthetic subject. I would suggest, rather, that this motion represents the establishment with Basil of the epistemological structure I am calling the glass closet. To recall, the glass closet is structured as an irresolvable liminality between a singular, autonomous subject and a multiple, fragmentary subject, resolvable as neither, which is constituted through speech acts of silence arising from a social injunction to such silence. The fragmentary subject of the closet, here, arises in the first moment from the social injunction to silence surrounding homosexuality. In the second moment,

this becomes reflected within the queer subject as they become incoherent to themselves, the “I” of statements such as “I am I” having indeterminable reference. In the third moment, the originating performative silence which produces the queer subject names them as such, but does so as a repetition *with* difference of silence. This renders the queer subject coherent as the system of relations which determines their pseudo-schizoid fragmentation of identity is itself made visible and delimited in the eye of the beholder. While at first appearing to suggest a further repetition of the second moment in which the subject is reflectively fragmented—and the imposition of an Hegelian “bad infinity” of constant fragmentation and re-fragmentation—this third moment, constituted in and by the address of the other, forestalls such dialectical negation. The subject is by no means returned to themselves, reinstated as an autonomous identity. Yet, in being acknowledged as closeted, they likewise cannot resolve to simple fragmentation. The constant social injunction to name the queer through the very discursive act of silence means that the queer subject is always being called forward as queer. Whether by the actual presence of another subject or by the mere fact of sociality, the queer subject is always undergoing the dialectical motion from the second moment of internally reflective fragmentation to the third of coherence before the other. The ambiguity of silent naming determines this ambiguous position of the queer subject, irresolvable either to the organic coherence of the autonomous subject or the incoherence of the fragmentary subject.

Between the reference to Basil’s “sudden disappearance” and the “strange conjectures” which surrounded it—which, of course, remain unnamed—and the attempt to “imprison within his brain” his experience of the moment, Basil looks at “the comely form he had so skilfully mirrored in his art” and a “smile of pleasure” crosses his face. While many readers, perhaps even most of Wilde’s contemporaries, might not hear the queer subtext, to the queer reader it is patent.



As Basil experiences a moment of homoerotic aesthetic pleasure, he then immediately recognizes the social injunction to silence that queerness and “suddenly” moves to imprison that self within the “brain.” Even so, at this very moment of subjective fragmentation, to the reader who is aware of the subtext this closeting motion does not undo the revelation. Even though the text refuses to explicitly name Basil as gay—even through all the talk of his idolatry and love of Dorian, the speech is elliptical and the narrative carefully avoids depicting actions well enough as to elide an explicit acknowledgement—a subset of readers is perfectly aware of what is happening.

Or, rather, what “surely must be happening.” The reader, assuming the necessary prior knowledge, is suspended between between one reading of the text in which the components—Basil’s unspeakably scandalous past, the pleasure he takes from the depiction of Dorian’s male beauty, his sudden desire to imprison that pleasure as firmly inside his brain as possible—do not cohere, and a reading in which they cohere because the reader interjects a knowledge of Basil’s homosexuality which is present in the text only through its distinct occlusion. At this moment the careful aesthetic cultivation of tension reaches its climax, and the epistemological standing of the reader in relation to the novel is established. Three possible positions, essentially, are established. First, the ignorant and entirely unsuspecting reader who, bringing none of the necessary prior knowledge to the text, reads the text as an organically coherent, if disturbing, work. Second, the attentive yet not sufficiently knowledgeable reader, who recognizes the apparent aesthetic incoherence of the text, yet is unable to provide the necessary knowledge to secure the relative coherence of the text within the glass closet. For this reader, the text is an example of fragmentation. In the third case, there is the ideal reader, who is able fully to read the homoerotic subtext and interject this significance into the text. For them, as for the second

reader, the text does not have internal, organic coherence. Rather, it is structured as an open secret, a glass closet, on its own terms indeterminate yet in relation to the knowing reader coherently legible.

As Riquelme articulates, chiaroscuro “provides an alternative and a challenge to visual representations that rely on general illumination, the appearance of a coherent Cartesian geometry, and a vanishing point” (610). As he argues, Wilde’s implementation of a literary version of this aesthetic strategy disrupts “reliance on positive knowledge and on believable representations that create for the reader an impression of sanity, intelligibility, and control” (611). In this I agree with Riquelme. However, I want to suggest that it is imperative to distinguish how Wilde’s aesthetics disrupt the three cornerstones of autonomous aesthetics Riquelme’s analysis of “realism” implies: “general illumination” or clarity, “coherent Cartesian geometry” and the implicit Cartesian subject, and “a vanishing point” or internal organizing principle. While all three hang together, more or less, and while Wilde disrupts all three, he does not do so in the same way. Specifically, as regards the third, Wilde’s move is not to negate the presence of an organizing principle, but to shift it, perhaps precisely as chiaroscuro does, from within the work to the perceiver. To quote again the novel’s delayed preface, “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors” (239). The novel is written such that, depending on the amount and content of the knowledge the reader brings to their reading, different aesthetic structures will crystallize.

In this sense Wilde’s queer aesthetics turn the Pascalian *pensée* with which I open this section on its head. If at one point it may have seemed possible to say that painting always determines the proper vantage, Wilde’s aesthetics insist that it be asked with beauty as much as in truth and morality, who will determine the proper perspective? In the next section I will trace

Wilde's appropriation of Platonic themes, and in the following section his appropriation of Biblical themes, to describe to two distinct claimants to the proper perspective on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. These appropriations, however, allude to their sources in much the same way Wilde alludes to Basil's homosexuality and to the queer in general—through performative silences. Ultimately, these silences, I will argue, produce a superfluity of possible meaning and a textual ambiguity structurally equivalent to the aesthetics of the first four paragraphs outlined here. That is, while an ignorant and entirely unsuspecting reader may encounter a text that seems to hang together entirely of its own accord, and a partially knowledgeable reader will perceive a multiplicity of readings that simply do not cohere, an ideally attentive and educated reader will find a text in which bringing all of their suspicions to bear renders it fully legible, while at the same time the text, through its insistent silence, refuses to determine for the reader on its own terms if they are correct. This, in turn, finally determines for the ideal reader an ambiguous text, neither autonomous in line with aestheticism, nor fragmentary in line with the avant-garde.

### III. The Sacred Grove: Reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Platonically

The aesthetic structure and epistemological position I have described in the introduction and have shown to be at work in the first paragraphs of the novel are, I will show here, at work structuring the novel as a whole. In the first place, the series of differently privileged epistemological positions with respect to the queerness of the text—unaware, partially aware, fully aware—determine, as in the first paragraphs, three different aesthetic structures. Among these, the open secret structure of the glass closet is constituted with respect to the fully privileged reader. After the first, “straight” reading of an autonomous text and the second “suspicious reading” of a fragmentary text, arises the third “queer” reading, which suspends the text between autonomy and fragmentation. In this way the text is resolved as irresolvable, known as ambiguously (un)knowable. The fullest of the three readings, the queer reading, is determinate precisely in its ambiguity. Within the glass closet the queer subject is determinate only as indeterminate, only in this particular structure of indetermination in relation to an other which recognizes the subject as indeterminate in this particular way.

In the second place, this queer system of aesthetic relations is realized through a system of intertextuality that offers, in addition and by way of the queer register, two further readings. These are, first, a “philosophical” reading guided by allusions to Plato’s dialogues and, second, a “religious” or “theological” reading guided by allusions to the Christian bible. Through a series of allusions that, as with the discourse which determines the novel as queer, operate silently—that is, always by insinuation rather than explication, and never so explicitly as to be irrefutably pinned down—two possible epistemological positions relative to the text are opened. One of these is partially aware, and one is fully aware, the fully aware reading incorporating the partially aware and unaware readings. Finally, this third fully aware position maintains the ambiguous

position relative to determination of textual truth manifest in relation to the glass-closeted subject. The text itself inviting yet never demanding this dialectical proliferation of meanings, the reader who stands in relation even to the final, fullest determination can only read the text in this ambiguity. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in the last, is determinate only by relationship to the reader and only in its particular indetermination.

The task at hand is as follows. First, it is to show how the queer position is the privileged one which allows access to this system of alternating interpretations. To do this, I will examine the garden scene of the second chapter as Dorian's seduction, drawing on parallels with the *Phaedrus*. Second, it is to explicate the novel's arch according to the Platonic allusions I detect and the philosophical problems implicated. While the essay, like the novel, is guided primarily by the character of Dorian Gray and the narrative arc of his tragedy, this will require first a substantial diversion into the character of Lord Henry and his philosophy, before then returning to Dorian. Third, it is to reinterpret the same narrative, scenes, and themes in light of the Biblical allusions I detect. In this section, I address the first two tasks, reserving the third for section three, and reserving the final implications of this analysis for the conclusion in section four.

#### A. The Figure of the Garden

While the opening paragraphs of the novel take place in Basil Hallward's studio, it is the floral scent of the garden and the visual imagery of its flowers and birds which dominate the aesthetic. These garden motifs are repeated throughout the novel, as the language of aroma and plant life—particularly flowers—consistently recurs. John Paul Riquelme well notes this, and in fact elevates this “echoing” of the opening paragraphs to the level of aesthetic structural principal (619). Once again, I agree with Riquelme, but with a difference. I wish to argue that it is not

simply “echo” as a structuring principle that is at stake, but rather the particular echoing of the garden. What this strategy achieves is to structure the aesthetic reception of the text as, first, a reflection out of the opening paragraphs, and in turn a consequence of the events that transpire in Basil Hallward’s.

