Oscar Wilde's "Secret"

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On this, the celebration of the one-hundredth anniversary of Oscar Wilde's death, it might be appropriate — in the spirit of the Wildean reversal — to begin not at the *ending,* but at the beginning, or rather, as with Jack Worthing's origins in that travel bag at Victoria Station in *The Importance of Being Earnest,* at some "beginning" before the beginning which has not yet been socially (or in this case, critically) acknowledged. Because this short talk will eventually address secrets and the unique way in which secrets are trafficked in Wilde's *œuvre,* I have chosen arbitrarily to "mark" this beginning before Wilde's beginning in a fairy tale smuggled into *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry,* published in 1888 under the editorship of William Butler Yeats. The fairy tale bears the distinctly Wildean title of "The Priest's Soul," and was contributed by none other than Lady Wilde, Oscar's mother. After all, our mothers are an unacknowledged *origin.*

This six-page fairy tale narrates the story of a child-prodigy brought up in an Irish monastery who became for a time one of the world's pre-eminent sages. In disputations with his mentors, the child-priest, adopting the rhetoric of eighteenth-century British empiricism, was able to demonstrate that God, Hell, Heaven, and Purgatory, those way stations and their agents of the human pilgrimage, were not experientially verifiable and therefore did not exist. People came from far and wide to study at the feet of this paradox, a Christian nihilist. Having flaunted his Order by taking a wife, the now mature scholar is one day visited by an Angel of the Lord and warned of his approaching death and condemnation as a sinner. The priest replies that as neither Heaven, nor Hell, nor Purgatory exist in fact, he cannot be "sent" anywhere upon death. The Angel of the Lord, now caught up in a disputation for which he did not bargain, gives the scholar-priest two really bad choices:

1) a wanton life of a hundred years of intense pleasures after which he will be cast into Hell forever or 2) a death in twenty-four hours of the most horrible torments, then passing through Purgatory, to remain forever until and unless he might find one person who *believes.* Only that discovery of a kind of counter-disciple, as it were, might redeem him. Our scholar-priest takes only seconds to opt for the second choice: a quick, albeit tormented death in twenty-four hours so that "my soul may be saved at last." But, as it turns out, our priest has taught better than he could have ever realized. For so convinced have his students become of his theologically nihilistic arguments, that he cannot find a single acolyte who believes in God, Heaven, or Soul. Converted, they now insist that he too prove the existence of the non-verifiable. Death is the absence of the disciple!

As the end of the scholar-priest's life draws nigh, his search for even one believer forces him to wander about the Irish countryside. Finally coming upon a child eager to study at his monastery under his own tutelage, the scholar asks if, uncorrupted, the youth believes in the fictions of the Christian faith. The child insists that he could refute the priest's arguments with a single question: "I would ask him, if he believed in life, to show me his life." The priest's rejoinder is entirely in keeping with his skepticism: "we have a life, but, [like all abstract Categories of the Understanding] it is materially invisible." To which the child then replies, "if we have a life though we cannot see it, we may have a soul though we cannot see it." In other words, the unseen is no secret. What escapes conventional representation by the symbols at our disposal, does not constitute a secret, so much as it does a truth shared *a priori.* Fame and renown, a traditional representation of immorality, are but the secretions of a false secret in "The Priest's Soul," which will be overtaken by the forced, involuntary secretion of his Soul. By allowing the atheist's secrets to be defined by secret rituals which mirror those of sacred rites, Wilde allows all belief, even those in radical opposition, to *share* a common "cover."

The scholar-priest then asks the future, new child prodigy to stab him in the heart until the paleness of death might descend, and then to watch for something ascending that would verify the existence of the Soul. In the

prophesied agony of a twenty-four hours dying — almost duplicating Wilde's own death from venereal disease — the once and former scholar priest passes away, and sure enough, as he does so, living creatures with snow-white wings mount from the dead man's body into the air, fluttering about a large head. Thus, according to Lady Wilde, was the origin of the butterfly in Ireland. But, the birth of the butterfly marked the end of Ireland's medieval reputation as a great centre of learning, as her elite schools emptied. What was the use of going to school to learn when the wisest man of Ireland did not realize that he had a soul until he had lost it... and could only learn that from the innocence of a naive(?) child.

As we know, Oscar Wilde deployed the butterfly as a kind of signature along with the green boutonniere over which his head, with hair parted in the middle and heavily padded shoulders, made him physically resemble the loitering butterfly, whose bearing too seems to sip of the sweetness of life from a plethora of *apparently* forbidden garden flowers. I say, *apparently,* because Wilde's gardens of delight are never quite as inaccessible as they initially seem, for those of us accustomed to lounge upon the terraces which so often limn the social setting of his drama and short fiction. Here at the outset, however, I would merely like to point to certain features of Lady Wilde's fairy tale that seem relevant to her son's later interests. There is the "promise" of the adolescent who wrote the rambling, albeit brilliant essay "The Rise of Historical Criticism" for the Chancellor's Essay Prize in 1879, with its reinterpretation of the vestigial figure of Polybius, "one of those many men born too late to be original," which drew the praise of even Ruskin. There is the birth of beauty from corporeal agony and decay, surely a motif of *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* The sacrifice of the self ever so slowly on the altar of aesthetic beauty seems an almost uncanny premonition of the willing/unwilling conversion of Oscar Wilde to Catholicism on his deathbed. The fascination with the "boy student," who seems a "likeness" even as he murders one, seems to be a pre-parody of Wilde's tenuous friendship with Lord Alfred Douglas. And finally, just perhaps, the hint of anti-intellectualism in Wilde, in every sense an intellectual giant, suggested in the birth of beauty from the death of traditional wisdom, with its empirical demands. As with Yeats' school children, there is a tendency for the body to request a bruising in order to pleasure the soul. unless and until it recovers some radical innocence which both betrays and redeems.

The so-called "compensation-effect" — we must lose in order to gain — is not only Church doctrine, but impacts the Church and its subsidiary institutions. For, if education follows fashion, along with everything else, then one age's genius is another's fool and vice-versa. Even that which is most sacred, monastic learning, is not exempt from intrusions into its inner sanctums and exclusionary ideologies and practices. At the same time, these practices and ideologies can be publicly accepted and embraced only if the secrecy is betrayed by selective agents into a public sphere where they can be trafficked to the fame of whatever priesthood. The Oscar Wilde who was simultaneously a public exhibitionist and yet a member of a "secret" cell of Freemasons during his student days is the same Oscar Wilde who apparently wanted it "both ways" in a variety of aesthetic and sexual endeavours. A crisis occurs when the hieratic priest longs for acceptance.

And these conflicting demands may be responsible for a characteristic ideological landscape which, for lack of a better phrase, I would call the "Wilde country," observable across a considerable range of his productive work. At the center of this landscape is some aesthetic or intellectual garden which combines the features of both Greek and nineteenth century bowers of bliss, insofar as they embody some resistance to the empty recurrence of history. One might for a moment imagine them as being descendants of say, Keats' lush gardens of the "Ode to a Nightingale" or the "Ode to Indolence," insofar as the objects seeking refuge there often function as producers of art for a rather special tribe of viewers or participants. Like the infamous Grecian Urn, these objects appear to participate in the "slow time" of eternity, yet, again, as with Keats' gardens, this privileged temporal status is threatened. In Wilde's case, the figures which inhabit this locale are often larger than life — pining giants, decorative statues, large portraits that cannot ever be exhibited. Perhaps the archetypal embodiment is to be found in the figure of the "selfish giant" in Wilde's own fairy tale of the same name protected (but only inadequately, as it turns out) by a sign: "TRESPASSERS will be PROSECUTED." In "The Selfish Giant" the privatization of aesthetic space at the hands of monumentalization transforms a springtime garden into the death of winter before a child, not unlike the one in Lady Wilde's fairy tale, breaches the walls of prohibition to convert it into a literal kindergarten.

