

Vernon Lee, Oscar Wilde, and the Dialogue of “New Aesthetics”

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I imagine a “tiny boy,” one who was “brought up like a girl, with curls and beautiful hands” (“DPM” 682) but who has grown up to be about the same age as Vernon Lee (a green but ambitious twenty-four) when she introduces him in her 1881 “A Dialogue on Poetic Morality.”¹ This is Cyril, an idealist (like Vernon Lee) and disaffected aesthete (also like Lee) who, as Lee’s narrative essay begins, has fallen into heated conversation about art with his friend Baldwin.

Now pause, forward a few years, and imagine a second Cyril, a strikingly similar young man who engages in a similar dialogue with his friend Vivian, Baldwin’s equal in prolixity and intellectual poise.² Taking place not quite a decade after the publication of Lee’s “Poetic Morality,” Cyril and Vivian’s conversation concludes with the assertion that “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life” (“DL” 55).³ This is, perhaps, the most memorable axiom in “The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue” (1889). It comprises one of four central tenets of what Oscar Wilde declares to be the “doctrines of the new aesthetics,” principles that British aesthetes following Wilde would regard as foundational to the theory of art for art’s sake (55).

Yet Lee’s “Poetic Morality,” an essay that enjoyed a wide initial circulation (including subsequent republication in three periodical and book venues) but has elicited little critical attention since, reminds modern readers that Wilde’s “new aesthetics” were hardly new as the 1880s drew to a close. In fact, Lee’s antecedent Cyril knows a great deal about what he calls “Art for Art’s own sake” (“DPM” 683), and if his

1881 conversation with Baldwin lacks the epigrammatic polish that characterizes the later Cyril's with Vivian, it nevertheless examines much of the same material – the role of the artist, the nature of art, and the artfulness of nature – that Wilde canvases in the piece that critics have identified as the “turning point” in his literary career (Buckler 311).⁴

Indisputably momentous in any account of Wilde's development as an aesthetic theorist, “The Decay of Lying” proves equally significant for scholars of the Aesthetic Movement at large, in that what seems to be a testament to individual genius is also, as the essay's title announces, an affirmation of the collaborative, dialogic nature of British theories of art for art's sake. When we consider “Decay” not (or not only) as the defining statement of British Aestheticism that it so often becomes for critics but as one product of the cultural dialogue that brought a variety of aestheticisms into conversation, our perceptions of Wilde and the doctrine now synonymous with him begin to change. It becomes possible to see Wilde as a participant in a continuing exchange of ideas, a theorist whose notions of aesthetic theory owe a great deal to those who preceded him, especially Vernon Lee. Critics have recognized Lee as integral to British Aestheticism for some time now; her moral vision and didactic language have caused her to be cast as something of an anti-Wilde – the “puritan” frowning upon his hedonism (Colby, “Puritan” 235). But place Lee's “Dialogue on Poetic Morality” beside Wilde's “Decay of Lying,” and it becomes immediately apparent that these two aesthetes were partners of a sort, each reliant upon the other for the creative dissent crucial to the formulation and articulation of their own aesthetic theory.

In “Decay,” we find Wilde responding to Lee, sometimes arguing with and sometimes adopting the aesthetic principles she lays out in “Poetic Morality.” We see Wilde conscripting Lee's narrative frame, the characters and setting she conjures up in her essay, as well as the rhetoric she funnels through these characters. We watch Wilde modify and reassert Lee's arguments against what she calls “the ethics of indecency” – a phrase that must have appealed to Wilde's fondness for verbal

paradox – to challenge the moralistic notions that allow Lee to characterize aestheticism as a “religion of good, of right” (“DPM” 687). By extending Lee’s claims in “Poetic Morality” to his own ends in “Decay,” Wilde converts the less familiar version of art for art’s sake that Lee outlines in her essay into a version that readers instantly recognize, a doctrine that justifies itself via its opposition to, rather than its alignment with, the system of ethics that Lee’s essay extrapolates. Alongside each other, then, Lee’s “Dialogue on Poetic Morality” and Wilde’s “Decay of Lying” evince a dialogic relationship whose sites of contestation and agreement were central to the formation of British Aestheticism.

Vernon Lee introduces Cyril – the character whose examination of aestheticism provides a narrative impetus for “Poetic Morality” – against the backdrop of the Italian countryside, “with its ilex and myrtle-grown black rocks, and its crumbling mounds, where the bright green spruce pine clings to the washed-away scarlet sand” (“DPM” 682). A catalog of beautiful sights, smells, and sounds, it is a setting Lee repeatedly employs in her narrative essays, all of which use characterization to soften the polemic that lies at the heart of her writing.⁵ Cyril has come to Montetramito to meet his friend Baldwin, an older mentor figure and an intentionally unarticulated character who serves as a cypher through which Lee communicates her own opinions when he appears in this and later essays. Baldwin opens “A Dialogue on Poetic Morality” with a question of artistic production that instantly alerts readers to Lee’s objection to the anti-utilitarianism commonly associated with Victorian aestheticism: “And meanwhile, what have you written?” (682).⁶ Cyril’s reply, “Nothing,” is not as significant as the manner in which he replies (682). Lee describes Cyril as “leaning back languidly in the rickety little carriage” that conveys the pair (682). Speaking “drearily,” with “his arms folded beneath his head,” he “smile[s] half-sadly, half whimsically in the face of his friend” (682). Baldwin reacts to this smile as though it were a slap. The disgust evident in his response to Cyril’s additional revelation that he has burned all of his manuscripts makes it clear that Baldwin is as

infuriated with what he thinks Cyril has become as he is with what Cyril has done. Rather than accusing his smirking friend of sloth or indolence, Baldwin cries, “effeminate heroics again!” and then strikes an even lower blow: “you are just the self-same womanish and uncontrolled *poseur*, the same romantic braggadocio that you were at seven” (682-83).

The gendered critique made in Baldwin’s retort – the accusation that Cyril’s destruction of his work is “effeminate” rather than, say, short-sighted or petulant – may strike modern readers as an allegation thrown somewhat wide of the mark. To Victorians reading the essay in 1881, however, Baldwin’s charge would have made explicit what Cyril’s resigned ennui and his inclination toward artistic consumption (rather than production) had already intimated: that Cyril is an aesthete. The stereotype of the (in Gilbert and Sullivan’s memorable phrase) “miminy, piminy” (38), tea-pot admiring devotee of sunflowers and peacock feathers that Baldwin conjures up for readers when he disparages Cyril as pretentious, posturing, and effete was ubiquitous in 1880s popular culture. W.H. Mallock had capitalized on this caricature of the male aesthete in his 1877 satirical novel *The New Republic*, as had Gilbert and Sullivan in their 1881 operetta *Patience, or Bunthorne’s Bride*, both of which Lee found wickedly entertaining.⁷

Cyril doesn’t appear in the velvet knee-breeches and silk hose that *Patience* immortalized, but he readily admits his allegiance to the doctrine of art for art’s sake and even concedes Baldwin’s hit: “I daresay I am all the things you say – vain, and womanish, ... and idiotically heroic” (683). The literature that had made him popular within a small circle of Britain’s literati was, Cyril confesses, all “hothouse scents and exotic beauty” (684), poetry composed “to match the newest artistic chintzes” (685). But as these incriminating descriptions suggest, Cyril’s satisfaction with aestheticism has lately begun to wane, and as the conversation continues, his disaffection turns to anger – at Baldwin.

Baldwin, who opens “Poetic Morality” by castigating Cyril for being too much the aesthete, is an aesthete himself, readers soon discover, and it was he who originally convinced Cyril of the superiority

of aestheticist precepts. Recalling this in the course of their argument, Cyril says to Baldwin, "You believe in Art for Art's own sake – Goethianism – that sort of thing, I know. It is all very well for you" (684). But for Cyril, who had "put the doubt behind [him]" at Baldwin's urging and grasped at the "Holy Grail" of purely autotelic art, aestheticism has proven a failure (683, 686). The poetry he composed with the highest of artistic ideals was embraced only "by a lot of intellectual Sybarites" (684) who, like Cyril himself, seem to have sacrificed "all manliness and energy, to the faint sound (heard through dreams) of paradisiac mysticism sung to golden lutes, or of imaginary amorous hysterics, or of symphonies in alliteration" (686). While the reception of his work by this pre-*Dorian Gray* group of Dorian Grays once pleased Cyril, he has come to regard their passion for lutes and alliteration as the stigmata of an "abominable artistic religion" (684). "I would rather be a French cook," he avers, "and invent indigestible dishes for epicures without any appetite" than continue working as "a poet for the cultured world of to-day" (684).