What transpires in Basil’s garden is Dorian Gray’s philosophico-erotic seduction by Lord Henry. For the reader in the epistemological position to recognize the homoerotic subtext, this interpretation is obvious. The older Lord Henry, following the younger boy Dorian into the garden, “draws his body close to his” (76), and leads him into the shade and sweetly perfumed breeze where, though the boy is attracted as well to Lord Henry’s “romantic olive-coloured face” and “cool, white, flower-like hands” (77), it is Lord Henry’s words that take hold of the boy. In the garden, Lord Henry performs the double act of seducing the boy erotically and philosophically. Having judged that Dorian “was made to be worshipped” (72), he weaves together the philosophical essay and bold yet indirect flirting—to give one example that, if we are open to the homoerotic as possible, should suffice to make the point, “You are too charming to go in for philanthropy, Mr. Gray—far too charming” (71)—that began in the studio. He alternately praises the boy’s physical beauty and articulates a philosophy of life, insisting on the necessity of a “new Hedonism” (79) which is a “return to the Hellenic ideal, to something finer, richer, than the Hellenic ideal” (74). In fact, Dorian, with his extraordinary beauty, “might be its visible symbol” (79). In this moment the erotic and philosophical seduction amount to a single motion. By the end Lord Henry’s philosophical flirtation has both “touched some secret chord, that had never been touched before, but that [Dorian] felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses” (75) and, as Dorian later recounts, “filled [him] with a wild desire to know” (92).

That is, by the time Lord Henry and Dorian return from the garden to Basil's studio, Lord Henry has initiated the boy into two new worlds, the erotic and the philosophic, the two represented as in some essential way inseparable. The transformation is radical. For, while Basil deeply loves and "worships" Dorian (66)—worships him so much that in the portrait he paints of the boy "there was love in every line, and in every touch...passion" (144)—and had been, in the most surreptitiously closeted of ways courting Dorian, Dorian has remained entirely oblivious. Not till much later, when in the seventh chapter Dorian forces Basil to confess as explicitly as possible his "idolatry," does he seem to comprehend Dorian's desire (144). Prior to Lord Henry's seduction in the garden, Dorian is "the most unspoiled creature in the whole world" (138), thoroughly ignorant of the passions that exist inside him and of his own beauty. He is at this point, as Lord Henry is happy to remind him, still a "boy" (84), both legally and experientially (108). The philosophico-erotic encounter with Lord Henry can be seen to initiate the radical transformation in Dorian Gray's character which the rest of the novel plays out.

In the next section, I will revisit these events under a different, religious register. In this first register, however, made available in recognizing the homoeroticism of the text, the particular act of seduction in which the erotic and philosophically are inextricably intertwined ought to bring to mind—for the epistemically privileged reader—Plato's *Phaedrus*. Like the *Phaedrus*, the dialogue takes place in a garden space set apart from the city, Basil's garden distinguished from London (57), and the sacred grove where Socrates and Phaedrus speak set outside the walls of Athens (227a). Both pairs retreat to their garden from the stifling air of their original meeting place—the exposed noontime air of the road to Piraeus for Socrates and Phaedrus (*Phdr.* 229a), the stifling air of the studio for Dorian and Lord Henry (*DG* 76). They arrive in their garden in both cases, moreover, with the older man following the younger (*ibid.*). There,

both pairs retreat specifically to the shade in order to talk engage in dialogue (*DG* 77, *Phdr.* 229b). The explicit reference to the ancient Greeks and their way of life frames this narrative repetition and invites the reader to draw the comparison between the one philosophical seduction and the other. In the context, especially, of the Victorian discourse in which Hellenism and homoeroticism become for certain speakers and audiences interchangeable specifically by reference to the Platonic dialogues, the parallel becomes for those certain audiences all-but immediate.

When Dorian tells Lord Henry later that their meeting “filled me with a wild desire to know” (92), the *Phaedrus* and Platonist philosophy are thereby invoked. Dorian Gray’s transformation is a philosophical one as much as it is an erotic one, and an erotic one as much as it is a philosophical one. Bearing this in mind, reading the novel in terms of the garden means in the first moment reading the novel as a philosophical one. Lord Henry tells Dorian in his seduction, “A new Hedonism! That is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol. With your personality there is nothing you could not do. The world belongs to you for a season” (79). What is it for Dorian to take on this challenge, to attempt to embody in himself this “new Hedonism”? In what sense is Dorian a manifestation of the Platonist philosophy Lord Henry, as a new Socrates, embodies?

## B. Lord Henry Wotton’s Exoteric and Esoteric Philosophies

In addition to the recurrent witticisms which have lead so many readers, accurately or not, to identify Lord Henry Wotton with Oscar Wilde, Lord Henry offers not one but two articulations of his philosophical position. In the first instance, there is the philosophical position Lord Henry offers Dorian, which is articulated in the garden scene I have centered. I call this



Lord Henry's "exoteric philosophy." In the second instance, there is the position Lord Henry articulates to himself, the philosophy of "vivisection" described at the end of the third chapter. I call this the "esoteric philosophy." These two positions are distinguished in the first place by the object of their address—Dorian Gray, himself—but also in terms of apparent sincerity. Whereas the second philosophy is rendered by internal monologue and represents Lord Henry's self-reflective position, whether or not Lord Henry would hold himself to a word of the first positions is dubious:

He was amazed at the sudden impression that his words had produced, and, remembering a book that he had read when he was sixteen, which had revealed to him much that he had not known before, he wondered whether Dorian Gray was passing through the same experience. He had merely shot an arrow into the air. Had it hit the mark? How fascinating the lad was! (76)

On the one hand, the words Lord Henry offers Dorian are entirely occasional. On the other hand, the fluency with which he delivers them belie the notion that they bear no substantial relationship to his "real" position. Rather, what is offered in the exoteric and the esoteric philosophies are two articulations of the same position. In kind with the glass closet structure of the queer epistemology and aesthetic of the novel, Lord Henry's position is split between a public and a private, the private sense privileged yet this privilege and the unity of the position maintained only in ambiguous suspension.

At the heart of the exoteric philosophy Lord Henry communicates to Dorian in the second chapter is a paired diagnosis and prescription: modern humans are cowards whose "souls starve, and are naked," requiring salvation by means of a rebirth of an "Hellenic ideal" (74). As Lord Henry puts it, "People are afraid of themselves, nowadays. They have forgotten the highest of all duties, the duty that one owes to oneself" (*ibid.*). Married to this egotism is the injunction to worship and obey "Beauty": "It cannot be questioned. It has its Divine right of sovereignty" (78).

At first, this appears an immoralism and anti-ethics, as when Lord Henry tells Dorian, “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, or the luxury of a regret” (74). It appears to be a praising of the body which has been too long subjugated to mind or spirit. The illness with which Lord Henry diagnoses modernity is a residue of the “maladies of mediaevalism” whose proper cure is a “return to the Hellenic ideal, to something finer, richer, than the Hellenic ideal” (*ibid.*).

This reading of Lord Henry’s position here is, however, superficial. Rather than an undoing of the medieval subjugation of the body to the demands of the spirit, the role of the body merely shifts, from a dead weight to the soul that must be shaken off, to a clothing for the soul which is its means of attaining to the proper service of Beauty. The problem with resisting the demands of the body is that if one resists, “your soul grows sick with longing” (74). The body lays demands upon the soul, dragging it from itself and causing it to be ill. Embodiment is treated as an infection of the soul. Lord Henry’s apparently radical, immoral claims do nothing, in fact, but reinstate the dualism of the Cartesian subject and the anti-materialism of Platonic ontology and ethics. While the beautiful is accessed through *aisthēsis* or bodily sensation, this is the body made a means of escaping the body. On the one hand this diagnosis of a sickness of the soul paired with a philosophical prescription echoes the common, Stoically-inflected Neoplatonic understanding in which philosophy and ethics are to the soul as medicine is to the body. On the other hand, this schema in which Lord Henry demands a passage through bodily sense and desire onwards and upwards to the purified, rarified position of “Beauty” who reigns with “the Divine right of sovereignty” all the more strongly echoes Diotima’s ladder and Plato’s other great erotic dialogue, the *Symposium*.

In that dialogue, to abbreviate and simplify a far more complicated position, Socrates recounts how the priestess Diotima “initiated [him] into these erotics” (209e). At the climax of the speech, Diotima summarizes erotics, famously, as a ladder, in which eros drives the lover to ascend as on rungs from desiring individual beautiful bodies, to multiple beautiful bodies, to beautiful bodies in general, to beautiful pursuits, to beautiful learning, to the learning of that which is in itself beautiful, and finally to the knowledge of the beautiful itself (211c). In the first moment, sensual beauty is the noblest end of action as aesthetics takes the place of ethics. By the end, however, this is seen to be a merely efficacious rather than telic treatment of the aesthetic. The beautiful is here a means of advancing entirely beyond and ultimately negating *aisthēsis*, the sensual. Life is no longer here determined as art and judged in accordance with the principles of art, art is determined as life and judged in accordance with its principle, the ethical. This arises as an answer to the human condition of mortality. Whether in pursuit of biological children as with animals (207a-207d), or in pursuit of honor, reputation, and ideas (209c-209e), “the mortal nature seeks as far as possible to be forever and immortal” (207d), and “all do all things for the sake of immortal virtue” (208d). In pursuing an orderly ascent from the desire of that which is least permanent—the particular beauty of a particular body—to that which does not even participate in time—the form of the beautiful—Diotima prescribes eros itself, at first a stumbling block always returning us to our embodied state, as the means of overcoming our embodiment.