I have introduced the idea of monumentalization here to describe a dialectical process, which shall be elaborated with the assistance of Robert Musil's splendid "Monuments" in *Posthumous of a Living Author* (Hygiene, Colo.: Eridanos, 1987). Musil comments upon a unique kind of invisibility which accrues to statues in urban settings. He imagines that statues and monuments are living beings, albeit endowed with a kind of life that creates their non-being: they are "conspicuously inconspicuous." To create such an extraordinary invisibility, however, such statues must become animate, albeit with a peculiar kind of animation which involves negation. They in effect "de-notice" us, for Musil. Once destroyed or otherwise defaced during times of political upheaval such as recently occurred in the former Soviet Union, however, they come alive! That is, from one perspective the very defacement of a statue or monument becomes a kind of slide toward its physical *reality*: Lenin is seen to have clay feet — which is part of his ideological "reality" — only when his representation invites a defacement which fuses the representation and what is represented. With defacement, the statue or monument moves from an excess of invisibility — the de-noticing that afflicts Hallward's portrait, say — to an excess of "noticing" that occurs on the last pages of *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

An early poem of Wilde's, "The Garden of Eros" might be illustrative of this process. In that poem, the speaker imagines himself at the "end of the line," a "last Endymion" to a poetic heritage including Keats, Morris, and Rossetti, the defense of whose poetic gardens is seen as a lost cause. Invading Titans replace the autotelic aesthetic garden with reproductions. The images of Spenser's "tuneful reed" passed to a succession of poetic singers of pastoral songs is replaced by the notion of the artist as a kind of monument defending a tradition against the ravages of a Darwinian "inexhaustible nature" which would subvert a sacred succession. In this instance, the metaphoric defacement is metaphorically likened to a multiple re-inscription which makes of the monumental a kind of palimpsest:

> Methinks my life is a twice-written scroll
> Scrawled over on some boyish holiday
> With idle songs for pipe and virelay
> Which do but mar the secret of the whole.
> ("Helas," 11. 5–8)

These gardens, it should be noted at the outset, are arenas identified with some secret or secretive activity which is never identified with precision. In the sonnet, "Santa Decca," a similar revolution which supplants the geopolitics of pagan deities with Christianity is described, not with any special lament for the displacement of values, but rather for lost secrets:

> The God's are dead; no longer do we bring
> To grey-eyes Pallas crowns of olive-leaves!
> Demeter's child no more hath tithe of sheaves,
> And in the noon the careless shepherds sing,
> For Pan is dead, and all the wantoning
> By secret glade and devious haunt is o'er:
> Young Hylas seeks the water-spring no more;
> Great Pan is dead, and Mary's son is King.
> ("Santa Decca," 11. 1–8)

Given the usually precisely identifiable geography inhabited by deities and mortals in classical literature, the wonder is why "glade" and "haunt" should be "secret" and "devious," and why the demise of this world should be imagined not merely as an "end," but as an exposure? In many of the poems set in Italy or Greece, the shift from pagan faiths to Christianity is characterized as a shift from Gods who "loiter" in paradises to a single Divinity who wanders in the desert with a specific "conversionary" trajectory in mind, a God who hunts down "the heart in hiding." Like science with its telescopes, Christianity is a spying faith whose symbolic impact depends upon Revelation.

When this putatively sacred *hortus conclusus* is absorbed so as to become a symbolic fixture in the fairy tales which comprise *The House of Pomegranates* and *The Happy Prince,* however, they are seen to be compromised as repositories of secrets. "The Birthday of the Infanta," a tale whose setting is the adolescent child's birthday party celebration, might be illustrative. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice Liddell and so many of the girls in Julia Cameron's remarkable nineteenth century photographs, the Infanta of Spain is twelve years old, oblivious to the sadness which afflicts her recently widowed father, a melancholy King threatened by a tyrannical enemy brother. Only on this birthday do the palace grounds and gardens become fully democratized; the Infanta is permitted to play only with children of her own social rank. But, on her birthday, the walls are symbolically breached by the masses, represented in this case by clowns, puppet masters, and buskers and hucksters from marginalized, yet extra-territorial tribes including the dreaded gypsies. During this particular birthday celebration, the Infanta's attention comes to be focused on a grotesque dancing dwarf whose skills include the ability to mime the movements of many of the animals in the gardens, all of whom are pleased by the flattery. Noticing the concentrated attentions of the day's honoured guest, the dwarf has an urge to reciprocate his affections by presenting her with a white rose as a token of his love.

Setting out to find his princess after the day's celebrations are concluded, the hunch-backed dwarf finds a secret entrance to the palace itself and wanders from room to room, each more richly furnished than its predecessor, hoping to find the one occupied by the Inamorata-Infanta. Upon finally opening the door to the last room in this many-chambered palace, where in the conventional nineteenth century fairy tale, he would find the right key or at least a properly fitting glass slipper, our dwarf encounters another glass surface. Having apparently skipped Jacques Lacan's "stade du miroir" phase of childhood development, he perceives in the glass pane what he initially believes to be a grotesque royal attendant. But, when he kisses the white rose, his double in the mirror also kisses a white rose that he had known to be his unique gift. The dwarf is suddenly made aware of his own ugliness: the Infanta was not expressing delight with his performance, but laughing *at* him.

What had appeared as sympathy was a gesture of betrayal. The other members of the royal family assume that the dwarf, like other lovers before him, has died of a broken heart. But it is surely rather that he dies of a particular kind of knowledge. The dwarf does not die, as do so many lovers in fairy tales and romances, carrying a secret to the grave, but of an illness as grotesque in its own way as he is — the prescient relevance of the mirror-image. He dies of immunity to a public secret, his own ugliness of which everyone, save himself, is aware. His handicap had enabled him to "live" his "art," but once the life is separated from the art as a consequence of the artist's accidental awareness of his deformed "self" as a producer of images for consumption, art and life cease in tandem.

Artistic "sincerity" disappears at the moment the artist becomes aware of his role as a producer of images for consumption. The public then romanticizes the death of the artist by an act of re-appropriation disguised as a re-privatization: the cause of death is a "broken heart." The public secret is the artist's deformity, but the fake secret is made to displace it: the secrets of the heart, presumably intended for a child on her birthday. The story gives the lie to its own moral, as it were, positing a false secret where none exist, but which nonetheless enables a public secret otherwise collectively inadmissible, to be sufficiently disguised so as to avoid guilt. Love is a fake secret which "covers" a hypocritical public.

We can see the same attempt to deny, subvert, or otherwise disguise some public secret in "The Devoted Friend," a sort of Wildian beastiary, narrated as a trilateral conversation between a Linnet, a Duck, and a selfish, bachelor Water-rat in the forest. The framed narrative involves a friendship between a Miller and a poverty-stricken child, Hans, whose only means of subsistence are flowers taken to market from a magical garden. The Miller constantly heaps verbal praise upon the poor child, even as he exacts increasingly painful tribute: free flowers; private errands; the labour of the youth in repairing the Grange; all the time with the promise of rewards to come later. Little Hans finally dies on one of his errands in behalf of the Miller (presumably one of the clerical order entrusted with separating spiritual wheat from chaff in Wilde's thinly- disguised critique of Church practice).

