

Subversive Aims: Science and Contamination in Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray

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*I*n *The Picture of Dorian Gray* we find the obsession with physiological processes that is typical of decadent texts. The decay of the body stands in a specular relationship with the decay of the work of art and it is the play between these two categories – the body and the work of art – that sustains the thematic level of the story as well as Wilde's commentary on modernity. *Dorian Gray* is the picture of corrupted personal development. We meet the protagonist in a state of physical perfection and spiritual innocence and we follow him and his portrait through the path of physical and moral degeneration. The tension between the original state of the body and its final state remains in the background as our attention is shifted to a process of contamination that affects the physical realm but whose cause is intellectual – a fatal influence of ideas. The ravaging effects of time on his portrait and of the poisonous book on his soul, turn a temporal progression, the chronology of the novel, of the work of art, into a site of regression and finally self-destruction of the protagonist.¹

A preoccupation with the relation between physiological processes and art, between nature and artifice, has long been recognized as a topos of decadent literature. Degeneration, a term that had been employed in conjunction with natural, historical, artistic, and moral realms by the decadents (and prominent anti-decadents like Max Nordau)² is held in traditional and contemporary criticism as the obverse side of progress: the signpost of a fundamental reaction against the pervasive impact of

positivism and science. This reaction, moreover, has frequently been portrayed as a purely aesthetic response – the term aesthetic referring not only to the creative milieu that characterized decadent literature but also as a term connoting a fundamental incompatibility with science. For some critics, the reaction of the aesthetic against the scientific carried suspicions that the former had little knowledge of the latter and was simply reacting against it.³

The publication of Wilde's Oxford Notebooks in 1989 called this set of assumptions into question. The ample annotations and comments under scrutiny revealed that Wilde not only cared deeply about science but also had extensive knowledge of nineteenth-century scientific debates and of the individual contributions that informed them.⁴ While this reassessment of science in Wilde's work has rectified previous misconceptions – that the scientific notions invoked by Wilde were uninformed, marginal, and secondary to an aesthetic project – it has proceeded concomitantly with the emergence of new theoretical and interpretative limitations, stemming from an overreliance on Wilde's notion of harmony as master idea.

The editors of the Notebooks, Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand, in their seminal contribution to Wildean studies, appear to have taken too literally J.E. Chamberlin's remark that "many Oxford students in the 1870's claimed that for a long period they never saw Darwin except through Hegelian bifocals" (17).⁵ Despite claims to the contrary, Smith subsumes textual complexities and contradictions under the rubric of a Wildean synthesis of aesthetics and science driven by the "metaphysical assumptions" of "Hegel's philosophy of dialectical spiritual progress" (33) and by Wilde's "master idea" of "harmony:"

Here I want to stress the importance of a master idea, what Wilde called "one high law, the law of form or harmony" ("English Renaissance" 445). The imagination, understood as a faculty of mind, intuits the harmonies, sees the analogies, and constructs the correspondences. Wilde's synthesis itself is an example of the aesthetic urge toward

order, harmony, and, as he phrased it in the entry on analogy, "mutual correspondence" of thought. This law of harmony does not eliminate or foreclose artistic and critical disagreements, oppositions, and conflicts: instead, it assumes the dialectical necessity for them in a progressive, but not necessarily orderly, development. (32)

The difficulty in reconciling this sweeping characterization with Wilde's role as decadent writer is evident in the footnote that accompanies the passage: "He [Wilde] conceded, however, that regression or stagnation might follow periods of historical progress; for example, he viewed Roman culture as such a period in the history of art and literature" (32).

The concept of synthesis also underlies John Wilson Foster's essay "Against Nature? Science and Oscar Wilde," which shares many of Smith and Helfand's assumptions but reaches a more skeptical conclusion regarding the synthesis' "dialectical necessity" for oppositions. He takes the interest in science documented in the Notebooks as evidence that "Wilde was the aesthete who, in one of the larger paradoxes of his career, gave aestheticism a scientific foundation" (340).