Lord Henry’s exoteric philosophy repeats this Platonic diagnosis. He warns Dorian, “You have only a few years in which to really live. When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it...Time is jealous of you” (78). Awakening Dorian to his own beauty and the power of that beauty, he immediately raises the threat of time to undermine it, and prescribes the pursuit of the beautiful as the only proper response to this malady imposed by the temporally bound body upon

the eternal soul. Lord Henry here echoes as well Walter Pater's famous conclusion to *The Renaissance*, where Pater he writes, "While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment" (189)—and thereby shows aestheticism turned inside-out, as it were. The activity of the intellect is not negated in favor of bodily sensation; rather, bodily sensation, in the face of the irrevocable passage of time, is put in service of the liberation of the spirit from that bodily temporal subjugation. Life is not put in service of art, art is put in service of life and of an ethical ideal of transcendence beyond the merely sensual. Lord Henry implores Dorian, "Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations" (79); Pater implores his reader, "we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more...our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time" (190); Diotima instructs the young Socrates, "It is at this place in life, in beholding the beautiful itself...that it is worth living, if—for a human being—it is [worth living] at any place" (211d). What appears at first as a radical philosophical aestheticism which rejects Cartesian dualism, the superiority within that dualism of the mind to the body, and morality as such, is in fact nothing more than a superficial Platonism which reinforces a dualist anthropology, the superiority of spirit to body, and the service of aesthetics to ethics, art to life.

Lord Henry's esoteric philosophy complicates this rehashing of Diotima's ladder. If the exoteric philosophy expressed in his seduction of Dorian Gray is disturbing for its apparent blasé attitude to moral sensibility, the presentation of the esoteric philosophy in Lord Henry's musings to himself is more disturbing yet. Set a month after their initial encounter, Dorian has just informed Lord Henry that he has fallen madly for an actress, and:

As he left the room, Lord Henry's heavy eyelids drooped, and he began to think. Certainly few people had ever interested him so much as Dorian Gray, and yet the lad's

mad adoration of some one else caused him not the slightest pang of annoyance or jealousy. He was pleased by it. It made him a more interesting study. (100)

What unfolds is an image of Lord Henry as having, in truly “philosophical” fashion, sublimated his erotic desire into a desire for knowledge. He has divorced himself from his passions and made himself in all things a scientist—cold and disinvested. If Basil Hallward “had no curiosity” and if this was his “chief defect” (211), Lord Henry is here Basil’s precise opposite. Mystery is, for Basil, a justification of life, the telos of his praxis: “You know how I love secrecy. It is the only thing that can make modern life wonderful or mysterious” (60). As for the Plato of the *Symposium*, for whom love of knowledge justifies and sublates love of beauty, for Lord Henry, mystery is a means and an injunction to the pursuit of knowledge that is itself the telos of life. “Enthralled by the methods of Science,” Lord Henry, “had begun by vivisecting himself, as he had ended by vivisecting others” (100).

On the one hand, both the exoteric and esoteric philosophies share the dualist sentiment that, “The separation of spirit from matter was a mystery, and the union of spirit with matter was a mystery also” (102). If there is, in other words, a dualism underlying the apparent simplicity of the subject that resists explanation, so does the unity of the subject resist explanation. On the other hand, there appears to be a profound distinction between the two articulations in that the exoteric implores a positive assertion of the self and the esoteric demands a fragmentation and negation of the self. In speaking to Dorian, Lord Henry declares, “The aim of life is self-development. To realise one’s nature perfectly, that is what each of us is here for” (74). This egotism appear to contrast with what Lord Henry muses to himself:

It was true that as one watched life in its curious crucible of pain and pleasure, one could not wear over one’s face a mask of glass, or keep the sulphurous fumes from troubling the brain and making the imagination turbid with monstrous fancies and misshapen dreams. There were poisons so subtle that to know their properties one had to sicken of

them. There were maladies so strange that one had to pass through them if one sought to understand their nature. (101)

Counter the egotism enjoined by Dorian, Lord Henry enjoins upon himself a praxis of self-negation. To live according to the desire of knowledge, the self must be spread out before the self, “Like a patient etherized upon a table” (“Prufrock” 3). To enable this auto-vivisection, Lord Henry must be able to distinguish between the self which is subject to experimentation, and the self which performs the experiments—between a thinking, autonomous subjectivity and the object of that autonomous subject, which nonetheless belongs to that same subject. In other words, the autonomous ego asserted in the exoteric philosophy must here be bifurcated between a spectator self on the one hand, and a spectacle self on the other.

This initial distinction between an exoteric philosophy in which the individual subject is positively asserted and an esoteric philosophy in which the individual subject is fragmented, however, collapses. Rather, the esoteric position represents the consequence of the exoteric. In the transcendence of the bodily self by the intellectual or spiritual self which is the culmination of the ascent of Diotima’s ladder, the subject becomes bifurcated. The Delphic maxim to “know thyself,” *gnōthi seauton*, which is taken by Plato’s Socrates as a guiding principle in the *Phaedrus* (229e) and elsewhere, is shown to contain within itself the dialectical negation of the self that would be known. Love of wisdom entails sacrifice of self and Eros is, as Diotima teaches, a philosopher (204b). From this position the subject looks back upon themselves and recognizes a divide between that intellectual, perceiving self, and that bodily perceived self which is subject to sensual desires and impulses of *aisthēsis*. In this moment the Keatsian principle of aestheticism—“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (49-50)—subverts itself. Beauty is no longer autonomous, the aesthetic to be

pursued for its own sake, *l'art pour l'art*. Rather, love of beauty is posited as the means towards love of knowledge. Ultimately, the transcendent egotism of the exoteric aestheticism dialectically posits itself as the self-negation of the esoteric *philosophia*.

Implicit in the philosophical tradition stemming from Plato's dialogues and the Platonic understanding of eros is, Wilde seems to be suggesting, the extraordinary violence of vivisection. To cut the living subject up is not an innocuous proposition. It has, rather, deep implications—implications which the reader is privy to see made manifest in the narrative arc of Dorian Gray. In his Socratic seduction by Lord Henry, Dorian Gray is “initiated into these erotics” (*Symp.* 210a). How does Dorian Gray interpret and practice these erotics of vivisection?

### C. Dorian Gray's Life as Art

Dorian Gray's passage through Lord Henry's seduction into a new, “philosophical” condition is captured most clearly in the novel's titular image, the picture of Dorian Gray. Facing the painting which is, incidentally, a painting not of Dorian *per se* but of Basil Hallward's love for him, of Basil's “idolatry” (144)—“every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist not of the sitter” (61)—Dorian “recognized himself for the first time” and the “sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation” (81). Immediately, the terror of time's unavoidable passage and the inevitable wasting away of his beauty through the years taught him by Lord Henry, washes over him. In that moment, he offer his “prayer” and wishes that,

He himself might remain young, and the portrait grow old; that his own beauty might be untarnished, and the face of the canvas bear the burden of his passions and his sins; that the painted image might be seared with the lines of suffering and thought, and that he might keep all the delicate bloom and loveliness of his then just conscious boyhood. (120-121)

In this moment, the portrait is no longer a picture of the Dorian which sat for its painting, nor of the love with which Basil painted Dorian, but of Dorian's soul. What Lord Henry can only dream of and attempt in the bifurcated consciousness of repression, Dorian is gifted in reality—he becomes the spectator of his own life.

Dorian in two key ways does not, however, simply substantiate what Lord Henry articulates philosophically. First, Lord Henry's philosophical position, in its fuller esoteric articulation, expresses a willful self-sacrifice and undergoing of suffering. To create a self that would know himself, Lord Henry destroys the very self that would be known, and submits what remains to the extraordinary suffering of vivisection. Dorian, on the other hand, bifurcates himself precisely to *avoid* suffering, and by way of the prayer that transubstantiates the portrait of his image to the portrait of his soul, manages in some part to achieve it. Dorian's spectator self is preserved from the sufferings of this spectacular self.

Underlying this first difference, however, is the second. Lord Henry's willingness to undergo the suffering implicit in his auto-vivisection is grounded upon his philosophy, that is, his love of wisdom. Lord Henry's position is the Delphic *gnōthi seauton* at the ground of Platonist philosophy dialectically positing its own negation, the self negating the self in order to know the self. Dorian Gray's desire to undergo the bifurcation of the self into suffering soul and eternal body is grounded not on love of wisdom, but on love of self. Lord Henry is a philosopher, and Dorian Gray is a narcissist. This is made evident when Dorian, seeing the portrait shortly after his "prayer," startlingly remarks, "I am in love with it, Basil. It is part of myself, I feel that" (84). Looking into the portrait Dorian not only sees himself, but falls in love with what he sees. Fulfilling Lord Henry's prophetic foreshadowing, Dorian, already an "Adonis" and "Antinoüs," becomes "a Narcissus" (59).