Facing off on a hill above Maremma, these two men – one "persuaded ... of his moral rightness" in burning his work and thereby rescinding his association with Britain's enthusiasts for "hothouse scents" and "artistic chintzes" (684), and the other ready to puncture this rightness with a sharp retort – illustrate the division that lies at the heart of the critique of aestheticism in "Poetic Morality." Cyril, persistent in his artistic idealism despite his disappointment with the aesthetes he knows, represents the conventional Victorian response to art for art's sake: condemnation of a doctrine gone wrong, a philosophy lofty in principle but base in practice. Baldwin, older and wiser if just as hot-tempered, holds out to Cyril and to Lee's readers something different. In the twenty-five pages that follow Baldwin and Cyril's opening confrontation, Lee uses Baldwin to outline a philosophy she would describe three years later as an aestheticism "of another sort" (*Miss Brown* 425). Baldwin's formulation of this alternative version of aestheticism allows him to maintain the principles of art for art's sake

despite their appropriation by the so-called “intellectual Sybarites” of Cyril’s acquaintance. Lee’s primary rhetorical goal in “Poetic Morality” thus entails convincing her readers to do the same, to reconceive of aestheticism in a manner that would allow them to embrace its high-minded principles without fear of being dragged into the morass of hedonism that seemed to many Victorians (as to Cyril) to be the only direction in which those principles could lead. Lee’s desire to convert readers to this ethical version of art for art’s sake is explicit throughout the essay; the dialogue that comprises the whole of “Poetic Morality” is intended as much for our benefit as it is for the benefit of Cyril, whose re-conversion to an aestheticism “of another sort” becomes Baldwin’s chief endeavor.

Persuasive as Baldwin is, however, this is no easy task because Cyril has no desire to be brought back into the aestheticist fold. Having been disappointed by every ideology he at one time or another pledged his artistic allegiance to, Cyril declares himself incapable of being converted to any dogma ever again. He refuses, for example, to take up the popular standard of “Progress” or to “sing the superb conquests of man over nature,” he tells Baldwin (685). Nor will he align himself with the artists and writers who champion reform, using their art to showcase “parliamentary debates, or High Church squabbles, or disestablishment, or woman’s rights, or anti-communism” (685). Though he once had great faith in the “fashionable religion of Science,” this too has gone by the wayside as have his once-fervent beliefs in “humanitarianism,” “positivism,” and “mysticism” (686). “You,” Cyril finally accuses Baldwin, who took it upon himself in past conversations to expose the errors in each of these systems of belief, “have destroyed successively all my gods” (686). No longer possessed of any creed – social, moral, or aesthetic – to which his muse can aspire, Cyril can think of only one thing worthy of dedicating his life to: using his small inheritance to “wash out this Augean stable of a world” through philanthropic service (683).

Cyril’s decision to forfeit literature and spend the rest of his life engaged in public service – which he regards as the categorical inverse of

the aesthete's self-indulgence – is a characteristically Victorian resolution. Many Victorians in the middle and upper classes joined philanthropic societies and formed charitable organizations in an effort to make a social contribution, to invest their time and money in some ethically purposeful venture.⁸ Cyril feels the need to join in this work with special acuity because of the years he dedicated to aestheticism, paying no mind to the often difficult lives of those around him while he pursued his art. With the social debt of these years weighing heavily on him, Cyril can no longer justify the neglect of others at the expense of poetry. "What moral right," he asks Baldwin, does a man have "to consume his life writing verses, when there is so much evil to remove?" (683). Implicit in this question is an assumption that Lee's readers would likely have shared, the belief that aestheticism is inherently selfish and solipsistic, a philosophy that moves one away from public engagement and the duties and responsibilities of civic and familial life. The active fulfillment of these duties constitutes what Baldwin describes – with Cyril's enthusiastic agreement – as "right living" (688), and for Cyril, whose pursuit of a long stream of secular gods was an attempt to find an ideology that prescribes the kind of moral rightness concomitant with "right living," aestheticism only leads one away from this end.

"What is right?" (687). This question, which Cyril puts to Baldwin in genuine perplexity in the midst of their argument over aesthetics, reveals the hinge upon which Lee's aestheticism "of another sort" swings. If a majority of her Victorian contemporaries believed aestheticism to be a philosophy of "wrong living," as Cyril himself has concluded, Lee believes just the opposite – that aestheticism can instead serve as an ethical ideology. The difference between these two conceptions of art for art's sake resides in a subtle discrepancy of definition, as Baldwin (who takes command of the dialogue at this point) begins to explain to Cyril. In the opinion of the younger man, the definition of "right living" is "to improve things in the world, to make it better for man and beast" (687). This was, Cyril admits, the reason he embraced aestheticism in the first place: "I thought abstract ideas of

beauty would set the world right” (687). Baldwin, on the other hand, has a slightly different definition of “right living,” one that encompasses Cyril’s definition but then goes one step further: “[My definition], the more I think over the subject, has come to be this: – the destruction of the greatest possible amount of evil and the creation of the greatest possible amount of good in the world” (688). This constitutes what Baldwin calls the one “true” faith, a “religion of good, of right” (687). And central to it, he claims, is the production of art “which has no aim beyond its own perfection” (687).

Immediately upon hearing this, Cyril voices the protest that would likewise have been on the lips of Lee’s nineteenth-century readers: that the patently aestheticist tenet at the heart of Baldwin’s “religion of right” is nothing more than “a return to my old aesthetic fetish worship” (687). But Baldwin stops Cyril here, interrupting his friend’s objection and clarifying his unexpected alignment of ethical living and autotelic art. “When I said that the only true religion was the religion not of nature, nor of mankind, nor of science, nor of art, but the religion of good, and that the creation of perfect beauty is the highest aim of the artist, I was not contradicting myself, but merely stating two parts – a general and a particular – of the same proposition” (688). Baldwin’s assertion that aestheticist philosophy and the ethical discourse that comprises his “religion of right” are dual aspects of a single “proposition” represents a significant revision of aestheticism. Lee is suggesting that fundamental to and inseparable from the practice of art for art’s sake is the practice of social ethics. Reminding Cyril of his two-part definition of “right living” – the destruction of evil *and* the creation of good – Baldwin explains that many selfless people are anxiously engaged in “destroying evil in one of a hundred shapes, as sickness, or injustice, or falsehood” (688), assisting the unfortunate in attempts to “set the world right” as Cyril longs to do. But while these well-intentioned and ethically-minded people do indeed eliminate evil, they do not create good, which for Baldwin is the higher calling and the best use of one’s resources and talents. Instead, the “creator of good, as distinguished from the destroyer of evil, is, above all other men, the artist” (689).

Baldwin's conception of the artist – and specifically the aestheticist artist – as the ultimate “creator of good” relies upon his conviction that “God intend[s] that poets should improve the earth,” although not by performing the typical acts of Christian charity that Cyril is eager to begin (688).⁹ Accordingly, the poet has a special vocation as an agent of social ethics that no other professional can fulfill. While all philanthropic and charitable workers – including those who “ten[d] the sick, or defen[d] the oppressed, or discove[r] new truths” – perform a good and necessary labor, Baldwin regards these servants of the people as merely “remove[rs]” and not “give[rs]” (688). They “leav[e] men as poor or as rich as they would have been had not disease, or injustice, or error stolen away some of their life” (688-89). And while “every one of us can destroy evil and create pleasure, in a sort of incidental, amateurish way, ... as the men of thought and of action are the professional destroyers of evil, so the artists are the professional creators of good – they work not for those immediately around them, but for the world at large” (689). Because of this special responsibility, Baldwin suggests, artists are “made of infinitely finer stuff than other men” (689).