If the two approaches reflect a different view of the role of oppositions in Wilde's work, they share the assumption that a closer relation between science and aesthetics was an attempt to buttress the aesthetic with scientific principles. The aesthetic project no longer stood in reaction against a little-understood science but was now able to incorporate its language and principles.

Even in more recent scholarship that has focused on Wilde's indebtedness to and textual appropriation of contemporary competing scientific tenets – particularly his interest in theories of heredity – we find a tendency to describe his art as "informed" by science. The relation between context and text appears particularly mono-directional in Michael Wainwright's otherwise excellent article, "Oscar Wilde, the Science of Heredity, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*." While tracing "the reciprocal manner in which evolutionary thought and aesthetic practice shaped one

another in the late nineteenth century” he illustrates how “contradictory but contemporary scientific hypotheses informed Wilde’s artistic practice, the science of heredity emerging as a potent source for his aestheticism.”⁶ This is undoubtedly an original and productive line of inquiry, but one that can result, as it does in Wainwright’s article, in a narrow depiction of Wilde’s aesthetic project – as one that chronicles rather than engages contemporary scientific debates.

Departing from these characterizations, I argue that in *Dorian Gray*, “Wilde’s project” had a more radical and subversive ambition: the aestheticization of the scientific method – a new conceptualization of observation and experimentation. This scientific stance would be grounded in the mechanisms of the imagination instead of neutral and objective recording devices of external reality.

The aestheticization of science exemplified by Lord Wotton’s evil experiment on Dorian cannot simply be dismissed as a reaction of aestheticism/decadence against science. It is equally misguided for the task of reevaluating the role of science in Wilde’s work to see subversion as secondary to synthesis. It obfuscates Wilde’s trenchant and ironic critique of pre-established moral categories that guide or reinforce scientific inquiry. Science is not taken by Wilde at face value: through the distortion of its precepts, its epistemology is dissected and questioned – tested if you will – as if it were the object of observation rather than the privileged locus of the observer. Contrary to the prevailing wisdom of scientific discourse, truth, as Wilde makes clear in “The Decay of Lying,” is not necessarily desirable and it is, in any case, a product of style and not facts. Wilde’s “harmony” is always undercut by irony, by his preference of paradox over linear reasoning and his distaste for closure in general.

Society sooner or later must return to its lost leader, the cultured and fascinating liar [...] For the aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure. He is the very basis of civilized society [...] Art, breaking from the prison-house of realism, will run to greet him, and will

kiss his false, beautiful lips, knowing that he alone is in possession of the great secrets of all her manifestations, the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style; while Life – poor, probable, uninteresting human life – tired of repeating herself for the benefit of Mr. Herbert Spencer, scientific historians, and the compilers of statistics in general, will follow meekly after him, and try to reproduce, in her own simple and untutored way, some of the marvels of which he talks. (305)

Wilde's critique of science, in this passage as in many others, is directed at its inability to deal with human pleasure, which he considered fundamental to human knowledge and uniquely possessing intrinsic value.⁷ The facts that established science uses to measure and determine value, remain outside the realm of passions and as such they are considered sterile and incapable of providing a nuanced understanding of human nature. Style, on the other hand, is the product of imagination and a mirror of human passions, of that inner life that Wilde recognized as authentic in contrast to the external and organic human life that science had taken as its object of observation.

The subversion of science's aims, as exemplified in *Dorian Gray* by Lord Wotton's evil experiment on Dorian, reintroduces those aspects of inner life – of the observer as well as of the observed – sensations, passions and emotions that the world of science, when applied to human behavior, had often considered beyond its scope. Wotton had an unorthodox relationship with his object of observation, one that moved from psychology to a certain cultural anthropology.⁸

He had been always enthralled by the methods of natural science, but the ordinary subject-matter of that science had seemed to him trivial and of no import. And so he had begun by vivisecting himself, as he had ended by vivisecting others. Human life – that appeared to him the one thing worth investigating. Compared to it there was nothing else of any value.

And this anthropology was conducted in ways that made scientific detachment neither desirable nor possible. As the following passage makes clear, the scientist seeks intoxication from his own experiment, to “inhale its fumes,” a direct involvement that would allow him to move from observation to creation to ultimate knowledge.

