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Fictions of Life and Death in Wilde, Gide, Strachey, and Woolf

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M.A., New York University, 2005

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Abstract

Fictions of Life and Death in Wilde, Gide, Strachey, and Woolf
By Scott Branson

Fictions of Life and Death reconstructs the legacy of Aestheticism by tracing its self-destructive formal imperative into Modernist experiments in the novel. Beneath Oscar Wilde's claim that life imitates art, I argue, there is a wish to confront death that simultaneously provides a critique of traditional narrative form and motivates a new idea of how fiction enables us to understand life. Wilde's literary legacy has often been overlooked in favor of the looming shadow his life and personality cast over the *fin-de-siècle*. However, in the aftermath of Wilde's tragic downfall, writers like André Gide, Lytton Strachey, and Virginia Woolf continued his work by using the form of the novel to explore the desire for death. These Modernists take up the radical aesthetics Wilde dramatizes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by reinventing the novel as a genre in which the *Bildungsroman* disintegrates into splintering plotlines and reflexive literary moments.

Drawing on queer theory's recent reevaluation of the political potential Aestheticism has to disrupt identity, I uphold the Aesthetic emphasis on momentary pleasure to counteract the understanding of life as a linear narrative from beginning to end. The aesthetic novel alters our understanding of life and death by overlaying anticipation and retrospection in order to expose narrative's promises of stable meaning as dependent on fleeting time. My project counters the recent emphasis on mourning in Modernist Studies by highlighting the novel's relation to death as desire. At the same time, this view replaces a redemptive aesthetic with one of dissipation.

Chapter one examines Wilde's alteration of the time of the novel in the form of a paradox as he figures death as retroaction. Chapter two looks at Gide's approach to death as an empty point of representation, where the comprehension of the world promised by realism meets a destructive desire for the unexplainable. Chapter three uncovers Strachey's biographical principle of death as repetition that fits individual existence into historical patterns. Finally, chapter four explores Woolf's model of death as communication, an impersonal narrative procedure that builds and disperses the contours of self, plot, and meaning.

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Writing can be an oppressively lonely endeavor. Writing about death only makes this solitude seem like a practice run. While I worked on this project, I learned firsthand the danger that Wilde ascribes to dealing in paradox; it would not be a stretch to say that *Dorian Gray* put me in the hospital. But with the help and support of friends and colleagues I managed, for now, to survive (and I can add it all up to field research).

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began writing on Wilde and the relationship between art and life. Her thoughts and writing on the subject are unsurpassed and her comments on my work have been sensitive and sensible. In her class, I also had the chance to first teach some aspects Aestheticism as well as *Mrs. Dalloway.* Above all, I owe to her the discovery that it is acceptable—or even imperative—to commit oneself to literary matters above all and that being a sensitive reader can translate into becoming a subtle thinker.

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I. Introduction

Aestheticism has always provoked a tone of accusation from its critics. The idea of *l'art pour l'art*, ever since Théophile Gautier's first pronouncement of it in France in the mid-nineteenth century, has pitted itself against ethical or political commitments in art, which opens it up to the full breadth of social criticism. Moreover, the attendant endeavor of living life like a work of art has mostly been shown to be a silly and even dangerous pursuit in all of the works that depict Aestheticism in practice. Even the late nineteenth-century British mouthpiece of Aestheticism, Oscar Wilde, seems to admit to the fundamental mistake of taking art for life with the punishment of Dorian Gray at the end of his novel, ostensibly for thinking he could escape the consequences of his sins for the sake of aesthetic pleasure. If that is not enough, Wilde's own life seems to prove the danger of purely aesthetic pursuits: in his assessment of his trial and incarceration in the letter *De Profundis*—though he attempts to incorporate a sense of tragedy and suffering in his aesthetics—Wilde cannot help but diagnose an error in judgment in spending more time living a beautiful life than writing beautiful works.

In other words, it is common sense that life is not a work of art—and that trying to live a beautiful life will inevitably run up against harsh reality, which is more than eager to stupidly destroy whatever plans one may have had. But this continual denial—cautionary tales still abound in literature and in criticism about the mistake of taking art for life—attests, I would argue, to an unfinished love affair with the ideas of Aestheticism.[1] We have yet to account for the pleasure of art that Wilde and many others

[1] For example, Gene H. Bell-Villada draws a legacy that leads from the artistic movement of Aestheticism in the late nineteenth-century to the American Academy in the mid-twentieth-century and its practice of close reading—and then to later theoretical developments like Derridean or deManian deconstruction. Bell-Villada's history falls in line with criticism that presumes an inherent danger—or at least non-serious

pursued, however recklessly, without feigning embarrassment over taking an interest in pleasure.

Nevertheless, the embarrassment that (American) critics feel in aesthetic pleasure is also part of the history of Aestheticism, which always had the hint of perversity and the taint of death attached to it: it is an interest in the useless and the non-productive. The dangerous implications of the Aesthetic pose are intimately connected to this embarrassment, for the Aesthete proposes pleasure without explanation. Therefore, to get at the root of the problem with Aestheticism we need to find the root of the danger and the shameful feelings that seem to cushion the commitment to art for art's sake. My claim is that the danger involved in Aestheticism is not proof against the rightness of the endeavor to look at life as art, but rather part of the pleasure itself. Rather than reading the stories of aesthetes like Dorian Gray as ending in disappointment, we can take the fact that the aesthetic endeavor repeatedly brushes with death as an integral part of Aestheticism. I will argue that the desire that brings us to art, when taken to its conclusion, is in fact a desire for death.

The argument that art answers a desire for death has its own history. In "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin famously grounds the novel form in a quest for the "meaning of life" that finds its structure and possibility in the experience of the death of the protagonist. "What draws the reader to the novel," he writes," is the hope of warming

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apathy—in the aesthetic perspective. However, it is worth noting that even de Man tended to foreground the danger in naïve Aestheticism that mistakes "linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism" ("Resistance to Theory" 11). De Man paired the rhetorical reading he performed with the power of "unmasking of ideological aberrations" (11). Likewise, contemporary critical trends have made it all but impossible to legitimately take up an Aestheticist bent in criticism since it has become much more important to justify reading literature with political motives. But before moving on from the pleasure to the moral explanation, I would like to stay with de Man's poignant admission that "it is difficult not to conceive the pattern of one's past and future existence as in accordance with temporal and spatial schemes that belong to fictional narratives and not to the world" (11). Aestheticism—and its development in Modernism—I will claim, stages this tension as the stakes of the pleasure we take in art.

his shivering life with a death he reads about" (101). The novel is the privileged form for the "revelation" of such meaning since it is dependent on time yet necessarily finite. Due to these "constitutive principles," the novel enables the reader to see "himself living this written life" (99); written into the genre is the inevitability of taking art for life, a hope for vicarious experience. Benjamin notes that this process that moves from the novel to life is not instructive, but rather grounded in the "incommensurable" and the "profound perplexity of the living" (87). Benjamin's investigation comes historically after the trauma of World War I, when he notes a loss in "communicable experience" (84). Though the ascendancy of the novel and the solitary and vicarious drive that fuels novel-reading had been long in developing, the novel's possibilities are taken to the extreme in the fractured narrative forms of Modernism. I claim that an important turning point in this history occurs in the Aesthetic movement, which explicitly raises the possibility that art is a matter of life and death, theoretically anticipating the trauma that Benjamin investigates. The Aesthetic movement ushers in the formal reflexivity that most famously characterizes High Modernism as a style of thinking about the way art works in our lives and thus about the way we enjoy art.

Beginning with Oscar Wilde, I look at how the desire for death underwrites the Modernist innovation in form, specifically in the temporality of narrative. The inheritors of Wilde that I read here—André Gide, Lytton Strachey, and Virginia Woolf—use the relation of life and death to alter and reflect on the meaning-making structure of the novel. I examine how all of these authors play with the time of narration to simultaneously anticipate the event of death and replicate the retrospective and meaningful view of life that death would provide. Written into the structure of their texts

is this paradoxical position that looks forward and backward at the same time and thereby produces the feeling that meaning is being created in the fleeting passage of present time. Since our lives as we live them have no determinate form, the experience of art—here, the experience of reading novels—allows us to crown our passing moments with a sense of structure that implies meaning, but does not actually deliver it. In the end, I argue that this feeling of meaning is as fleeting as the present; more accurately, meaningfulness is an affect that accompanies the reading of the novel. Wilde's paradox that life imitates art describes the fact that we overlay our reality with the structure of fiction in order to apprehend reality.

The Modernist authors I treat here all lived under the same stigma that brought Wilde down. Their commitment to art called forth critical accusations of Aestheticism that barely hid charges of homosexuality. Gide's role as an outspoken public advocate for homosexuality lost him friends, especially among the contingent of Catholic artists. Former Symbolists and Decadents who shared Gide's sexual preferences renounced their ways along with the forms of art and converted to Catholicism.[2] In England, the name Bloomsbury became as synonymous with the non-normative sexual proclivities of some of its associated members, like Strachey and Woolf, as it was for the difficulty of the art they produced. Elite and effeminate were epithets hurled hand in hand at the likes of Strachey by F.R. Leavis and Wyndham Lewis, fusing personal characteristics into a general classification of Bloomsbury prose, including other notorious practitioners like Woolf and E.M. Forster. As with Wilde, the fact that these authors committed themselves to an artistic lifestyle called into question their sexual, ethical, and political sympathies.

[2] However, it must be noted that Catholicism intrigued many aesthetes in its commitment to ornaments and beauty. Huysmans converted and even Wilde is rumored to have converted at his death.

Aestheticism was not a uniform movement with many adherents, but it is most clearly associated in British literature with Oscar Wilde. Wilde's paradoxical and humorous style, most celebrated in his plays, often dampens the impact of his social critique and his artistic philosophy. The history of Wilde studies has for the most part taken to an appreciation of the man rather than his works—and this division follows Wilde's own view of himself. However, I would argue that we need to take Wilde's work seriously in order to fully evaluate the legacy of Aestheticism. To do this, I place one of Wilde's most famous claims, that "life imitates art far more than art imitates life," at the head of an evaluation of this swath of literary history. Wilde's claim means something more than a clever reversal of the common sense of representation. If Wilde's claim is true, then the formal properties of the work of art really affect the way we live our lives whether we know it or not.

Indeed the crux of Wilde's paradox hinges on the question of knowledge. In the traditional understanding of mimesis, from Plato and Aristotle on, art was seen as an imitation of life, whether of objects or, as Aristotle puts it, the actions of men. In this formula, art itself is the product of an action: the act of representation is the consequence of conscious effort to make something. When Wilde reverses the formula so that life imitates art, we can no longer adduce the same intention behind the imitation. Life is not understood to be a conscious product—at least not a product that can be fully accounted for by intentions. In other words, Wilde's reversal, I claim, takes out the actors from mimesis so that the effect of art on life is not a conscious process.

In effect, this unconscious aspect of art's impact on life is what Wilde had to try to accommodate in his thought after his imprisonment. The mantra of his letter to his

vicious lover Bosie, *De Profundis*, is "Everything that is realized is right" (874), a kind of *amor fati* that applies an aesthetic (and perhaps also an ethical) judgment on whatever life brings, beautiful or tragic. Wilde explains further, "I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure . . . But to have continued the same life would have been wrong because it would have been limiting" (922). Though he was taken down at the height of his fame and talent because of his refusal to cover up his homosexual lifestyle, Wilde says this final act of his life—his punishment—is also necessary. "Of course," he writes, "all this is foreshadowed and prefigured in my art" (922). He goes on to list examples of this impending "Doom" and explains that his understanding of this suffering to come was deferred until this moment, so that "when I wrote it seemed to me little more than a phrase" (922)—but then it came true. As a summary, Wilde again lines up life and art, claiming that "At every single moment of one's life one is what one is going to be no less than what one has been. Art is a symbol, because man is a symbol" (922).[3]

The effect of time that Wilde describes here in relation to the symbol—that each moment contains all that was and will be—refers to a specific literary lineage Wilde inherited from his mentor, Walter Pater. The delayed structure of recognition is the time of life's relation to art that I will trace through my readings in Aestheticism and Modernism. Pater based his own understanding of the aesthetic moment on Wordsworth's "spots of time."[4] In fact, Pater's essay on Wordsworth in *Appreciations* is

[3] Compare this to Benjamin's commentary on Moritz Heimann's claim that "A man who dies at the age of thirty-five is at every point of his life a man who dies at the age of thirty-five." Benjamin calls this claim "dubious" because "the tense is wrong": "the statement that makes no sense for real life becomes indisputable for remembered life" (100). For Benjamin, the predicament of this sentence epitomizes the life of a character in a novel, but it also figures a desire that we bring to experience vicariously this sense of definition. From Wilde to Benjamin, we move to a more complex, reflexive sense of time that abjures the completion of the symbol for the potential of the allegory.

[4] See Bloom's introduction to his *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*, where he reads Pater's inversion of Ruskin's refusal of Wordsworth's idea as an effect of the pathetic fallacy (xiii). Again an accusation of

also where Pater announces an aesthetic project for life: "To treat life in the spirit of art, is to make life a thing in which means and ends are identified: to encourage such treatment, the true moral significance of art and poetry" (139).[5] The folding in of means and ends is the epitome of the aesthetic moment, "periods of intense susceptibility," where we are more being than doing (135). This encompassing feeling, for Pater, is like Faust's *macrocosm,* or as Pater redefines it: "the network of man and nature . . . pervaded by a common, universal life" (135).[6] Pater puts all the terms in place such that life and death are enveloped by an idea of art, with the sense that an omniscient narrator (or God) exists through and outside all of us. But this feeling of expansion is the effect of one intense moment, the symbolic potential to see life and death, means and end, all at once.

For Pater, as opposed to Wilde, this privileged aesthetic moment does not necessarily bring with it any knowledge. If, as he writes in the conclusion to *The Renaissance*, the "single moment" is "gone while we try to apprehend it," then we must "be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions" (60-1). Like the macrocosm, we see that Pater's moment is in fact a model of life itself. He quotes Hugo, saying, "we are all under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve" (61). The moment is always passing. "Our one chance," Pater writes, "lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time" (61). It is the structure of the passing that allows for us to have in the moment "this quickened sense of life": with passion, we may accede to a "quickened, multiplied consciousness" (62). And

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error, the pathetic fallacy contains a crossing over from art to life that proves to be an ineluctable literary mode for Aestheticism, drawing us back from Modernism to Romanticism.

[5] For Pater, the moral imperative is an ethical treatment of art that doesn't use it for other means. We owe it to ourselves, he claims, to appreciate art without ulterior motive.

[6] "Common life" is a term that Perry Meisel picks up in his examination of the aesthetic influence on Modernism, *The Absent Father: Walter Pater and Virginia Woolf,* to stand for the textuality of life that both Pater and Woolf point to in their writings.

the model of how to crown these moments is “art for art’s sake”: “for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake” (62). If we emphasize Pater’s “nothing”—art gives nothing—we can see that he relies not on understanding but rather momentary feeling. In other words, the moment is death in its nothingness; art merely gives us the perspective necessary to watch it pass and not miss it.

Wilde’s revision of Pater’s fleeting moment crowned by art adds an investigation of history and influence. Where Pater’s moment disintegrates, Wilde’s sums up and repeats all that came before in view of what will come. In “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde rewrites one of Pater’s most famous passages, his description of the Mona Lisa, and subtly shifts the description of the work of art to the description of our lives. In this shift, Wilde tries to explain our susceptibility to art—our imagination—and ultimately he describes how life itself, to the extent that we can know and understand it, has the structure of a work of art.

First, let’s look at Pater’s description of Leonardo’s *La Gioconda*:

> The presence that thus rose so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all “the ends of the world are come,” and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions . . . All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of

> Rome, the reverie of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave . . . The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern thought has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea. (46-7)

The painting in Pater's words becomes a palimpsest of experience, a "summing up"— in effect, an alignment of the ancient and the new, "the old fancy" and "the modern idea," like his insistence that we match up means and ends. However, Pater notes that "perpetual life" is a "fancy;" only art provides the feeling of this summary.