Such a lofty endowment means that the artist has a divinely-appointed responsibility to create art, and specifically, to create art “which has no aim beyond its own perfection.” Cyril, whom Baldwin regards as an inheritor of this “finer stuff,” would thus betray not only himself but also “the world at large” were he to follow through with his plans, resigning his poetry and taking up philanthropic work. “A man endowed to be an artist,” Baldwin states, “that is to say, a creator of good for the whole world – is simply failing in his duty by becoming a practical worker” (689). By allowing himself to “indulge in the moral luxury, the moral amusement, of removing an imperceptible amount of pain, he has defrauded the world of the immense and long-lasting pleasure placed in his charge to give” (689). Baldwin's relegation of the work of bettering society to mere “moral luxury” or, even more damning, to “moral amusement,” represents a drastic inversion of moral convention, the reinterpretation of philanthropy as a type of fraud. In

addition, the accusation this statement makes against Cyril and those like him only heightens the counter-intuitivity of the paradox that lies at the heart of Baldwin's "religion of right": that turning away from the social exigencies of the poor and the needy to the creation of autotelic art does more for "the world at large" than any charitable agency or friendly society could hope to do.

Not surprisingly, Cyril doesn't buy it. The idea that *not* working to relieve suffering will do more good than working alongside the legions of Victorians who dedicated their time and resources to "societies, hospitals, or that sort of thing" (684) seems to Cyril the height of aestheticist arrogance. After all, what if "the pleasure which the artist thus gives is not morally valuable to those who enjoy it?" (690). Baldwin counters this objection by pointing out to Cyril the debilitating interestedness (as opposed to *disinterestedness*) his statement assumes for art. According to Baldwin, Cyril's desire that art be "morally valuable" disqualifies it from being the kind of purely aesthetic art that improves society by creating good. Men and women who create art that "attempts to perform the work of philosophy, or practical benevolence, or science, or moralizing, or anything not itself" fail in the midst of their good intentions by mistaking the role of artist for that of "practical worker," claims Baldwin (692). The art they produce for any purpose other than the celebration of beauty might destroy evil to some small extent, but such pieces of commercial, political, or moral propaganda will not serve the more important ethical function of creating good for "the world at large." This, Baldwin explains, is the real potential of aestheticism. While fostering a seemingly solipsistic artistic individualism, it actually performs an invaluable social service, and it does so while remaining uncorrupted by the personal or institutional interests that inevitably motivate even the most well-intentioned philanthropic missionary traipsing through the East End.¹⁰

Baldwin's defense of aestheticism as a potential "religion of right" – ethical despite its apparently contradictory withdrawal from active social engagement – is unexpected, to say the least. Lee doesn't hesitate to

paint aestheticism at its "Sybaritic" worst, but without ever dismissing or downplaying aesthetes' affronts to conventional morality, she manages to exonerate the philosophy by pointing the blame at aestheticism's practitioners rather than its principles. No doubt this struck those of her readers who were familiar with the deprecating depictions of aestheticism and aesthetes in popular culture as unaccountable. Yet such a defense of art for art's sake had been made at least once before. In "Poetic Morality," Lee summons all of her rhetorical resources to resituate aestheticism outside of the realm of sensual "prostitution" (where Cyril claims it has been dragged by careless aesthetes who "want art not for its own sake, but for the sake of excitement") and into the realm of "right living" (691). Four years previous to the publication of "Poetic Morality," Britain's most esteemed advocate of art for art and the man Lee regarded as her aesthetic mentor had attempted to do much the same thing.¹¹ In 1877, Walter Pater famously suppressed the "Conclusion" of *The Renaissance*, with the stated intention of preventing his culminating essay from "mislead[ing] some of those young men into whose hands it might fall" (150). Pater's retraction and subsequent republication (with its cautionary note) of the "Conclusion" failed to convince most late-Victorian readers that aestheticism could be the kind of morally transcendent doctrine that Pater would set himself to outlining in greater detail in his 1885 novel *Marius the Epicurean*. Lee, however, recognized in Pater's work the ethical impetus that similarly leads her to recast art for art's sake as a kind of secular gospel in "Poetic Morality."

If Lee imagined herself as following in Pater's footsteps and advancing the work that this "master" who "began as an aesthete, and ended as a moralist" had begun, one thing makes her attempt at vindicating aestheticism quite different from his (Lee, "Valedictory" 255). While Pater's attempts to justify aestheticism on ethical grounds were highly controversial and much publicized, Lee's effort in the same direction elicited little response. This was certainly not a result of obscurity or lack of dissemination of "Poetic Morality." Lee's essay first appeared in the widely distributed conservative paper *Contemporary*

Review, and it was quickly reprinted (at Lee's insistence) in the smaller *Living Age* and *Appleton's* as well. Shortly thereafter, "Poetic Morality" was republished once again in a collection of Lee's essays entitled *Belcaro*.¹² Fairly well circulated, then, at a time when aestheticism was at the center of cultural attention, the dialogue between Cyril and Baldwin offered one other incentive that should have guaranteed the essay's notice: it provided British readers with a conciliatory middle road through an otherwise contentious public debate, and it did so just as aestheticism was evolving from a continental philosophy embraced by a few of Britain's literati into a widespread cultural fad. "Poetic Morality" suggested that the principles of art for art's sake could be adopted without the profligacy or amorality that many believed to be characteristic of – and inseparable from – aestheticism in practice. In fact, Lee's essay outlined a way in which aestheticism could be regarded as fully compatible with the most stringent of ethical systems, by transforming the resoundingly condemned solipsism of aesthetes into a much more palatable aesthetic individualism that operated within a respectably sanitized program of "right living."

One would think that an essay that domesticates aestheticism for the ethically-minded would attract considerable attention, at least within aestheticist circles. Strangely, however, neither critics nor supporters of aestheticism seem to have taken notice of "Poetic Morality" until 1889, when Cyril appeared, once again, on the aestheticist stage. Perhaps it was the terribly earnest tenor of Lee's "religion of right" that initially piqued Oscar Wilde's interest in the extended conversation between Cyril and his friend Baldwin. Though Lee's essay was nearly ten years old, the solemn moralizing of "Poetic Morality," along with its paradoxical proposition that one can best serve society by immersing oneself in the creation of art that serves no social or moral purpose, must have struck Wilde as fairly begging for remark. And much had transpired between Wilde and Lee in the years between the 1881 publication of "Poetic Morality" and the 1889 publication of another fictional conversation, an essay that takes the form of a narrative dialogue and simultaneously

enters into a dialogue itself. When Lee first met Wilde in the same year that "Poetic Morality" appeared in *Contemporary Review*, he was, as Lee wrote in a letter to her mother, "the wonderful Oscar Wilde!" (*Letters* 64-65). Lee was not fond of the other aesthetes she met in London or the popular aestheticism that had permeated the homes of England's artistic élite (she called the interior decoration of the Humphrey Wards' home "the height of aesthetic desolation" [qtd. in Colby, VL 80]), but with Wilde, she felt differently. Perhaps Lee considered Wilde at that early stage of his career to be engaged in the same kind of ameliorative work that she undertakes in "Poetic Morality." She explains to her mother that although Wilde "talked a sort of lyrico-sarcastic maudlin cultschah for half an hour," his "clever" aestheticist quips seemed to her a kind of coded critique of his fellow aesthetes: "a good half of his absurdities are mere laughing at people. The English don't see that" (*Letters* 65).

If it seems strange that Lee, whose Cyril describes the aestheticism practiced in 1880s Britain as "mere ornamental uselessness" (684), would speak in such approving terms of the country's most renowned advocate of aesthetic uselessness, we should recall that the man Lee praised in 1881 was not the Oscar Wilde who would become the icon of popular culture that he continues to be. Throughout the 1880s, Wilde was, as Josephine Guy and Ian Small point out, "a reviewer, not a critic," and certainly not a figure who could be reckoned among the country's "intellectual elite" (43, 41). Richard Ellmann designates 1891 as Wilde's "annus mirabilis," the year he began to make his mark as a literary figure, but Guy and Small push this date even further toward the twentieth century, suggesting that it was probably not until 1893 that Wilde attained widespread recognition and financial profit from the success of his society dramas and essays (47-48).