To unpack more fully what Dorian's narcissistic position means, I wish to refer here to Oscar Wilde's brief prose-poem, "The Disciple":

When Narcissus died the pool of his pleasure changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, and the Oreads came weeping through the woodland that they might sing to the pool and give it comfort.

And when they saw that the pool had changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, they loosened the green tresses of their hair and cried to the pool and said, 'We do not wonder that you should mourn in this manner for Narcissus, so beautiful was he.'

'But was Narcissus beautiful?' said the pool.

'Who should know that better than you?' answered the Oreads. 'Us did he ever pass by, but you he sought for, and would lie on your banks and look down at you, and in the mirror of your waters he would mirror his own beauty.'

And the pool answered, 'But I loved Narcissus because, as he lay on my banks and looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my own beauty mirrored.' ("Poems in Prose" 901)

The great force of the poem rests not in the suggestion that when Narcissus looked at his own reflection in the pool, the pool looked at its own reflection in Narcissus's eyes. Rather, it is that the pool never even noticed whether Narcissus was beautiful. Looking in a mirror is not purely absorptive; I can notice, after all, whether a mirror is well polished and whether its frame is beautiful. When I look into a mirror, I do not, *ipso facto*, lose all sense of the mirror's substantiality. If anything, it is the ambiguity inherent to the mirror between its own objectivity and my reflection in it which lends the mirror its disturbing force. I might imagine that it would be the same for the pool of water, but the pool, like Narcissus himself, can only see itself. Even as the pool, in having captured Narcissus's image, becomes the target of Narcissus's loving gaze, all the pool can see is its own image, not the loving gaze which mirrors it.

This is the case with Dorian. When he looks into the portrait which shows "the secret of [Basil's] own soul" (61), namely, that Basil "worships" him (66), Dorian sees only his own image reflected back at him. He does not see that he is loved; the lover's gaze is reduced to the reflection it produces. Like the pond that was Narcissus's first disciple, Dorian becomes a

narcissist himself, learning to love and “worship” his own image. In this way, Wilde unpacks the dynamics implicit in the “Platonic” understanding of eros as “reason’s recognition of itself in that which seemed to be other” (Lisi 33). This notion of eros, necessary for aestheticism and its Cartesian conception of the autonomous subject, ultimately undoes the autonomous coherence of that subject. “Eros is love, first of all, of some things, and secondly of whatever things the need for which is present to him” (*Symp.* 200e). Eros is, Plato’s Socrates argues, desire with specific content, that content being necessarily a lack with respect to the desirer. The lover cannot in themselves already possess the object of their love; the beloved must be not the lover. In order for the narcissist to love himself, he must constitute a distinction between himself as lover and beloved, the beloved self no longer identical with the loving self. That self as object of desire must, further, be constituted as a *not*-self. To desire that which is the same as, which is identical with oneself, requires, paradoxically, the negation of that identity.

Dorian Gray’s narcissism and Lord Henry’s philosophy appear, then, to converge once again. Both originate in an egoistic impulse towards autonomous subjectivity which, ultimately, negates the very self which would be posited as autonomous. Dorian standing before his portrait, watching it change as he lives and sins, and Lord Henry, imagining himself scalpel hand standing over himself strapped to the surgeon’s table, constitute analogous images. For both, the result is a condition in which each of them, “although alive, is in another sense dead” (Kierkegaard 157). Like the “modern Antigone” and *Sumparanekrōmenoi* (“Fellowship of the Dead”) of Kierkegaard’s pseudonym “A,” the aesthete of *Either/Or*, Lord Henry and Dorian Gray cash-out aestheticism’s striving towards absolute autonomy as this ambiguous position between life and death. Vivisection is this unnatural suspension of a subject between life and death, as is the division between the portrait in which time passes and Dorian lives, and the body

in which he does not. In the attempt to constitute an autonomous system of subjective relations between a spectator and spectacular self, Dorian is left as nothing so much as a spectre.

This ghostly nature of Dorian's life as an aesthete is shown to unfold in the infamous ninth chapter of the novel. Constituting the great bulk of the temporal passage of the book—chapters one through eight span one month and three days, chapters then through twelve six weeks, and chapter nine seven years—the chapter is nonetheless devoid of action. The reader is not privileged to see precisely what sins are marring Dorian's portrait and soul. Rather, Wilde describes in series several catalogues of art objects and aesthetic experiences Dorian becomes, one after another, obsessed with collecting. This is, for Dorian, an explicitly philosophical and in turn ethical project, in the sense that the ethical demands the subjugation of art as a means to life as an end: “He sought to elaborate some new scheme of life that would have its reasoned philosophy and its ordered principles and find in the spiritualizing of the senses its highest realization” (161). *Aisthēsis* as a means to transcend the sensual, the translation of all sensual value into coordinate spiritual value. If Oscar Wilde would in *De Profundis* say of his literary project, “I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art” (1017), of Dorian Gray's aestheticism it can only be said that he made art a philosophy, not philosophy an art.

This is manifested in the particularly progression of aesthetic experiences Wilde describes. At the surface level, Dorian progresses from the most spiritual to the most sensual, from the religion to science (163-164), to perfumery (164-165), to music (165-166), to jewelry (166-168), to textiles (168-171). From intellectual experiences treated to aesthetically, to the least immediate of the sensual experiences, to that which is still experienced as, primarily, immaterial, yet now with form, to the solidly material yet useless, to the most “arts and craft” of the arts. However, as the medium of the aesthetic experience becomes more and more sensual,

Dorian's treatment of the medium becomes more and more spiritual. With religion and science, his interest is tied to the activity implicit in each, to the rituals of the "Roman Catholic Communion" (163), and the "action and experiment" of "the Darwinismus movement" (164). With perfumery, he attempts to abstract from each perfume its effect on the brain, and thereby upon the soul, "to elaborate a real psychology of perfumes" (165). Then to music, then to jewelry, the objects of which become not so much inspirations for experience of the beautiful, as opportunities for reflection on the "wonderful stories" which accompany them (167). And finally, to embroidery, of which his favorite objects are either the "Ecclesiastical vestments" for which he "had a special passion" (170), or, importantly, textiles which he never actually encounters materially, only in books (169). The objects may progress from the least to most sensual and material, but the mode of reception progresses from the least to most spiritual and intellectual as Dorian "spiritualizes the senses." As with Lord Henry's Platonism, this ends in the negation of *aisthēsis*, as the art object is replaced by linguistic report of that object.

Towards the end of the chapter, Dorian reflects on his "ancestors," both the biological ones depicted in the "cold picture-gallery of his country-house" (174), and those "ancestors in literature" one has in addition to those "in one's race" (175). He concludes "that in some mysterious way their lives had been his own" (176). This echoes the opening of the chapter in which, reflecting on a book Lord Henry has given him which comes to absolutely obsess him, he reflects, "the whole book seemed to to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it" (158). Dorian does not live his own life, but the life of the dead. The aesthete, striving against time and the fragmentation of a self subjected to its passage, is ultimately figured as in some way already dead. They are no longer in any way autonomous, no longer subject to themselves, but rather to external impulses. This is captured nicely by Lord Henry who, having

undergone his own evolution as an aesthete, even more occluded from the reader's sight than Dorian's, remarks to Dorian Gray,

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 strange 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 that it is on things like these that our lives depend. (212)

Life lived as imitation of art, the transcendence of life in art, resolves as spectrality.

At this moment, the convergence of Lord Henry and Dorian Gray appears to have solidified. However, a further distinction must be made. Where Lord Henry's vivisection is motivated by adherence to a principle of duty non-identical with himself, namely, knowledge, Dorian's narcissism demands adherence to an ethical principle which is identical to himself. While Lord Henry would predicate that knowledge upon standards imminent to his own subjectivity, in positing knowledge of self as a telic principle, that self, as I have suggested, is displaced from the self and made non-identical with it. Dorian's narcissism, while repeating the disidentification of self as subject and object performed by Lord Henry's vivisection, attempts to refuse the displacement of standards of adjudication implicit in this disidentification. Lord Henry's position resolves as that not of desiring the knowable self, but desiring knowledge of the self; Dorian does not desire love of the self, but the self he loves. The conscious self-sacrifice Lord Henry undergoes is possible because knowledge of self displaces the self as telos of desire. The self-negation which Dorian undergoes is, to the contrary, the result of the paradoxical demands of taking the self as telos of desire.

This itself represents a further unpacking by Wilde of the Platonic conception of eros implicit in aestheticism. Within that conception, "eros is of the good's being one's always"

(Symp. 206a). For Wilde, this is not eros itself, but epiphenomenal to eros. Eros does not, in the first place, seek that the good belong to the lover, but to the beloved; it does not seek justification of the lover, but of the beloved. Kierkegaard makes much the same point in the sermon which concludes *Either/Or*, “The Upbuilding That Lies in the Thought That in Relation to God We are Always in the Wrong”:

To some you are drawn by a more fervent love than to others. Now, if such a person who is the object of your love were to do you a wrong, is it not true that it would pain you, that you would scrupulously examine everything but that you would then say: I know for sure that I am in the right; this thought will calm me? Ah, if you loved him, then it would not calm you; you would investigate everything. You would be unable to perceive anything else except that he is in the wrong; you would try to find something that could speak in his defense, and if you did not find it, you would find rest only in the thought that you were in the wrong. (347-348)

The lover desires that the good be theirs only insofar as this justifies the beloved, that it means the beloved does the lover no wrong. Loving himself, Dorian desires that he be justified, not in his capacity as lover but in his capacity as beloved.