Now, turning to Wilde's essay, we see the aesthete Gilbert begin from the modern predicament, explaining how each action we undertake sags under the weight of history. But Gilbert spies a freedom in our imagination that recapitulates Pater's description and with it all of history:

> And yet, while in the sphere of practical and external life it has robbed energy of its freedom and activity of its choice, in the subjective sphere, where the soul is at work, it comes to us, this terrible shadow, with many gifts in its hands, gifts of strange temperaments and subtle susceptibilities, gifts of wild ardours and chill moods of indifference, complex multiform gifts of thoughts that are at variance with each other, and passions that war

> against themselves. And so it is not our own life that we live, but the lives of the dead, and the soul that dwells within us is no single spiritual entity, making us personal and individual, created for our service, and entering into us for our joy. It is something that has dwelt in fearful places, and in the ancient sepulchers has made its abode. It is sick with many maladies, and has memories of curious sins. It is wiser than we are and its wisdom is bitter. It fills us with impossible desires, and makes us follow what we know we cannot gain. (1041).

In Gilbert's description we have become la Gioconda; we live other lives, "the lives of the dead" and confront Pater's "secrets of the grave" in their "abode" of "ancient sepulchers." The aesthetic experience transforms us into a complementary single space packed with multiple potential, like the canvas that bears Mona Lisa's image. The impression of the work that Pater catalogued is now collapsed into the spectator. Life imitates art: all we know of life comes from art. Wilde goes on to list our indirect experiences of feelings through artists and the characters they create. For Wilde, these feelings only exist because of art.

Wilde's revision of Pater in this essay, which substitutes the audience for the work, attempts to explain the effect art has on time. Gilbert argues for the superiority of literature over other forms of art because in it time passes:

> The statue is concentrated to one moment of perfection. The image stained upon the canvas possesses no spiritual element of growth or change. If they know nothing of death, it is because they know little of life, for the secrets of life and death belong to those, and those only, whom the

> sequence of time affects, and who possess not merely the present but the future and can rise or fall from a past of glory or of shame. Movement, that problem of the visible arts, can be truly realized by Literature alone. It is Literature that shows us the body in its swiftness and the soul in its unrest. (1026)

Wilde takes Pater's expansion of the individual moment and gives it a sense of duration, the "movement" and "the sequence of time" only available to literature. But what he arrives at is no simple sense of chronology. The moment of life quickened by death resumes all of history, individual and collective, leading to a layered sense of time. Like Wilde claims later in *De Profundis*, the past and future are *there* in the present—to the extent that, contrary to Pater, we may say that anything *is* there. More exactly, however, Wilde, with Pater, is trying to account for the fleeting emptiness of the present: our sense of time is always retroactive, never in the moment. Pater wants us to be rather than to do in order to sense the moment as it passes. Wilde instead wants to exchange the expanded time of art for the nothingness of the present in order to inflate our sense of time.

Both Wilde and Pater seek out art in response to a sense of limited time. Rather than use art to transcend this limit, however, their models of the aesthetic moment try to confront the death that might come at any time and that the empty moment portends. This desire is most notably associated with the French counterpart to Aestheticism, Decadence, which is explicitly founded upon a sense of impending decline and a fascination with death. Where Aestheticism places emphasis on pleasure in beauty, Decadence does not hide the deathly desire that fuels the love of beauty. The idea of Decadence speaks to the sense of lateness that both Wilde and Pater express in their

desire to sum up all of culture in a moment. In *Queer Beauty* Whitney Davis looks at the organic metaphor of decay that underlies the idea of Decadence. He lines up sexuality and death in a "circuitry" that runs back and forth between nature and culture. Davis claims that the organic metaphor of decay cannot be grounded originally in either a natural or cultural use, but instead figures exactly the paradox of time that Wilde develops out of Pater's description. In other words, the idea of decadence aligns finite human experience with natural evolutionary trends that cannot be measured within the span of a life time. It puts together time and eternity, without resolution. Davis's analysis of the time of decadence helps add a critical point to the momentary "summing up" that Pater and Wilde both looked for in aesthetic experience. Rather than rely on the redemptive qualities of the symbol, we see the summary itself as a fleeting proposition, such that the feeling art produces is a feeling of death as well as life, a meaningful concatenation and a fragmentary dispersal.

Criticism of Decadence often points, as Charles Bernheimer puts it in *Decadent Subjects*, to the "dynamic of paradox and ambivalence" that the term "sets in motion" (5). For Bernheimer, the idea itself marks "the slippage from poetic metaphor to historical fact, from aesthetic dream to real life, from a book about decadence to a decadent existence" (5), the same movement we are looking at, from art to life. The movement, Bernheimer suggests, is paradoxical in itself, as it encompasses the modern tendency to disrupt meaning as well as the conservative and nostalgic search to establish meaning (54). And Decadence is paradoxical on the level of form as well. Michael Riffaterre claims that paradox is the paradigmatic trope of Decadence, operating both on "formal and semantic" levels ("Decadent Paradoxes" 66). Linking these two ideas together, I will

claim that the paradox of time—the fleeting moment and its summation—informs the Aesthetic and Modernist experiments in narrative structure. Wilde's use of paradox in his work, I suggest, sets the mode for Modernist narrative attempts to effect the crossover from art to life. But in my reading, the paradox shifts from the mimetic reversal of life imitating art to a paradoxical desire to reach death in life. Aestheticism too contains this paradoxical potential, though its interest sometimes seems to lie in the potential immortality promised by art than in a lust for death. I choose to maintain the term Aestheticism, part of the apparatus of British rather than French literature, for its name contains an attempt to make practical—considering an "ism" as an active ideology—the with the theoretical and philosophical questions of aesthetics.

The main critical interest in Aestheticism and Decadence in recent years has been the role that the associated writers played in forming the modern homosexual identity. Wilde himself makes the connection between Aestheticism and sexuality when he reflected on what drew him to the form of paradox. In *De Profundis*, Wilde relates his love of paradox to his homosexual desires. "What the paradox was for me in the sphere of thought," he claims, "perversity became for me in the sphere of passion" (913). In line with this statement, in her groundbreaking *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick places Wilde's work at a crux in literary history: leading a reaction against Victorian sentimentality, which had been changing from a feminized domestic emotion to a foregrounding of the eroticized male body itself feeling emotions. However, the desired male body, Sedgwick argues, cannot retain the spotlight; it must be hidden and thus ushers in a "newly articulated modernist 'self'-reflexiveness and antifigurality, antirepresentationism" (161). The Aesthetic love affair with form is what Sedgwick calls

"the alibi of abstraction" (164), which displaced homosexual content such as the direct representation of the male body towards a narcissistic desire to represent the self.[7] Lodged within the tension of sentimental content and abstract form is another version of Wilde's paradox that life imitates art. Sentimentality, Sedgwick claims, allows for "an oblique communication . . . dealing in reader relations and in projective fantasy" (156). But the vicarious drive of novel reading that we saw in Benjamin becomes infused with dangerous properties when the content speaks of illicit desire. Thus, Modernist formalism, exemplified by Wilde, finds ways to conceal desire in quests for identity, activating the slippery qualities of the first-person pronoun, which Sedgwick notes can encompass gender-bending and even survival after death. Sedgwick's claim that "homosexuality leads to a slippage between identification and desire" (159) provides a way to read Wilde's exploitation of the formal properties of the novel to effect the crossover from art to life. Within the alibi of abstraction, I want to examine the self-destructive properties of formal reflexivity, the way a quest for identity becomes a paradoxical dispersal of the self, where the novel, seemingly bereft of erotic content, activates the desire for death it seems to ward off.

It is no accident that in the doctrines of Aestheticism this complex of sexuality acts itself out. Pater's abjuration of art as a means and Wilde's anti-utilitarian claims for

[7]Similarly, Davis sets Wilde's repetition of Pater's description into a line of thinking of homosexuality in terms of narcissism that began in the second half of the nineteenth-century and was developed into the twentieth-century, notably by Freud, who himself used Pater's description in his study of Leonardo. The desire to sum up all forms of life, Davis claims, is related to "the primal autoerotic or narcissistic wish" and was a standard trope used "to represent socially proscribed (and perhaps only dimly imagined) nonstandard eroticisms in a publicly acceptable pseudo-spiritualism of pansexual cosmic synthesis" (226). Davis points to the moment, earlier in the essay, when Gilbert actually quotes Pater's description of Leonardo's painting as an example of how criticism is a higher form than painting for it sets the work in relation to us and gives the work meaning. Neatly, Pater's words become Gilbert's own just as Gilbert makes us into a similar repository for feeling and experience. When Gilbert actually quotes Pater, he tells the story of him and his male friend sitting together in the Louvre reciting Pater in front of the painting.

art reproduce in the realm of art a non-(re)productive desire. The search for pleasure for pleasure's sake, like art for art's sake, is a perversion because it diverts itself from genital reproductive sexuality. As Leo Bersani famously claims, "Male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of *losing sight* of the self, and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of ascesis" (30).[8] In this way, homosexual desire is the symbol of desire itself, at no danger to be attached to the telos of procreation—but an eminently dangerous desire that threatens the lines of selfhood.

Lee Edelman provocatively takes this argument to its limits in *No Future*, a polemic against what he calls "reproductive futurism," the political view that seeks to repair for the future under the auspices of the next generation the original lack or gap that has structured our present subjectivity as an insatiable desire. Against this dominant heteronormative ideology, Edelman places "*queerness*," which "figures, outside and beyond its political symptoms, the place of the social order's death drive" (3). Edelman's argument takes its cue from a redemptive view inherent to "the logic of narrative history" (23) that temporalizes desire and masks "formal repetition" as fulfillment so that the past may be restaged as future development.

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[8] In his essay, "Style," Pater provides a literary understanding of ascesis that gains a new meaning when paired with Bersani's self-destructive drive. Pater defines ascesis as "self-restraint, a skilful economy of means" on the part of the author, which leads to the reader's "aesthetic satisfaction in that frugal closeness of style which makes the most of a word, in the exaction from every sentence of a precise relief, in the just spacing out of word to thought, in the logically filled space connected always with the delightful sense of difficulty overcome" (110). Pater connects ascesis to the "tact of omission," which has the Aestheticist implication of ignoring the vulgar. But Pater frames it as a matter of the life and death of art: "For to the grave reader words too are grave; and the ornamental world, the figure, the accessory form or colour or reference, is rarely content to die to thought precisely at the right moment, but will inevitably linger awhile, stirring a long 'brainwave' behind it of perhaps quite alien associations" (110-1). This lingering is the dangerous life that crosses over from art and threatens the individuality of the spectator. Bloom understands Pater's ascesis as a reaction to his anxiety of influence, a self-abnegation that leads to a final reversal reinvesting content over form or matter over style. Pater's own literary desire, in this reading, undoes his claims by asserting a contradictory taste.

Edelman's linking of queerness with the death drive has important consequences for an understanding of literary history, since it helps illuminate the theoretical movement from Aestheticism to Modernism that I am tracing. For Edelman, the view of the future as a continuation—a sequence—is a fantasy in which we may survive our deaths as an empty point of perception. Queerness may pose a resistance to this by refusing the forward movement and not covering over the necessary end involved. I would suggest that the future-oriented fantasy propels us into a realm of fiction, the place of an impersonal narrator. Aestheticism, lodged firmly in tradition but providing also an ironic critique of it, aims to view this fantasy as what it is—fantasy—and to maintain the insistence on disintegration that it necessarily involves. We may take pleasure equally in the fantasy as well as in its impossibility. The narrative experiments that later get named "High Modernism," but which I claim begin with the Aestheticism of Pater and Wilde, are attempts to produce the feeling of this fantasy in the reader. Futurism gives us a model of time that tries to transform a simultaneous anticipation and retrospection into a linear narrative. Beneath this, I would suggest, we see the paradoxical formalism of Aestheticism that disrupts the alignment and shows the destructive charge behind this drive. Aestheticism must be maintained as a non-teleological, non-purposive pleasure in the present that figures its relation to the past and to the future as a repetition, instead of as a development. This gives us a new way to view literary history: the Modernist inheritors of the Aesthetic movement use the novel as an experiment, as Edelman might say, to disarticulate narrative at the same time as trying to construct it, to theorize its process even as it describes, so that pleasure is not deferred to a future understanding but attends the aesthetic moment as a disruption.

If we take a step back and gather all the threads together, we see that the formalism begun with Aestheticism and developed with Modernism takes on the paradoxical relation of art and life by experimenting with narrative time in relation to sex and death. At the root of desire with no end is really a desire for the end. In narrative theory, this kind of argument has been put forth before, for example, by Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot*. There Brooks devises a libido theory of narrative, which is driven on by the contradictory impulses of pleasure and death. The ultimate paradox is that the desire that instigates a story yearns for its own extinction, for the death of the desire, or in the end, just death. We can link this to Wilde's paradox about life imitating art where Brooks draws a parallel between the desire represented in the story, which drives the plot along, and the desire generated in the reader by the story, which is the narrative's dynamic that eventually brings it to its end. The question he asks, along with Benjamin with whom we began, is whether reading novels can give us a vicarious knowledge of the end that we yearn for. I would suggest that we can interpret Wilde's paradox as an answer: life desires to imitate art so that it can lay hold of what Brooks calls the "master trope" of narrative, a temporal chiasmus, "anticipation of retrospection."

The paradoxical time structure that Brooks uncovers fits nicely with the modern experience of time that both Pater and Wilde discuss as a function of art. Following Brooks, I find that Freud's theory of *Nachträglichkeit* or deferred action helps to understand the narrative manipulation of time that provokes our desire for the novel.[9] Freud outlines this strange temporality in the "Wolf Man" case history while trying to

[9] As Perry Meisel has shown in *The Literary Freud*, the logic of deferred action structures all of psychoanalytic knowledge and is also its condition of representation. There, Meisel looks at the influence of Aestheticism on psychoanalysis and makes an illuminating comparison of their shared rhetorical modes, which leads to a similar style of knowledge production.

locate in the patient's chronology the "primal scene" of witnessing his parents' sexual intercourse. Freud's discovery is that an event might not actually happen until after the fact; rather, it only has real effects after a period of delay. This temporality accounts for the simultaneous anticipation and retrospection that marks the aesthetic moment, a feeling of transience matched with a sense of summation. [10] But Freud's concept of deferred action contributes more than a sense of time to narrative theory. In the Wolf Man case, Freud neutralizes the truth value of the original event, since it occurs in an unverifiable past. Whether or not the primal scene "was a phantasy or a real experience," Freud writes, "is not in reality a matter of very great importance" (256). If the effects are real, he claims, it doesn't matter whether the cause is a truth or fiction. This neutralization marks an essential ambiguity between truth and fiction. This is the borderline where art crosses into life, as it affects us after the fact with recognizable structures that allow us momentarily to see time as it passes. This claim puts all stock in the suitability of the interpretation such that the content matters less than the effect.

Freud's argument here has important consequences for our understanding of how life may imitate art—and more broadly for an understanding of how literary history moves. He concludes that "wherever experiences fail to fit in with the hereditary schema, they become remodelled in the imagination," so that "we are often able to see the schema triumphing over the experience of the individual" (279). We may elaborate on this claim to suggest that "life" is the product of a deferred understanding put into place to suit

[10] In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth extrapolates from Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* and the paradoxical non-experience of trauma to question whether this belatedness is in fact the very structure of our experience of the world. This radical possibility underlies the aesthetic experience that both Pater and Wilde adumbrate; I would argue that this model of aesthetic experience is in fact the filter through which we interpret the world. Life imitates art because life only knows itself—after the fact—through art.

narrative conventions and readability.[11] But, I would argue, the key event that escapes this historical schema as an experience that no one ever has and is essential incommunicable, is not only sex (the moment of conception), but also death (the moment of destruction)—so that the beginning and the end become a single paradoxical moment. As the final reserve in the drive to align fact and fiction, death fuels our desire to produce life through reading. We read in order to anticipate the final moment of death, at the limit of which we hope for a retrospective and summary view of life.

In each of the texts I examine, fiction is used to match up simultaneity and succession in order to frame the telling of a life story. If life moves from moment to moment, death, one hopes, will sum up and make sense of the disparate effects of time. The formalism of Wilde, Gide, Strachey, and Woolf gives us an ironic view of narrative process such that we can see the ambiguity of a life story at the same time as the conditions that enable the telling of it. Following the idea Freud develops in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* of repetition compulsion, we can see that meaning builds up through the reuse of convention and form. Freud's concept of repetition marks the tension of the forces of life and death, since the repeated event can be both an active attempt at mastery and control over the past or a passive return of an inevitable event that overwhelms the self. Only through the cumulative effect of literary convention—in other words the repetitive path of influence, like the one I will trace from Wilde to Woolf—can we recognize the way life in fact imitates art because it brings us to a sense of our own limits.

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[11] I follow here de Man's rhetorical question in "Autobiography as De-Facement": "We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium?" (69).