A reviewer of Wilde's *Intentions*, the collection of stories and essays in which Wilde's "The Decay of Lying" appeared after its 1889 publication in *Nineteenth Century*, seems to confirm the assertions of Guy, Small, and Ellmann. The unsigned review that ran on 6 June 1891 in the *Athenaeum*, one of nineteenth-century Britain's most respected

journals of the arts, claims that with *Intentions*, Wilde finally “succeeds in proving that he has something to say” (101). The reviewer acknowledges that “the first essay” – “The Decay of Lying” – “is by far the cleverist,” but he then adds that here and elsewhere, Wilde “spoils his style by making it mechanical” (101). What is worse, Wilde seems to “find it necessary to resort to the tricks of the smart advertiser in order to attract attention to his wares” (101). Wilde’s crass commercialism, this comment implies, cheapens his intellectual product, making him something like a huckster among more serious writers. Despite this, however, the writer is willing to concede a position to Wilde within the ranks of Britain’s aestheticist authors: “In speaking of writers about art Mr. Ruskin must, of course, be left in the place which he incontestably occupies by himself. But speaking of lesser people, after ‘Vernon Lee’ hardly anyone has a better claim than Mr. Wilde to be named as a contributor of something fresh, something original and stimulating” (101). As late as 1891, then, Wilde could still be relegated to a humble third position, beneath Ruskin (as might be expected) but also beneath Lee, whose reputation as a “writer about art” is such that she can stand next to Ruskin himself.

This assessment, difficult though it may be to reconcile with the twenty-first-century status of Wilde, suggests that when Lee praises “the wonderful Oscar Wilde” at the time of the composition of “Poetic Morality,” she is offering her opinion of a figure still very much in the process of self-creation – as Lee was herself. Additionally, the realization that at least throughout the 1880s, Lee was considered to be at the forefront of aesthetic originality goes a long way toward explaining the drastic alteration in Lee’s opinion of Wilde that occurred in the years following her initial endorsement of him. Whereas in 1881 Lee felt what Vineta Colby calls a “special affinity” toward Wilde (80), two years later she was stung by Wilde’s condemnation of the paintings of her longtime friend John Singer Sargent (whose art Wilde called “vicious & meretricious” [*Letters* 126]). By this time Lee had also begun to resent the growing disparity she saw between the “subtle and solemn” aesthetic

ideals of Pater (whose family she had grown close to since 1881) and what she regarded as the perversion of those ideals by the real-life Cyrils who rallied around Wilde ("Valedictory" 255; Colby, VL 102).

In 1884, in an effort to illustrate the growing divide Lee perceived between the aestheticism of "another sort" that she had outlined in "Poetic Morality" and the aestheticism that was more and more frequently associated with Wilde, Lee published her first novel, *Miss Brown*. A thinly veiled *roman-a-clef* that proved a social and literary disaster for Lee, *Miss Brown* parodied Wilde as Mr. Posthlehwaite, a "flabby elephant" of a man with a "mellifluous fat voice" (144; 157). Wilde, along with the Rossettis who featured in similarly unflattering terms in the novel, was furious. In the small world of *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism where London encounters were almost inevitable, Wilde managed to avoid meeting Lee for nearly ten years. Until the poetry of Lee's half-brother, Eugene Lee-Hamilton, eventually won a truce of sorts between them, Lee, in the words of mutual friend Mary Costelloe, "hated [Wilde] almost as bitterly as he had hated her" (qtd. in Colby, VL 106).¹³

These personal differences, which only exacerbated the ever-increasing ideological differences between Lee's notions of aestheticism and Wilde's, make it reasonable to assume that Wilde's attitude toward Lee was probably less than friendly when he took up his pen to compose – in the narrative dialogue genre that Lee had employed in seven publications to date – an aestheticist manifesto featuring the conversion of a young aesthete named Cyril to what Cyril's friend Vivian calls the "doctrines of the new aesthetics" (55).¹⁴ This essay, "The Decay of Lying," remains one of Wilde's most significant pieces of criticism, both for its exemplary demonstration of Wildean wit and for the principles of aestheticism that Wilde lays out in the course of Cyril and Vivian's conversation. Although there is no evidence that Wilde read Lee's essay or had it in mind when he began "Decay," Wilde's reliance upon the aesthetic principles Lee outlines in "Poetic Morality" suggests that despite the animosity that characterized the aesthetes' personal relationship, Lee's essay is integral to Wilde's conception of art for art's

sake in “The Decay of Lying.” The two essays, each of which identifies itself as “A Dialogue” in the title, certainly look a pair when placed side by side as though in actual conversation: by a coincidence of in-house formatting, both pieces appear in a serif font, the typescript beginning one-third of the way down from the top of the page where the titles are both printed in full capitals.¹⁵ More than this, however, the essays follow the same narrative trajectory, which Wilde conscripts and modifies as he begins to outline a theory of aestheticism that reiterates as much from Lee’s “Poetic Morality” as it rejects.

The scene that unfolds on the first page of Wilde’s essay when readers are introduced to Cyril and his friend Vivian recalls that of “Poetic Morality” in several particulars. Wilde’s essay begins with Cyril’s suggestion that he and Vivian leave the library on this “perfectly lovely afternoon” to “go and lie on the grass and smoke cigarettes and enjoy nature” (“DL” 35) – a suggestion Lee’s Cyril would heartily have approved. As in “Poetic Morality,” we are given only the vaguest of narrative details (here in parenthetical stage-directions) of the characters themselves. Like his predecessor Baldwin, Vivian remains largely undescribed and therefore well-suited to disappear when the author speaks through him, as Lee does through Baldwin. And like Baldwin, Vivian quickly takes command of the conversation, relegating Cyril to the same position he occupies in Lee’s essay – the conversational instigator whose alternating obstinacy and ignorance drive the other’s speech. In “Decay,” Vivian seizes the position of primary speaker by professing surprise at Cyril’s invitation (“Enjoy nature!”) and declining the offer, claiming that he has “entirely lost” the ability to appreciate the outdoors (35). He then chides Cyril, who apparently has not lost this faculty, by asserting that those who believe nature to be pregnant with moral significance – to be hiding “secrets” that might be revealed through artistic study – are suffering from a “cultivated blindness” brought on by being too thoroughly steeped in the artistic convention-alities of landscape painters like “Corot and Constable” (35).

This initial difference of opinion establishes Wilde’s Cyril as a man who does find meaning – here emotional renewal and enjoyment – in a

landscape, just as Lee's Cyril does in "Poetic Morality." In Lee's essay, in fact, the outdoors holds enormous symbolic significance. Like "Decay," "Poetic Morality" begins with a description of a perfectly lovely "autumn afternoon" ("DPM" 682) and an equally lovely landscape that draws not only the attention of Lee's characters but a veritable "cry of pleasure" from her Cyril (684). Throughout this essay, the sublime hills of Montetramito serve as signifiers of the emotional states of Lee's characters (682). During their conversation, a storm gathers, threatens, and disperses as Cyril's anger at Baldwin follows the same course. The "wide strip of Maremma swamp-land" that Lee's men gaze down upon, parallels the boggy, aestheticist "Maremma poetry" that both Baldwin and Cyril despise (684; 695). And a "flat, grass-grown place, surrounded by cypresses on the top and ridge of the hill" provides the level stage and almost limitless perspective that allows Baldwin to resume a more level-headed demeanor after being provoked by Cyril's accusations at the beginning of the dialogue (684). In these instances and elsewhere, readers need only to note the natural landscape of "Poetic Morality" to discern the evolving inner landscapes of Lee's characters.

While Wilde avoids such overt inner-outer correspondence in "The Decay of Lying," he doesn't discard the premise upholding it: that nature is a moral signifier and, conversely, that the rejection of the natural world represents a rejection of this moral ethos. This is evident in the fact that Vivian's refusal to step outside at Cyril's urging prefaces Vivian's vindication of egotism, a quality presented in Wilde's essay as an inversion of conventional ethical behavior. Vivian's belief that "nature is so uncomfortable ... hard and lumpy and damp" and his preference for "houses" in which "everything is subordinated to us, fashioned for our use and our pleasure" leads him to conclude that "Egotism itself, which is so necessary to a proper sense of human dignity, is absolutely the result of indoor life" ("DL" 35). The first of many characteristically Wildean reversals of expectation, Vivian's praise of egotism is blatantly provocative and signals to readers that the assertion that follows this one should be regarded as similarly antagonistic to Victorian notions of what

Lee calls “right living”: “Out of doors,” Vivian tells Cyril, “one becomes abstract and impersonal. One’s individuality absolutely leaves one” (35-36). The cultivation of individuality, then, requires turning away from the obligations and pleasures of the public realm, living instead an “indoor life” where one can devote one’s attention wholly to one’s own affairs.