Narcissism as such represents the fullest articulation of autonomous subjectivity and aestheticism. As Lisi interprets the passage from Kierkegaard above,

Where in the Platonic tradition, love followed knowledge, in Kierkegaard, knowledge follows love, as the standards and rules of reason are here made subservient to the requirements dictated by our intuitive affection. The relation of love receives the beloved as the standard of our meaning. (50)

If this understanding of eros is taken as correct, then the attempt to assert the subject itself as the standard of meaning is a substitution of the self for the beloved within the structures of eros.

Dorian Gray’s narrative represents precisely the impossibility of this structure of narcissistic subjectivity to sustain itself in the presence of the erotic. While the ninth chapter examined above constitutes the temporal bulk of Dorian’s story, it is the erotic encounters—with Basil Hallward,

with Lord Henry, with Sybil Vane—framing the Dorian’s aesthetic project which cash-out the significance of the aesthetic project contained in chapter nine.

In the immediate aftermath of his seduction, Dorian faces the portrait of Basil’s love for him, and rather than entering into the erotic relation there postulated and accepted the beloved other as standard of meaning, he substitutes his reflection in Basil’s gaze as the standard of significance. This sets the stage for both the unfolding of his encounter with Basil, and for his encounter with Sybil Vane, the distinction between which is enlightening. The reader fully cognizant of the queer register of the novel will read Dorian’s encounter with Sybil, in the first place, as the prototypical attempt of the queer person—particularly the homosexual—to conform to compulsory heterosexuality in finding a heteronormative relationship. Dorian’s case is however, of course, complicated by his narcissism. The erotic encounter between Dorian and Sybil is, strictly speaking, from the position of Dorian, never actually erotic at all. The reason for this is expressed succinctly in this exchange between Lord Henry and Dorian:

“You can dine with me to-night, Dorian, can’t you?”

He shook his head. “To-night she is Imogen,” he answered, “to-morrow night she will be Juliet.”

“When is she Sybil Vane?”

“Never.” (98)

Dorian does not love Sybil, because there is no Sybil—she “never really lived” (133). Dorian tries to say that she is, “more than an individual” (98), but Lord Henry is more accurate when he tells Dorian to mourn the deaths of the heroines she played, and adds “But don’t waste tears over Sybil Vane. She was less real than they are” (133). Sybil is identical with the characters she plays, that is, she is identical with the art she makes. And, as an artwork, “it is the spectator” that she “mirrors” (*DG* 239). Dorian’s love for Sybil is only ever a love for his own reflection in the aesthetic experience her acting offers.

At no point does Sybil replace Dorian as the standard of significance for Dorian. He, however, does come to be the standard of significance for Sybil. In a series of allusions to Plato's *Republic* and the allegory of the cave, Sybil tells Dorian,

before I know you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. I thought that it was all true...I know nothing but shadows, and I thought them real. You came,—oh, my beautiful love!—and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is...You brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection. You have made me understand what love really is. My love! my love! I am sick of shadows...I might mimic a passion that I do not feel, but I cannot mimic one that burns me like fire. (116-117)

In the face of Dorian's desire, Sybil's living only within the realm of art taken as autonomous from life becomes untenable as art seems to her nothing but a mimesis of life. At this moment, she can no longer perform, and being able no longer to perform, can no longer offer Dorian the reflection of himself that allows her to fit within the narcissistic structure of his consciousness. Dorian tells her, "You have killed my love" (117), and the wild, cruel torrent he unleashes upon her, together with his abandonment of her, drives her to suicide.

This false erotic encounter with Sybil is a mirror image of the erotic encounter with Basil which enfolds it. In the ninth chapter Dorian's aestheticism is represented, on the one hand, as a progression towards the full "spiritualization of the senses" and the attainment of the transcendent beautiful, and on the other as a condition of inaction, temporal suspension, and ambiguity between death and life. If Sybil is ambiguously alive, so here, as articulated above, is Dorian. Within the delimitation of chapter nine, this ambiguity seems stable. This, however, is only possible given the suspension of the erotic encounter between Basil and Dorian which is short-circuited, so to speak, when Dorian narcissistically perceives Basil's portrait as a mirror of his own beauty. In the dénouement of the novel Basil returns in such a way as to expose the



dynamics of Dorian's narcissism as unstable and, in parallel to the Dorian's impact on Sybil, necessitate the resolution of Dorian's ambiguity between life and death in suicide.

Face to face with the lover, the narcissist is moved to hatred. In the moment when he shows his portrait, burdened with the weight of his life, to Basil, "Dorian Gray glanced at the picture, and suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over him" (190). Anne Carson helpfully locates hatred as a response to love in the very phenomenon of eros itself, "Desire, then, is neither inhabitant nor ally of the desirer. Foreign to her will, it forces itself irresistibly upon her from without. Eros is an enemy. Its bitterness must be the taste of enmity. That would be hate" (4). Subjective autonomy is invaded by eros, as the presence of the beloved draws the lover out of themselves. The lover loses control—indeed, recognizes that control was only ever an illusion—and responds with rage at the cause of that loss. Dorian's position is not exactly the same as that Carson finds captured in Sappho's description of eros as "*glukupikron*," "bittersweet." The narcissist has attempted to prevent the dynamics of eros *glukupikron* through substitution of the self for the beloved. What is necessary to see is how this preventative effort is disrupted.

Throughout the novel, at his moments of greatest sin, Dorian's driving impulse is to justify himself before himself. First, as he confesses to Lord Henry and reflects upon the fact that he "murdered Sybil Vane" (190), and then as he reflects upon having actually murdered Basil and inspired the suicide of the man, Alan Campbell, he blackmails into erasing the evidence of Basil's murder, he determines "It was of himself, and of his own future, that he had to think" (214). His victims, indeed, become the perpetrators, "Nor, indeed, was it the death of Basil Hallward that weighed most upon his mind. It was the living death of his own soul that troubled him. Basil had painted the portrait that had marred his life. He could not forgive him that" (*ibid.*).

And finally, he goes on to conclude, “It was the portrait that had done everything” (*ibid.*). The portrait is of his own soul and reflects, not what others have done to him, but what he has done to himself. When the portrait changes in response to Dorian’s murders, it is his own responsibility. Yet, loving himself, he cannot ascribe that responsibility to himself. He must justify his beloved.

So long as the dynamics of erotics remain circumscribed within the individual subject, it would seem a potentially stable system. This system, however, is always already only imperfectly circumscribed. Dorian’s narcissism arises only in response to Lord Henry’s seduction in combination with the capturing of Basil’s loving gaze in the portrait. Narcissism, as an autonomous system of erotic relations, is predicated upon a perversion of a more originary eros. Dorian, like the pool in which Narcissus loses himself, relies upon the erotic gaze to mirror his own desirability back upon him. When Basil confronts Dorian about his reputation and insists upon knowing the truth, the initial refusal of openness to the erotic which initiated Dorian’s narrative is undone.

In this confrontation, Basil tells Dorian, “Know you? I wonder do I know you? Before I could answer that, I should have to see your soul,” and Dorian replies, “You shall see it yourself, to-night!...Come: it is your own handiwork” (184). At first, Dorian takes a “terrible joy” in the prospect of showing Basil the portrait (*ibid.*). However, when Basil stands before it, that joy changes into a disinterested, aesthetic appreciation: “watching him with that strange expression that is on the faces of those who are absorbed in a play” (188). As Basil observes the portrait and reads from it the sin it contains, however, Dorian is for the first time brought to tears (189). In that moment, Basil’s gaze replaces Dorian’s introspection as the the standard of meaning and the full burden of his responsibility comes over Dorian.

For an instant, a resolution seems possible. Basil insists that Dorian pray with him and that, “It is never too late” (189). Dorian, however, “glanced at the picture, and suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over him” (190). Basil, loving Dorian, strives to justify Dorian. Not, that is, to excuse his behavior—unlike the lover in Kierkegaard’s example, the conceit of the portrait means that Basil has absolute, incontrovertible certainty that Dorian is guilty—but to justify that behavior through accepting full responsibility. Love, as Basil illustrates, does not blind the lover to iniquities; it renders them for the lover beside the point. The beloved is justified even though they are guilty. Accepting this loving gesture and entering into an authentic erotic relation to Basil, however, remains for Dorian impossible.

To insist that the beloved be justified is not only to insist that the beloved be justified in or despite their actions, it is to insist that the beloved receive what is their just due. Dorian has manifested this impulse towards himself repeatedly, as in the moment when reflecting on his behavior to Sybil Vane he thinks to himself:

Cruelty! Had he been cruel? It was the girl’s fault, not his. He had dreamed of her as a great artist, had given his love to her because he had thought her great. Then she had disappointed him. She been shallow and unworthy. (121)

In the first moment, Dorian justifies his own actions. In the second, he lays blame on Sybil for being unworthy of him, for not rendering to him what he is justly due. When, under Basil’s gaze, Dorian glances at his portrait and sees “that accursed thing leering” at him (190), he recognizes the claims his beloved—himself—holds against him who victimized his beloved—again, himself. To accept Basil’s love and recognize his own sin, he would have to recognize the claims to justice he holds against himself, and hold himself accountable. However, loving himself, he can do no such thing; he must hold himself to be justified. Caught in this intractable paradox, the conditions of his autonomy revealed to be fundamentally unstable, Dorian finds himself

overcome. Like Sappho's lover in Carson's recounting of *glukupikros erōs*, Dorian, overcome by a force foreign to his will, is driven to hate of the origin of that force.