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, nor 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. And, yet, what a great reward one received! How wonderful the whole world became to one!

Poison is the medium of choice that allows the scientist to transform the experiment into experience while retaining the intellectual gaze, in fact enhancing his perception of the intricate connection between logic and emotions.

To note the curious hard logic of passion, and the emotional coloured life of the intellect – to observe where they met, and where they separated, at what point they were in unison, and at what point they were at discord – there was a delight in that! What matter what the cost was? One could never pay too high a price for any sensation. (218)⁹

In crafting the character of Lord Wotton, Wilde would have been acutely aware of the price paid for sensations by an actual poisoner. Wilde had telegraphed his fascination with such a man in 1889 with the

publication of "Pen, Pencil, and Poison. A Study in Green," a short memoir of the life of Victorian artist, critic, and poisoner Thomas Griffith Wainewright.¹⁰ The chronological proximity of the essay with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891) is intriguing but not as relevant for the present discussion as their intertextual connections – so numerous and intricate that one is tempted to read Wilde's novel as a coda to the essay. While Wilde's appreciation of the power of suggestion is in full display throughout "Pen, Pencil, and Poison," its closing line "to be suggestive for fiction is to be of more importance than a fact" (122) underscores the suggestive effect and leads one to wonder whether it refers to the works of fictions that had already been inspired by Wainewright's life (he mentions Dickens' *Hunted Down* and Bulwer's *Lucretia*) or indeed to Wilde's novel.¹¹

Dorian Gray fills the imaginative space left by Wainewright's "lost book" – the poisoner's scientific log that Wilde would have liked to peruse: "How he first became fascinated by this strange sin he does not tell us, and the diary in which he carefully noted the results of his terrible experiments and the methods that he adopted, has unfortunately been lost to us" (115). The void left by the book of the poisoner would be filled by the poisonous book in *Dorian Gray* in a chain of contamination that aims to destabilize boundaries of observation and experimentation on the human subject.

Contamination

If Lord Wotton's human experiment on Dorian can be read as a critique of the dehumanizing aspects of science, it is not an unambiguous critique but one that is deepened by a paradoxical play on the location of evil that increasingly moves from Wotton to Dorian – transferred, as it were, by the toxic manuscript: "Dorian Gray had been poisoned by a book. There were moments when he [Dorian] looked on evil simply as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful" (290).

Wilde seeks to "re-humanize" science by aestheticizing the scientific method – bringing pleasure and beauty to bear on the process of self-knowledge. In *Dorian Gray*, the evil of science, its inability to deal with

the human factor that it objectifies but cannot comprehend, is replaced by a science of evil: the objectification and observation of the human factor that to Wilde really mattered – the inner life. Contamination discloses its mechanisms, acting as a catalyst that activates and reveals what would otherwise remain latent. As Basil Hallward observes with horror while examining his painting, “Through some strange quickening of inner life the leprosy of sin were slowly eating the thing away” (299).

Critics have often approached Wilde’s treatment of evil in relation to science and art in ways that reflect, or indirectly reinforce, the prevailing positivist vs. decadent categorization. Accounting for the subversive role of evil in *Dorian Gray* is difficult if one remains within Smith’s overarching notion of Wilde’s synthesis of science and aesthetics as “an example of the aesthetic urge toward, order, harmony” (32), a stance that squarely puts Wilde on the side of progress and evolution via Hegel. According to Smith:

Wilde’s aesthetic and critical theory envisioned the progressive and self-conscious development of human culture through evolutionary mechanisms recognized as valid by Victorian scientists. (30)

A specular interpretation of Wilde’s organic view of history, one driven not by evolution but by devolution, is offered by Christopher Nassaar in *Into the Demon Universe*. Nassaar explores the genealogical position of Wilde as the last exponent of the Victorian movement – the culmination of a line that runs through Rossetti and Pater and is rooted in the aesthetics of the Romantic poets. He distinguishes the decadents from prior forms of aestheticism as they go beyond the representation of evil through an attempt to find joy and beauty in it. For Nassaar this is a dubious mark of distinction, and one that he equates with demonism and self-destruction (xii).