The relationship of Hans to the Miller is one defined by an exchange of gifts, or rather more precisely, by gifts given to the Miller in return for the promise of some reciprocal act which is never forthcoming. The gift withheld is a betrayal, for it is ultimately the "gift of life" denied poor Hans. The child becomes a disciple only to be sacrificed to an institution for whom the "withheld gift" is foundational, insofar as it is Heaven. If relationships are founded upon the exchange of gifts, then paradise (heaven) becomes an "open secret" insofar as it represents a contracted exchange — a covenant — vacated by one of the parties to it. Alas, the meek as it turns out, do not inherit the earth; Hans dies from overwork in the Miller's behalf and at his funeral, the Miller, as chief mourner, praises the child of the earth. At the end of the tale, the Water-rat, whose philosophy is akin to that of the Miller, does not comprehend the so-called "moral" of the story:

> 'I am rather afraid that I have annoyed him,' answered the Linnet.
> The fact is that I have told him a story with a moral.
> 'Ah! that is always a very dangerous thing to do,' said the Duck.
> And I quite agree with her.
>
> (*CW*, p. 309)

The "moral" or "coda" to a fable — and by implication just perhaps morality itself — is made by Wilde into a "secret" that no one "gets." The Water-rat replies that had he known that the story had a "moral", he would never have listened in any case. Hence the "moral" is a kind of public secret made opaque to all who might benefit from it, preserving a "monumental silence."

Similarly in "The Canterville Ghost," Wilde's contribution to the counter-Gothic genre, an American minister, Hiram Otis, buys Canterville Chase which, as with all distinguished British patrimonies, includes in the purchase price, its historical past, incarnated as a vestigial ghost. Like Henry James after him, Wilde deploys the American innocent abroad as an emblem of the country's love/hate relationship with the past and its corruptions. The public secret is of course what makes the American an American: we love the property and its lovely prospect, but do not wish to be inconvenienced by any undue homage demanded by history. And, as we know, the Canterville Ghost has a rough time of it with American owners who use an array of weapons to eradicate his charming presence: blood-stain remover; a lubricant for his rusty chains; and string to bar his access to bedrooms at midnight. Without the "traces" needed to impose fear, ghosts have a short life expectancy, hence, the Canterville Ghost turns to love as a last resort to command respect. Anglofilia must be perpetually renewed, by re-petitioning the past.

Kidnapping Otis' lovely daughter, Virginia, does the trick, sending the household into a panic as they search for Virginia's whereabouts. The reader never discovers what has gone on in the ghost's chamber beneath the stairs, but once, the door is opened, Virginia is free (to marry an Etonian snob), and the ghost is dead. After marriage, Virginia's husband asks her a formidable question: what went on while she was alone, held prisoner, by a ghost from the past? And she, like other brides before her, begs to be allowed to retain the past, as really past, a personal secret:

> 'You can have your secret as long as I have your heart,' he murmured.
>
> 'You have always had that, Cecil.'
>
> 'And you will tell our children some day, won't you?'
>
> Virginia blushed.
>
> (*CW,* p. 214)

This antecedent affair with the Canterville Ghost by which Virginia tells Cecil that she has learned of love is a kind of preparation for a more materially-inspired marriage, but the repressed affair tarries, as it were, in the leaden casket of Canterville family jewels which are bequeathed to Virginia as part of the ghost's last will and testament. The presumably private secret is of course not private at all but a public secret: Americans are easily seduced by British "tradition" and its nocturnal "traces" in mail and chains. Once having been so seduced, we Americans destroy the memory of a past (as do so many women in Wilde's work), replacing it with what Great Britain has become in the twenty-first century, a kind of living museum-as-parody

of its own past. Before his death, the Canterville Ghost's intrusions into everyday life are nothing more than, as he himself says, "performances." before an amused rather than awe-struck audience.

Again, the public secret — America's love affair with a British "past" from which it had initially been in some playful opposition — is translated as if it were a pre-marital love affair which America survives and Britain does not. An historical and cultural alliance is symbolized as a forbidden "dalliance" whose secret is "covered," allowed to be hidden in ways appropriate to post-marital collusions. A private love displaces a public secret, known to anyone who has ever thought about Anglo-American culture, and yet inadmissible to both parties: a "special relationship" reduced to a "ghostly affair." The Canterville Ghost is another instance of the recurrent "monumental" — a trans-historical individual or symbolic representation of some eternalized "spirit" inhabiting an estate, kingdom, magical garden, or fairy palace — who must be dismembered or otherwise sacrificed so as to subsidize the translation of a public secret (to which no one will confess) into a private tale where blame can be apportioned.

To be sure, the monumental, when we do encounter it in Wilde's work, seems a curious blend of the human with the passivity of the aesthetic object, so that one is unable to determine the originary from some reproduction attempting to live up to an audience's expectations. If the Canterville Ghost came *with* Canterville Chase, along with heirloom furniture and antique carpets, then the reader is tempted to regard him (as in fact the previous owners demand in fixing the price) as an artifact who comes to life. The ghost's formal dimension is undone as it were in direct proportion to the ghost's intrusions into a "life" of the Otis family: that is to say, that the ghostly residue "dies" into a kind of humanity, becoming a bridegroom only in death — in the same way that Lady Wilde's prodigy-priest proves the existence of the Soul, only in death — when the lead casket (borrowed from *The Merchant of Venice*) becomes part of a genuine physical legacy to Virginia.

But, just as often Wilde reverses this trajectory, so that one first falls in love with a beloved (always fraught with danger) only to discover its slow transformation into the distant, historically "monumental" which de-notices. In "The Sphinx Without A Secret," Lord Gerald Murchison explains his continued bachelor status by narrating a story to an old Oxford friend about a lost love from the past. The most notable feature of this woman to whom he was in one way attached, was apparently a peculiar "beauty molded of many mysteries" (*CW,* 215). Attempting to become intimate with Lady Alroy, thereby discovering the experiences which ground this mystery, Murchison finds her enmeshed in an apparent riddle. Letters to her must be forwarded to the care of a third party; engagements are suddenly postponed without explanation; and gifts are refused or returned. Upon reading one sad day of her sudden death in the *Morning Post,* the imaginary lover calls at Lady Alroy's flat to discover more about her secret, hidden life. But the landlady, as shocked as he is, informs Murchison that there are no secrets, but public secrets. The rented rooms have not been used for clandestine affairs, but rather the opposite: a place "for the pleasure of going there with her veil down" (*CW,* 218). There are, then, no secrets for this aristocratic sphinx; her life is entirely open, maybe too open, as she spends her days in a drawing room reading books and taking tea, with no more secrecy than that which attends upon normal British domestic life. He has found, so Murchison believes, the sole woman he could trust, yet her open-ness qualifies as a kind of non-existence, the non-existence of the work of art, suggested in Wilde's subtitle to the short story, "An Etching." In every sense, the tale is an "Imaginary Portrait," to borrow from the genre perfected by Walter Pater. It is her admirer who endows her with any mystery, much as Pater was to do in his essay on "La Giocanda" in *The Renaissance.*

Whereas the Canterville Ghost was one version of the monumental seeking to become human, "The Sphinx Without a Secret" details the life of the all-to-human given a mystery she does not possess so as to add meaning to a boring life. One structurally appropriate analogy might be that perhaps too elegantly elaborated in Yeats' *A Vision,* but more accessible in his poetry. Even as man seeks transcendence by "shooting the arrow that goes straight to the sun," our Gods, incarnated as swans among other vehicles, seek the "blood and mire" of Leda's veins. The human attempt to reach an abstract heaven and the heavenly attempt to achieve "mere complexities" turns the oppositional gyres of history. Similarly, the "monumental" is that into which ordinary life hopes to flee so as to escape the boredom of the quotidian, but also that from which those flee in the hope of living a life unconfined by per-*formance.* But, in both cases it should be noted, there is no secret inherent in the aesthetic object separable from that attached to it by humans, and endowed with *intentionality* after the fact.