Dorian cannot face his own iniquities, and yet he also cannot face Basil's love, in which Dorian's iniquities would become justified. Confronted with eros, the autonomy project of aestheticism as radicalised in narcissism is shown to stand on fundamentally unstable ground. In turn, when confronted with the possibility of a grounding upon the gaze of the lover, narcissism prevents any such reorientation. Dorian murders Basil, the proximate cause of the disruption of his subjective autonomy, then turns upon himself. The paradox of self-negation for the sake of self-assertion which has been held in dialectical suspension from the moment of Dorian's bifurcation between body and portrait as an ambiguity of being-dead-although-living resolves as Dorian actualizes the suicide implicit in auto-vivisection.

Displacing responsibility for his suffering and the transformation of the image of his soul in the portrait from himself to the portrait, he determines to destroy the portrait and in so doing, "kill the past, and when that was dead he would be free" (216). Attempting in this moment to realize as permanent the momentary escape from time offered by the aesthetic—"Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought/As doth eternity" (Keats 44-45)—the radicalisation of the autonomy posited by aestheticism as subjective nihilism is realized. The only escape from one's past, and likewise, the only escape from the other who in eros overtakes the subject and drives them mad, is death.

Dorian's absolute assertion of autonomy resolving as suicidal fragmentation may be reinscribed in the categories I began this excursus with as a refusal of the silent acknowledgment which constitutes the glass closet. Standing before Basil, Dorian is in the first moment perceived as an organic unity; there may be rumors about him, but Basil is able to say,

Mind you, I don't believe these rumors at all. At least, I can't believe them when I see you. Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. People talk of secret vices. There are no such things as secret vices. (182)

In the second moment, however, Dorian is perceived as fragmentary. Basil in this moment cannot resolve his understanding of Dorian between the unblemished exterior he presents, and the gossip which hounds Dorian:

Then there are other stories, stories that you have been seen creeping at dawn out of the dreadful houses and slinking in disguise into the foulest dens in London. Are they true? Can they be true? Which I first heard them, I laughed. I hear them now, they make me shudder. (183)

Between these Dorians, the one Basil believes himself to know and the one who is split between an irreproachable public self and a scandalous hidden self, Basil cannot ascertain the truth. To do that he says to Dorian, "I should have to see your soul...But only God can do that" (184). Which is to say, the tension between Dorian as an organic, self-organizing individual and a fragmentary, ultimately dissolute and incoherent multiplicity can only be resolved from a position of absolute epistemic privilege. In the moment when Basil stands before both Dorian and the portrait of his soul, the glass closet appears on the horizon of possibility. Basil does not insist upon resolving whether Dorian is either his unitary or fragmentary self. Rather, he is to Basil, in some way, both. Moreover, this acknowledgement by Basil of Dorian's liminally bifurcated self is done, not as an explicit naming, but by way of a silence. Basil does not insist that Dorian confess and enumerate his sins, the content of his life which has formed the image of his soul in the portrait, but only that he join him in "repentance" (189). The relationship the fully epistemically privileged reader stands in towards Basil in the first chapter of the novel, is repeated in Basil's relationship to Dorian. His closeted position is known and acknowledged, yet not named. Dorian is indeterminate, yet determinately so.

Dorian, however, rejects this possibility. Remaining narcissistically motivated towards an assertion of absolute autonomy, Dorian rejects any subjective dependence upon an other as well as any indetermination in himself. Read by way of Wilde's allusions to Plato as I have, Dorian Gray's tragedy may be considered an exploration of the horizons of aestheticism as the radicalisation of the narcissism implicit in the philosophical understanding of the self and eros. Having elaborated these dynamics and illustrated how they manifest in Dorian's case a failure of the glass closet, the task of the next section will be to reinscribe these events in terms of Wilde's allusions to the Biblical narratives of the Garden of Eden and Passion of Christ and to see what difference the reorientation makes.

#### IV. The Garden of Eden: Reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Biblically

I suggested in the previous section that, having centered Basil's garden and the queerly erotic, the narrative of *Dorian Gray* comes to read as that of Dorian's philosophical seduction by Lord Henry. For the epistemically privileged reader this, in turn, draws forward allusions to and parallels with Plato's *Phaedrus*, opening the text to a "Platonic" or "philosophical" reading structured in terms of the intertextual relationship with Plato's *œuvre*. Here, I wish to suggest that for a more particular set of epistemically privileged readers, the Platonic reading I have outlined, in turn, draws forward allusions to and parallels with the Bible, particularly the Garden of Eden narrative of Genesis and the Passion of the Christ as reported in the Gospels. The coexistence of these registers in the novel, like the coexistence of the "straight" and "queer" registers is structured, I aim to show, according to the contours of the glass closet. Initiated through strategies of "silent" discourse, that is, never allusion which never explicitly names, three positions are described: a first, oblivious position, in which neither the Platonic nor the Biblical register are perceived; a second, partially knowing position, in which the reading offered to the first, oblivious position, as well as the Platonic reading are perceived; and a third, fully knowing position, in which the first two readings as well as the Biblical are available. The first position would contain within itself all three positions relative to the queerness of the text, though it is only through the queer "seduction" register that the further Platonic and Biblical registers become available. Meanwhile, the final Biblical reading potentially sublates the previous ones, offering a fuller reading, yet this final sublation remains suspended as the ambiguity of the text inherent to its silent strategies of discourse prevents a final determination in one direction or another. The only available determination is as this particular set of indeterminacy relative to the epistemic privilege or lack thereof of the the reader.

My specific proposal for this section is to take Basil's garden, which I have transposed, as it were, into a Platonic context in which it reads as an analogy for the sacred grove along the road between Athens and the Piraeus, and transpose it again into a Biblical context, in which it reads as analogous to the Garden of Eden. This transposition is made possible through three hermeneutic moves. First, in reading the text queerly, Dorian's encounter with Lord Henry is legible as a seduction in a garden. Second, in reading the text Platonically, that seduction is legible as a seduction into philosophy and an initiation into a particular sort of knowledge. Third, in the final chapters of the book explicitly religious language—particularly at the moment when Basil insists Dorian pray the Lord's Prayer with him (189)—directs the reader who is in a position of epistemic privilege so as to already be open to this possibility, to return to that seduction into knowledge in the garden and see it as the seduction by the snake of Adam and Eve into eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Biblical register, therefore, is available only as a sort of "reading back into" the text. Even more than the readings previously articulated, this reading depends upon the intervention of the reader to organize the text according to principles not immediately imminent to it. As such a reading back, however, this insistence on the intervention of the reader from the outside does not mitigate the authority of such a reading; rather, it privileges it. In turning back into and reinterpreting the text, the reader places all previous readings under the sign of the final reading.

This hermeneutic move would be analogous to that dictated by the supersessionist hermeneutic strategies of Christian Biblical exegesis which, taking Paul's "to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile" as a guiding hermeneutic principle (Authorized King James Version, Rom. 1:16; 2:9-10), read the Hebrew Bible as containing an initial message which is augmented and sublated—though not, necessarily, negated—by a second message legible only in reference to the



Gospels. Unlike Christian supersessionist exegetes, however, for whom the privileged position of the reading “to the Gentile” is absolute and unquestionable, the position of the Biblical register within the text of *Dorian Gray* remains insistently ambiguous. The task in reading the novel Biblically is therefore aimed at understanding this ambiguity and where the refusal of the text to finally determine its own meaning leads, or does not. In order to do so, I will parallel the supersessionist exegesis Wilde analogues. First, I will read Basil’s garden as the Garden of Eden of Genesis, recasting the events and characters as necessary. Second, taking Dorian as Adam and his portrait as a “Second Adam” (1 Cor. 15:45), reading the destruction of that Second Adam as a perverted Crucifixion.

Returning to Basil’s garden and reading it as the Garden of Eden, where Lord Henry was Socrates and Dorian Phaedrus, Dorian is now—ambiguously—Adam and Eve, and Lord Henry the serpent. In turn, the seduction into philosophy is here the eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. As was established in the Platonic reading above, the philosophical aestheticism Lord Henry offers Dorian here is not the immoralism or anti-ethics it at first appears to be. It is, rather, itself an ethical philosophy in which the practice of erotics and desire for the beautiful lead the soul upwards, away from the debased condition of embodiment towards the transcendental beautiful with its “Divine right of sovereignty” (78). It is a “knowledge of good and evil” which, to amend my earlier, Platonic analysis does not merely lead one to the beautiful in its divinity, but, Lord Henry suggests, makes one divine oneself:

You have a wonderfully beautiful face, Mr. Gray. Don’t frown. You have. And Beauty is a form of Genius, is higher indeed than Genius, as it needs no explanation. It is one of the great facts of the world, like sunlight, or spring-time, or the reflection in dark waters of that silver shell we call the moon. It cannot be questioned. It has its Divine right of sovereignty. (*ibid.*)

Likewise, the serpent tells Eve that, contrary to God's warning, if she and Adam should eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, "Ye shall not die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4-5). Lord Henry is here suggesting to Dorian that he could be as God, for he is beautiful and beauty, both being and transcending all categories of knowledge subsumable under "Genius," has "Divine right of sovereignty."