Where Brooks finds a narrative desire for death at the root of the novel form itself, I focus on a specific portion of literary history in the transition at the turn of the century from Aestheticism to Modernism. In Modernist novels, this aesthetic desire for death takes on a new expression through self-conscious experiments with narrative or novelistic form. In other words, I would argue that the reflexivity that Sedgwick claims arises around the failure to represent male-male desire is also an attempt to formally express the experience of death. The non-representation of sex leads to the representation of death—or the representation of nothing, a final paradox. In all of the novels I read here there is an attempt to represent death, either as an experience or as a witnessed event. But, I argue, precisely at these moments there is a failure, much like the failure of decadence to come down on one side or the other of its ambivalence. In narrative, death promises meaningful structure but also empties out any concrete meaning. What we are left with is a feeling of meaning that is created in the aesthetic moment—the time of reading. Our desire for this feeling of a meaningful end compels us to repeat our experience of reading, for it is only during these moments that we can borrow the structure of fiction that promises meaning for the purposes of our own lives.

In each of the chapters that follow I focus on the work of a single author in order to examine the way death figures the narrative mode and the effect it has on the reader. With each work, I dig into the hallmark of Modernist fiction—the form that simultaneously tells a story and reflects on its telling—in order to show how, for these writers, the question of how literature creates meaning is the same as the question of how we can understand our life and our death. The chapters each center on a particular manifestation of the desire for death that roots the author's literary project, though these

four instances are inextricable to paint a complete picture of the way I claim death works in literature. In the first chapter, I examine Wilde's figuring of death as retroactivity, a paradoxical retrospective anticipation that alters the time structure of the novel. In the second chapter, I look at the way Gide approaches death as the empty point of representation, where the comprehension of the world promised by realism meets a destructive desire for the unexplainable. In the third chapter, I frame death as a principle of repetition in Strachey's biographical enterprise that fits the individual existence into a historical pattern where particularity and generality intertwine. Finally, in the fourth chapter, I culminate my enquiry with Woolf's model of death as communication, an impersonal narrative procedure that provides builds and disperses the contours of self, plot, and meaning. We know that the pathbreaking work of these Modernists is to overlay their novels with a theory of fiction itself. My hypothesis is that this theory of fiction is not merely an abstract self-referential aesthetic process, but a practical—though by no means direct or linear—application of art to life.

II. The Novel's Paradox: Time and Death in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

> "Death and vulgarity are the only two facts in the nineteenth century that one cannot explain away" (202).

The Picture of Dorian Gray is an experiment in fiction. Oscar Wilde's only novel and his longest prose work is an attempt to narrate a paradox. Wilde tries to stretch the effect of his famous epigrams, aphorisms, and witticisms into the structure of a novel. One paradox in particular, which Wilde announces in his critical essay, "The Decay of Lying," contains the whole of the plot and structure of the novel: "Paradox though it may seem—and paradoxes are always dangerous things—it is none the less true that Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life." This statement is the epitome of the (Wildean) paradox: a reversal of the received logical relation of two terms. Jean-Michel Rabaté has described the typical form of Wilde's paradoxes as "an exception subtly com[ing] to annul the premise" (*The Ethics of the Lie* 244). [1] In this particular paradox, Wilde turns on its head the traditional understanding of mimesis as the basis of aesthetics. Art does not attempt to correctly represent life; rather, art is the model for life. Life is merely an echo or a repetition of what happens in art. *Dorian Gray* not only narrates this paradox, but also places emphasis on its particular dangers. In the story of Dorian Gray's attempt to live life like a work of art, Wilde shows that the apparent wish to capture immortality through art really masks a wish for death.

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[1] Rabaté further describes Wilde's paradoxical logic as based "on the utterance of a totality that receives an exception, or on the division of the world in two parts—people who do one thing and those who do the contrary" (244). Though Rabaté shows that this penchant leads to cliché, according to him, Wilde escapes this fate by getting caught up in his own paradoxes, or in the truth of his own lie. For Rabaté the most intriguing aspect of *Dorian Gray* is how it anticipates Wilde's own life—his relation to Bosie parallel to Basil's love for Dorian in its disastrous effects—thus proving Wilde's claim that life imitates art, though not to beautiful effect.

On a superficial reading, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* tells a cautionary tale of the horrible effects of mistaking art for life. As the young and handsome Dorian Gray sits for his portrait with the painter Basil Hallward, the dandy Lord Henry Wotton catches his ear with a philosophy of life that emphasizes the fleetingness of youth and beauty. Lord Henry wants to make Dorian aware of the power of his beautiful looks so that he will not waste a moment of his life; Dorian awakens to a fear of death and decay that drives him instead to wish to trade places with the eternal youth and beauty of his portrait. This fantastic wish apparently comes to be: while Dorian lives for pleasure at Lord Henry's encouragement, the ravages of time have no effect on his body. But the portrait ages and decays in his place. After Basil confronts Dorian with his notorious lifestyle, Dorian in a fit of rage shows Basil the changed painting and then kills the artist. Eventually, Dorian's sense of guilt leads him to stab his painting. In this final moment, however, the painting reverts to its original beauty, and Dorian dies a haggard and destroyed middle-aged man. From this telling of the story, the clear moral is that one cannot escape the effects of one's actions; living for pleasure alone is a sin.

However, if we read *Dorian Gray* from the aesthetic point of view, a different story emerges. The trajectory Dorian follows from art to life does lead him to his demise. But rather than see this end as Wilde's submission to Victorian moralism, I argue that Wilde uses Dorian's end to reveal the desire for death that brings us to art in the first place. Dorian's death is not an aberration or a punishment, but instead, in the tradition of Wildean reversals, the effect he truly sought in the first place by wishing for the apparent timelessness of the painting.

In her reading of *Dorian Gray*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick takes the arc of the plot less as a capitulation to Victorian morals than an attempt to bypass the homophobic dictates that forbade direct representation of same-sex desire, not merely as a question of morals, but also as a question of taste, where the desired male body became an abject example of sentimental literature. At the head of her analysis, Sedgwick asks: "how does a man's love of other men become a love of the same?" Her response is that "the novel takes a plot that is distinctively one of male-male desire, the competition between Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton for Dorian Gray's love, and condenses it into the plot of the mysterious bond of figural likeness and figural expiation between Dorian Gray and his own portrait" (160). The important move, Sedgwick claims, is a typically Modernist emptying out of content (the homosexual love story) for an interest in form (the story of representation and identity). The figures of the "open secret" or "glass closet"—all of the ciphers for homosexuality, from Dorian's portrait to his dabbling with opium—condense the paradox of form and content. Within Sedgwick's innovative connection between sexuality and formalism, we can trace Wilde's ambivalence, as he does not completely abjure the desire for identification, to apply art to life, in his move towards abstract formalism.

However, I would ask whether we can understand this formal reflexivity otherwise than as a homophobic tendency. In other words, my question is: could we read the formalism, which Wilde's aestheticism ushers in and which gets fully developed in High modernism, as simultaneously an expression and repression of desire? In "Homosexual Desire and the Effacement of the Self in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,"Jeff Nunokawa counters Sedgwick's claim that the homosexual secret must be emptied out.

There, he argues that, in *Dorian Gray* "homosexual desire is brazen enough . . . to venture past the avenues of intimation where its conduct is generally confined under the rule of canonical standards or family values" (311). Thus, we may say that Wilde's formal innovation necessarily connects with the homosexual content as a way to make the desire expressible even through convention. Nunokawa's most interesting claim is that the type of homosexual desire and homosexual identity that Wilde expresses through the characters in *Dorian Gray* is one that actually threatens the coherence of the self. Moreover, Nunokawa generalizes this self-effacing desire as a condition of the narrative voice, where the "ambiguity of indirect discourse" merges narrator with character to "dissolve" homosexual feelings "into the faceless perspective of objective narrative" (318).[2]

Nunokawa complicates Sedgwick's reading of the formalist tendency by showing how the very desire it ambivalently represses and expresses is itself ambivalent and self-destructive. Following Nunokawa's generalization, I want to read in Wilde's novel how the self-canceling desire also characterizes Wilde's relation to art and his aesthetic theories. The desire for the same that makes Dorian fall in love with his portrait, I would argue, is in fact a desire to find the limits of the self—in other words, death. The desire itself, like the novel, is paradoxical since it is a yearning to put an end to itself. But this self-cancellation, I claim, is given its full account only in the narrative time that Wilde exploits, which confronts succession with the apparently empty moment.By looking at Dorian's trajectory to his death in the novel, I will show how Wilde creates in the reader the same ambivalent desire for destruction. Elsewhere, Nunokawa argues that the

[2] Nunokawa builds on Leo Bersani's work, particularly his suggestion in "Is the Rectum a Grave?" that male homosexuality points to a destruction of the self inherent in sexuality in general.

boredom both represented in and caused by *Dorian Gray* is the other side of desire, its aftereffect in the "enervated body" (*Tame Passions of Wilde* 72). Wilde's book seeks to simultaneously describe and produce the experience and effects of desire, all as a symbolic summary of the trajectory of life towards death. The aesthete's insistence on artistic pleasure is not a sublimation of sexual feelings into a higher form, I would argue, but in fact a truer mode of expression for a paradoxical desire.

The paradoxical desire Wilde demonstrates and reproduces in *Dorian Gray* is specifically a narrative desire. In her thorough reading of *Dorian Gray*, Elana Gomel makes a similar claim about the desire for art by reading Wilde's novel as an allegory of the "death of the author." Gomel shows how writing is an attempt to negate the particular physical identity and liberate a "textual subject" that is "infinitely reproducible and potentially immortal" (76). She finds a paradoxical structure in the novel, which produces it "scandalousness": namely, "Wilde's opposition of hunger for identity, achieved through identification with an external model, and corporeal desire, that ruptures this narcissistic self-presence by admitting the Other" (83). Gomel tries to show how Wilde's logic actually breaks out of the logic of the same that Sedgwick outlines in the development of homophobic discourse at the turn of the century. Importantly, the rupture of the same, or the interruption of the other, ties together desire and death. But how, we might ask, does this desire become linked to a fictional enterprise? The true value of Wilde's text, I argue, is its self-conscious exploration of the way art—specifically the novel—actually structures our lives beyond our control. In this way, our reality depends on fiction. Wilde's experiment crosses the boundaries of fact and fiction, realism and the

fantastic, in a way that points to later Modernist attempts to redefine the relation between art and life.

By viewing *Dorian Gray* as a literary experiment, I argue, we can reevaluate Wilde's impact on Modernism. The novel is more than a misguided attempt to transform his perfect witty sayings into a sustained story. It is also more than what critics have traditionally dismissed it as: a reversion to simple moral didacticism by an author desperately trying to surpass Victorian values. Instead, Wilde's attempt to plot paradox represents an innovation in narrative time, which situates Wilde's work as a foundational moment that anticipates the High Modernist experiments with non-chronological narration.

My approach to *Dorian Gray* revises recent criticism by reading Wilde aesthetically rather than politically or biographically. Wilde's artistic ability has long been overshadowed by his outrageous persona. And even before Wilde was put on trial for gross indecency, the publication of *Dorian Gray* unleashed a legendary critical attack on his morals, pushing the question of the novel's literary merit aside. These attacks were reprised at the trials when Wilde was made to answer for the connection between supposedly unethical behaviors in the novel and his own life.[3] The critical revival of

[3] Shoshana Felman provides one of the most important exceptions to the potentially reductive more politically motivated readings in her unique combination of biographical, literary, and legal analysis of Wilde's trial in "Oscar Wilde's Performance on the Witness Stand." Felman argues that Wilde's trials "*stage literature within the courtroom*" (302), specifically in the use of *Dorian Gray* as evidence in support of Wilde's homosexual behavior. In the theater of the courtroom, she finds "an exemplary dramatic confrontation—a linguistic duel—between legal discourse and literary discourse" that leads to a "tragic *missed encounter*," a "radical *misunderstanding* between the two clashing conceptions and vocabularies" (304). Interestingly, Felman traces the paradoxical political potential of the supposedly unworldly aesthetic pose in the courtroom as an opening of literary effects, a refusal to maintain a single meaning—in this case, sodomy. The drama of the courtroom thus is the competing understandings of the relation of art and life, where the prosecutor believes there is a simple correspondence and single meaning and, for a time, Wilde can evade this insistence on meaning by the very ambiguity of literary language. The trauma results after Wilde's conviction, since a sentence will eventually be delivered. The puzzle of the relation of *Dorian*

Wilde in the last thirty years has attached itself more to his personality than to his work, focusing on Wilde's status as a modern martyr to homophobia. As was true in Wilde's time, we are so overwhelmed by the man that we tend to overlook the work.

Narrating Paradox

There are inherent difficulties to narrating paradox, and Wilde knows his fictional experiment may fail.[4] Yoking opposites together seems to halt the progress of narrative, arresting the developments in character and story we traditionally expect from a novel. Many critics complain about Wilde's failure to produce a typical novel. For example, Edouard Roditi evaluates *Dorian Gray* as unsuccessful because the "thread of its narrative is too frequently interrupted by Wilde's esthetic preaching," with the result that this "distorts the plot" (80). I would counter however that Wilde actually seeks this distorted effect. Wilde uses the supposed failure to expose not only the conventions of literature, but also the demands we place on literature (and art more generally) to shape and inform our lives. Wilde's aphorisms are indeed revolutionary: their paradoxical tension and simultaneity moves the aphorism beyond good and evil.[5] The aphorism has an untimely aspect, slowly unraveling in the reader or listener's mind. I argue that this complex sense of chronology points to Wilde's greatest innovation in *Dorian Gray*. The violent impact of a paradox cannot be narrated into a simple succession of events. Wilde's novel may look like a typical cautionary tale, but this master-plot merely masks Wilde's depiction of far more complex effects of time. Events in the novel do not unravel

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Gray as foreshadowing Wilde's own life is precisely the charge for literary history that I examine as it plays out in the influence Wilde has on Modernism.

[4] Similarly, the critical reading of the paradox risks failure since each moment can be read either way. *Dorian Gray* seems to be saying two things at once.

[5] What is revolutionary about Wilde's aphorisms is what pairs him so well with Nietzsche, as Thomas Mann has observed. See Mann's "Wilde and Nietzsche" in Ellmann's collection of essays, *Oscar Wilde*.

sequentially and simply, but function instead on a delay. Dorian seems to be captured in the static, atemporal space of the portrait—but this stillness only prefigures the story's violent ending, where the years revisit Dorian in an instant. What Wilde's narration of paradox ultimately shows, like the belated understanding of the aphorism, is the repetition and return of time delayed, deferred, and only belatedly understood. Rather than an eternity without consequence, the aim of the novel, as Dorian represents it, is the instantaneous revisiting of the years, the ultimate fictional experience based on the model of death as a summary of life.

Aside from his own conversation, Wilde's paradoxes most famously appear in the plays he wrote after *Dorian Gray*.[6] In the dramatic setting, Wilde's witticisms are conversational fireworks leveled at the audience. They have an ephemeral aspect, lodged within the rhythm of theatrical dialogue. There, the paradoxes sparkle and fade, achieving both comedic effect and critical insight precisely in the fleeting meeting of conventionally held opposites. Situated within the context of dramatic dialogue, the witticism culminates in its pronouncement, like the play culminates in its performance. Fitted into seemingly safe domestic comedies with rather conventional plots, Wilde's epigrams barb his plays with hyper-critical power. But in the plays, the epigrams are singular moments that, fading even as they disrupt, are without narrative potential. With *Dorian Gray*, however, Wilde explores the writing of the epigram rather than the speaking of it. Writing out the epigram stretches the mounting and the shock of its

[6] An interesting exception is the tragic *Salomé*, published like *Dorian Gray*, in 1891. *Salomé* is different from the comedies, mainly because it is not built around conversational paradox—this could be generic, since it is a tragedy, or linguistic, since Wilde wrote it in French. But it shares an aspect with *Dorian Gray*, since Wilde's Salome is a composite of all the paintings he viewed of Salome (in addition to and more important than the Biblical text). In this play, Wilde attempts something similar to *Dorian Gray*: he tries to get Salome to move (to dance), to make a painting come to life.

condensation of opposing views. By transposing the effect of the witticism into the form of the novel, Wilde exploits a narrative potential in the paradox that provides a temporality other than traditional linearity. This new temporality brings two contradictory modes together at once, the succession of years that is the typical domain of the novel of development and the synchronization of time in a representative moment that is the summarizing power of the symbol.