His analysis of *Dorian Gray* reflects his view of Oscar Wilde as “the decadent, who began by writing fairy tales and ended by declaring himself damned” (xiii).¹² In this account, personal biography and artistic production mirror each other, and both are propelled by the same “demonic” impulse.

The genealogical devolution from innocence to damnation unfolds for Nassaar in accordance with Pater's view that the world of childlike innocence, corresponding to the Greek ideal, had come to its maturity with the modern age:

The art of an age can isolate itself from evil only during the infancy of that age. As the age matures, such art movements must collapse as evil presses in on them. Consequently Sibyl, the symbol of an innocent movement in Victorian art, dies. The Satanic Wotton reflects: "There is something to me quite beautiful about her death. I am glad I am living in a century when such wonders happen."

(50)

The unholy worship of evil beauty that Nassaar takes as both propelling force and end product of Wilde's decadent posture is not, however, a stable self-explanatory notion through which we can read Wilde's biography or his role as decadent writer. Wilde's irony, of which the character of "Satanic" Lord Wotton is a prime example, seems to preclude such comfortable explanation. Wotton's aesthetic contemplation of the beauty of evil – his unholy faith in the power of corruption – is counteracted by his role as scientist. In this contemplative act, unholy faith is undermined by the necessity for testing the object, for unraveling the process of contamination and thus understanding how passions can poison the soul. For Wotton, the death of innocence is an aesthetic pleasure not because it is replaced by evil but because the process itself brings about a new innocence or wonder. It opens sensorial possibilities unconstrained by prevailing moral categories.

"Pleasure is the only thing worth having a theory about," he [Lord Wotton] answered, in his slow, melodious voice. "But I am afraid I cannot claim my theory as my own. It belongs to Nature, not to me. Pleasure is Nature's test, her sign of approval. When we are happy we are always good, but when we are good we are not always happy." (235)

Wilde's hermeneutics of subversion – a “science of evil” dedicated to the pleasure of knowledge as well as the knowledge of pleasure – goes beyond a system of oppositions. It elevates pleasure to the status of a third, privileged term that cannot be firmly placed on either side of a binary system.¹³ It is deeply grounded in Nature (“Pleasure is Nature's test”) and yet it is precisely in the act of distinguishing pleasure from its natural sources that its full potential can be known: “Believe me, no civilized man ever regrets a pleasure, and no uncivilized man ever knows what a pleasure is” (236).

Insofar as it yields knowledge, pleasure partakes of, and can be derived from, good as well as evil. There is no distinction between good pleasure and evil pleasure – only the prevailing moral categories that, following the system of oppositions that Wilde rejects, have ascribed beauty and desirability to the first and the opposite to the second.

Yes: there was to be, as Lord Henry had prophesied, a new Hedonism that was to recreate life, and to save it from that harsh, uncomely puritanism that is having, in our own day its curious revival. It was to have its service of the intellect, certainly; yet, it was never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience. Its aim, indeed, was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they might be. Of the asceticism that deadens the senses, as of the vulgar profligacy that dulls them, it was to know nothing. But it was to teach man to concentrate himself upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment. (278-79)

The science of evil takes subversion not as a simple category of differentiation from a normative ideal – a strategy that would ultimately only reinforce it – but as a creative, hermeneutical tool to destabilize the boundaries of the oppositional system itself. Evil is not the simple opposite of good but the term that opens and unmoors the definition of “what good

is" in relation to pleasure. For Wilde, evil is a relational term that forces preexisting categories of knowledge and morality into a new relationship with one another. The experience of "bitter fruit" is not necessarily better than that of "sweet fruit," indeed the fruit itself, the object, is irrelevant – what matters is the mode of experience: the knowledge of the mechanisms through which the subject knows the object and takes pleasure in this process.

I would suggest that the fulfillment of the "Demonic line" that, according to Nassaar, culminates with Wilde's elevation of evil to the status of a religion, bringing into the open the demonic impulse latent in his Victorian predecessors, is neither the guiding principle behind Wilde's exploration of evil and contamination nor the intellectual genealogy that most strongly defined his decadent position. Another line had more profound effects on Wilde, one that more directly took on the relation of science to art: Arnold's and Pater's critical views on the purity and contamination of the act of observation.