When Dorian succumbs to Lord Henry's seduction, as when Adam and Eve succumb to the serpents, what he learns is not merely the sense in which he is divine and transcendent, but the sense in which he is human and bodily. When Adam and Eve eat the fruit that is offered them, God observes, "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil" (Gen. 3:22), yet in the same moment, "the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (Gen. 3:7). When Dorian, shaken by his encounter with Lord Henry, looks at the portrait Basil has painted of him, "his own beauty came on him like a revelation" (81). It was "as if he had recognized himself for the first time" (*ibid.*). Yet again, in this same moment, he reflects on what Lord Henry has just told him—"Beauty...makes princes of those who have it. You smile? Ah! When you have lost it you won't smile" (78)—and thinks to himself,

Yes: there would be a day when his face would be wrinkled and wizen, his eyes dim and colourless, the grace of his figure broken and deformed. The scarlet would pass away from his lips, and the gold steal from his hair. (81)

Looking at the portrait of himself, he declares, "I shall grow old, and horrid, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young" (82). At once beautiful, and therefore like the divine which transcends the temporality of material being, he recognizes the material embodiment which will subject him, necessarily, to the passage of time and, eventually, to death: "I am jealous of everything whose beauty does not die" (83).

Here, however, arises a distinction between Adam and Eve, on the one hand, and Dorian, on the other. In the wake of Adam's seduction, God intervenes and casts him from the Garden of Eden, "lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever" (Gen. 3:22). Adam leaves his seduction behind knowing both his dignity and his shame, his transcendental soul and his body, and that these are inseparable. The conceit of the picture is precisely that Dorian leaves his seduction having realized the separation of body and soul and transcendence of time and mortality. As Dorian recounts to Basil in their last encounter, he stood before the portrait of himself and, "In a mad moment, that I don't know, even now, whether I regret or not, I made a wish. Perhaps you would call it a prayer" (188). He sees that portrait will remain beautiful while he ages and that, "Every moment that passes takes something from me and gives something to it. Oh, if it was only the other way!" (83). For Dorian, this comes true. Where Adam's fall from grace is immediate, Dorian's fall from being "the most unspoiled creature in the whole world" (189), is in this sense suspended. Dorian's knowledge of himself and the implications thereof—that he is in fact mortal, that he will in fact die—remains incomplete.

The resolution of this incomplete fall is answered in reading the the doubling of Dorian in the portrait as the repetition of Adam in the Second Adam that is Christ. The portrait, in the first place, is never precisely of Dorian, but of Basil's "idolatry" (144). Basil "worships" Dorian (66), and this is what the portrait depicts—"every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist not of the sitter" (61). In turn, Dorian, in his narcissism, is not merely "jealous" (83) and "in love with" (84) the portrait, he idolizes it. When, in their final encounter, Basil implore Dorian to pray the Lord's Prayer with him, he tells Dorian,

The prayer of your pride has been answered. The prayer of your repentance will be answered also. I worshipped you too much. I am punished for it. You worshipped yourself too much. We are both punished. (189)

Dorian constitutes the portrait as an idol and personal Christ; it will bear the burden of his sins, and suffer on his behalf. Translated from the language of erotics which accompanies Plato to the language of worship which accompanies the Bible, narcissism reads as auto-deification. The narcissist can neither love another, nor worship another, nor depend upon another for the constitution of meaning in their world, nor, finally, depend upon another for their salvation.

Dorian must be his own Christ, he at the same moment cannot. Salvation in Christ is dependent upon Christ's being non-identical with who is to be saved. The dynamics of the narcissist are repeated, the self bifurcated unsustainably between lover and beloved, the latter both identical and non-identical with the self. Dorian bifurcates himself between saved and saving, the latter both identical and non-identical with himself. In turn, the narcissist's paradox of justification—on the one hand, called by eros to justify his own actions, and on the other hand called by eros to attain justice for the harm those actions cause himself—is repeated. To be his own Christ he must both, somehow, suffer the full weight of his own sins and redeem in graceful forgiveness those sins. He must save himself and, at the same time, sacrifice himself. As such, when Basil calls him to repentance before the portrait of his soul, that is, to acknowledge in fullness responsibility for his life, he can do no such thing.

Grace, being entirely undeserved, justifies the saved even as they are guilty. Accepting such a grace requires accepting a dependence upon external justification. As in the case with the Platonic reading, where Basil's love insisting upon this external dependence moves Dorian to murderous hatred, so here Basil's direction of Dorian towards God's grace moves him to kill Basil. This murder, however, does not resolve the paradox raised by Basil's directing Dorian to the question of his own salvation. The portrait, which Dorian has posited as his Christ, now appears to him, in light of this irresolvable paradox, as the origin of his damnation. In the final

scene of the novel, with the night laying over the house, which “was all dark, except for a light in one of the top windows” (217), Dorian mounts to the top of the house and takes up the knife with which he has killed Basil. Knife in hand, he “stabbed the canvas with it, ripping the thing right from top to bottom” (*ibid*), echoing the Gospel account that “the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom” at the moment of the Crucifixion (Matt. 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). As Christ “cried again with a loud voice” when he “yielded up the ghost” such that “the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; and the graves were opened” (Matt. 27:50-51), so when Dorian destroys the portrait, “There was a cry heard, and a crash.” As at the Crucifixion, “the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose” (Matt. 27:52), so at the destruction of the portrait, “The cry was so horrible in its agony that the frightened servants woke, and crept out of their rooms” (217). Dorian, in attempting to destroy the source of his suffering, at the same moment destroys his anointed salvation. That is, he kills himself.

Read in this way, the destruction of the portrait is on Dorian’s part both a final attempt at autonomy—the destruction of that externality which would suffer for him and be his salvation—and a rejection of autonomy, of the possibility of being his own justification. It is, in turn, both a final rejection of fragmentation and assertion of fragmentation. It appears, moreover, to be a rejection on Dorian’s part of a further possibility beyond the glass closet not yet explored. In invoking God and the act of prayerful repentance, Basil both invokes the Biblical register which informs this reading, and an epistemic position distinct from any of the three I have concerned myself with thus far. Within the epistemology of the closet, there is the ignorant other, the partially knowing other, and the fully knowing other, the last being that which allows the glass closet to crystalize. This final position, however, is established by an essentially silent relationship which insists upon persistent ambiguity. Standing in relationship to God removes all

such silent ambiguity. In rejecting the prayerful act of repentance before God Basil calls Dorian to, Dorian rejects the possibility of standing in such a relationship of declarations and certitude.

Where one might expect a more realist novel to strive to place the reader in relation to the text in such a God-like position, *Dorian Gray* defers that position beyond the reader. The reader, rather, stands in relation to Dorian much as Basil does; even with the fullest possible knowledge of the text, it remains insistently ambiguous. Every detail of every reading I have offered—from the queer to the Platonic to the Biblical—is available only insofar as the reader intervenes within the text. The novel may invite through strategies of silent allusion the intertextual readings I have suggested, but it refuses to ever explicitly name and thereby demands those readings. In insisting to the last in every successive register upon this ambiguity, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offers no determination. Rather, it gestures beyond the itself and solutions suggested by its own aesthetics and epistemology. Implicit in the queer for Oscar Wilde, it would seem, is a gesture at once profound and ambiguous towards Christian faith and the religious.

## V. Epilogue: Towards a Theology of the Broken Heart

How else may man make straight his plan  
And cleanse his soul from sin?  
How else but through a broken heart  
May Lord Christ enter in? (*Ballad* 615-618)

Oscar Wilde's particular fascination with the figure of Christ is a persistent, if secondary, feature of the criticism. Guy Willoughby is unique in taking the figure of Christ as the singular organizing principle of Wilde's work (*Art and Christhood* 15), but a critic as prominent as Julia Prewitt Brown takes Wilde's relationship to Jesus as central. One of her more intent interventions is, for one, to draw Wilde away from Walter Pater's Hellenistic and Darwinistic aestheticism and towards John Ruskin's Christian aestheticism (8-10). She goes as far as to claim that Wilde's "most original achievement, his theologically imbued *De Profundis*" (xviii), represents "the culmination of the Wildean aesthetic speculations" (xiii). It is with this understanding of *De Profundis* as Wilde's "culmination" that I take issue.

For both Willoughby and Brown, Wilde's Christ is a thoroughly secularized Christ. Brown insists that, "Although Wilde was preoccupied with the figure of Jesus from his early years his perennial toying with formal conversion to Catholicism had the air of insolence from beginning to end" (39). For Willoughby, it is "Wilde's remodeled Jesus" (15), that is, Jesus stripped of his divinity and transferred entirely from the sphere of the religious to that of art, that is remarkable. I believe this shared valorization of the figure of a secularized Jesus—it is noteworthy that both Brown and Willoughby seem to almost squeamishly prefer "Jesus" while Wilde consistently prefers "Christ"—is grounded in their taking the earlier works of "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (in Willoughby's case) and *De Profundis* (in Brown's case) as archetypical of Wilde's Christianity. It may seem strange to refer to *De Profundis* as a relatively early work, but it is Wilde's penultimate composition, not his final one. That title belongs to

Wilde's unabashedly Christian *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. The poem is, besides his last composition, perhaps his most shamefully underappreciated work. I suspect that this is in no small part because its explicit religious themes make Wilde's largely secular academic readership—especially those deeply invested in championing profoundness and seriousness of Wilde's modernity—uneasy. My proposal here is to reverse this disease and read *The Ballad* as, more so than *De Profundis*, the culmination of Wilde's *œuvre*. In so doing, I believe the theology implicit to the poem may be legible as the closest thing Wilde offers to an answer to the questions raised in gesture at the conclusion of *Dorian Gray*.