Reading a paradox foregrounds the interpretive process that may be accidentally missed in the volley of the stage. The performance of a play makes different demands on the actors and the audience than does the reading of a novel. The narrative form allows more time, during which the philosophical weight packed tightly into the small package of the epigram can unfold. In the slowing down of the paradox through its novelization, Wilde plots out and models the danger that comes with its essential incongruity, which only detonates later for the play's audience. Since *Dorian Gray* outlasts the single moment, it allegorizes the process of understanding that the paradox sets in motion. Still, the importance of the paradox lies not in the perplexity of the moment of utterance, but rather the unconscious after-effects that jolt the reader. The delayed reaction of understanding is dramatized in Dorian's final act of stabbing the painting, when the passing time he thought he had escaped comes back to him all at once. His life only gains static beautiful form after the fact, once he is dead. In other words, life has structure only relation to art and this structure is only momentarily borrowed.

Wilde highlights the importance of the paradox for *Dorian Gray* by adding a preface of epigrams to his revision of the novel for its publication in book form. After it first appeared in the journal *Lippincott's* and was attacked for its indecency, Wilde edited

and expanded the story for a second publication.[7] The Preface is a series of epigrams, where the arrangement of short sentences on the first page—no paragraphing, with each saying on a new line—give the appearance of a poem rather than a novel. Wilde published a number of letters defending his novel after its initial critical panning, and each letter gets boiled down to an epigram in the Preface, which was published independently between the serialized and novelized editions. The Preface therefore works two ways: firstly, it serves as Wilde's pointed response to his critics; secondly, it provides a summary of Wilde's aesthetics in an attempt to distance art from ethics. But the text only takes on its full potential affixed to the beginning of the novel.

As a preface, these epigrams both change the reader's expectations of the novel and twist the effect of time that the novel ultimately produces. The long list of epigrams, focused on arguments for art over morality, has something of a thematic unity, and they are all structurally similar. But this does not make the list any easier to read. Each sentence asks to be read as an independent entity, and the series does not add up to a fully and logically articulate philosophy. They do not build one on another; there is no attempt at succession; and it seems that no narrative could string these aphorisms together (though readers may try as they might to reconcile the novel that follows with these

[7] Donald Lawler thoroughly compares the two editions in *An Inquiry into Oscar Wilde's Revisions* of The Picture of Dorian Gray. Lawler launches this evaluation in answer to the claims that Wilde was merely censoring the homosexual implications of his novel for the book publication, or that he only added material to it in order to it to be long enough to be considered a novel. Lawler's central claim is "the dominant motive underlying all the important changes made by Wilde was an artistic desire to suppress an underlying moral which Wilde considered too obvious and, for that reason, distracting" (2). Lawler's evaluation replicates the supposed tension between aesthetics and ethics that *Dorian Gray* questions and turns it to ironic profit in its certainty that Wilde improved the novel artistically by playing down the moral component. Lawler's inquiry shows how Wilde indeed worked against the almost inevitable moralization that comes with Dorian's death. But the critical burden remains a question of how to read Dorian's death amorally, beyond good and evil?

difficult and suggestive points). The epigrams are fragments, making the Preface a kind of anti-plot that prepares us for Wilde's attempt to make a plot out of a paradox.

The Aesthetic Impulse: Transcending Morality

Wilde's first critics were troubled by the implied immorality of *Dorian Gray*, even though Dorian's "sins" are mostly hinted at rather than described. A major point of attack centered on the painter Basil's love for Dorian. Wilde's entire critical defense of the novel rested in a similar distinction between art and morality.[8] In the Preface, Wilde claims, "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all" (3). The important distinction Wilde points to is that the terms good/bad can be applied to art as well as morals. "Good" can imply either an ethical or an aesthetic judgment. Wilde exploits this essential ambiguity of judgment with *Dorian Gray* by claiming to sublimate Dorian's pleasure and sins into the realm of art. Aesthetic pleasure stands in for pleasure in general and for Wilde pleasure is not a question of morals but of aesthetics. According to him, "The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium" (3). Thus, one must always mark the difference between form and content. Morality is the stuff of plots; beauty comes from form. The distinction is important since it enables Wilde to sidestep his critics. Getting into an argument about the sins committed by a character in a novel replicates the same supposed mistake that

[8] As Robert Mighall has pointed out, there are many coded references to homosexuality throughout the novel and at least one overt reference to it defending Basil's love for Dorian: "The love that he bore him – for it was really love – had nothing in it that was not noble and intellectual. It was not that mere physical admiration of beauty that is born of the senses, and that dies when the senses tire. It was such love as Michael Angelo had known, and Montaigne, and Winckelmann, and Shakespeare himself" (115). The love the narrator describes here is seen as sublimated above the senses into the realm of art. Wilde made a similar defense during his trial when the prosecution confronted him with Lord Alfred Douglas's poem "The Two Loves."

Dorian commits, to take art for life. This move shirks the critical duty to attend to the style and craft of the novel—what in fact makes it art and not life.

But if Wilde argues that there is no such thing as an immoral life, how do we interpret Dorian's "punishment" at the end of the novel? Even Wilde explained Dorian's demise as a punishment for his immoral behavior. Can we read Dorian's death as an aesthetic rather than an ethical judgment? In his biography of Wilde, Richard Ellmann proposes such a reading of *Dorian Gray*. The aesthetic problem that Ellmann claims the novel addresses is Wilde's debate with Whistler on the priority of literature over painting. Ultimately, however, Ellmann insists that the novel is an ethical revision of the aesthetic philosophy Wilde puts forth in the essays that make up *Intentions*, which was published in a collection in 1891.[9] For Ellmann, Wilde's critique of his own aesthetics in *Dorian Gray* resides in the novel's moral trajectory. Dorian's downfall implies that there is something wrong in the extreme or paradoxical aestheticism pronounced in the essays of *Intentions*. A life that imitates art will shortly end in death.

This reading merely reinserts Dorian's death in the moral order and undoes Ellmann's more important point about Wilde's use of *Dorian Gray* as a platform for critiquing different genres of art. Wilde is not reducing his radical aesthetics by tying it to a typical moral. The apparently moralistic arc of the novel is instead a critique of the role of plot in the novel. We can turn to one of Wilde's own private assessments of the book to see how the plot of *Dorian Gray* becomes a critique of the novel form. As Wilde

[9] Ellmann actually follows Walter Pater in this assessment of Wilde's novel. Pater claims that *Dorian Gray* revises the claim that life imitates art put forth in *Intentions* by allowing for "a certain amount of the intrusion of real life and its sordid aspects" ("A Novel by Mr. Oscar Wilde" 264). This, Pater implies, leads to the moral that "vice and crime make people coarse and ugly" (265) or, in more Paterian terms, that a "true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism" and must therefore not "lose the moral sense . . . the sense of sin and righteousness" (264).

writes to his friend Beatrice Allhusen, "I am afraid [*Dorian Gray*] is rather like my own life—all conversation and no action . . . I can't describe action: my people sit in chairs and chatter" (quoted in Ellmann, 314). A novel is supposed to depict time passing through a series of actions, but this is precisely what Wilde finds to be his weakness as an artist. In reply to this, Wilde uses *Dorian Gray* to indict action as the basis of plot.

Still, Wilde gives the book a plot, and a predictable one at that, replaying mythical themes of Narcissus, Pygmalion, and Faust. The main elements are Dorian's exchange with the painting, his reading of the "poisonous" book, his murder of Basil, and finally his death when he stabs the painting. All of these plot points are strange kinds of actions, not events but a series of engagements with artistic forms. Action is reduced to different forms of aesthetic spectatorship. This is the famous formal reflexivity that becomes the hallmark of Modernism: the plot of the novel about exchanging life for art is made up merely the description of other works of art.

Crossing Stasis and Succession

Wilde's debate with Whistler encapsulates the tension between static forms and the temporality of plot that informs the paradoxical temporality of *Dorian Gray*. Ellmann claims that Wilde set out to prove to Whistler that literature is "capable of doing what painting could not do, exist temporally rather than eternally, and yet enshrine a portrait of its beautiful and monstrous hero" (312). The form of the novel can do one better than a painting, since it is not limited to a single moment. The important point that Ellmann discovers is that Wilde brings "together, as Whistler could not, the exalted moment and its disintegration" (312).[10] What Ellmann points to is the structural tension or paradox at

[10] Interestingly, as Ellmann shows, whatever critical content this debate eventually had, it began as a feud of vanity. Whistler could not abide Wilde's rivalry of his enormous presence (regardless of the painter's

the heart of *Dorian Gray*: a tension that plays out not only in the opposition between painting and writing, but also between stasis and the passage of time.

Though Wilde centers the novel on this temporal tension exemplified by the two art forms, I would argue that he is not trying to resolve the opposition in favor of one over the other. Instead, the strange narrative turns of *Dorian Gray* develop from a mutual striving of each art form towards the other. Dorian uses the painting and the novel as different models of life that art might provide. First Dorian sees his portrait and wants to become this painting. When the painting figures for him his physical and moral declines, he wants to use it as a "guide to him through his life." Then Dorian reads "the poisonous book" that Lord Henry gives him and replaces the painting with a new guide. The painting strives to become a novel, as Dorian imagines it: It "held the secret of his life, and told his story" (98). The static form contains a narrative. Likewise, the novel strives to be a painting, to become a total portrait of Dorian: "the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it" (123). Each form overlays two modes of time, a simultaneous anticipation and retroaction. The painting somehow knows the effects of Dorian's actions before Dorian himself does. The poisonous book also anticipates Dorian's actions. He sees the hero of his book as "a kind of prefiguring type of himself" (123).The painting and the book are neither quite static nor quite successive. They both present the possibility of life in development at the same time as life already complete.

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actually small stature). His typical joke at Wilde's expense was over Wilde's pilfering of Whistler's own jokes, as well as his aesthetic theories. Ellmann shows that Whistler himself was not that original; he developed from the same aesthetic pool as Wilde. Whistler bristled more until the joking became serious accusations of plagiarism, which, for *Dorian Gray*, culminate in his claim that all of Wilde's maxims in the preface were really Whistlerisms.

In this desire to crossover, Wilde depicts the transitive property of art. Rabaté claims that *Dorian Gray* is an example of "ekphrasis with a vengeance" (*Given 1º Art 2º Crime* 128). Building on Wilde's assessment of his failure to provide action in the novel, Rabaté shows how it instead reverses the typical representation of realism: Wilde writes in the mode of describing a painting (ekphrasis) rather than developing a plot. The larger claim Rabaté makes is that "murder conditions the very possibility of the esthetic as such" and that "murder inhabits the fundamental genre of ekphrasis" (124). Rabaté's usage of the term "ekphrasis" can help us think through Wilde's attempt to synthesize stasis and movement. The fusion of art forms coincides with the retrospective temporality Wilde explores and marks the crossover from art to life through death. The paradoxical conclusion of art for art's sake is that its refusal to make art a means to a moral or practical end actually hyperbolizes the effects of art on life. Wilde moves from this pure aestheticism to the idea to make life into art. Therefore, all forms of art may serve as guides for life or measures for the events of life. Again, as Rabaté shows, this desire brings with it a necessary danger of death.

The anticipation of art hurdles on to retroaction, as an attempt to give life form after the fact. This is the paradox of desire that wants to cancel itself out. As an effect of this desire, the chronological markings of before and after are no longer stable in the world of Wilde's novel. The structure of recognition of anticipation is a delayed effect of art. Dorian only knows his life after he sees it in the painting or reads it in the book. The ultimate effect that Wilde seeks in pitting portrait against novel is the retroactive temporality of *Dorian Gray*. The two forms pitted against one another, stasis and succession, do not cancel each other out but instead provide a convolution in the way

time is experienced so that it operates on a delay. In art, we desire this privileged position that sees past and future simultaneously. However, Wilde insists, this privilege stems from a fictional understanding of death.

Whether in twists of narrative time or in a strange use of narrative tense, the paradoxical time shifts throughout the novel are the paths of influence, the way life imitates art. From the very beginning of the novel, the status of narrative time is in question. The temporal tension plays out in the problematic Wilde noted of action in the novel: the opposition of plot and description. *Dorian Gray* opens in the mode of a stage setting: a languorous description of Lord Henry Wotton sitting in the studio of the artist, Basil Hallward. From the beginning, Wilde juxtaposes stillness and motion, time stopping and passing. The studio is secluded from the bustle of the world: the "dim roar of London was like the bourdon note of a distant organ" (5). The evocation of a world of movement is undercut by the musical simile Wilde uses. The "bourdon note" drones away unchanging, numbing the studio even more from the shock of the real world. The only sense of time is a rhythmic repetition of the "light summer wind," blowing in the perfume from the garden, and "the fantastic shadows of birds in flight" which "now and then . . . flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window" (5). But this repetitive movement slows down the passage of time to an oppressive stillness.

The opening paragraphs confirm Wilde's claim in response to the first critics of *Dorian Gray* that the novel is "an essay on decorative art" (letter to *Daily Chronicle*, Ellmann 321), since the narrative so far only conveys a static sense of space. In fact, thus far the novel is similar in mode to Wilde's critical writing: it is philosophy in a beautiful

setting. Alternatively, we could read the novel's opening in anticipation of Wilde's later theatrical form in the mode of stage description.[11]

Suddenly, however, temporality is pushed to the fore as the novel produces its first hiccup in time, a simultaneous anticipation and retrospection that becomes the typical time of the book. Shifting narrative focus to the artist Basil Hallward sitting motionlessly in front of the painting, we learn that his "sudden disappearance some years ago caused, at the time, such public excitement, and gave rise to so many strange conjectures" (5). The temporal effect of this sentence might go unnoticed, especially upon a first reading of the novel. "Some years ago" may refer to a time before the narrative commences, as a way to give some background. However, after having read the novel, it becomes clear that this description takes place in the "now" of the narration, after the action of the plot has taken place, after Basil's murder by Dorian near the end of the book and even after Dorian's fateful end. The narration exploits this temporal ambiguity, seeming to fold in upon itself past and future, what takes place before and after the telling of the story. An already informed or repeat reader might see this as a narrative slip that lets out the plot before it happens.[12] I would argue that this slip in time is not a narrative fault but is instead representative of the paradoxical temporality of the

[11] In *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde employs prose-like stage descriptions to the point of making it almost novelistic; they share with *Dorian Gray* the sense of narrating a painting, giving time to a static scene (which prefigures cinematic camerawork).

[12] One could imagine an overeager storyteller getting ahead of himself. Or else someone recapping a story and assuming the audience is in on the plot. Another possibility would be that the narration itself occurs in the timelessness of the portrait, the survivor of the story. Thus, the narration slips back to its present moment while recalling a later development. A final possibility, which puts the novel itself in the mode of a hypothesis, is that the narration is one of the "strange conjectures" that Basil's disappearance provoked. In this reading, the origin of the story is no longer Dorian Gray, man or picture, but rather the mystery of the death of an artist. The narrative possibilities are engendered from Basil rather than from Dorian, as Basil claims of his own art. Regardless of which possibility one entertains, there is a disjunction of knowledge and revelation.

novel, which tries to collapse the movement of time, past and future, into an enlarged and static present.

Wilde's structural paradox pitting stasis against succession short circuits the plot of *Dorian Gray* so that the only time passing is narrated contiguously through Dorian's absorption in the painting, the novel, or his vast collection of objets d'art. In other words, we could skip over most of the novel and go straight from Dorian's wish to trade places with his portrait to his death after stabbing the painting and arguably not miss much. But this story would then tend toward the moral element. What occurs in between is the aesthetic effect that Wilde desired—the real important contribution of *Dorian Gray* to literature—and it only takes its toll after the fact; the years build up and return in an instant, a delayed effect.[13] This is a deeper critique of aesthetics than what Ellmann sees in the apparent moral trajectory.

Whereas Wilde's predecessors in so-called aesthetic novels—like Huysmans, whose *À Rebours* is a potential model for Dorian's poisonous book—wrote books that had no plot except a tabulation of the protagonist's tastes in art, Wilde gives the aesthetic novel momentum—albeit a stuttering one—and thereby comments on the desire for immortality that often gets linked with art. Dorian seeks preservation in his collection, but what he really ends up with is his death. Dorian provides a twist on the normal protagonist, since he only appears in the novel as an after-effect of different art works. His life, as well as his death, is a delayed result of his aesthetic experience. Wilde uses Dorian as an example to show us that the desire we bring to art is not a desire to endure but rather a desire to die, to bypass indefinite and unknown time. The retrospective

[13] Or, what comes in between is what Nunokawa expresses in *Tame Passions of Wilde* as the necessary boredom that *Dorian Gray* both depicts and creates.

temporality of the paradox that structures *Dorian Gray,* with its predictable plot, allows us an anticipatory look at death foretold and understood.