In Lord Wotton's disinterest for the ordinary object and methods of science and his interest in the human subject as the object of scientific observation, Wilde reproduces Pater's critique of Arnold's views and then takes it one step further. Arnold's contention that "the aim of criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is" was modified by Pater in his Preface to *The Renaissance*: "the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly" (xxix). For Wilde, "the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not."¹⁴

In Arnold's view the critic forsakes all aspirations of creativity and adopts the methods of a scientist who operates within the established parameters of scientific discourse: the alienation of the observing subject from the object of observation. Pater's "decadent turn" is an inversion of those parameters, as he undermines the factual authority of what is observed. The critic becomes the artist who brings the subject and the category of pleasure to bear upon the external object ("Does it give me

pleasure?”¹⁵). Wilde takes Pater’s inversion of the autonomy of the object and transforms it further. The object is not only denied the independent and authoritative status as fact repository; it is also denied an independent existence. It only exists insofar as the observer creates it.

The creation of a new order, of a new relationship between observer and observed through the act of subversion, is crucial to Wilde’s attempt to aestheticize the scientific method. The concept of degeneration, which excited both the literary and scientific world of the nineteenth century, carried with it interest in the related notions of norm and deviance, order and disorder. As Edward Chamberlin points out, “The biological understanding of degeneration [...] was entangled with the nineteenth-century logic of types, and of stereotypes. In 1857, B.A. Morel characterized degeneration (in *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l’espèce humaine*) as a morbid deviation from an original type. His was one of the first attempts to delineate the relationship between abnormal mental states and processes of a degenerative environmental and hereditary determinism” (265). The scientific notion of degeneration as deviation and disorder was pervasive but not exclusive. The term had a double focus, even though distinctions were frequently blurred “between degeneration conceived as a scientific pathology and degeneration conceived as an aesthetic or ethical anarchy, or between disorderings and perverse orderings” (265).

For Wilde, the critic not only becomes the artist, he also becomes a new scientist – certainly different from Arnold’s model of a detached observer. The Wildean scientist *creates* its object of observation by subverting the order of the real: he tests the autonomy of the object not as a way to record a taxonomy of types, norms, and corresponding deviations as they occur in nature, but to produce a new, artificially constructed, experimental environment that includes an active, as opposed to neutral, observer. Polluting one’s object of observation yields more compelling results than observing the object “as in itself it really is” or to “know one’s impression” of it “as it really is.”

He [Lord Wotton] was conscious – and the thought brought a gleam of pleasure into his brown agate eyes – that it was through certain words of his, musical words said with musical utterance, that Dorian Gray's soul had turned to this white girl and bowed in worship before her. To a large extent the lad was his own creation. He had made him premature. That was something. *Ordinary people* waited till life disclosed to them its secrets, but to the few, to the elect, the mysteries of life were revealed before the veil was drawn away. (DG 218)¹⁶

For the ordinary scientist, the disclosure of life's secrets is the discovery of nature's fundamental order and its corresponding pathologies of disorder. Mastery of the object of observation empowers the scientist only in a limited sense, since his authority is exercised primarily as a controlling function of natural laws. As George Levine succinctly put it: "it is the power of reality not the scientist that determines the conclusion" (214). Wilde's aestheticization of the scientific method is an attempt to empower the artist/scientist by disrupting the boundaries of the order/disorder opposition that guides his method of observation. He does so by envisioning a different order – one that brings aesthetics to bear upon science: the realm of the extraordinary as a subversive order grounded in the power of the imagination, and driven by the pursuit of knowledge and experience of pleasure instead of the pursuit of reality.

Pleasure is the term that opens – subverts – the order/disorder binary construct, for it is a third term not strictly opposed to that balance but in excess of it. While traditional science seeks closure – a stable structure in the process of taxonomic differentiation of original types and their deviations, Wilde attempts to transform scientific investigation into an open-ended production of new combinations – new sensorial possibilities that exceed, in their multiplicity, any stable definition of norm and pathology. Observing Dorian's premature behavior is for Lord Wotton a source of pleasure, for in so doing he is observing an unnatural

combination, an artistic pathology that he has induced by creating Dorian as his human experiment and his work of art.