Even had it not come on the heels of Vivian’s praise of egotism, this argument’s anti-social tenor would be unmistakable. Individualism, for Vivian, is a kind of anti-virtue, the selfish antithesis of social engagement. Yet there is a great deal of similarity between Wilde’s characterization of “egotism” here and the highly ethical aesthetic individualism that Lee makes central to her “religion of right.” Lee’s Cyril resists Baldwin’s suggestion that the artist must turn his back on society, must metaphorically remain indoors, to be a creator of good rather than simply a destroyer of evil. He asks, “is [the artist] to say to justice and injustice, good and evil, purity and foulness, ‘I know you, but my work lies not with you?’ ... Oh, Baldwin, if he be a man and an honest one, he surely cannot: he cannot set aside these ideas and devote himself to his art for its own sake” (“DPM” 692). But Baldwin, like Vivian, believes that excusing himself from the “outdoor” work of “practical benevolence” is exactly what the artist must do (692). Baldwin couches this idea in moral terms, but at the center of all his talk of “duty and reason” lies Vivian’s “egotism,” justified by the ethical ends that Baldwin anticipates his aesthetic individualism will achieve (692).

In “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde does not alter this principle. By designating what Lee calls “right living” to be “egotism,” he merely divests it of the high moral tone it carries in “Poetic Morality.”¹⁶ Wilde’s semantic revision, however, maintains the paradoxical element that Lee attaches to her notion of aesthetic individualism. Like Baldwin in “Poetic Morality,” Vivian invokes the necessity of egotism for public, as much as for personal, good. He assures Wilde’s Cyril (with a mock earnestness that parodies Baldwin’s sincerity) that he is thinking of “happiness” in a collective sense – of England “as a people” – when he advocates an

"indoor" life (36). And it is the wellbeing of "the people" that leads him to write the article for the fictional *Retrospective Review* that will become the bulk of "Decay," something that strikes Cyril as "not very consistent" with Vivian's professed concern for cultivating one's individualism at the expense of the "out of doors" world (36).¹⁷

Wilde's Cyril, like Lee's, has trouble seeing the public value of egotism, but Vivian quickly dispels his confusion by suggesting that with greater egotism and a complementary upsurge in individualism, the people of England will witness the resurrection of yet another paradoxical public virtue: lying. Vivian describes his *Retrospective Review* article as a plea for "lying in art," and he claims to have composed it as an antidote to "the popular cry of our time": "Let us return to Life and Nature" (42). The call to "return to Life" that Wilde condemns through Vivian marks another important parallel between the aesthetic program laid out by Lee in "Poetic Morality" and the "new aesthetics" laid out by Wilde in "Decay." As it unfolds in Vivian's article, Wilde's argument against artistic naturalism is two-fold. First and foremost, the "worship" of "reality" strikes Vivian as "monstrous" (38) and "vulgar" (44) because the "foul sore and festering wound" that naturalist writers like Guy de Maupassant and Émile Zola delight in revealing to their readers indicates an aesthetic interestedness that debars their texts from being considered true art (39). The mimeticism of realism and naturalism (which Wilde conflates in "Decay") makes its subjects too actual, too authentic, when, as Vivian writes, "we don't want to be harrowed and disgusted with an account of the doings of the lower orders" (39). An account of the doings of the higher orders would be equally unacceptable on aesthetic grounds because the "perfectly truthful" representation of reality – whether it be the reality of a prince or a pauper – disqualifies itself by virtue of its very truthfulness (39). While "the public" may believe that "because they are interested in their immediate surroundings, art should be interested in them also," this very interest "makes [these things] unsuitable subjects for art" (41). "As long as a thing ... appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the

environment in which we live,” Vivian contends, “it is outside the proper sphere of art” (41).

The second argument Vivian makes against the “return to Life” in art is important enough to become one of the principal tenets of Wilde’s “new aesthetics.” Vivian explains to Cyril that what readers and viewers call a “return to Life” is actually nothing of the sort. This is because “nature is always behind the age, ... old-fashioned, antiquated, and out of date” (42). Its outdatedness means that rather than existing *prima facie*, the external world is continuously being constructed after the fact. The seemingly authentic portrait of “Life” presented by the realist is thus every bit as fabricated as the fanciful worlds that might emerge from an author’s imagination. “People only discover [in nature, or ‘Life’] what they bring to her. She has no suggestions of her own,” Vivian says (42). This leads him to conclude that far from imitating or representing life, art more accurately fashions it: “Art takes Life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms” (43). Hence, and most famously, “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life” (55). Examples that Vivian cites – a real-life Mr. Hyde who is “filled with horror” upon discovering that he had “done accidentally what the Mr. Hyde of fiction had done with deliberate intent” (49); a living and breathing Becky Sharp who “some years after the appearance of *Vanity Fair* ... ran away with the nephew of the lady with whom she was living” and briefly made “a great splash in society, quite in Mrs. Rawdon Crawley’s style” (48-49) – seem to prove his assertion that “Life holds a mirror up to art” (50) rather than vice versa.

Vivian’s reasoning, as he builds his protest against the lamentable “decay of lying” among artists, possesses a certain counterintuitive appeal. Yet his ideas draw only skepticism from Cyril. His friend’s hesitation comes as no surprise, however, for the two-part argument that Wilde’s Cyril regards as “a very curious theory” (50) had struck Lee’s Cyril as equally “curious” eight years before, when Baldwin had articulated a nearly identical condemnation of naturalism in “Poetic Morality” (“DPM” 701). In that earlier essay, Baldwin concludes his

discussion of artists as creators of good by introducing Lee's Cyril to what he calls the "ethics of the indecent," a phrase that sounds almost Wildean in its conflation of two seemingly contradictory elements (697).¹⁸ According to Baldwin, the "ethics of the indecent" function as a justification for the creation of art that neither creates good nor destroys evil but exists solely for the base pleasure of exhibiting life at its most sordid. Long before Vivian identified "Let us return to Life" as the "popular cry of [his] time," Lee's characters had similarly observed the public demand for art that bills itself as "real" or "natural." Her Cyril despairs, "What is wanted nowadays is not art, but life" (684). In response to this desire, says Baldwin, some artists claim "that it is their duty" to depict "pools of filth" and "evil odours" in order to make their work "vital and honest" (697, 698). They profess an "ethical" responsibility to transmit "indecent" in the form of art that (to use Wilde's phrase) "returns to Life and Nature." Baldwin, who despises naturalism as much as Vivian does, believes this attempt to vindicate "indecent" art is wrongheaded, and he offers in support of his opinion the same reason that Vivian offers in support of the reinstitution of lying – namely, that the naturalism of such self-professed "naturalists" is actually *unnatural*. For Baldwin, however, this is true not because of the constructedness of nature as it appears in the work of naturalists, but because "Nature herself chastises [foulness] after having produced it" (702). While he admits that "there is in Nature a great deal which is foul," he believes that nature reviles against these "abominable necessit[ies]" by instilling in both "mankind and brutekind" an inherent aversion to "the foul" (702). Those artists who pit themselves against nature by glorifying the sordid are therefore practicing a kind of anti-naturalism under the auspices of gratifying the public desire for the "real."

Baldwin doesn't mince words regarding these artists. Such offenders, who include various French novelists and, of course, British aesthetes whose "feet are for ever [*sic*] stumbling into pools of filth while [their] eyes are seeking for the splendid traceries, the gorgeous colours

above" (698), are deemed "straightforward, naturalistic pigs" (701). But Baldwin's real vehemence is directed not toward realists or aesthetes who seem to have "no immoral intention," who believe themselves to be doing something "ethical," but toward those who use the "ethics of the indecent" to justify "spiritualiz[ing] the merely animal" (699, 701). These he dubs "the mystico-sensual," meaning artists who "wish to show that the whole of Nature is holy" (701). The danger of mystico-sensualists lies partly in their moral dissemblance: while readers are "gloating over sensual images," these writers "persuade themselves and you that ... you are improving your soul" (701). By recasting the "foul" elements of nature as noteworthy aspects of the human experience, they confuse what Baldwin considers to be real virtues – "justice, charity, heroism, self-command, truthfulness, lovingness, beauty, genius" – with appetites that humans share "with every scoundrel and every animal" (702). "In thus attempting to glorify that in which there is nothing glorious," Baldwin tells Cyril, mystic-sensualists "make men think that self-indulgence is sanctity" and allow readers to "consume their lives in mere acquiescence with their lusts and laziness" (702).