Moving from Painting to Novel

Dorian first uses the painting as the model of crossing over from art to life in an attempt to endow life with the seeming eternity of art (though that eternity is really a fleeting moment). But when Dorian reads the "poisonous book," we see a more complex exchange that models the effect Wilde seeks to produce with *Dorian Gray*, to integrate the eternal moment with passing time.[14] Painting absorbs the spectator and takes him or her out of time for the moment of contemplation; the novel gives this absorption a paradoxically timeless duration. In other words, the paradox Wilde exploits as a narrative structure consists in the fact that reading seems to simultaneously condense and expand time. While reading, one must account for minutes, days, years that pass in the story—all within mere moments of actual time. We may read of ten years passing in one minute or spend three hours reading of the passing of one minute. It is this formal capacity that Wilde exploits most fully in this chapter.

In an attempt to separate his actions from consequences, Dorian eventually hides the painting in the schoolroom. The secret location will allows him to control his awareness of its decay. This relocation also marks the transition from the painting's influence to the novel's. After he secrets the painting away, description of Dorian's actions all but disappears. The narrator tells us—without telling us—about Dorian's

[14] The novel itself could be read as a kind of catalogue of the arts. We have decorative arts, music, painting, drama, and writing, all in an attempt to show how art in fact shapes life. After the fantasy of the painting, the most effective attempt for Wilde is in the Sybil Vane interlude. The theater seems the most ideal place for art to come to life. However, Wilde aborts this attempt since it does not have the same temporal effect—it is merely linear (taking place in Cartesian space). The poisonous book is the ideal location for Wilde to make his experiment happen, since reading is both linear and cyclical, repeatable and unique—formal and plot driven.

"mysterious and prolonged absences that gave rise to such strange conjecture among those who were his friends" (124).[15] Through this empty point of plot, Dorian's relation to the book and his other art works takes over the narration of his life. The transition occurs within the language of Chapter XI, which performs for the reader of *Dorian Gray* the influence of the poisonous book on Dorian. The verbs of Chapter XI are in the imperfect past, the tense of free indirect discourse—not a past annihilated, but an indefinite and indeterminate time. They happen, have happened, but never stop happening, which means it is impossible to know when they happened. The language of *Dorian Gray* is infected by the arrest of Dorian's development at the stage of his freezing in the painting, trying to pigeonhole him in an eternal present. In other words, the narration of the novel becomes portraiture; the book simultaneously remains still and represents the passing of time.

Dorian wants novel reading to be just like looking at his portrait. But as we saw, the portrait itself does not remain stable in relation to Dorian. Dorian is static and the painting changes; the painting is now closer in its being to a novel. This is where the delayed effects of art on life come into most explicit effect. The major difference between the novel and painting, like Wilde's description, is the tense of novelistic description. The painting, for all of its changes, would be described in the eternal present tense. The novel uses the imperfect past. The imperfect tense is also the time of Dorian's reading of the poisonous book, as it passes from the page into his life, for the continuous action of the novel hides the actor and makes the deed available to anyone ready to plug himself into the text. It is the tense of the passive reader becoming an active participant in the book.

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[15] These absences always end in the scene of Dorian looking at himself in the mirror and in the painting simultaneously: as if the absences need to be repaired by a double and contradictory presence.

Dorian's reading places our reading *en abyme,* so that form and content switch sides. We read about reading and in the process we learn how reading affects life outside the book.

Dorian confronts the book as the past to his future. He sees the hero as in a mirror, "a kind of prefiguring type of himself" (123). Dorian's can easily substitute himself for the character because of the structure of the poisonous book: "It was a novel without a plot, and with only one character, being, indeed, simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian" (121).The book itself is a vague thing with fuzzy outlines that allows Dorian to easily enter within its framework and identify himself with the protagonist.[16] Dorian first picks up this book at the end of Chapter X and "after a few minutes he became absorbed" (120). Absorption, like staring in the mirror, is an immersion in the text, a suspension of the boundaries between art and life. Dorian is amazed:

> It was the strangest book that he had ever read. It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed. (120)

[16] Wilde originally named this book *Le Secret de Raoul* by Catulle Sarrazin, but decided to make it anonymous in the novelized version. It is tempting to try to find a source for the poisonous book and many critics have found originals in books like Huysmans' *A Rebours*, Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* or his *Renaissance*. However, it is best to see this book itself as an absorption of all of its precedents condensed into one. The poisonous book stands in for all of literature, for the possibility of living life as a work of art and for the privileged form from which life most clearly imitates art. In *Crack Wars*, Avital Ronell examines the effect of "killer texts," linking literature to poison and narcotics, in a reading of *Madame Bovary*. These poisonous books, she claims, "stage for the socius an irremediable destructive satisfaction" (99), a pleasure that comes precisely from the crossover from art to life, the realm of Bovarysme. Interestingly, in relation to the famous carriage scene, Ronell claims that literature becomes most dangers "when it stops representing, that is, when it ceases veiling itself with the excess that we commonly call *meaning*" (57). Wilde uses this same negative capability of literature in *Dorian Gray*, veiling the pleasure of art with a typical moral tale, while actually disrupting the possibility of culling redemptive meaning from art. The pleasure is in the dispersal.

In Wilde's novel, the word "thing" acts like the portrait of Dorian in effecting the changeover from art to life, "making real" Dorian's fantasy: "thing" is the crossover point, from subject to object, from art to life. Thing, in its vagueness, encompasses all the objects, emotions, people, that surround Dorian—up to the point of Dorian's own subjectivity, which is trapped within a thing, the portrait. Dorian's reading process is synaesthetic; he sees and hears through the book. It substitutes for his sensation of the world and becomes a total aesthetic experience.

The temporal effect of reading that Wilde wants to represent as well as to produce is the exchange of life for art. With the painting, this exchange is framed by Dorian's wish that he may displace the effects of aging onto the portrait. With the poisonous book, however, Dorian reverses the direction of the exchange: without moving (i.e. living) Dorian gains the experience of the protagonist. His life becomes the displaced effect of the novel. Once Dorian gets absorbed into the book, Wilde uses Chapter XI to enumerate Dorian's aesthetic collection through a contemplation of "the influence of this book" on Dorian. The ensuing descriptions of Dorian's interests follow the prescription of the book he reads endlessly as if it was instruction for life.

Dorian sees only himself in the book. He approaches all art in the same way that he relates to his portrait, which was dictated to him by Basil and Lord Henry. In other words, Dorian reads books as if they were paintings. His reading process produces the same kind of absorption Dorian finds in front of his portrait:

> The mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music, so full as it was of complex refrains and movements elaborately repeated, produced in the mind of the lad, as he passed from chapter to chapter, a

> form of reverie, a malady of dreaming, that made him unconscious of the falling day and creeping shadows. (121)[17]

Absorption turns into "reverie," which Wilde defines as a cancelation of time. Dorian tells Henry "I forgot how the time was going" (121). Still, this escape from time is not an escape from himself. Dorian's reading is actually a process of self-creation.

Wilde moves us from this initial description of absorption in the poisonous book to the notorious chapter XI, which catalogues Dorian's decadent collection of books, objets d'art, jewels, and so on. In this movement, Wilde substitutes narration of Dorian's life for description of his aesthetic experiences, following the model of the aesthetic novel that Huysmans purveyed in *À Rebours*. When the spell of the painting and the book seems to be working, then Wilde can cancel out plot.

Chapter XI is a compendium of years hinted at through their tangent objects, all summarized in the repeated reading of the poisonous book. This chapter performs for Wilde the simultaneous effect of passing time and its distortion into stasis. When we read this chapter, we enter into Dorian's own absorption in the poisonous book. We therefore miss out on Dorian's life: in a minute external description of Dorian's collection, Wilde passes over not merely moments, but years and years of Dorian's life in one chapter of the book. But this displacement is exactly Dorian's mode as a character. He is only the after-effect of the work.

However, to complicate matters, Wilde also makes this temporal effect the content of the poisonous book that Dorian reads. The hero of that book "spent his life trying to realise in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that

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[17] I am tempted to collapse the "cadence" of the book, the rhythm that moves it forward, into an opposing movement of *de*cadence: time slowing itself down towards its end.

belonged to every century except his own, and to sum up, as it were, in himself the various moods through which the world-spirit had ever passed" (121). The "summing up" is a delayed reaction; likewise, the temporal effect of Dorian's novel on him is the very quest of the poisonous book's own hero. This hall of mirrors obliterates the original moment, so that what is copying what is no longer clear: life imitates art.

Like Wilde, Dorian wants to provide a history for the repetition of art in life. While both the painting and the book seem to Dorian to contain his life story, the book provides a more complete backstory, not unique to his own person. Dorian sees his relation to art as a chance to master one's life and the external realities that impose themselves upon one. After worrying about the determinism of his family heritage, he muses that "one had ancestors in literature, as well as in one's own race, nearer perhaps in type and temperament, many of them, and certainly with an influence of which one was more absolutely conscious" (138). This thought propels him into the fantasy that spreads his aesthetic experience to encompass everything: "the whole of history was merely the record of his own life, not as he had lived it in act and circumstance, but as his imagination had created it for him" (138). What Dorian gets wrong, Wilde shows us, is the overestimation of the conscious control over this influence. Dorian has the idealist fantasy that the world is a projection of himself. This is a misunderstanding of Lord Henry's lesson. Lord Henry counsels development and ironically warns against influence—at very moment he is influencing him. Dorian seeks complete and immediate development by immersing himself in influence.[18] His mastery, however, is limited. His

[18] Susan Sontag identifies the search for "instant character" as part of the camp aesthetic she derives in part from Wilde. See "Notes on Camp," note 33 (114). For Sontag, the camp idea of character counteracts any sense of development. This is the plot problem of *Dorian Gray*, but also a version of the Modernist problem of belatedness. One wants simultaneously to be completely new and to reference what has come

attempt to model life on art, in the mode of the paradox, escapes his control and his full knowledge.

Dorian Delayed

Though Wilde circumvents plot for the most part, boiling it down to a handful of important actions, we must not merely dismiss this as lazy composition. Where the novel's description of action disappears into a description of Dorian's art collection, Wilde is upholding an anti-mimetic principle that refuses direct representation. In other words, the result of Wilde's twisting of narrative is that Dorian is merely an effect of art: of his portrait, of Lord Henry's Hedonistic theory, of the book he reads. We should not, then, read the minimal plot points as a lack but as a way to create the delayed effect of Dorian's character.

As the books opens, we expect to encounter Dorian Gray, but instead we find two other men sitting with a portrait of an unnamed handsome man (the description gives no more detail regarding the particularity of his good looks). Dorian's name does not occur until the third page. As in the title, Dorian Gray is preceded by his picture; and when the narrative shifts from Lord Henry's seclusion in a monotonous cloud of smoke and perfume to the portrait standing in the middle of the studio, this placid immobility is quietly disrupted. The focus moves to "the centre of the room" where the "full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty" stands (5). The delay that characterizes Dorian is the temporal principle of the novel, the outcome of the confrontation of stasis with passing time. Delay occurs as a result of the simultaneous anticipation and retroaction that Dorian seeks in relation to art.

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before. Here the secret—what is hidden from representation—is the path of influence. We can place Wilde's wholesale incorporation of other texts as part of this sought effect.

If Dorian is only the delayed effect of art, then what does this mean for the concept of literary character? Character itself becomes a locus for Wilde to reflect on the processes of art, specifically narration. The character is its own paradox in the novel, since it is both a subject—an attempt to represent an independent and ostensibly self-conscious life—and an object, put in place by the narration and fully explored both internally and externally by description. Since *Dorian Gray*'s first publication in *Lippincott's*, critics have commented on the thinness of Dorian's character. I would argue that indeed Wilde intended Dorian to be an empty formal structure. Dorian's effect in the novel actually depends on the thinness of his surface, the reflective capabilities of his veneer. Like the portrait within the novel, Dorian is an empty space in the narrative. The reflected image, Dorian in the portrait, is merely a vehicle for projection, for Basil or Lord Henry to fill up with their ideas. Wilde wrote in reply to a critic, "Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray. What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them" (Mason 81). This comment warns critics about assuming too much about the narrative lapses where we lose description of Dorian in view of his art collection. But Wilde is also describing the relation of the other characters in the novel to Dorian. As Basil stands looking at the portrait of Dorian Gray, he too is susceptible to Wilde's warning. The disruption of time in the third paragraph description of Basil indicates the distorting view of art. Lord Henry also projects himself onto the blankness of Dorian and gets its new form mirrored back to him. He is content to live vicariously through Dorian. Despite his evident interest in Dorian's "story," Lord Henry quickly passes on in his thoughts to the real importance the boy has for him, as an instrument of

his thought. He muses on the influence he can have over the boy by "project[ing] one's soul into some gracious form, and let[ting] it tarry there for a moment" (37).

Due to his reflective properties, Dorian exists in the novel as a retroactive projection, the coming to life of a portrait. As Wilde claims, art is always ahead of life, which merely repeats its forms. Dorian the man is only an after-effect of his portrait. But this is not to say that he is merely a beautiful surface. Dorian acts violently. With Dorian's entrance, Wilde undoes the arc of the typical story of development that builds a character from beginning to end. Dorian is already complete, but somehow empty. He paradoxically stays the same while also moving the novel along.

Stylistically, the delay of Dorian's entrance might be his most explicit presence; the first chapter's sumptuous décor and aesthetic discourses between Lord Henry and Basil, are most representative of the art which Dorian Gray comes to symbolize in his body and personality. Throughout the first chapter, besides the physical presence of his portrait, which goes unidentified, Dorian exists only as an idea—an influence on Basil's art, the sitter for the portrait. Basil explains to Lord Henry that Dorian "is never more present in my work than when no image of him is there" (14). Dorian is not merely the content of the work, the sitter for a portrait, but more importantly the "suggestion . . . of a new manner" (14): a formal innovation, both for Basil and for Wilde. But Dorian's actual entrance in the second chapter knocks style out of center and oppresses the book with his personality, throwing off the initial main characters so that he may become the hero and the book may have a plot, unlike Wilde's critical writing. Basil rightly fears the power of this influence, which overpowers him as well as the seemingly placid narration of the novel. But it is rather how Dorian gets influenced himself that gets the plot moving.

Even though Dorian seems to occupy the traditional hero position in the novel, Wilde still alters the typical story structure that the presence of a young man about to enter the world implies. This is most evident in the way Wilde tells us Dorian's life story. Rather than tracking the hero's development from the beginning, Wilde presents us with Dorian fully grown and then fills in the past belatedly and retrospectively. As Lord Henry himself sees, our sense of Dorian's background works pictorially. What narration Wilde does provide of Dorian's life is not in the traditional manner. Lord Henry digs up information about his new friend and acolyte from his uncle. But what he discovers is merely condensation of symbolic images. The narrator sums up Dorian's back story in Lord Henry's thoughts with a series of sentences that do not so much give the illusion of a continuous development, but rather reduce his "parentage" into a parade of scenes, perfect subjects for illustration:

> A beautiful woman risking everything for a mad passion. A few wild weeks of happiness cut short by a hideous, treacherous crime. Months of voiceless agony, and then a child born in pain. The mother snatched away by death, the boy left to solitude and the tyranny of an old and loveless man. (37)

The series of incomplete sentences hurry on from one to the next like dabs of paint to form the full picture of a grown man. Though the sentences seem to imply action, they remain in the eternal present of the painting with no conjugated verbs, instead shifting from gerund to past participle, and thus remaining adjectival, mere descriptors, building blocks now visible in the whole. Lord Henry sums up the effect, "Yes; it was an

interesting background. It posed the lad, made him more perfect as it were" (37). Perfectly placed, Dorian conforms to the type Lord Henry seeks to create.

The sense of duration a life story should give—an illusion of growth through the building up of experience—gets reduced by the ambiguity of the word Lord Henry uses to characterize Dorian's life, "background." While this word could refer to the genetic, national, social, or historic elements of one's life, Lord Henry uses it as static setting that allows the figure to show forth more clearly. Dorian has no personality, no development—he is more powerful as a static image. In addition, Wilde only fills us in on Dorian's background after he has already bargained away his soul for eternal youth. This twists the trajectory of development, since we only gain a sense of Dorian's previous life once has already been frozen in time through his wish.