There may be in fact a third possible prospect for the "monumental" in terms of the way it both produces and is defined by secrets that are never real secrets, but rather *secrete* in such a way as to corrupt any authenticity. The tall statue of "The Happy Prince," decorated with precious stones and gold leaf, stands guard over a large metropolis, where one evening a solitary swallow, like Lord Murchison the victim of an unreciprocated love, seeks refuge from the chill of the hastening winter. Assuming that the statue is symbolic of the monumental as we have been addressing it, one immediately comprehends the ease with which art appears as an alternative, compensatory refuge for the victims of an unrequited love. Is the desire evoked by the monumental like that evoked by lovers, and if so, why is sexual desire like an aesthetic response? For our forlorn swallow expects a reciprocity from a fixed statue that is unobtainable from his once and former flexible Reed by the river. Assuming that one either falls in love with secrets or that love itself is secretive, then we might have an answer. But one is disappointed ultimately because the secret of the statue is really a pretty open secret as he himself enunciates to the swallow: "There is no Mystery so great as Misery" (*CW,* p. 290). Although a statue whose feet are fastened "to the pedestal," (*CW,* p. 287), rather than endowed with the swallow's wings to soar and explore, the statue longs for some commerce with a world that might thereby be improved. As it turns out, the swallow will be the agent of the monumental, a Hermes-like messenger, who describes in a panorama a world of suffering, illness, and poverty. And progressively, the swallow commences the slow defacement of the work of art, distributing the statue's ruby eyes and gold-leafed lips to the underprivileged, much as Oscar Wilde distributed his *bon mots* to the less verbally endowed and perhaps much as the author of

"The Future of Man Under Socialism" would have hoped to re-distribute the world's wealth so as to be able to look upon the faces of the poor without feeling guilt.

With the aid of the defacing swallow, art secretes its secrets, hastening the advent of what could only be described as the winter of art which claims both the message (the statue, now part of the junk heap of history, albeit more noticed in decay than in presence) and the messenger (the swallow) in tandem. Art is meaningless until some act of partially willed deformation makes it publicly accessible. Yet, paradoxically, as soon as it socially means, it ceases to be art and becomes as mortal as its messengers and agents. This defacement of the work of art seems remarkably similar to that encountered in Lady Wilde's "The Priest's Soul," where the most theologically appropriate gesture occurs at the moment when the theologian dies, a moment that reverses his very *raison d'être.*

This leakage of what had been presumed to be art's secret rituals is surely one of the themes of "The Critic as Artist," where the iconography associated with classical art is dismissed. Images of snow on Olympus or Apollo singing to isolated shepherds in the vale are there imagined by Wilde to be the products of some faulty historical sense: "there is no fine art without self-consciousness, and self-consciousness and the critical spirit are one"(*CW,* 1020). In their dialogic encounter, Gilbert goes to considerable lengths to refute Ernest's view that at its apotheosis, artistic achievement is uncorrupted by critical practice:

> And I assure you, my dear Ernest, that the Greeks chattered about painters quite as much as people do nowadays, and had their private views, and shilling exhibitions, and Arts and Crafts guilds, and Pre-Raphaelite movements . . . Why, even the theatrical managers of travelling companies brought their dramatic critics with them when they went on tour, and paid very handsome salaries for writing laudatory notices.
>
> (*CW,* 1019)

Wilde identifies criticism, "chatter," and self-consciousness as part of the necessary *retailing* of art, even in classical antiquity where art was presumably an elite endeavour. Without these forms of perpetual re-inscription, art would run the risk of dying out altogether. The systemic deformations wrought by the pens and mouths by which it is socially reproduced constitute a necessary evil. These parasitical disruptions by which the critic becomes an artist — parasitical because commentary is so easily identified *with* and even mistaken *for* art — are simultaneously usurpers, agents in the production of a counterfeit version of the "original," and carriers of aesthetic development. Hence, the corruption of art in response-reception, the leakage of its secrets and the imposition of intentionality by its critics, both deforms and advances art: "What is termed sin is an essential element of progress" (*CW,* p. 1023).

In "The Decay of Lying," Wilde sees this leakage of the public secret as being part of a three-phase evolution undergone by every new art movement. All art, for Wilde, begins as abstract decoration. An art which deals only with what is unreal or non-existent creates a closed enclave of meanings in isolation from the mutable world, like that, of say, the Lady of Shalott's mirrored island or Basil Hallward's studio in the opening pages of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with its "shared" portrait and secret rites. In the case of Hallward's studio, this isolation is only apparent, since the sounds of human activity from London's streets penetrate its exotically decorated inner sanctum with ease, as does the predatory Sir Henry Wotton.

In the second phase of art's growth, drawn by criticism, life becomes fascinated with the new wonder, "and asks to be admitted to the charmed circle," (*CW,* p. 978), much as does Sir Henry Wotton. Then, having seduced life, art takes its victim as raw material and refashions life into fresh forms. In the final apocalypse, imagined as some *fin du globe,* life breaks free from this circle and "drives Art out into the wilderness" (*CW,* 928), destroying the enchanted garden forever, but leaving in its place another, miming narrative — that of art's consumption. Occasionally, the secret ritual by which art organizes mutable life while setting itself apart from life, seems only remotely to resemble an aesthetic object or aesthetic activity. The short story "Lord Arthur Saville's Crime," may be a case in point. The curious Mr. Podgers, the chiromantist at socially prominent gatherings, would seek to endow human action with the formal determination of art by predicting the future. Reading the human palm as if it were an artistic text, the soothsayer simultaneously engages in a clandestine activity which nonetheless makes the "secret" an open secret.

Arthur Saville *must* sin, by committing murder, so as to make the work of art (Podger's ordering of future time) co-incident with nature. But nature always drives art into the wilderness, in this case by claiming Saville's sins and the clairvoyante's art as its own: the intended victims die of *natural* causes. Only by murdering the artist, a murder which society misreads as self-destruction (suicide) can Saville be released from the artist's spell, to re-enter an equally counterfeit, yet normal social life — including marriage — from which he has exiled himself in deference to an ordered life.

The full implications of "Lord Arthur Saville's Crime," make of what appears as merely an ironic thematic reversal, something with more far reaching implications. For the reversal is not, as in classical Greek drama, an operation by which justice is re-distributed in a world of very fickle Gods with human attributes, but rather a kind of foundational ideology. Unable to free himself from a pre-determining narrative because life pre-emptively displaces that narrative, the listener/subject kills the narrator — much as Dorian Gray will kill Basil Hallward — with similar results, whose death comes to be received by an equally false, albeit determining narrative, that of authorial self-sacrifice. This fiction paradoxically liberates the listener/subject, even as it finally succeeds in fulfilling the demands of the foundational narrative. Saville escapes the narrative of criminality at the very moment when it becomes "realistically" true, because "guilt" too is a determination based upon assent to a specific narrative.