Even more than Baldwin fears the mystico-sensualists' attempts to sanctify the sordid, however, he fears their ability to succeed where Wilde believed such naturalists failed. In "Decay," Vivian critiques those who advocate a return "to Life and Nature" for failing to realize that art fashions, rather than imitates, life ("DL" 42). In "Poetic Morality," Baldwin condemns naturalists for not only realizing this but for exploiting it to serve what he regards as immoral ends. He grounds his description of how this happens in "modern psychology," an emerging science that held particular appeal for Lee ("DPM" 700).¹⁹ Baldwin explains to Cyril that art's ability to fashion life is attributable to "the strange connection between the imagination and the senses" that makes even "the slightest artificial stimulus" a "danger to mankind" (700). Art, says Baldwin, possesses the "power of awakening physical desires, of almost reproducing sensation" (700), and it is in this near reproduction of physical sensation that potential danger lurks. Working

from the psycho-physical observation that the representation of food can "make the mouth water," just as "the description of a surgical operation [can] make the nerves wince," Baldwin concludes that representation itself has the ability to induce "moods" and "physical desires" that ultimately find expression in actions (700). If the desires stimulated by naturalist art were moral or ethical, all would be well, but as Baldwin laments, the mystico-sensualists more often induce moods that "lead to excess – that is, to evil" (700). This is why, according to Baldwin, "the immorality of indecency is quite unlike the immorality of – how shall I distinguish? – of ordinary immorality" (700). "Ordinary immorality" may "pervert[t] the sympathies," but an aesthetics motivated by the "ethics of the indecent" awakens "immoral" physical desires that instigate real, physical actions (700). It prompts the enactment in life of what is represented in art.

The worry Lee expresses in "Poetic Morality" concerning art's ability to fashion life is entirely moral, but for her, morality has real-world significance. Because art has the ability to reproduce physical sensation and inspire physical action, an aesthetic offense or "sin against taste" causes what to Lee is a real and consequential injury, even (or as Lee would insist, especially) if it is "an injury to your neighbour's morals" (699). As Baldwin explains, to "pain [the] eye" – and "pain" here stretches all the way from the kinds of aesthetic hurt perpetrated by mystic-sensualist artists who practice the "ethics of the indecent" to the more trivial aesthetic bruises caused by the hanging of "a bright green curtain close to a bright blue wallpaper" – is to inflict a wound (699). He points out, however, that a belief in the moral consequences of aesthetics does not impinge upon the autotelic nature of art itself. Art should have "no aim beyond its own perfection" (687), Baldwin continues to impress upon Cyril throughout the essay, and the "poet's object" should *not* be "to moralize mankind" (706). And yet because the poet "deliberately chooses as material for his art the feelings and actions of man," he plays his melodies upon "the human soul, which in its turn feels and acts" (706).²⁰ The poet may – and should – espouse the kind of aesthetic

individualism that would compel him to attend first and foremost to the creation of beauty, but as he creates his art, he should remember that he “carr[ies] in his moral arms the soul of his reader – of each of his thousands of readers” (706). Unlike his poems themselves, which Baldwin believes should exist in autotelic seclusion, the aesthetic consequences of the aesthete’s poems reverberate exponentially within the moral realm of everyday life.

The premise upon which Lee is building her aesthetic theory here – that what art might *do* does not necessarily correspond with what art must *be* – is reiterated by Wilde in “The Decay of Lying.” What is more, upon hearing Vivian expound this notion, Wilde’s Cyril has the same confused response to it that Lee’s Cyril initially has. Before Baldwin convinces him otherwise in “Poetic Morality,” Lee’s Cyril thinks that in order for art to serve a moral purpose (to carry the “soul” of the reader, as Baldwin puts it), it has to be a moral entity in itself. Wilde’s Cyril mistakenly feels the same way. He’s willing to accept the “strange” notion that life may, in fact, imitate art rather than the other way around, but he has trouble understanding that in order to affect life, art doesn’t have to reflect life (“DL” 50). “Surely,” Wilde’s Cyril asks Vivian in “Decay,” “you would acknowledge that art expresses the temper of its age, the spirit of its time, the moral and social conditions that surround it” (50-51). But Vivian’s repudiation of this Ruskinian assumption is absolute: “Certainly not!” He then repeats to Wilde’s Cyril what Baldwin impresses upon his companion in “Poetic Morality”: “*Art never expresses anything but itself*” (51, original emphasis). Despite the fact that the “wondering crowd that watches the opening of the marvellous, many-petalled rose fancies that it is its own history that is being told to it,” art, says Vivian (repeating the very words that Lee puts in Baldwin’s mouth), reveals nothing but “her own perfection” (51).

Having thus conscripted Lee’s distinction between what art should be and what art should do, her argument against artistic naturalism, and her promotion of aesthetic individualism, Wilde finally draws away from “Poetic Morality” as he concludes “The Decay of Lying.” In Lee’s essay,

Baldwin's belief in a wholly autotelic art is attendant upon his belief in the fundamental morality of the realm in which such art operates. The supreme expression of this morality is the image of writer and reader in perfect ethical accord, the writer carrying the soul of the reader "in his moral arms." In "Decay," Vivian agrees that art practiced for its own sake can and does have enormous effect upon its recipients (who "either reproduc[e] some strange type imagined by painter or sculptor, or realis[e] in fact what has been dreamed in fiction" ["DL" 50]), but he refuses the mutual ethical responsibility that brings writer and reader together in Lee's model. As though he were speaking directly to Lee's Cyril instead of to his own like-named friend, Vivian declares that "The highest art rejects the burden of the human spirit, and gains more from a new medium or a fresh material than she does from any enthusiasm for art, or from any lofty passion, or from any great awakening of the human consciousness" (51). His mention of "lofty passions" and "great awakenings" gestures toward Lee's insistent morality, the ethical strain with which she manages to undergird her notions of art without compromising her belief in the aesthetic purity that must direct such art's composition. At the same time, however, Vivian's statement evinces Wilde's move away from such "awakenings" and the "burden" they impose on the artist. This constitutes an important point of diversion. Wilde never contests the fundamental principles structuring Lee's doctrine of aesthetics, as the bulk of "Decay" demonstrates, but he does reject the moral exigency with which Lee saturates them.

As both Vivian and Wilde near the end of their cognate essays and Vivian begins to lay out for Wilde's Cyril the "doctrines" that comprise his "new aesthetics," Wilde's deliberate parsing of Lee's aesthetic principles from the ethical philosophy in which they are couched – a separation that allows him to keep the principles while jettisoning Lee's moral discourse – becomes all the more apparent. In large part, Vivian's "new aesthetics" align quite neatly with the doctrines that Baldwin and Lee's Cyril discuss in "Poetic Morality." Leading off Vivian's list is the tenet that he has spent the majority of his *Retrospective Review* article

expounding, the notion that “Art never expresses anything but itself,” that it has “an independent life, just as Thought has, and develops purely on its own lines” (“DL” 55). A less concise version of this principle anchors Baldwin’s conversation with Cyril in “Poetic Morality.” There Baldwin proclaims, “I want art in general not to meddle with the work of any of our other energies. [...] If it attempts to perform the work of philosophy, or practical benevolence, or science, or moralizing, or anything not itself, it will merely fail” (“DPM” 691-92). In both instances, Lee and Wilde turn to art for art’s sake in an attempt to free British aesthetics, once and for all, from the lingering specter of Ruskin. Lee allows Baldwin frankly to admit as much: “I have always laughed at the Ruskinian idea of morality or immorality in architecture, or painting, or music, and said that their morality and immorality were beauty and ugliness. I have done so because moral ideas don’t enter into the arts of line, or colour, or sound” (693). Wilde doesn’t mention the critic who had so much influence on British art by name, but he, too, grasps onto the idea of an independent life for art as a means of asserting that “In no case does [art] reproduce its age,” a classic (and in both Wilde’s and Lee’s minds, erroneous) Ruskinian claim (“DL” 55).