Wilde uses the trappings of the typical developmental narrative to mask the violent and confusing effects of felt time. There is a tension between our experience of time and the way literary convention tries to make sense of it. Wilde wants to account for the delay of our understanding and this is only possible through art. Douglas Mao, one of the few critics to take seriously Wilde's claim that life imitates art, connects Wilde's plot to contemporary materialist psychology that questioned the role of the conscious subject to completely determine and control his or her environment. Mao places *Dorian Gray* in the decline of the genre of the *Bildungsroman* due to its "fin-de-siècle fascination with developmental arrest" (94). Furthermore, Mao argues that the failure of experience in Wilde's novel—that it "manages to be formative *without* being instructive"— is "an allegory of the nineteenth century's engagement with the developmental unconscious, its fixing of attention on chemical or quasi-chemical transactions by which experience subtly

configures the self" (95). Mao wants to understand Wilde's materialistic ethics and the apparent failure they entail for leading the aesthetic life, i.e. why Dorian must die. He claims that Dorian confronts "the sad chiasmus according to which the same passing of time that permits expansion of the soul enjoins also a dimunition of the body" (99). Thus, Mao leads us back to the paradoxical desire that Wilde uncovers in our relation to art. It is not a desire to escape one or the other side of this paradox, I would claim, but rather an attempt to run through the "score of shameful years" and come to its end, where the soul expands and the body crumbles to nothingness.

Though Wilde parts with traditional development, he still makes reference to its conventions to thematize the desire for meaning that we bring to art. Dorian takes up various types of art, and tries to interpret them by acting from them, figuring for the reader the misapprehension and temporal displacement that truly pervades development, notwithstanding narrative attempts to make sense of life by plotting it out sequentially and causally. Hidden beneath Dorian's ponderings on inheritance—the handing down of attributes, both physical and literary, over the passage of time—is an alternate story of the repetition of events visited upon one unconsciously that defy narrative understanding.[19] *Dorian Gray* is therefore at least three things at once: the culmination of a Victorian narrative strategy, a version of the Bildungsroman, as well as a foreshadowing of the Modernist narrative that completely disrupts this narrative arc and dislocates the representation of time.

[19] This theme is actually shot through the novel structurally in the patchwork of quotations that typically characterizes all of Wilde's writing, signaling both conscious and unconscious borrowings (or plagiarism), and showing us the seams of the writing and reading process rather than smoothing these over in the traditional communication model that moves from author through the book to the reader, from origin to medium to reception. For an interesting theoretical examination of Wilde's borrowing, see Florina Tofescu's *Oscar Wilde's Plagiarism: the Triumph of Art over Ego*, where she argues that Wilde's intertexuality "spoil[s] the mimetic illusion" and allows for an escape from personality, which later gets developed by Gide.

The Poles of Paradox, Part I: The Moment

The structure of time that opposes the fleeting moment to lasting duration, favoring the former as a model of fulfilled artistic experience, is not only a plot mechanism that allows for foreshadowing of the climactic ending. The structure can be found everywhere in the novel, at different levels, predicting the outcome of events. The juxtaposition of moment and duration is what drives Dorian's wish to change places with the painting, as if he could make a choice between the two. In "The Critic as Artist," this same structure becomes for Wilde the vital side-effect of consuming art, the function of reading, since it "makes us live more in one single hour than life can make us live in a score of shameful years" (1037). This is an economical wager that crosses the fleetingness of life with the momentarily expansive enjoyment. There are two economies at play at once: the first says art is long and life is short, trade life for the permanence of art. The second, using a different artistic temporality, says live in the moment fulfilled with the pleasure of art, rather than seek fulfillment in the long and unsatisfying extent of life. These two economies seem to be incommensurable, but they are both in effect in Wilde's novel. This paradox causes an interference in understanding what exactly *Dorian Gray* says about the relation of art to life: can one live life like a work of art? Or does it necessarily deliver one to sin and death? To enable Dorian's wish to stay young and beautiful, one economy must be repressed; however, Wilde shows, it is doomed to return.

Reading allows us to multiply our lives, as Wilde would say—but it works precisely through the vicariousness that we see in Lord Henry's relation to Dorian. Vicariousness once removed, since Dorian himself is in vicarious relation to his portrait. Thus, Lord Henry is a spectator of a spectator. He watches while Dorian lives a decadent

lifestyle unblemished and his actions visit their degenerating effects upon the portrait. Dorian makes the switch—art for life—and (temporarily) lives a life within his control, repeatable and almost imaginary. He watches himself with the safe aesthetic distance we take when we approach a portrait. In "The Critic as Artist," Wilde claims that life is a "failure" from "the artistic point of view" due to "the fact that one can never repeat exactly the same emotion" (1035). Life's apparent linearity counteracts pleasurable repetition but it also saves life from dangerous return of effects. Art, on the other hand is an attempt to master repetition: "There is no mood of passion that Art cannot give us, and those of us who have discovered her secret can settle beforehand what our experiences are going to be. We can choose our day and select our hour" (1035). Time is within our control, since we can always pick up the *Inferno* and be sent back to the same place we were when we first read it. But in *Dorian Gray*, Wilde is out to show that the apparent linearity of life does not provide security against the threat of a return of something that already happened. There is no longer a clear distinction between life and art in the experience of time.

Dorian's temporal exchange with his portrait, trading the eternal moment of perfect youth for the more typical chronological development of the body, results from a wish Dorian makes after first seeing the completed portrait. Lord Henry has just filled Dorian's mind with ideas of a new Hedonism based on seizing the possibilities of youth. However, where Lord Henry preaches a process of development, all Dorian hears is a warning about the fleetingness of time and beauty. Dorian's bargain is thus made on a false premise and the resulting contradiction leaves Dorian in a static position of non-understanding while the painting bears the burden of his actions. Dorian can do things

without consequence, while the picture of him suffers physical decay. If we look closely at how Lord Henry plays upon Dorian's youth and inexperience, we can trace more clearly Dorian's error. All of the imagery that prompts him to make his wish is in anticipation of the dead body that we finally see at the novel's close when Dorian stabs the painting. In other words, it is not the picture of beauty that drives Dorian on, but the picture of death. I would claim that this apparent fear of death is really a death wish, a wish to skip over the pain of development right to the end, following the novel's own short circuits.

Lord Henry lectures Dorian in Basil's studio on his theories of life and art and Dorian eagerly listens, ready to apply everything he hears to his own life. Lord Henry warns Dorian that being too open to influence is dangerous. Lord Henry tells his newly found pupil that "'the aim of life is self-development. To realize one's nature perfectly'" (20). Lord Henry is not speaking of "sum[ing] up the world in a phrase," as his witticisms try to do, but rather plotting it out completely in one's life:

> 'I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream – I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of mediaevalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal' (21)

Though Lord Henry speaks of a return to an ancient model, his theory is forward-looking. It is a philosophy of realization, rather than repression: "The mutilation of the savage has its tragic survival in the self-denial that mars our lives. We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us" (21). This is

a pseudo-Aristotelian aesthetics of life, premised on a cathartic enactment of feelings: "'The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification'" (21). But where Dorian ostensibly remains pure after his actions, the painting soon becomes a reservoir of his sins. The recording of his actions, like the collection of things he soon amasses, masks the cathartic release with an attempt at preservation.

Lord Henry finally snags Dorian with his speech extolling the importance of youth and warning of the degenerative effects of time. This speech is all the more effective because of its juxtaposition with the youthful portrait Basil is painting.[20] Lord Henry sets Dorian up to take a look at the finished portrait, which encapsulates the persistence from which every human being—but most cruelly, according to Lord Henry, the beautiful person—is barred. At this moment, however, Lord Henry's speech is paradoxically extolling Dorian's beauty while giving a negative description of the beautiful Dorian from the painting: "'Some day, when you are old and wrinkled and ugly, when thought has seared your forehead with its lines, and passion branded your lips with is hideous fires . . .'" (24). This description is a clear prediction of the final image of Dorian lying dead on the floor after stabbing the portrait. Time will negate all of Dorian's attributes: Dorian is only a fleeting proposition. Dorian has, according to Lord Henry, "'only a few years in which to live really, perfectly, and fully'" (24). But while Lord Henry definitively makes Dorian feel the crunch of time, he is not necessarily advocating its cancelation. Lord Henry commands Dorian: "Live! Live the wonderful life that is in

[20] The argument of the timelessness of the portrait has one hole: though it captures a "moment," Dorian must sit for it over a number of days. Dorian's youthful impatience impedes this process and when it is finished—helped by Lord Henry's enrapturing of the sitter—Basil finds it worthwhile to thank him for (or preen him on) the fact that he "'sat splendidly to-day'" (26).

you! Let nothing be lost upon you" (25).[21] Dorian overlooks the fact that the effect of youth and beauty relies on their finitude.

Lord Henry's lecture confuses Dorian. There are two conflicting views at work here: one is a method of development, a process of realization; the other is a record-keeping, a timeless deposit, like the portrait, of events, thoughts, feelings, in the world. This opposition is at the crux of the paradox Wilde uses to structure his text, between the moment and the plot. As with all that affects Dorian, his understanding of Lord Henry's lecture comes after the fact, only when he looks at the painting. At this moment, the narrative tells us, he looks "as if he had recognized himself for the first time" (27) in an instantaneous "revelation" of his beauty. The sequential logic of Lord Henry's "strange panegyric on youth," which outlines a process of development, gets bypassed in the moment of recognition. Only now, "the full reality of the description flashed across him" (27). He sees the painting, but like Lord Henry before, he narrates instead his decay:

> Yes, there would be a day when his face would be wrinkled and wizen, his eyes dim and colourless, the grace of his figure broken and deformed. The scarlet would pass away from his lips, and the gold steal from his hair. The life that was to make his soul would mar his body. (27)

In the flash, Dorian ages the portrait in his mind, wiping away his features in a mirror of his future, much like Lord Henry's description of his withered body. But the image he narrates away is apparently permanent. The painting will stay the same forever. This leads Dorian to articulate the wish, "'If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! . . . I would give my soul for

[21] This final injunction echoes another Henry (James), in his oft-cited advice to the novelist ("The Art of Fiction," 1884).

that!'" (28). Dorian does not want life. He wants to deny the passage of time, so that he, like the portrait, "'will never be older than this particular day of June'" (28). He wants to abjure linear time that that pushes him ever further from himself: "'Every moment that passes takes something from me, and gives something to it [the portrait]'"(28). To become what Lord Henry promises, the type of a New Hedonism, an aesthetic model must trade places with the portrait, borrowing the apparent eternity of art and letting the painting decay in his stead.

The fact that Dorian's wish comes true turns *Dorian Gray* into a fantastic novel. For the most part, the book follows realist narrative conventions of omniscience and description. Wilde's additions of twists in time and the unexplainable fantastic plot device mark the mixture of fiction and reality. Any explanation of the mechanism that grants Dorian's wish is curiously absent. His articulation of the desire is merely enough. The granting of Dorian's wish goes back to Dorian's amazement at the power of Lord Henry's words:[22]

> Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them! They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things, and to have a music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of lute. Mere words! Was there anything so real as words? (22)[23]

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[22] This is an effect that Lord Henry himself recognizes: "He was amazed at the sudden impression that his words had produced, and, remembering a book that he had read when he was sixteen, a book which had revealed to him much that he had not known before, he wondered whether Dorian Gray was passing through a similar experience" (22). But Dorian does not "pass through," he is stuck in this experience until the end.

[23] As Shakespeare is an acknowledged relative of *Dorian Gray*, we can see here that Wilde plays a variation on Hamlet's remark to Polonius on what he is reading: "Words, words, words" (II.ii.193). Where Hamlet, acting his madness, deflates the importance of words, Dorian feels how "mere words" can actually give life to something. But Hamlet also knows, in his manipulation of Claudius' death sentence, that words

Life imitates art; mere words have a real effect. While it could be claimed that Lord Henry authors Dorian's wish as well as its fulfillment, this would be much too productive a role for him, the subtle spectator and passive observer of life. It is rather a flourish of Wilde's pen, a wink to the reader that we are in the realm of fiction. But this wink is not a mere cue for the reader to suspend disbelief; it is Wilde's sincere acknowledgement of the power of words, the reality they have. Therefore, Wilde shows, the novel's most salient mark of its fictional status is in fact a mark of reality—reality determined by artistic fantasy.

Wilde paradoxically ties together fantasy and reality. Dorian's transformation is an effect of writing, an exploration of Wilde's theories of the conjunction of art and life. The fantastical aspect of Wilde's novel actually links it to the Modernist innovations to come, if we look at the fantasy as a metafictional device. By attaching this literary history to Wilde's aesthetic theories about the relation of life and art we see that Wilde is out to prove that narration defines consciousness. With Dorian's strange pact, the importance of form is confirmed and the novel becomes a reflection on fiction and language, turning in on itself like a paradox around the empty point of Dorian. Just like Dorian, the reader of *Dorian Gray* is an after-effect of art.

The Poles of Paradox, Part II: Repetition

Dorian Gray takes its strange composite form of reality and fantasy from the attempt to resolve timelessness and development, art and life, into one story. The main development in Dorian's life is this particular day in June, listening to Lord Henry and watching Basil. When he tells Lord Henry that he would have objected to being

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can give death. Dorian moves from "cruel" to "sweet," without looking back. Wilde wants to punish his characters for their constant oversight of the implicit violence.

reprimanded for his youth "'this morning,'" Lord Henry replies, "'Ah! This morning! You have lived since then.'" (30). Life, as the passage of time and the development or realization of the individual, halts here for Dorian. Whatever else happens is an aftershock, the echoes of this experience playing out in what becomes a life devoid of privileged moments—devoid of time, and finally, devoid of life. Each episode in the remainder of the novel is a repetition of this earlier moment, the reversal of priority of life and art. Under the influence of art, Dorian's life is completely prefigured and therefore does not need to be lived from one moment to the next. Like the hero of the poisonous book, Dorian's life becomes a summing up, a retrospective view even in the present.

Dorian only realizes that his wish to change places with his portrait is granted after the fact, as a result of what could be called a first experiment for Dorian the newly crowned Aesthete: his affair with the actress Sybil Vane. Sybil Vane is an ideal love for Dorian because, as he tells Lord Henry, "'She is all the great heroines of the world in one. She is more than an individual'" (54). He falls in love with the part(s) not the person. However, when he crosses the line between art and life and kisses Sybil, the spell is broken. Sybil chooses life over art and loses her talent as an actress. When Dorian confronts her with what he sees as her failure, she tells Dorian, "'You taught me what reality really is'": "'You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection'" (84). If Sybil really accedes to reality, it is only as another delayed effect of Dorian's. His rebuke of her leads her to commit suicide. Sybil is the first to discover that at the limits of life and art is death.

Before Dorian knows of her death, however, he sees a change in the painting. At first this leads him to the ethical decision to gauge his actions by the effect on the painting. The paintings catalog of Dorian's actions would be the one attempt at plotting out a chronological narrative, to represent duration. The painting would then be Dorian's externalized conscience, separated from himself in order to read his actions and judge them. But the novel quickly swerves away from this moral possibility of narrative. Lord Henry comes in handily to teach Dorian to take Sybil's death from the aesthetic point of view. He convinces Dorian to become a spectator of his own life, to judge events for their beauty and form rather than their consequences. The only way to experience chronological time is paradoxically from a distance, once time has already passed. Sybil Vane's death, Lord Henry points out, is not real; rather, her suicide was her greatest role, an effect of her art. Once the moment has passed, it can be understood and judged:

> "Sometimes, however, a tragedy that possesses artistic elements of beauty crosses our lives. If these elements of beauty are real, the whole thing simply appeals to our sense of dramatic effect. Suddenly we find that we are no long the actors, but the spectators of the play. Or rather we are both. We watch ourselves, and the mere wonder of the spectacle enthralls us" (98).

Lord Henry shows Dorian that the beautiful aptitude of his love affair with Sibyl lies in her death. Artistic quality comes from finite structure. What really constitutes a beautiful experience for Henry is that it has an end. Henry bemoans the common love affair, where women "'always insisted on living on, long after I had ceased to care for them, or they to care for me'" (98). A marriage would not be beautiful since it ostensibly continues, that is

why the marriage is typically the end of a story. Lord Henry's comment relates to the novel as marriage plot by explaining why the aesthetic interest ends once the couple comes together. After the consummation, time seemingly reverts to its typical succession. He admits, "Of course, now and then things linger" (98). But the beautiful romances all die. This is the most mortifying presage of Dorian's fate: the work of art cannot survive itself. Transcendence (what Lord Henry calls "being in love with love") actually is death.