Wilde here locates in our ideological conventions — what we call "crime" or "realism" — a *transparency* of the figural which carries with it an implicit value judgment: "bad art" would always be that which gives the "lie" to its "naturalness" by a premature exposure of its artifice. Any attempt to foreground this *transparency* can never succeed, for the reader or listener of one story always has the possibility of becoming the narrator of another, the narrator of one becoming the reader of another, the actor of one becoming

the narrator of another, *ad nauseam*. The Sybil Vane of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a Shakespearian actress and an actress in Dorian Gray's story; her brother, James Vane, is both perpetrator and victim of crime. This porousity of narrative barriers and socio-dramatic roles in Wilde's work might suggest, as do the narratives constructed in court by competing attorneys, that *intentionality* (for anything) is narratively determined, depending upon which narrative earns our belief.

The unfinished nature of aesthetic experience lends it a "likeness" to other experiences which are then subject to secondary narrations. Art can be preserved only as false appropriation or dissimulation or critique of some original in a process imagined as some artistic evolution or, alternatively, the human attempt to make it relevant, but which are in reality, only appropriations of the attempted closure of *transparent fictions*. Artistic self-consciousness is represented, consequentially, as an allegory of a recognition of what exceeds it: there is always some surplus that re-figuration can never quite master. Hence, contrary to harbouring some secret or hidden truth behind a plethora of masks, both art and life in Wilde's achievement generate a surplus of narratives which are then claimed or otherwise appropriated by other narratives, often with grotesque consequences. Let us recall again that the child-priest in Lady Wilde's "The Priest's Soul," does not really "give up the ghost" upon his tortured death, but rather another narrative: a story of the origin of the butterfly in Ireland.

If, for Dorian Gray, "it seemed that in some mysterious way" the lives of his ancestors "had been his own," (*PDG* 11, p. 177), and that Wilde seems to have had tastes remarkably like those that attracted his mother, so Wilde himself was repeatedly troubled by similar accusations. Perhaps no British writer with the possible exception of Coleridge is so vulnerable to charges of plagiarism, the unacknowledged verbatim reproduction of the work of others. Having heard some memorable witticism from Whistler, a notoriously grave man, Wilde is reported to have uttered the extraordinary compliment: "I wish I had said that." To which, Whistler reportedly countered, "You will, Oscar, you will." Even if that story is apocryphal, the public denunciation of Wilde's gift of a volume of poems to the Oxford Union on the grounds that the poems were in fact not entirely Wilde's by Oliver Elton, later a Professor of English-Literature at Oxford University, was. not at all apocryphal:

> It is not that these poems are thin — and they *are* thin — and they *are* immoral: it is not that they are this or that — and they are all this and *that*: it is that they are for the most part not by their putative father at all, but by a number of better known and more deservedly reputed authors. . . . The Union Library already contains better and fuller editions of all of these poets: the volume which we are offered is theirs, not Mr. Wilde's: and I move that it be not accepted.

Perhaps the most egregious example of potential plagiarism in Wilde is to be found in his unpublished lecture on another figure at the centre of another controversy involving forgery: Thomas Chatterton. The seventy-odd page manuscript, in the Clark Library in Los Angeles, was most certainly intended for publication in The Century Guild Hobby Horse. It is liberally interspersed with unacknowledged printed clippings taken verbatim from the biographies of Chatterton by Daniel Wilson and David Masson. The lecture, as if to support Elton's charges of wholesale appropriations from the British literary canon in Wilde's poetry, concluded with a poem on Chatterton that was in fact the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

All of this from the author of "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." where Cyril Graham has a theory about a work of art, commits forgery in order to "prove" the theory, and then becomes a martyr so as to create a religion, born of sacrifice, whose only truth is its dedication to a lie. Plagiarism is certainly one way of talking about some "disappearance of difference" between an anxious heir and his antecedent, to borrow from Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence.* But it might also encompass a plethora of love-hate relationships in which we deconstruct that which has shaped us, all the time denying the influence or dismissing it as some fleeting seduction, not unlike that imagery which Wilde used in his *De Profundis,* appropriating the imagery of Newman's *Apologia,* in describing his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. As we read *Salomé,* this thematic cluster of plagiarism-mirroring and sacrifice born of love/hate relationships, should not be lost on us in Wilde's unique reading of Matthew 3: 1–17 and 11 and Mark 1: 1–11 and 6. Salomé, born of Herodias and her first husband, skirts a taboo when requested to seductively dance before her stepfather, Herod. Refusing his requests out of deference to her mother's wishes (for whose new husband's affections, Salomé would then become a rival), she turns her seductive movements to Iokanaan (John the Baptist) who preaches abstention and resistance to sexual temptation. Their relationship ends of course with his head brought in upon a silver platter and her sacrificial death. But the secret of this relationship is an open secret. Iokanaan is an adopted child of a similarly quasi-incestuous relationship: Christ seduced, as it were by his new father, God. John the Baptist — of all people, given his biological kinship with Jesus of Nazareth whom he proclaimed the Son of Man in baptizing — has stooped to a new level of hypocrisy in condemning Salomé's seductive lifestyle and marginally legitimate social status. Salomé's erotic dancing and the disciple's asceticism are, perhaps paradoxically, both attempts to liberate the spirit from the body, a consistent interest of the *fin de siècle.* Even more intriguing, is the way in which both Salomé and Iokanaan, in Wilde's strategic re-writing, appeal to consumer "belief" in attracting admirers and converts to what lacks political sanction. Each is irresistible, reflecting perhaps a new incarnation of the struggle between a sweet and light Hellenism and a stricter Hebraism in a dialectic which leaves traces, a kind of negative residue, in the Other. Although both lead lives "under cover," in one instance under the cover of a (baptismal) well, that presumed secrecy in no way inhibits their considerable appeal, to each other and *as* victims.

The Importance of Being Earnest brings this shared secret, a marvelous oxymoron, into an even more radical elaboration when Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrief come to share a "name" that neither possesses. In other words, they assume the fiction of "earnest" young men in deference to a cultural demand which puts a premium on a "good name," that, even when assumed, has more worth than "Worthing." As it turns out, Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrief are a socially unacknowledged "brotherhood," which is made over into an actual biological relationship of brothers in Act III upon the discovery of Jack's real ancestry. But the real secret of their relationship is an open secret. The prolonged disappearances on weekend "Bunburying" excursions to the country by which they "cover" for each other's absence from the rituals of more traditional courtship, is of course a code word for one kind of homosexual sex, known to any cultivated Victorian theatre audience. Once again, there is no real secret to this name, simultaneously a "proper" name and an "improper" name which, like Romanism, refers to a specific place and to a cluster of activities: with the displacement of one consonant, an established brand of men's "covering" apparel. As Wilde with his trope of the foundling deposited in Victoria Station, the precise origins of the mysterious "body" may be obscure, but the exchange involving a manuscript for a body (and the ease with which both can be dissimulated and disguised) occurs in an introverted, albeit highly public institution characterized by constant traffic — not unlike that other open/closed terminus in Wilde's life, Reading Gaol.

What I have been trying to suggest is a relationship between two separable, but thematically interwoven motifs in Oscar Wilde's achievement which cuts across all the genres with which he experiments, not least of which was his own life: l) a contested ownership (of ideas, movements, aphorisms, people, the human soul) and 2) a shared secret which is always fully open, maybe too open, to the public. The Greek gardens and their solitary, pining monuments which demarcate the landscape of the "Wilde country," are in each instance transformed into a cultural dessert. Yet, it is not so much that artists and their creations, alienated from an increasingly bourgeois culture, must either seek other arenas ("The Scholar Gypsy") or sacrifice their isolation for a social life that threatens their derivative identity ("The Lady of Shalott"), but rather too much of the wrong kind of aesthetic sympathy.