Vivian’s second doctrine – “All bad art comes from returning to life and nature, and elevating them into ideals” (“DL” 55) – likewise finds earlier (and much more recriminating) expression in “Poetic Morality.” In fact, the vehemence with which Baldwin denounces the artists he regards as “naturalistic pigs” who “spiritualize the merely animal” by writing of “Nature herself” makes Lee’s endorsement of this doctrine difficult to forget (“DPM” 701, 702). Baldwin condemns artists in the realist and naturalist schools as “the worst pests we have in literature” (“DPM” 701), and Wilde’s Vivian agrees, suggesting that “As a method Realism is a complete failure” (“DL” 55). Artistic reproduction of the here and now constitutes, in Vivian’s opinion, a capitulation, art’s surrender of “its imaginative medium” (“DL” 55). And more than this, it forces art in an artificial direction, for the natural tendency of art inclines it toward the shaping, rather than the imitation, of life. This, of course, is

Vivian's third and most renowned "doctrine of the new aesthetics," the notion that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" ("DL" 55). Here again, Wilde proves himself in concordance with Lee. Although Vivian insists upon the originality of this principle, claiming that it "is a theory that has never been formularised before" ("DL" 55), he is simply itemizing Lee's central concern in "Poetic Morality," the ability of art to "awake[n] physical desires" and thereby incite physical actions that arise sympathetically from the sensations called up by the artist ("DPM" 700). The primary distinction between this principle as it appears, fraught with moral anxiety, in "Poetic Morality" and its wittier iteration in "Decay" lies in Wilde's dismissal of the moral gravity that Lee invests in the idea and in its aesthetic consequences. Evident in both the flippancy with which Wilde's Vivian pitches the notion at Cyril and in the untroubled brevity of his extrapolation (Vivian states simply that this "theory ... is extremely fruitful, and throws an entirely new light on the history of Art" ["DL" 55]), Wilde's avoidance of any discussion of ethical import regarding the desires or actions called up by the artist does seem to justify Vivian's assertion of originality, to some extent.²¹ In "Decay," the idea that "Life imitates Art" is notably different in spirit, if perhaps not in letter.

The fourth and final "doctrine of the new aesthetics" that Vivian proposes once again separates Lee's aesthetic theory, which Wilde maintains, from the discourse of morality permeating and substantiating Lee's essay, which Wilde rejects. Vivian concludes his article by returning to the assertion that had first startled his friend Cyril in the opening pages of "Decay," when Vivian had declared, "what I am pleading for is lying in art" ("DL" 36). His fourth doctrine makes an epigram of this idea: "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art" (55-56). Vivian's consequent recommendation that the "commonplace character of modern fiction" can and should be resuscitated by a rejection of "Facts" and "Truth" (54) hearkens back to "Poetic Morality"; there Baldwin similarly disparages artists who dedicate themselves to the creation literature that is ostensibly "vital and

honest” because doing so often means indulging in what Lee considers to be “indecent” (“DPM” 698). Baldwin tells *his* friend Cyril that “The literature of the past” which recounts “real life, life complete and thoughtless” is “full of filth” (698). Therefore, artists of the future must choose to close their eyes to such “filth” while continuing to “see[k] for the splendid trceries, the gorgeous colours above” (698). If Lee recognized the illogicality (or even the duplicity) of the suggestion that artists close their eyes to “real life” in order to create “honest” literature, she does not indicate as much in her essay. And her high moral tone – her entwining of aesthetic principles with her condemnation of “indecent,” “evil,” and “immorality” – serves to cloak this inconsistency in the guise of the strenuous uprightness that both Baldwin and Cyril espouse. The moment Wilde designates the aesthetic rejection of realism as “lying,” however, this moral virtuousness collapses. With the application of this unforgiving label, Wilde summarily divorces his fourth doctrine from conventional morality, making it seem the very antithesis of the program of “right living” that Lee advocates in “Poetic Morality” (687). He manages, in one perfectly executed stroke, to turn an aesthetic principle fundamental to Lee’s “religion of good, of right” (687) into a tenet seemingly at odds with the values upon which Lee’s aestheticism is based.

The doctrine of art for art’s sake that emerges from “The Decay of Lying” thus appears to be uniquely Wildean, an aestheticism that unapologetically celebrates moral relativity, wit, and performance – inversions all of the earnest gravity and concerted righteousness that characterize Lee’s version of art for art. And Wilde went to great lengths to convince readers of “Decay” that the aesthetic vision contained in this essay was wholly new. In several letters to friends, he extolled the originality of “Decay,” claiming, for example, that only readers with “a quick artistic instinct” would have “a chance of comprehension”; and in a portion of his letter from Reading Goal that did not make its way into *De Profundis*, Wilde provided a lengthy retrospective account of the essay’s genesis during a “delightful dinner” at a “little Soho café”

(*Letters* 428).²² Lawrence Danson's recent work has demonstrated, with convincing acuity, the general spuriousness of this account (37), but Danson's archival debunking does not reveal anything the essay itself doesn't already attest to the reader familiar with the aesthete who preceded Wilde in late-Victorian critical estimation. One need only place the concluding paragraphs of "The Decay of Lying" alongside those of "Poetic Morality" – paragraphs that feature twin Cyrils gazing out at twin sunsets – to see that the much-trumpeted novelty of "Decay" is hardly that.²³ As the final scenes unfold in stereo, however, what is most striking is not the resemblance that clearly identifies one essay as the progenitor of the other but the manner in which the essays converse in their closing pronouncements.

While Lee's Cyril stands at the edge of the precipice, observing the "row of houses glimmering white along the dark lines of coast" and the moon "slowly silver[ing] into light" ("DPM" 705, 707), he is racked by doubts, fears, and hesitations regarding the secular aesthetic gospel that he once rejected but now reconsiders in light of his conversation with Baldwin. Cyril's convictions have been deeply shaken, but he is not sure what to do next. Lee's essay ends in crepuscular uncertainty. The last line of dialogue in "Poetic Morality" is Cyril's reply to Baldwin's final query as to whether or not he has succeeded in convincing his friend of the moral potential of aestheticism. Cyril states (disappointingly, but in "the tone of a man before whose mental eyes things are taking a new shape"), "I don't know – perhaps" ("DPM" 707).

Wilde's Cyril also watches the night fall while standing at the edge of a "terrace, where 'the milk-white peacock glimmers like a ghost'" and the "evening star 'washes the dusk with silver'" ("DL" 56). But there is nothing hesitant or uncertain about this young man. Having listened with unflinching patience to Vivian's long argument for the rejuvenation of British aesthetics through the reinstitution of lying, Cyril declares, "Then we must certainly cultivate it at once" ("DL" 55). At this moment, Wilde's 1889 Cyril seems called into being not so much by Vivian's need for an auditor but by the rhetorical exigency with which Lee's 1881 essay signs

off. He becomes something of a belated response to the query that Lee's Cyril cannot answer, the question that remains open at the close of "Poetic Morality." When regarded in this light, it is difficult not to see "The Decay of Lying" in the dialogic terms first indicated by the essay's title, as one part of a conversation that Wilde is neither beginning nor ending (despite his assertions to the contrary) but contributing to. Wilde's Vivian alludes to this ongoing dialogue – the exchange that helped to fashion British Aestheticism from the multiple and protean aestheticisms brought into conversation by aesthetes like Wilde and Lee – in his final statement: "Come!" Vivian tells Cyril. "We have talked long enough" (56).

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Notes

¹ Lee's "A Dialogue on Poetic Morality" was first published in the *Contemporary Review*, the version to which all citations here refer. The essay was later published in *Belcaro* (1887), a collection of Lee's dialogue essays featuring similar characters, some of whom also appear in essays published in *Baldwin* (1886) and *Althea* (1894).

² Cyril is also the name of Wilde's older son (3½ at the time of "Decay"'s publication), as well as the protagonist in Wilde's *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* (1891).

³ All quotations from "The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue" are taken from the January 1889 version of the essay, which appeared in *Nineteenth Century*. This version differs considerably from the more familiar text that Wilde edited for inclusion in *Intentions* in 1891.