Still the very quality that makes Dorian's tragic fling beautiful—its end—also makes it available for vicious repetition. Lord Henry explains near the end of the book that "'romance lives by repetition, and repetition converts an appetite into an art'" (188). As Dorian learns, "the secret of life is to reproduce that experience as often as possible" (188). However, the repetition soon overtakes control, and Dorian becomes the victim. Instead of simple duration, the time that takes over the novel is unintentional repetition after the fact: not a controlled mastery of life through art, but an unconscious imitation in life of the forms of art. Art is repeatable; this is one of the pleasures Wilde extols. But in *Dorian Gray*, we find that when art appears again it returns with the unassimilated past.

The Sybil Vane subplot serves two purposes: on the surface level, it gives Dorian a heteronormative love interest—therefore a typical plot device—even though this love is a dead end. *Dorian Gray* thus incorporates into its plot structure the forward moving love story, if only to neutralize it immediately. Next, on the formal level, Dorian's love for Sybil Vane confronts him with the time of drama and performance, another art form in Wilde's catalog. Performance is seemingly unique, but the actress takes on that important aesthetic property of containing within herself the multiple possibilities of art. Dorian

rejects Sybil because she chooses him as a unique instance of love over the repetition inherent in playing the great heroines of drama every night on stage.

Repetition is still a threat for Dorian however. It turns out that Lord Henry's cathartic spectatorship might not be quite so simple. Dorian confronts the temporal ambivalence of the past and its inevitable return as he tries to hide the painting and forget about its change. He decides to "wrap the dreadful thing" in an heirloom "pall for the dead" (115), linking the decaying portrait with the decomposition of a corpse: "The pall would hide something that had a corruption of its own, worse than the corruption of death itself—something that would breed horrors and yet would never die" (115). If Dorian has gained art's immortality in his real life while transferring all human decay onto the painting, then indeed the degeneration of the portrait will be never ending. He realizes now that "the thing would still live on. It would be always alive" (115). But it will also be eternally dying. The portrait, now associated with death, becomes the figure for the returning past. If art earns its charm from its finitude (its possibility of death), this also allows it to live on in memory, to return to be reviewed, for pleasure or, as in this case, for pain.

Dorian wants to use the portrait's retention of the consequence of his actions as a way to "annihilate" his past. In a Wildean reversal, the desire for no past is really a desire for no future, for self-annihilation. The projection of conscience onto the portrait becomes a separation from it. The painting is now a container for the sins of Dorian's life so that he may remain a beautiful living form. In fact, the painting actually takes on the content of Dorian's life, while he remains only a formal presence, as Basil insists—to the

extent that, after the Sybil Vane interlude, the reader is given fewer and fewer details about what Dorian is up to when he "sins."

Dorian cannot decide between these two interpretations of "the past is past," between complete oblivion or mastered repetition. A third choice, the possibility (or inevitability?) of the past returning, causes him anxiety and makes him take great precautions to hide the painting from view. This paranoia of discovery is first announced paradoxically by Basil's fear of showing himself to the world through his portrait of Dorian—effectively showing his adoration for the young man. Dorian too begins to fear discovery after the investigation into Sybil's death turns up his name. Dorian finally settles into this paranoia when he begins to lead multiple lives of dissolute pleasure and the threat of someone seeing his deformed painting leads him to shroud his actions as well in secrecy.

Beneath Dorian's attempts to master the past spatially by containing the painting in a locked room is in fact a confrontation with the unwanted return of the past. He takes his earlier suggestion to hide the painting, in his old schoolroom at the "top of the house" (116).[24] When Dorian enters the room ahead of the men he hired to move the painting without looking at it, the past floods in on him at once: "How well he remembered it all! Every moment of his lonely childhood came back to him as he looked around" (118). The past once again cannot be contained. The most important aspect of this return of memory is its instantaneous revisitation, replaying in miniature the condensation of the narrative

[24] As a topographical model of the psyche (warranted because so much of this novel's plot is involved in the mapping of projections on the surrounding world), it is important that this room be at the top, rather than at the bottom, where a rudimentary understanding might place what one wishes to represses (sinful, sensuous urges). Dorian's painting belongs to a higher realm; it is the externalization of conscience. He is not trying to forget his sins but rather the record of them. However, in an overdetermination characteristic of Wilde's paradoxical style, the room at the top of the house is also the place of his childhood—again the area one might place on the ground floor, bolstering up everything to come.

of development into the moment of a painting that forms the plotline of *Dorian Gray*. The novel's paradoxical form is an allegory of the working of memory: its successive recording and instant return. The involuntary return of memory prefigures Dorian's deadly end. The portrait will reverse the effects of time—the pastness of the past—in a moment, just as it reverses the direction of Dorian's action: in his last confrontation with his image, everything he has done will be instantaneously done to him.

Action and Linear Time

The two major actions in *Dorian Gray*, which are the only directly represented plot devices and which have been well foreshadowed by the retroactive time of the novel once they finally take place, are Dorian's murder of Basil and his subsequent self-murder. These two actions are also the necessary consequences of Dorian's exchange of life for art, for they uncover the real desire behind Dorian's wish: his desire for his death. Dorian thinks that by killing Basil, the painter of his portrait, he will become his own creator. On the surface, this murder is motivated by a wish to eliminate the consequences of his actions that the painting depicts, so that he may reside in pure and beautiful timelessness. Instead, the murdered Basil becomes a "thing," an object just like the painting. Previous to the murder, Dorian's things stand in for his life; like the painting, they collect his life and preserve it. After the murder, the same ethical power of conscience that the painting embodies is unleashed into every other thing in the novel, starting with Basil's dead body. When Dorian walks downstairs after killing Basil, we read that "the woodwork creaked, and seemed to cry out as if in pain." (153). It takes Dorian a moment to realize that the stairs are not echoing Basil's death groan and that his interpretation of the sound is just another projection of his guilt. Dorian now learns that one cannot make art into life

through an effort of will and mastery. Art determines life in a way that is out of our control.

The narrator presents with irony Dorian's takeover of every object around him, starting with his painting and ending in his obsessive collections of perfumes, stones, and clothes. In Dorian's artistic contemplation is an allegory of the narcissistic work of projection that goes into our enjoyment of art, robbing others and things of their individuality as they are co-opted in one's own delusional drama. But as usual, Wilde reverses this process: the things make Dorian Gray, not the other way around. Rather than an idealism that sees the world as a projection of the subject, we get a materialism that sees the subject as a projection of surrounding objects. This is why Wilde typically shows us Dorian's things instead of him. However, as Nunokawa shows, Dorian's things, just as much as him, are bound to their own destruction: "The ephemerality of individual desires heralded in *Dorian Gray* can thus be read as the subjective correlative of the obsolescence built into the objects that the dandy prefers above all others" (*Tame Passions* 84). Dorian is still blind to the self-destructive desire that aestheticism articulates, even though he acts it out perfectly.

Nevertheless, Dorian's construction out of objects—his artistic identification—can carry ethical import. If Wilde gives us any kind of ethics, it is as a subgenre of aesthetics, which must always be understood as a direct practical guide for the way we lead our lives. It may seem that when the painting returns to its original beauty and Dorian's dead body becomes "withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage" (213), art secures its immortal triumph. That Dorian is only recognizable in the end by his rings, i.e. his things, throws a curve into this by robbing him finally of the much treasured

individuality he was at pains to develop. If Dorian's development is really static, one could blame this on his accumulation of things, whether they be delectable experiences or perfumes.

In fact, the two murders—of Basil and of Dorian by himself— mark the intertwining of the aesthetic and ethical plots. Wilde does not merely try to escape Victorian moralism, but also to encompass it in his aesthetic plot, so that morality is a side-effect of art. On the one hand, there is no way to avoid the ethical question when thinking of Dorian's murder of Basil and the punishment that ultimately takes its toll on him when he stabs his portrait. On the other hand, Wilde cleverly writes the ethical question into the thematic content of the novel. The night of the murder, Basil comes to Dorian to moralize, to make sure Dorian has not actually lived the way he is rumored to live. Dorian decides to show him the painting as a way to burden the artist with some of his own guilt. When he kills Basil, Dorian, like Wilde, attacks bland moralism.

Basil's murder proves that the painting brings an insistence on time not an escape from it. In a characteristic move, Dorian refers to the painting as a written text that Basil will have to read: "'I keep a diary of my life from day to day, and it never leaves the room in which it is written . . . You will not have to read long'" (147). Again, painting and writing are crossed in terms of their temporal aspects. The painting sums up a successive experience in a moment; but now, instead of the beautiful potential of Dorian, it contains the record of passing time, spring-like and ready to uncoil. In fact, I would argue, the painting kills Basil just as it kills Dorian—Dorian is only a temporary agent for the painting when he stabs Basil.

Dorian hopes to annihilate the past even though he knows from Lord Henry that "things linger." Aesthetics and ethics coincide in their temporal property of inevitable repetition. Wilde does not so much resolve the assumed discrepancy between art and morality; he instead shows their co-dependence. This connection of aesthetics and ethics only complicates matters however. If we follow Dorian's thinking after Basil's murder, we see the real aesthetic idea of Wilde's novel, which demonstrates life's imitation of art as an unconscious repetition—a return of time. But before the return of time, Wilde provides a short interlude of linear time. Dorian's crisis of conscience propels him momentarily back into the typical mode of passing time. The depths of ennui, Dorian discovers, consist of the practicalities of dealing with death.

We have traced two strange alterations of chronological time that are at play in the novel. First is the freezing of time through Dorian's wish. Some part of time stands still, and thus stands in the way of Dorian's development, his ability to be a typical Bildungsroman hero. Second is the retroactive quality of time. This time comes at the level of narrative, where the narrator hints at a knowledge not yet available to the reader, but which changes the whole aspect of the novel when understood.[25] But retroactivity also happens at the level of story: for example, when Dorian walks into the schoolroom and his past washes over him, or finally, when Dorian's sinful actions catch up to him all at once as he pierces the painting with his knife—and dies. This is the function of time at the beginning of Chapter XIV, when Dorian gets rid of Basil's body: "Gradually the

[25] This is the form of the "open secret," or the "glass closet," as Sedgwick defines it: a performative creation of knowledge that exists only in the hint of its existence and that flattens out into the mundane when finally announced. In E.S. Burt's reading of this structure in Wilde, the secret is always connected to "violent death," turning language into a weapon that privileges form over content (*Regard for the Other* 186) The violence, she notes, quickly turns back on the keeper of the secret as soon as content is provided. This explains the uncontrollable dissemination of death (and potential meaning) in *Dorian Gray* unleashed by the transitive relation Dorian maintains with all objects as artworks.

events of the preceding night crept with silent bloodstained feet into his brain, and reconstructed themselves there with terrible distinctness" (155). Dorian is in his normal mode: time is not linear, but somehow backwards. Suddenly, however, the narrator begins to mark the time as it passes and we learn that ethical time is linear time. Dorian falls into an obsessive contemplation of his horrible act and decides that he needs something to rid his conscience of it.

While he waits for Alan Campbell to make Basil's corpse disappear, Dorian begins to reflect on the actual passing of time. Waiting is too much for him to handle:

> The suspense became unbearable. Time seemed to him to be crawling with feet of led, while he by monstrous winds was being swept towards the jagged edge of some black cleft of precipice . . . Then, suddenly, Time stopped for him. Yes: that blind, slow-breathing thing crawled no more, and horrible thoughts, Time being dead, raced numbly on in front, and dragged a hideous future from its grave, and showed it to him. He stared at it. Its very horror made him stone. (159)

Dorian's merely momentary crisis of conscience comes bound intimately with an experience of time. His horrible thought, that time is dead, is in fact what he wished for: time's death and his eternal youth. But somehow time's death propels him into a future, also dead: and he freezes, time stops again. What sense can be made of this time fantasy Dorian has? Is he actually on to something here, drawing out the eventual horror of his predicament? Whenever the narrator marks time within the narrative it is not in the typical sense of ordered time but instead as a presage of Dorian's untimely end, the true content of Dorian's wish to enter the realm of art.

Passing time breaks the spell of the aesthetic novel. Wilde exposes the novel's structure as he delves into vulgar details: while Dorian waits for Alan Campbell to dissolve Basil's corpse. They sit together, waiting for Alan's lab equipment: "For nearly twenty minutes, neither of the men spoke. A fly buzzed noisily about the room, and the ticking of the clock was like the beat of a hammer" (164). But this dragging feeling of time is magically swept away when Alan goes into the schoolroom to take care of Basil's body, "the silent thing . . . stretched across the table" (165). The narrative gives us a gap of hours from the moment Alan locks the door to the room until "long after seven when Campbell came back into the library" (166). Dorian regains his erasure of all but the pleasurable moments, at least for the time being.

Time of Return (Return of Time)

Through Dorian's torment after murdering Basil, Wilde implicitly constructs an aesthetics of ethics. The plague of conscience is its remorselessness, its potential to repeat its claims. Dorian realizes: "Each man lived his own life, and paid his own price for living it. The only pity was one had to pay so often for a single fault. One had to pay over and over again, indeed. In her dealings with man Destiny never closed her accounts" (181). The narration goes on—whether as part of Dorian's train of thought or as a comment on it is ambiguous—to explain the loss of "freedom of . . . will" through instincts and impulses. We have no control over our actions when we have "passion for sin": "conscience is either killed, or, if it lives at all, lives but to give rebellion its fascination, and disobedience its charm" (181). In other words, pleasure relies on the conscience for its pique. If we extrapolate, then, aesthetics and ethics are in a differential

relation, formed along the lines of judgment. The pleasure of art depends on its deviation from ethical propriety.

The same repetitive effect that Dorian finds in paying for one's sins Lord Henry locates in the effects of the senses in particular, and in art, in general:

> 'You may fancy yourself safe, and think yourself strong. But a chance tone of colour in a room or a morning sky, a particular perfume that you had once loved and that brings subtle memories with it, a line from a forgotten poem that you had come across again, a cadence from a piece of music that you had ceased to play – I tell you, Dorian that it is on things like these that our lives depend . . . There are moments when the odour of *lilas blanc* passes suddenly across me, and I have to live the strangest month of my life over again.' (206-7)

The experience Lord Henry describes, "to live life over again," shows us that we are controlled by our sense of time in a series of repetitions of recognizable moments. The retroactive time of Wilde's novel is not merely the temporal effect that art has on life; it is the time of life itself, which we only know through our descriptions of it. The core realization, both ethically and aesthetically, is that "'Life is not governed by will or intention. Life is a question of nerves, and fibres, and slowly built-up cells in which thought hides itself and passion has its dreams" (206). Both aesthetics and ethics, in Wilde's vision, are attempts to deal with absence of control over life, which is most evident in our relation to time in its inevitable passing and its inescapable, if delayed, effects: "Actual life was chaos, but there was something terribly logical in the imagination . . . It was the imagination that made each crime bear its misshapen brood. In

the common world of fact the wicked were not punished, nor the good rewarded" (191). In life there is no consequence, but in art there is. This gives the lie to Dorian's attempt to escape succession through art. Only through art, Wilde shows, do we get a vision of a plot that makes sense of our lives. In *Dorian Gray*, Wilde radically evacuates the sense of the plot by leaving its mechanism (the wish) unexplainable, by moving over large sections of time without description except of Dorian's collection, and by eliminating the logical order of time's effects. Most importantly, however, this delineation of life and imagination portrays ethical thinking as a side effect of art. Actions, plots, and passing time only have meaning and can only be judged when given narrative form.

Dorian becomes enmeshed in this line of thinking that combines aesthetics and ethics, on his way to stabbing the painting. He complains to Lord Henry about the influence of the poisonous book on his life and Lord Henry rebukes him for "moralizing": "'Art has no influence upon action,'" he tells Dorian, "'It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame.'" (208). Lord Henry echoes Wilde's claims in the preface by claiming that what one finds in a work of art is really what one brings to it in the first place. But we may also judge Lord Henry's words according to the experiment of *Dorian Gray*: if Wilde was indicting action and plot in his fantastically real novel, he was also showing that art in fact does and can influence action. The mirroring effect that Lord Henry depicts covers over the real influence of art on life: the mistaking of one for the other that we all, like Dorian, perform in our aesthetic enjoyment, such as identifying with the characters of a novel. The real claim that Wilde puts forth is that this influence, this action, is not under our control. It is unconscious and its effects may be delayed and

therefore untraceable. This is why the one to one correspondence of aesthetics and ethics must be abjured. But more shockingly, Wilde shows that the ultimate influence that art has on life is the drive towards death that Dorian finally realizes. The moral judgment that condemns Dorian to death covers over the aesthetic pleasure, a real enjoyment, that leads him to his death in the first place.