In a very early poem, "On the Sale by Auction of Keats' Love Letters," Wilde tells how "the letters which Endymion wrote/To one he loved in secret, and apart" (ll. 1–2) became part of the "auction mart," thereby commodifying the intimacy of a romantic artist whose odes so often had pastoral settings. Wilde wrote the poem, years before his own letter, left in the pocket of a jacket left for cleaning, fell into the hands of an unintended recipient who, demanded a price for its re-privatization — a price, that, if Richard Ellmann's account is to be trusted — was more than Wilde asked for most of his poems! Once consumed at auction, trafficked, the public interest in the details of Keats' relationship with Fanny Brawne, like Wilde's with Sir Alfred Douglas, is transformed into another, competing aesthetic commodity — gossip and public opinion — which democratize it. Social "meaning" comes to usurp a notion of intention defined as "aesthetic purpose," not completely perhaps, but as a kind of doubling "shadow," which can never be quite separated from it, as say Salomé's erotic physical beauty from Johanaan's pale, wordy, asceticism.

This "shadowing" of self-contained, autotelic aesthetic value by some value-in-exchange which runs alongside it might be compared with Marx's infamous analysis of the difference between proper or proprietary "value" and "nominal value" in paper money in "The Chapter on Money" in the *Gründrisse.* Oscar Wilde's "The Fisherman and His Soul" will use a rather unique relationship between the body and the soul to talk an analogous form of "shadowing" or "stalking." In a nautical variation of the Wilde geography we have been examining, the monumental here lies beneath the waves, as a large mermaid, until one day, it is caught by a fisherman. Like all Wilde's secrets, even when caught, they somehow manage to just slip away, a clear sign of the elusive nature of artistic "meaning." Our combination siren/mermaid functions simultaneously as a producer of art (she sings lovely songs); the embodiment of art (she displays almost classical beauty); and as the potential of art's commercial utility (her singing draws other fish into his nets).

But falling in love with the monumental is always a dangerous proposition in Wilde and "The Fisherman and His Soul" is no exception. For, she demands as a condition of "living happily ever after" in a state of marital bliss beneath the waves, that our fisherman abandon his soul. And, against the advice of religious elders in the community, he does abandon his, as it turns out, heartless soul. But abandoning a soul is easier said than done, for though it presumably has theological value, the soul has no commercial value, for no one in the marketplace will purchase it. Markets traffic in everything for the body and even bodies themselves — given that this story is set in a time of slavery — but the soul has no price. Hence, the fisherman must cut away the soul from his body with the assistance of a little witchcraft. Realizing that mermaids, along with hornbeams and Judas trees, belong to the paraphernalia of demonic witchcraft, the fisherman asks a witch for the secret by which the soul can be severed from the body, only to be told, initially, that such a secret is known only to witches. When accused, however, of being a false witch, she does what witches always do in literature: she makes secret rites accessible to selected initiates in an "open secret," thereby resisting the logic of the false witch, a human being:

> 'What we call the shadow of the body, is not the shadow of the body, but is the body of the Soul. Stand on the sea-shore with thy back to the moon, and cut away from around thy feet thy shadow, which is the Soul's body, and bid thy soul leave thee, and it will do so.'
>
> (*CW*, p. 255)

One can live a life in paradise with an androgynous monumental which the fisherman is under the illusion he has "caught," but which has really "caught" him, only by detaching himself from a shadowing Spirit.

But the Spirit is a kind of double-edged sword, representing both the impulse to explore strange lands, a kind of latent wanderlust, and also the temptation to do evil, which our fisherman does on his annual retreats to dry land. The struggle is not, as is customary, between the Soul and the Body for man, but rather between the mutability of the ever new experiences in strange lands and the permanence of a monumental love beneath, in the now aquatic gardens of the ocean depths. What Wilde creates is a full-fledged economy, wherein one can buy curiosity and sin at the price of love and devotion, but cannot have both at the same time. The life with the Soul in exotic kingdoms smacks of trafficking in goods and services: the fisherman is always tempted by his Soul to steal gold or murder merchants in bazaars.

Man would appear to need both the silent, unchanging love-life with art beneath the waves as well as the dubious morality of desert bazaars, subsidized, it should never be forgotten, by religion, whose representatives see both of the fisherman's lives as interdependent: the requirement that one abandons one's Soul is tantamount to living with pagan mermaids, but to live with the Soul on the mainland is to stoop to the evils of a protestant mercantilism.

As Wilde's story progresses, the soul, having no heart save one bent upon criminal exploitation, beseeches the fisherman to allow him to gain entrance once again to the body, a wish that the fisherman grants, and once again the soul comes to shadow the body, incurring for the fisherman the renewed wrath of his mermaid/lover. Sent forth into the world the Soul has no heart, but once it re-enters the body of the fisherman, it interferes with an illicit love. For so compassed about is the fisherman with love, that the Soul can find no place of entrance. Wilde's story, then, would *maintain* desire as part of an economy of "doubles." When one has the love of art, he longs for the mutable world of exploitation, sanctioned by religion and its minions, who as always minister to the Soul, but in the sanctums of the Soul, on the mainland, one longs for the amoral (and asexual) life beneath the sea. This *economy of desire* is of course an economy of *sacrifice*: desire is created by the more or less free ingress and exit of the Soul, which contests ownership of the fisherman.

Read with this kind of emphasis, "The Fisherman and His Soul" reads as if it were a prelude to *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* where the preternaturally youthful Dorian is the object of a contested battle involving the artist (Basil Hallward) and the would be lover/tutor, Sir Henry Wotton. The pleasure derived from intellectual mastery is regarded as every bit as strong as the pleasure of the artist in "mastering" the subject's shape to such an extent that he is reduced to a similar pawn of lines and shadows. Just as Basil Hallward's portrait of the youth is described in terms of an opacity which reflects the soul of the artist, so the recipient of Wotton's intellectual investment is imagined as a variant of our familiar shadow-figure, or to borrow an acoustical metaphor, an echo:

> There was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence. No other activity was like it. To project one's soul into some gracious form, and let it tarry there for a moment; to hear one's own intellectual views echoed back to one with all the added music of passion and youth; to convey one 's temperament into another as though it were a subtle fluid or strange perfume, there was real joy in that — perhaps the most satisfying joy left to us in an age so limited and vulgar as our own . . .
>
> (*PDG* 3, p. 60)

The portrait, equally "shared" by its creator and its subject is matched by another instance of contested ownership, that of Dorian Gray's body itself. Henry Wotton's intellectual/sexual seduction is imagined as a kind of "shaping" which is then reciprocated (akin to one of the expectations of hetero-sexual love) in the same way that the artist "shapes" the highly representational portrait, with the expectation that it returns his investment. Each of these activities is regarded in some way as "deforming" or corrupting what Dorian Gray *is*, but the competition resulting from the contested ownership by tutor and artist is freely admitted by Dorian Gray in his instructions to Alan Campbell:

> 'Whatever my life is, he had more to do with the making or the marring of it than poor Harry has had. He may not have intended it, the result was the same.'
>
> (*PDG* 14, p. 200)

If *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is given this admittedly philosophical reading, then corruption turns out to be a two-way street: not only is art corrupted when critics or the public appropriate its meanings and deform it in the way in which the statue in "The Happy Prince" loses his bejeweled eyes and golden skin, but, equally important, the individual will is corrupted when reproduced as a work of art. Realism is a myth, for neither art nor life can be reproduced as is. In some uncanny way, *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* admitted as evidence in convicting Wilde of a corrupting influence upon

youth, repeats one of the themes of the book: art corrupts. Although not a part of D.P.P. Carson's argument in the first Wilde trial, we should not ever forget — though so many critics do — that the troubling portrait "reflects" Dorian's act *before he acts*; it anticipates rather than represents.