Written after serving his conviction for sodomy in Reading Gaol, the ballad takes the execution of a fellow inmate who has murdered his own wife as the occasion for a reflection on the relationship between justice, love, murder, and salvation. As the poem opens, the bifurcated structures of the closeted aesthetics appear to be at work. The narrator begins watching the condemned man, yet remarks of him,

A cricket cap was on his head,  
And his step seemed light and gay;  
But I never saw a man who looked  
So wistfully at the day. (9-12)

As he continues, he reflects, “And, though I was a soul in pain, / My pain I could not feel” (25-26). In the first instant, the condemned man himself is perceived as in someway fragmented, what the narrator knows of him being irreconcilable with the impression of the man. He is both apparently happy and necessarily, in his condemnation, in anguish. In the next moment, the narrator experiences an incoherence in himself, a knowledge of his own condition that does not align with his experience of that condition. As the poem continues, the sense of fragmentation spreads to the whole of the inmates, as the narrator recounts how, even as they would go about the daily tasks that are their punishment, “in the heart of every man / Terror was lying still” (227-



228). Public selves which go stonily about their daily tasks are matched with private selves filled with frantic terror. These private selves in turn, however, are not so private; there is a communal sense to horror in the place and a shared experience of hidden dread.

This structure, for the moment, closely resembles the glass closet. Caught between the self which can yet look,

with such a wistful eye  
Upon that little tent of blue  
Which prisoners call the sky,  
and at every drifting cloud that went  
With sails of silver by (13-18)

and the self which is torn apart by anguish and dread, the prisoners gain a semblance of determinacy relative to the other prisoners who, though that anguish and dread cannot be named, recognize and share in their condition. However, and here Wilde begins to push past the determined ambiguity of *Dorian Gray*, this determinacy is for the inmates no real solution. The real suffering in the jail, the narrator reports, is not the physical suffering, as harsh as it is, but how “every stone one lifts by day / Becomes one’s heart by night” (587-588). He continues,

With midnight always in one’s heart,  
And twilight in one’s cell,  
We turn the crank, or tear the rope,  
Each in his separate Hell. (589-592)

Whatever they may share of their existential condition, at the end of each day the prisoners return to their cell. As a community, the jail may offer a determinate indeterminacy through the silent sharing of suffering, but what is determinate is still a living and ultimately a lonely hell.

At this moment, the final dénouement of the long poem, however, Wilde suggests that precisely in the hardening of the heart that the jail entails, lies the possibility of salvation: “God’s eternal Laws are kind / And break the heart of stone” (605-606). Where earlier the narrator must say, “I know not whether Laws be right, / Or whether Laws be wrong” (535-536):

But this I know, that every Law  
That men hath made for Man,  
Since first Man took his brother's life,  
And the sad world began,  
But straws the wheat and saves the chaff  
With a most evil fan (541-546)

here he is able to juxtapose the law of God. This is not a novel notion, that the law of God—particular the law of love instituted by Christ—overturns the harshness of human law. The notion that, as Wilde puts it, “the crimson stain that was of Cain / Became Christ’s snow-white seal” (635-636), is a striking but traditional one. What is novel is the representation of the dynamics of eros Wilde situates as underlying the transvaluation.

Paired with the question, “How else but through a broken heart / May Lord Christ enter in?” (617-618) is the proclamation,

The man had killed the thing he loved,  
And so he had to die.

And all men kill the thing they love,  
By all let this be heard. (647-650)

Earlier, I analyzed the sense in which eros entails both love and hate. The latter conclusion, that “all men kill the thing they love” seems to be the suggestion taken to its fullest conclusion.

“Desire, then, is neither inhabitant nor ally of the desirer. Foreign to her will, it forces itself irresistibly upon her from without. Eros is an enemy. Its bitterness must be the taste of enmity.

That would be hate” (4), as Anne Carson unpacks the coming together of *odi et amo*. Love comes over the subject not merely as a desire, but as an uncontrollable desire. The lover falls in love whether they want to love the beloved or not; in Plato’s language, they are driven mad.

Implicit in this is the disastrous undermining of subjective autonomy which drives Dorian to murder Basil, and eventually to kill his true beloved, himself. That this dynamic applies to all

lovers is trickier to see. It may help to reflect on an early exchange between Lord Henry and Dorian:

“There is no such thing as a good influence, Mr. Gray. All influence is immoral—immoral from the scientific point of view.”

“Why?”

“Because to influence a person is give him one’s own soul.” (73)

When the lover reaches out to touch and take hold of the beloved, when they attempt to seduce the desired, they attempt to excerpt their influence on the beloved. Attempting to grasp the beloved as one’s own, the lover attempts to arrest the lover as they are and fit them to the mold which motivates the lover’s desire. In so doing, the lover attempts to negate the beloved as a distinct being from themselves. Desire does not merely disturb the foundations of the lover’s own autonomy, it moves them to disturb the foundations of the beloved’s autonomy, even the beloved’s distinction. Whether by a “sword” (654), or, more likely, a “kiss” (653), “word” (652), or “look” (651), the lover moves to kill the beloved.

It might seem evident that it is only just that a murderer should die, but here it is the particular murder of the beloved which demands justice. This dynamic was seen in *Dorian Gray*, both when Dorian must kill Basil because Basil has harmed his beloved—himself—and when he must destroy the painting and in so doing kill himself. Perhaps more poignantly, this dynamic can be read in Basil’s painting of the portrait which shows his “idolatry” (144). Basil, in the portrait, tries to capture and arrest the image of Dorian he loves. In so doing, he is the proximate cause of Dorian’s “suicidal” prayer that his soul leave his body for the portrait, and a cause, ultimately, of Dorian’s eventual actualized death in the destruction of that portrait.

Dorian’s heart, unlike the prisoners of Reading Gaol, is never broken. He is never subject to the pain of watching his beloved die at his own hands. It is precisely in having one’s heart broken, however, that the possibility of a relationship to that which, in its absolute nature, cannot

be destroyed by the dynamics of eros is opened. Basil offers, in Dorian's personal dénouement, the opportunity to turn with him towards God. In order to do so, he would have to experience not only the insufficiency of his own autonomy to establish standards of meaning, but ultimately the insufficiency of the erotic other. The glass closet structure of determinate indeterminacy seems stable, an irresolvable liminality which holds the dialectic of asserted and negated selfhood in suspension. How long, however, can a dialectic be held in suspension? Within *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the question is only gestured towards. However, in the intervention by God suggested by Basil but never brought to bear upon the text, the solution of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* seems to be posed. If the paradoxically *glukupikros* nature of loving desire determines the human other, even the human other with the fullest possible knowledge of the subject, as an insufficient grounds for determination, it can only be in relationship to the divine other whose absolute knowledge infinitely surpasses all possible human knowledge that sufficient grounds might be established. Much as it was only through the partially cognizant position that the fully cognizant position of the glass closet could be arrived at, moreover, here it appears to be that it is through the fully cognizant position of the glass closet that the absolute position of the relationship to God appears.

Realizing aesthetically such an epistemological relation of dependence upon the absolute would be, however, beyond the ontological possibility encompassed by the aesthetic. All art stands in relation to a necessarily human audience which is called to determine, of their own accord, whether to "go beneath the surface" or to "read the symbol" (*DG* 239). The relationship to God would posit God as a third term, an absolute point according to which the subject and their other, the artwork and its audience, could orient themselves with the absolute certainty the aesthetics of autonomy seek in the I. I suggested above that Wilde turns Pascal's *pensée* which

asks, of the appropriate orientation point, “Perspective determines in the art of painting, but in truth and in morality, who will determine it?” (Pascal S56/L21), on its head, insisting that it be asked with beauty as much as with truth and morality, who will determine the proper perspective? Now, in the context of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, I wish to suggest that his answer is twofold. On the one hand, for truth, ethics, and art taken in themselves, there is no single given point. The art of perspective can only guide us through what are the essentially anarchic and ever-shifting conditions of lived reality. On the other hand, stepping outside the necessarily delimited scope of each of these spheres and viewing the given reality as potentially in relation to a position beyond it, the answer for beauty, as much as for truth and morality, is God.

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## Curriculum Vitae

Harel Newman was born in Chicago on September 1, 1991. He received his BA in Liberal Arts from St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland in 2013. Currently a student on the Intellectual History track within the Humanities Center, his research lays at the intersections of literature, philosophy, and religion, with particular interest in how marginalized identities and marginal traditions within the normative Western tradition both navigate modernity and wrestle with the Classical inheritance. I am especially interested in how marginalized figures within the long twentieth century alternately mobilize religious and theological themes in this process. Particularly relevant figures include Oscar Wilde, Flannery O'Connor, and Jean Genet. Fields of interest include queer literature and theology, the philosophy of love and desire, philosophical aesthetics, and religious existentialisms— particularly Kierkegaard, Pascal, and Martin Buber.