Subversion

While it is easy to recognize in Arnold's position the tenets of nineteenth-century scientific discourse ("to see the object as in itself it really is,") Pater's and Wilde's "decadent turn" represents neither a flat rejection of that discourse, nor its unquestioned acceptance. It can be more accurately described as stemming or taking its moves from a debate within the scientific discourse itself. Despite the prevalence of science's reliance on a structure of alienation of the observer from the object of observation, the act of intervening on what is watched is not a practice that lies totally outside the parameters of scientific discourse. Claude Bernard, one of the leading medical authorities of the time, exemplified science's uneasy relationship with its object of observation. He tried to rationalize inherent contradictions by drawing a distinction between observation and experimentation:

In sciences of observation, man observes and reasons experimentally, but he does not experiment; and in this sense we might say that a science of observation is a passive science. In sciences of experimentation, man observes, but in addition he acts on matter, analyzes its properties and to his own advantage brings about the appearance of phenomena which doubtless always occur according to natural laws, but in conditions which nature often has not yet achieved. With the help of these active experimental sciences, man becomes an inventor of phenomena, a real foreman of creation; and under this head we cannot set limits to the power that he may gain over nature through future progress in the experimental sciences. (18)

It is evident from the passage that the scientist's "advantage" over nature is a problematic notion that betrays science's epistemological uncertainty of its

own neutrality and a thinly disguised wish to dominate nature. On the one hand, the advantage of experimentation is portrayed simply as a facilitation of natural phenomena ("which doubtless always occur according to natural laws") where induction is merely a tool for revealing hidden but inescapable laws. On the other, the final characterization of such advantage ("man [...] as a real foreman of creation") leaves no doubts as to science's tendency to assume a dominating posture – to believe in the possibility of achieving unmitigated power over nature – the power of creation.

Science's epistemological uncertainty regarding the implications of intervening in its object of observation became even more acute after the emergence of Darwin's theory of evolution. As the focus of observation increasingly shifted from inanimate nature to human beings, the problem of establishing observational authority assumed a new saliency. As Levine pointed out:

The scientific objectification of the human develops parallel to a new emphasis on subjectivism because it withdraws all external authority for knowledge and leaves it to observation. (219)¹⁷

Lord Wotton's experiment reflects this tension within the scientific debate for his object of observation is, on one level, Dorian, but on a deeper one, the observation of the self:

It was clear to him [Lord Wotton] that the experimental method was the only method by which one could arrive at any scientific analysis of the passions; and certainly Dorian Gray was a subject made to his hand, and seemed to promise rich and fruitful results. [...] It often happened that when we thought we were experimenting on others we were really experimenting on ourselves. (DG, 219-20)

A re-evaluation of the subjective is the guiding principle behind Wilde's engaging of science. This new emphasis on subjectivism, however, that in art would parallel the scientists' skeptical view of

empiricism and positivism – to represent its obverse side – is not reducible, in Wilde’s case, to a reaction against positivism and the authority it places in the objective. Wilde’s aestheticization of science seeks a new role for the subjective precisely as one that goes beyond the subject/object dichotomy. In a way, he short-circuits this opposition. In seeing the object “as in itself it really is not,” Wilde empowers the observing subject with the ability to create the object that, ultimately, can be nothing other than the reflection of the subject. If the independent status of the object is thus obliterated, the autonomy of the observing subject is also called into question, for what he is doing in the process of creation/observation is experimentation of the self as an unstable entity: seeing the *subject* “as in itself it really is not.”

Experimentation on the self becomes an open-ended process of sensorial exploration and exploitation of new and “wonderful” combinations. To underscore the absence of closure in the process of observation and the absence of a firm distinction between subject and object, the prerogatives of Wilde’s experimenter – Lord Wotton – are simultaneously transferred onto the experimenter’s creation. Dorian is the object of Lord Wotton’s experiment. But he is at the same time the observing subject of his own painting, of his own experiment, for he too “poisons,” with his own actions, the painting that he watches so carefully.¹⁸ Wotton had set this very exchangeability in motion: “Suddenly we find that we are no longer the actors, but the spectators of the play. Or rather we are both. We watch ourselves, and the mere wonder of the spectacle enthralls us” (254).