Hence, the removal of the framed portrait to a closet in Dorian's childhood nursery might represent some attempt to either restore the image to the occasion of its instantiation (childhood innocence) or to maintain the work of art in its own garden (kinder-garten?) exempt from any possible retail consumption by the public at large. This gesture, the removal of the portrait from studio to nursery, evading the public exhibition which had been planned, is crucial to the plot of *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* for the gesture symbolizes a denial of Hallward's "share" in an aesthetic relationship that has come to be — or perhaps has been all along — inscribed sexually. Or, stated in another way, the isolation of the work of art from its ostensible creator and its subject (as well as the consuming public) is tantamount to some impossible mystification of "aesthetic" value. The threat to re-privatize an art threatened with public exposure, like the attempt to keep any other relationship secret, is a failure: at the novel's conclusion, the portrait is defaced and both Hallward and Dorian are "consumed" in similar ways. Neither art nor life's practices can survive when confined to a "closet."

If art "means" only in a critical consumption which competes with art (so that every critic becomes an artist), then "secondary" discourse is always a kind of "rival," threatening to usurp whatever meaning presumes to be "proper" to the work of art. Although he initially suggests that Hallward exhibit the portrait at the Royal Academy, Sir Henry Wotton quickly acknowledges that the consuming public competes with the art as collateral objects of consumption:

> 'Whenever I have gone there, there have been either so many people that I have not been able to see the pictures, which was dreadful, or so many pictures that I have not been able to see the people, which was worse.'
>
> (*PDG* 1, p. 24)

In Oscar Wilde's world, there is a constant leakage from some "originary" idea in its social reproduction, which is, paradoxically, the sole carrier of meaning. After detecting a resemblance to one of her husband's theories in one of Dorian Gray's aphorisms, Lady Wotton remarks that "she must always hear Henry's views from his friends" (*PDG* 6, p.70). The necessary distortion in social reproduction means, as Henry Wotton himself, says, in arguing against aesthetic "verisimilitude," that "Nothing is ever quite true" (*PDG* 6, p.107). Only an art whose "intentionality" has been corrupted, would be true, which of course, gives the lie, the dissimulation, a profound truth.

Within such an aesthetic so dependent upon the masking and unmasking of a *necessary* dissimulation, "secrecy" must lie at the very core of power, much as it does for a thinker like Elias Canetti in *Crowds and Power.* In its traditional structural configuration, all "faces" and "surfaces" are abandoned, and the secret lies behind or under some dissimulating shadow which obscures its presence. In his analysis of secrecy in *Crowds and Power,* the most noteworthy feature of exposure is its speediness — speed becomes the prelude to a transmutation of meaning into force, and indeed historically, revelations, as St. Augustine discovered, do behave like "lightning." But in Wilde's work, secrets seem to both occupy a different structural position and have an altogether different dynamic which puts in jeopardy the very notion of *unmaking* the secret. The secret itself (whether of a past relationship, birth, or hidden record of sin) becomes an active spirit, standing over those who created it or collude in it, controlling them with a near animate intensity.

Since Lord Alfred Douglas may be considered to be at the heart of Wilde's rather open secret, it might be intriguing to consider the ways in which friendship or "disciple-ship" folds into secrecy in Wilde's work, the real subject of *De Profundis.* One's intimate friend, patron, client (in what Wilde was to term a "lop-sided friendship"), even one's informant in whom he places some trust, all constitute the heart of the Other in what comes to be a virtual ethnography of the secret. Yet, friendship, as most of us in university departments realize, is also synonymous with ambiguity, paradox, and instability, not because society demands constancy or consistency, but precisely because it does not. This is never more true than in Wilde's work, where all social life participates in very temporary affinity groups dictated by fashion with which they share a very limited attention span. Friendship, when it is on display at one of the social gatherings in Wilde's plays, for example, is always related to class or financial "interests" or the need to be identified with those who share them. There is something in fact very anti-social at the heart of Wilde's world which would forever impede the kind of "solidarity" which accrued to Ruskin's intellectual contributions. Intimate friendships provide the illusion, but only the illusion, of a refuge from the "bourdon note" of the world, like say, Basil Hallward's studio, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* The nature of all Wilde's putative aesthetic or social refuges from the world — from Sybil Vane's stage to the Duchess of Monmouth's Selby Royal estate where an intruding James Vane is shot — are highly permeable to intrusions from the world at large: there are never any secure conservatories of art nor "retreats" from social "trafficking."

Hence, friendship and discipleship are revealed to be built upon a contradiction of means and ends. On the one hand, friendship is an end in itself insofar as it, like art for art's sake, is part of the fiction of disinterestedness. Yet, at the same time, it serves as an instrument of self-advantage, never more so than in Wilde's sparkling wit which perfects the competitive "put down." Friendship or discipleship — and the two are often identical in Wilde — is thereby maintained only by the dissimulation of one's true feelings. In other words, everyone knows that the ideal of friendship is being betrayed, but, depending upon the skill of the manipulator and the interests of other parties, the fiction of friendship is nonetheless upheld. In *De Profundis,* Wilde painfully recalls the response of Sir Alfred Douglas to his critique of the latter's tardy and egregiously poor translation of *Salomé,* that Douglas felt himself to be under "no intellectual obligation of any kind to me" [Wilde]:

> 'I remember that when I read that statement, I felt that it was the one really true thing, you had written to me in the course of our

> friendship. . . . I am not saying this in bitterness at all, but simply as a fact of companionship. Ultimately the bond of all companionship, whether in marriage or friendship, is conversation.'
>
> (*De Profundis,* p. 880)

The betrayal of a friendship lies at the heart of a truth which friendship itself should deny! A betrayed conversation, like a betrayed — in the sense of unfaithful — translation, is paradoxically made to appear more true than the betrayed truth. Plagiarism is no betrayal, but a bad translation is.

Wilde's analysis here would make friendship analogous to Marcel Mauss's famous representation of the dynamics of the "gift" which cements much of social cohesiveness, yet is at the very heart of corruption. Mauss drew attention to this latent duplicity in the gift which is, as he stated on the first page of his book, in theory, voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous, but is just as often interested and in fact, obligatory. The form usually "taken" is that of a gift generously offered, but the accompanying behavior, as we know from Japanese social life, is that of "formal pretense and social deception." The logic of the gift is implicated in friendship, even as friendship is in most situations, likely to presume the gift or at least be itself a gift. This may well account for the recurrent presence of gifts or objects — *billet-doux* — that might potentially become or have already been gifts in the conversational exchanges between Basil Hallward, Sir Henry Wotton, and Dorian Gray. Although art and art objects seem to occupy so much space in Wilde's plays and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (the word "art" occurs over forty times in the latter), the objects themselves are remarkably forgettable, for, like Lady Windermere's fan, they sacrifice materiality in favor of establishing a relationship between a donor and a recipient. Even the portrait itself assumes the dimensions of a gift *in situ,* exchanged before its actual conception has been realised:

> 'You know the picture is yours, Dorian. I gave it to you before it existed.'
>
> (*PDG* 2, p. 52)

In other words, the portrait as an open secret, *materially* belongs to neither Basil nor Dorian, but is rather the portrait of *their shared relationship*; that is, until such time when its materiality is *appropriated.*

Friendship is defined in Wilde, then, as the locus of secrecy and shared secrets, just as it is a locus of gifts and their sharing. Conversely, gifts can come to resemble secrets (often well-wrapped and implicated in surprise). And assuredly it is in the nature of surprise that the contradictions inherent in the gift discharges itself with such sudden force. From one perspective, *De Profundis* might be read as a catalogue of the gifts which Wilde used as a synecdoche of his friendship and its betrayal by Douglas — meals at the Savoy, three months vacation at Goring, non-interest loans, time borrowed from the writing of "An Ideal Husband," culminating in an epistle which assumes materiality when a price is placed upon it. The gift, like friendship, appears to be freely, even spontaneously bestowed, even as it too is enmeshed within social prescription which regulates it in such a way that even its absence, *means*:

> To be entirely free, and at the same time entirely dominated by law, is the eternal paradox of human life that we realise at every moment; and this, I often think, is the only explanation possible of your nature, if indeed for the profound and terrible mysteries of the human soul there is any explanation at all. . . .
>
> (*DP*, p. 891)

Because those occasions when gifts are exchanged in some sense lie at the intersection of social obligation (law) and freedom (the gratuitous offering), Wilde makes of disciple-ship a kind of gift which, like Judas', *is* betrayal.