⁴ Buckler goes on to argue that "The Decay of Lying" transformed Wilde from a minor poet and reviewer into a major "critical-creative presence in modern letters," a claim that is somewhat contested by other scholars of Wilde (311).

⁵ Other examples of Lee's Italianate essays include "About the Social Question" published in *Althea* (1894) and "The Value of the Ideal" in *Baldwin* (1886). Pater also projects his aestheticist characters into the Roman countryside in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), a novel-length narrative dialogue that imitates Lee's essays in many ways.

⁶ Lee often begins her essays by plunging the reader into the midst of a conversation already in progress, as she does here. This is a technique that would later and more famously be employed by Virginia Woolf, who read and admired Lee (Woolf, "Art" 277-80). Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, which also opens with a question, "But, you may ask, we asked you to speak about women and fiction – what has that got to do with a room of one's own?" cites Lee as an example of a female writer who has successfully invaded the traditionally male sphere of aesthetic theory (*Room* 78).

⁷ In a letter to her mother, Lee calls *Patience* "far the best comic acting I have seen in London, really delicately excellent" and speculates as to possible real-life models for Mallock's Mr. Rose in *The New Republic* (*Letters* 78, 80). Lee perhaps had Mallock's conversational novel in mind when she penned "Poetic Morality," which similarly lacks plot and narrative and uses characters primarily to ventriloquize the author's opinions.

⁸ Amateur philanthropists were, in fact, some of the most socially active individuals in Britain. The appendices in Prochaska's *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* detail the astounding number of philanthropic organizations active in fin-de-siècle Britain, many of which were managed and staffed by middle-class women who had no formal training in social work. Wilde excoriated these philanthropists in his 1891 essay "The Soul of Man under Socialism," where he claimed they were motivated by "an unhealthy and exaggerated altruism" and described their efforts as "try[ing] to solve the problem of poverty, for instance, by keeping the poor alive; or, in the case of a very advanced school, by amusing the poor" (127). It is worth noting, however, that Wilde himself supported "missionary aestheticism" – philanthropy in the form of attempts to beautify the lives of the poor – on occasion; see Dowling, 330n4.

⁹ Lee expresses the idea that the artist's mission is a God-given one by having Cyril recite to Baldwin a sonnet that begins "God sent a poet to reform His earth," written by A. Mary F. Robinson. Lee, a close friend

of Robinson, dedicated “Poetic Morality” to the poet who, in turn, dedicated her book of poems, *The New Arcadia* (1884), to Lee. As Harrington has noted, both Lee and Robinson were particularly interested in the ethical responsibilities of the artist and in how “the acts of producing and consuming art could themselves be moral by creating pleasures that approached the feeling of sympathy” (68).

¹⁰ Fletcher coins the term “missionary aesthete,” which Maltz and Cohen both adopt to describe those proponents of beauty motivated by secular or religious desires to improve the lives of the poor through art (24). In Maltz’s *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes*, her study of missionary aestheticism focuses primarily on Ritualists, but she applies the term to secular art philanthropists in her article on Wilde’s *Woman’s World*. See also Cohen’s discussion of evangelical aestheticist ministers (26-30).

¹¹ Lee’s admiration of Pater, most explicit in her 1895 essay “Valedictory” but evident throughout her work, was wholehearted. While she does not refer specifically to Pater in *Belcaro* (the collection of essays in which “Poetic Morality” was eventually included), Lee was inspired by “Pater’s endorsement of art for its own sake” because of its “commitment to the Platonic ideals of truth, purity, and beauty,” as Colby explains (VL 56). At this point in her career, Lee worshiped Pater from afar, not yet acknowledging her reliance upon his work openly, but she would eventually come to be known as “Pater’s disciple” (Colby, VL 56).

¹² “Poetic Morality” appeared in *Living Age* 149 (1881): 731ff. and in *Appleton’s Journal* os 26, ns 11 (1881): 53ff.

¹³ Lee-Hamilton, eleven years Lee’s senior and the partial inspiration for her pen name, published several collections of poetry throughout the 1880s and 1890s, when he was bed-ridden with an unidentified (perhaps psychosomatic) illness that kept him largely dependent on Lee for conversation, criticism, and literary source material (Maxwell 22-27). Wilde, who admired Lee-Hamilton’s decadent verse, sought out the invalid’s acquaintance while in Italy in 1894 (Colby, VL 106).

¹⁴ In addition to "Poetic Morality," six other narrative dialogues were collected and published in *Baldwin* (1886). By 1889, the genre had become a hallmark of Lee's literary persona.

¹⁵ In the later *Intentions* version, Wilde changed the subtitle of "Decay" from "A Dialogue" to "An Observation," making his use of the narrative dialogue genre less overt (163). Most readers familiar with the essay know this 1891 version, which includes many of the most memorable lines of "Decay" (for example, "Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows?" [184]) which do not appear in the 1889 version.

¹⁶ Wilde examines the relationship between egotism and individualism in much greater detail in his 1891 essay, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," which was published the same year that "Decay" was reprinted in *Intentions*.

¹⁷ The imaginary *Retrospective Review*, Vivian's intended publication venue, is surely a satirical shot aimed at Lee, who published "Poetic Morality" and several of her other essays in the *Contemporary Review*. By altering the name in this way, Wilde makes the righteous indignation of Lee's "contemporary" Cyril seem stodgy and old-fashioned – "Victorian," even, if this adjective can be used "retrospectively" as early as 1889.

¹⁸ It is a phrase that also appealed to the daughter of Lee's friend Leslie Stephen. In Virginia Woolf's 1922 novel *Jacob's Room*, Jacob titles his unmailed letter in protest of literary censorship "The Ethics of Indecency" (79).

¹⁹ Small describes the close relationship that existed in the nineteenth century between the study of aesthetics and the "new" science of psychology in *Conditions for Criticism* (68-86). Lee was especially drawn to what she called "psychological aesthetics" or the "particular group of mental activities and habits" that art seemed to invoke in viewers (qtd. in Maltz, "Engaging" 211). This interest would later motivate Lee's partnership with Kit Anstruther-Thomson and their

collaboration in Lee's *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (1913) and *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (1912), as well as Anstruther-Thomson's *Art and Man: Essays and Fragments* (1924). See Maltz, "Engaging," and Mannocchi.

²⁰ Throughout "Poetic Morality," Lee uses "poet" to signify the artist generally, including in this category writers of all genres as well as visual artists, but at this point in the essay she narrows her discussion specifically to the poet, whom she begins to distinguish from other writers or artists.

²¹ In later versions of "Decay," Wilde inserts a paragraph immediately after "the history of Art," explaining in greater detail this third doctrine. That this paragraph does not appear in the 1889 *Nineteenth Century* version of the essay where Wilde moves immediately from his third to his fourth doctrine makes the distinction between Lee's labored discussion of the ethics of the principle and Wilde's complete dismissal of such ethical ramifications all the more apparent to the reader.

²² In a letter to W.H. Pollock sent immediately after the essay appeared in print, Wilde suggests that his ideas in "Decay" were so unique that he felt compelled to use a kind of coded language in the essay so as to obscure his thoughts from intellectually predatory readers: "the public so soon vulgarize any artistic idea that one gives them that I was determined to put my new views on art ... in a form that they could not understand, but that would be understood by the few who, like yourself, have a quick artistic instinct" (*Letters* 236). Wilde's January 1889 letters to Violet Fane and Amelie Rives Chanler assert essentially the same thing, that "Decay" was "meant to bewilder the masses by its fantastic form" (*Letters* 236) and was "written only for artistic temperaments: the public are not allowed a chance of comprehension" (*Letters* 237).

²³ J.A.M. Whistler was, perhaps, the first critic of Wilde to voice his suspicions regarding the origin and originality of "Decay." Shortly after "Decay" appeared in *Nineteenth Century*, Whistler claimed in a letter to

the editor of *Truth* that in the essay, Wilde "deliberately and incautiously incorporated, 'without a word of comment,'" part of a letter Whistler himself had written (Wilde, *Letters* 253n1). Whistler also sent a letter to Wilde, accusing him of being "down the area again, I see!" – "the area," of course, being intellectual theft (*Letters* 253n1). Whistler was made aware of Wilde's alleged plagiarism by Herbert Vivian, who is only one of many critics who have examined Wilde's notorious habit of borrowing words from his own and others' publications.

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