The imaginative space opened by Wainewright’s lost diary could hardly have been filled more thoroughly or skillfully in *Dorian Gray* for, after all, as Wilde tells us in “Pen, Pencil, and Poison” (106), painting had been the first art that fascinated the “extraordinary young man” (114) who later became a poisoner.

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Notes

¹ While the title of the poisonous book is never mentioned in Wilde's novel, it is widely recognized to be Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À rebours*.

² See Nordau, *Degeneration*.

³ A frequently cited example of this critical stance is Peter Morton, *The Vital Science: Biology and the Literary Imagination, 1860-1900*. See for instance Philip E. Smith II, "Protoplasmic Hierarchy and Philosophical Harmony: Science and Hegelian Aesthetics in Oscar Wilde's Notebooks" 30, and Heather Seagroatt, 757.

⁴ Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand, the editors of the Notebooks, have traced the sources of entries to "writers often associated with Wilde – Plato, Aristotle, Baudelaire, Swinburne, Pater, Ruskin – as well as humanists, philosophers, and social scientists not usually associated with him – H.T. Buckle, W.E.H. Lecky, Benjamin Jowett, William Wallace, T.H. Huxley, John Tyndall, W.K. Clifford, E.B. Tyler, Herbert Spencer, Ernest Renan, Theodor Mommsen, J.A. Symonds, G.W.F. Hegel and many others" vii.

⁵ Also quoted in Smith 31.

⁶ Wainwright 494.

⁷ In "Decadence as Scientific Fulfillment," Christine Ferguson sees "freedom from usefulness" (471) as one of the central tenets that decadent writers (including Wilde) put forth as a response to orthodox scientific discourse. I believe that for Wilde, "pleasure" was a more salient category in this respect.

⁸ For a discussion of Wilde's appreciation of human psychology and the deployment of some of its constructs in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, see Seagroatt.

⁹ All citations in this essay of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are from the 1891 text in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, Vol 3, ed. Joseph Bristow.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the vicissitudes surrounding the publication of the essay see Josephine M. Guy's Introduction, xxvii-xliii.

¹¹ Joyce suggests that in the particular combination of abilities in crime and culture we can see Wainewright as a prototype for Dorian Gray (504-5).

¹² Nassaar also makes what I consider to be an unfounded and stereotypical claim in his association of homosexuality with “evil” and “demonic impulse” – a characterization that he attributes to Wilde himself without supplying any evidence to support his claim (xiii).

¹³ Albeit in different ways, both Seagroatt (756) and Ferguson (471) see Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* as operating beyond oppositional systems. My point is not to add to the list of dualities that Wilde’s text destabilizes but rather to indicate that “pleasure” is the term that allows such operation.

¹⁴ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 369. In his Introduction Richard Ellmann clearly delineates the alterations in Arnold’s conception of criticism at the hands of Pater and Wilde. He notes that “there are not two but three critical phases in the late nineteenth century, with Pater transitional between Arnold and Wilde” (xi).

¹⁵ Pater xxix.

¹⁶ Emphasis added.

¹⁷ Levine also points out the parallels between the scientific debate and literary developments: “These forces, leading to the internalization of knowledge in science, are reflected in the famous difference between Arnold’s desire to “see the object as in itself it really is” and Pater’s “to know one’s impression as it really is.” By facing directly the relativist and solipsist implications of the empiricist emphasis on “observation” of the external world, Pearson makes the move that has striking parallels not only in Pater’s essay, but notoriously in the fiction of James and Conrad. Science, says Pearson, “deals not with the external world but with the contents of the mind” (218-19).

¹⁸ In her discussion of late Victorian theories of psychology and their resonance in Wilde’s creation of a dialectic between materialism and idealism, Seagroatt comments on Dorian’s role as “both scientist and subject of study” (743).

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