The gift, like disciple-ship and I might add "gossip" itself, are implicated in an exchange — and hence the sharing — of what appears to be a secret, yet *means,* acquires value, only when opened and mutually acknowledged as a symbolic transaction. But once opened, made part of the public record, the gift, like the disciple, is no longer secret but secretes into *publicité* (in both senses in which that word is commonly used). The recipient of material, intellectual, or communicative "gifts" must adopt some attitude toward the donor which simultaneously passes judgment on both themselves and the donor. No gift can be exchanged without comment or judgment — which would imply the Manichean nature of the morality of such exchanges that limit responses to approval or disapproval. Gifts, disciple-ship, and gossip never escape evaluation; as with art, they are subject to moral "appropriate-ness."

In "The Disciple," one of the so-called "Poems in Prose," the subject is the ostensible object, the pool into which the vain Narcissus gazed, transfixed by his own reflected image. Unlike everyone else exposed to Narcissus in the myth, the pool never knows whether Narcissus was really beautiful or not, for it sees only itself in Narcissus' eyes, which become the pool's pool, as it were. The pool is really in the relationship of a disciple of Narcissus whom the youth unwittingly initiates into his own egotistical mysteries. The relationship between Narcissus and the pool in Wilde's vignette is like that which pertains in instances of what in Texas as teenagers we used to call "Indian giving," keeping for oneself that which has ostensibly been given to others as a gratuitous gift by requesting its later return. The gift is betrayed when the donor or master demands to retain the "rights" to it or its production, like masters with ostensible disciples or copyright holders to subsequent reproductions or copies. Surely, the betrayal implicit in all gift exchanges participates in that "tarrying of the negative" so crucial to comprehending the dynamic of Hegel's thought (at which, as the Smith and Helfand edition of the *Notebooks* reveals, Oscar Wilde was no amateur). Since every gift is wrapped in such a way as to preserve its mystery as a secret, a surprise — even for Infantas' birthday parties — let us assume for a moment that the "pose" in Wilde, the assortment of verbal and behavioral performative effects by which he attracted interest in himself and his aesthetic causes, was not some superficial wrapping or "mask" typical of *fin de siècle* sensibilities, but...*truth.* Such a leap outside the judgments of literary history would imply that the "covering" which keeps secrets was no more a "cover" than Lady Alroy's gestures "cover" a hidden secret. Were this to be the case, Wilde would be saying, as he did countless times, that the so-called cosmetic "pose" is indistinguishable from what informs it. There are no obscuring layers, no real secrets to be exposed, no possibility of some "payoff" discovery in the recuperation of hidden, metaphorically disguised readings by which we critics earn our livings. As opposed to the critic or gift recipient's urge to look *behind* or *beneath* the veil in some Platonically-inspired environment or its puritanical counterpart, the God who withholds himself, everything would be metonymically accessible, along a singular, non-differentiated plane.

Such a world where all secrets were open secrets could never really be exposed, since what had passed for the "inside" would have been always-already exposed, for those who know how to look. As we all know, the irony of Oscar Wilde's public disgrace lies in the fact that we was never accused of homosexual acts by the Earl of Queensbury in that note left at the Albemarle Club which occasioned Wilde's disastrous suit for libel. He was accused by Alfred Douglas' estranged father of "posing as a sodomnite" [sic]. What if Wilde had defended himself by saying, "I am not posing, but attempting to eliminate all poses. I am." When reality gives the lie to all "covers," is the accusation of "posing" libelous, like, say, accusing a purveyor of defective goods of "posing" as a merchant? Is the "pose" that does not cover a mystery at the heart of Wilde's achievement?

Maybe, but we still have not really answered the question posed, namely: what would a world without covers, wrappers, masks, a world where the real and the posed, are undifferentiated, look *like*? Initially, it might be a world without metaphor, where nothing is *like* anything else. No ideology could ever be "faithfully represented," posing real obstacles to representative democracy. Every critic, even those who plagiarize in the act of reproduction, would be an artist, even an original artist whose ostensible "covers" as they are called by today's disc jockies — never hide anything, the source being an "open secret." Such a world may resemble the gardens of the rich in Wilde's dramas and poems or the artificially abandoned stage props and names whose secrets are pretty "open" by the second act. It would be a world where ostensible proper names, like "Bunbury," are never quite proper but slide into the performative. But, it would also be a world where gifts, disciple-ship, and gossip are no longer possible, insofar as nothing secret can be given or received, recalling the *Vita Nuova,* described in "De Profundis:" "One cannot give it away, and another may not give it to one" (*DP,* p. 913). The end of the gift and the end of the mask occur simultaneously, with the experience of pain:

> Behind Joy and Laughter there may be a temperament, coarse, hard and callous. But behind Sorrow there is always Sorrow. Pain, unlike Pleasure, wears no mask. . . . Truth in art is [similarly] the unity of a thing with itself. . . .
>
> (*DP,* p. 920)

This is indeed both the occasion and the site of an individualism as radical in its own way, as the individualism which the secret had defined. In dwelling in a world of pain which can be shared only with difficulty if at all, Wilde was surely anticipating our therapeutic universe where family and personal secrets are transformed into pathologies which at least become part of a dialogic where there are neither donors nor recipients, a genre to which Wilde was drawn throughout his career. The mask or label does not hide or cover anything; it *is* (copulatively?) the thing.

Even on his deathbed, Wilde persisted in attempting to remove a "cover" of sorts in a gesture which, seems appropriate to Andy Warhol, with whose achievement Wilde's seems so compatible. For, as the pop artist showed how the designer label would come to displace the contents by making the label an omnipresent cover which we cannot escape, so Wilde achieved a similar feat with his now immortalized last words. Robert Ross reports that a Wilde wracked with pain, looking up at the wallpaper of his highly decorative Paris chamber, pronounced, "either that pink wallpaper goes or I do." As is often the case, even with Warhol's Campbell Soup cans, the labelling "cover" is often more durable in western thought than what lay dead beneath it, but not "covered" by it.

P.S. Because immortality has such unconventional representations in both Wilde's work and life. it might be worthwhile to recall the narrative or least one narrative which accompanied his death to which Richard

Ellmann accords a mention. While being washed and prepared for burial, Robert Ross reported that the corpse virtually "exploded" with the most "appalling" emissions. Usually these effects are among the unquiet passings of Gothic monsters who retain the sublime "frisson" into the next world. Not the birth of the butterflies emitted from the capital orifices of a dying priest in Lady Wilde's "The Priest's Soul," but a possible supplement to it?