Dorian stabs the painting to rid himself of conscience as well as to rid himself of art. The joke is that trying to excise aesthetics or ethics from life is literally death. In Wilde's world, aesthetics swallows up ethics. Moral judgment is a subspecies of artistic judgment. The work of art, on the model of Dorian's portrait, is an externalization of conscience. We feel shame for the pleasure we take in it, the pleasure that carries with it our desire for death. The aestheticization of conscience shows that ethics is just another way of reading the world.

However, the alignment of aesthetics and ethics at the end is just another mark of the novel's indecision, of its ambivalent commitment to the paradox it seeks to form in its narration. Is the novel a story of development or of inertia? Wilde wants it both ways: Lord Henry's philosophy places emphasis on development and self-realization, but Dorian's misreading of this aesthetics causes a freezing of time.

In the end, Dorian's past comes back to haunt him—and so does Wilde's paradox of life and art. Dorian's final action is as barbaric as a Victorian critic. He blames his painting for his problems. Picking up the same knife with which he killed Basil, he thinks

> As it had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter's work, and all that that meant. It would kill the past, and when that was dead he would be

> free. It would kill this monstrous soul-life, and with its hideous warnings, he would be at peace. (212)

Still, there is a slight difference here between Dorian and the ignorant critic, since Dorian at least acknowledges that with his hand he aims to "kill." The critic instead imputes moral deviancy to the work of art and its author and covers up his own ill intentions. Dorian is punishing the painting for "its hideous warnings." He does try to escape responsibility, not for his actions, but rather for the burden of conscience. Thus, just as the naïve identification of reading is inevitable, so are the conscience-pricking claims one can extrapolate from the work. There is no escaping this narcissistic takeover of the text, it gives us an interest in reading. In the end, the subject's position must remain blind, for each person is not the author of his or her life, but the protagonist, under an anonymous and invisible control.

The final view of Dorian does not undo the confusion of subject and object that this allegory of the pathetic fallacy entwines for us. Dorian is not free even in death, for he exists only contiguously through the things he collects—and he survives only as a memory in the portrait. The rushing back of the effects of time when he stabs the portrait, straightening out the narrative ripples, amounts to a crushing of Dorian under the sheer weight of his accumulation. What Wilde teaches us through Dorian's example is that the object has mastery over the subject, not the other way round. Dorian only becomes who he is through his relationship with art. Art personifies Dorian. His fallacy is to believe that the poisonous book predicts him as in some kind of fate. Like Lord Henry's maxims, he takes the text as a suggestion, a guide to action. When Dorian stabs the painting, he does not secure his freedom as he hopes. Instead he relegates the painting to the same

role as the poisonous book, a sort of fateful description. No longer is he the interpreter of the moral warnings of the painting; they are now written in his body, causing his death.

The critical reaction to *Dorian Gray*, which not only brought welcomed publicity to Wilde's novel, also enacts the theoretical implications of Wilde's writing. We can plug it back into his preface as a reformulation of Matthew Arnold's famous definition of culture as "the best that has been said and thought" as another meta-discourse: art, for Wilde, is that *about which* the best has been said and thought. The "best," from Arnold to Wilde, changes its moral valence, no longer implying ethical superiority but a critical commitment to rethinking and rewriting—just as in the Preface, Wilde plays with the ethical and aesthetic ambiguity of the word "good."Wilde goes on to claim in the Preface, "Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital. // When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself" (4). Wilde equates critical disagreement with the life of the work. And the life of the work of art, as we have shown through Wilde's paradoxical employment of time in his narrative, is discontinuous, characterized by gaps and subsequent attempts to smooth them over. Life, like literary history, is repetitive in its reformulations, its attempts to sum up through representative moments. Life is what comes after art, as an interpretation follows a text. Though they seem to exist simultaneously in a mutually explanatory relation, life can only be seen—made visible like Dorian in his painting—through the prism of art.

The return of time prefigures Dorian's momentous death, but also prefigures a major concern in the Modernist novel. At the late stage in the history of the novel, the ethical objection that the literary form has the tendency to distort readers' perception of the world and influence their action has become a *fait accompli*. The history of the novel

can be read as an attempt to trace its influence on reality, where Wilde ushers in a final stage of reflexivity that empties out all content in order to more explicitly thematize our attempts to control our lives through the meaning making (or interpretation) involved in our relation to art. The novel manipulates our sense of time, as Wilde shows, and promises us the impossible standpoint of retrospection that characterizes narrative and its third person past tense. The novel allows us to anticipate this end and escape the singularity and emptiness of the present moment.

Wilde's experiment is not a secularization of final judgment, or conversely an inauguration of a religion of art that promises its own sensual immortality, though Wilde self-consciously displays for us the way the novel manipulates our sense of fate in face of the unexplainable and coincidental facts of life. Wilde begins the formalization of the novel that we will trace through the works of Gide, Strachey, and Woolf, by cutting to the chase, hurtling us on to death without plot. Wilde acknowledges that the pleasure we derive from art is the false sense of mastery over our mortal condition that it gives, which only covers over the inevitable return of time upon us in the form of death. Like Dorian, we read because we have a drive to get on to the end, to short circuit the plot and know it all already. But at this moment, paradoxically, there is nothing; control is wrested from us. Gide, Strachey, and Woolf pick up on the allegory of death that Wilde plots out in *Dorian Gray* and make it the very principle of their writing lives.

III. Gide, Death and the Unexplainable End of the Novel

Death is not the end

Gide's only novel, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, ends with a bang—almost: little Boris, the troubled illegitimate grandson of the piano teacher La Pérouse, shoots himself in the head in front of the classroom as an initiation ritual forced upon him by a group of his pernicious classmates. But this tragedy does not simply die out. As with every event in Gide's novel, the question of how to represent it—or whether such an inexplicable event can be represented—subsumes the act itself. Édouard, the novelist in *Les Faux Monnayeurs* who is writing his own *Faux-Monnayeurs*, comments on Boris's death as it relates to his own novel:

> Without exactly pretending to explain anything, I should not like to put forward any fact which was not accounted for by a sufficiency of motive. And for that reason I shall not make use of little Boris's suicide for my *Counterfeiters*; I have too much difficulty in understanding it. And then, I dislike police court items [*"faits divers"*]. There is something peremptory, irrefutable, brutal, outrageously real about them. . . . I accept reality coming as a proof in support of my thought, but not as preceding it. (394)

Édouard's hesitation centers on the difficulty in "understanding" or "explaining" this act without apparent "motive." In the 19th-century, the *fait divers*, or short newspaper item about a notable but random act, had a particular literary value as a "real" source for novelistic ideas outside of the life of the writer. The irony here is that though Édouard dislikes *faits divers*, Gide had a vast collection of newspaper clippings and Boris's death

indeed derived from a story he read just after the turn of the century.[1] The idea took some time to percolate but it was one of the important seeds of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, along with the story about a gang of adolescents passing counterfeit money. Though there are clear distinctions between Gide and his novelistic avatar, Édouard's comments raise the question of why Gide makes a different decision than Édouard and uses this "outrageously real" event in his own novel. Gide wants to have it both ways: he simultaneously represents and refuses to represent reality (in the form of Boris's death). This paradox provides the theme as well as the structure of both authors' novels: the opposition of reality and the representation we make of it.

The critic Alain Goulet offers a biographical reading of Boris's suicide by placing Boris in a chain of similar suicides that occur in Gide's work, including his autobiography, *Si le grain ne meurt*, and his dialogues defending homosexuality, *Corydon*. All of these figures, Goulet claims, lead back to an early friend of Gide's who ended up killing himself because he could not come to terms with his homosexuality. Gide's public defense of homosexuality stems, in Goulet's view, at least in part from Gide's bad conscience concerning this friend's death. But Goulet's interpretation of Boris as a "*victime expiatoire*" (65) mistakenly places emphasis on the potential redemption that Gide would seek by atoning for his friend's death rather than the tragedy of his sacrifice, which is precisely what Gide calls attention to. Instead, I would suggest, Boris's death shows the limit to what narrative can explain, since his too real death has no apparent motivation.

[1] For an thorough quantitative analysis of Gide's collection see Elizabeth R. Jackson's "André Gide's Collection of 'Faits Divers'" The actually clippings that Gide pulled from have been appended to Dorothy Bussy's translation of *The Counterfeiters*.

The overriding tension Gide examines in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* occurs between the attempt of self-narration—to master past, present, and future in an instant like a character in a book—and the unexplainable event that cannot be redeemed by narrative or meaning. The beginning of Gide's thinking of this issue may indeed be traced to a biographical instance, to Gide's friendship with the fallen Aesthete, Oscar Wilde. While critics, taking the cue from Gide himself in his tribute to Wilde, *In Memoriam* (1901), and his autobiography *Si le grain ne meurt* (1926), have focused on Wilde's influence on Gide's sexual awakening and his subsequent work to openly defend homosexuality, I will suggest that Wilde provides Gide with a similarly radical aesthetic challenge. Wilde's commitment to an artistic life and his untimely downfall and death are the seed for Gide's grappling with the conventions of the novel form as a way to represent life and influence life with its representation. I will situate Gide's involvement in this literary process historically as Gide's way to work out unresolved issues from Wilde's brand of aestheticism. Wilde's paradoxical claim that life imitates art casts a shadow over Gide's entire *oeuvre,* in his formal experiments with *mise en abyme* and his theorization of the *acte gratuit*, finally culminating in his only novel, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (1925), where Gide undertakes his most extensive reflection on the intrication of art and life.

Wilde's life posed the same challenge for Gide that Boris's death does in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*. Even when Wilde's own drama turned *affreux* like Boris's, he went headlong into his fate. What struck Gide when he crossed paths with Wilde in 1895, soon before Wilde's trial for gross indecency, was the aesthete's seeming knowledge of his impending fate. Gide had warned him against the catastrophe that awaited him if he returned to London, but Wilde in a kind of *amor fati* tried to present it as a combination

of his own will and destiny: "'I must go as far as possible,'" he tells Gide, "'Something has to happen, something else. . . . '" (146).[2] Wilde moves forward into an ambiguously known unknown future, but Gide realized that these traditional narrative contours were too simple to capture the play of fate and chance between life and art.

Édouard's reason for excluding Boris's death from his book—that it precedes rather than supports his thought—reiterates a principle that Gide claims to have taken from Wilde, which reiterates this paradox between art and life: "I stick to Wilde's paradox: nature imitates art [*la nature imite l'art*]. The artist's rule should be never to restrict himself to what nature proposes, but to propose nothing to nature but what nature can and should shortly imitate" (416 translation modified). Gide uses Wilde's paradox to question the possibility of representation and non-representation in the novel, circling around the contiguous realms of sex and death. Gide takes apart the novel and puts it back together again in order to exhaust the genre that figures most clearly the importation of literary conventions into an understanding of reality. In other words, the novel shows us that reality is a side-effect of literature. In Gide's writing, Wilde becomes a cipher for the struggle between life and art, between the unknown, inconsequential, unexplainable, and the beautiful, formed, narrated.

The First Person

The story of Gide and Wilde's relationship typically centers on the important influence Wilde had on Gide's homosexual awakening, as Gide describes it in his

[2] The English translation prioritizes Wilde's "I" in facing his fate, which is more ambiguous in Gide's French: "'*Il faut que j'aille aussi loin que possible . . . Il faut qu'il arrive quelque chose… quelque chose d'autre…*'" (33). Wilde is placed impersonally in the syntax of the sentence, only to be taken over by an "other" at the end.

autobiography, *Si le grain ne meurt*.[3] But, I would argue, the importance of Wilde's literary influence rounds out the personal influence he had in helping Gide "come out," not as a project of stable identification but as a mobilization of plural identities through art. Perhaps the most important personal encounter Gide had with Wilde came in 1895, right before Wilde's trials. The two men met in Biskra—Gide's beloved sensual haunt in Algeria. After sitting together in a café watching a young Arab boy, Mohammed, play flute, Wilde asked Gide if he wanted the young musician. Gide managed to answer yes. Gide fits this event into the internal drama he was living. Gide's night with Mohammed was not his first homosexual encounter, but it was the event that made Gide realize he had "already triumphed in my imagination and my thoughts over all my scruples" (286). Though Gide's retroactive understanding might seem to bypass Wilde's role, this delayed reaction of self-formation is in fact the structure of influence that Gide learns from Wilde. In Gide's telling, Wilde stands in for the devil, for the influence of evil compared to Gide's image of moral rectitude, and the consequences of Wilde's influence became the measuring point for Gide's future search for pleasure: "Every time since then that I have sought after pleasure, it is the memory of that night I have pursued" (288).[4]

Soon after Gide's awakening, however, Wilde was convicted for gross indecency and sentenced to two years hard labor. After Wilde's release from prison in 1897, the two

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[3] For a version that compiles sources from both Wilde and Gide, see Jonathan Fryer's *André & Oscar*.

[4] The translation misses a grammatical nuance in Gide's narration: "*Depuis, chaque fois que j'ai cherché le plaisir, ce fut courir après le souvenir de cette nuit*" (342). Lucey's interpretation of this sentence in *Gide's Bent* uncovers the *Nachträglich* structure of Gide's attempt to account for his sexual awakening: "Before we get to the event, we are already past it" (33). Lucey's reading of Gide ingeniously traces the intertwining of Gide's sexuality with his writing (whether grammatically or narratologically). I will shift the emphasis from the retrospective glance Lucey points to in Gide's attempt to fix a primal beginning point, instead to Gide's attempt to anticipate reotroactivity and greet the future with a novelist's explaining power. As Lucey notes, Gide's orientalization of the young Arab boys he meets simultaneously place them in a place of "nature" and reveal Gide's literary embellishment. The power politics behind Gide's sexual adventures reveals Gide's search for a narrative account for life in the present.

men met again in France, and Wilde made an important critique of Gide's sincerity in his penchant for confessional writing. Gide sought Wilde out in Berneval where he was staying in order to spend an evening with his old friend (somewhat out of guilty feelings for Wilde's tragedy). At the end of the night, Wilde took his leave from Gide with a comment on the recently published *Nourritures terrestres*: "'Listen, dear,'" Wilde says, "'now you must promise me something. *Fruits of the Earth* is fine . . . fine . . . but, dear, promise me: never write "I" again'" (153, translation modified). Gide doesn't seem to understand, so Wilde continues: "'In art, you see, there is no *first* person'" (153). Though Gide didn't strictly take Wilde's advice—he never fully separates himself from the lyrical or confessional "I"—Wilde's comment resonates throughout Gide's work.

In *Never Say I*, Michael Lucey uses this bit of advice (as well as a similar warning Proust made to Gide) to frame a discussion of homosexual first-person narration in terms of the production of identity in the literary market place. Lucey pits Gide's use of "I" against a tradition that goes back at least to Flaubert and that Wilde exemplifies of upholding impersonality in literature. In this literary history, first person narration seems less serious and more popular.[5] Lucey, however, makes the seemingly counterintuitive suggestion that we can read the use of "I" as another formal attempt at literary abstraction. The "I," he claims, can perform "a work of abstraction on the relation between first-person utterances and same-sex sexualities" that allows writers "to say new things, to produce semiotic dynamism within their social world" (23). Lucey shows that the first-person can be just as rigorous as the impersonal narrator in calling "interpretive attention to be paid to the work of abstraction itself, to the very forms and devices in

[5] This history also follows the anti-sentimental trajectory of formalization that Sedgwick outlines in *Epistemology* as a way to avoid representation of homosexual desire.

which and through which the struggle for semiotic dynamism occurs" (23). Lucey's reading of the abstraction of the first person allows us to integrate Gide's confessional mode with his other dominant mode: metafiction or reflexivity. Gide is not a straightforward proponent of sincerity; he is always reflecting on the act of saying "I."

Wilde's rule to avoid "I" picked up on a concern that Gide had already grappled with four years earlier. Gide tries to come to terms with the first person in his 1893 book *Paludes*, a short fiction that satirizes literary endeavor and the seriousness of literary salons, themes that Gide develops further in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* over thirty years later. *Paludes* provides a perfect example of what Lucey calls the abstraction of the "I." Gide's first-person narrator, a forerunner of Édouard, who is writing his own *Paludes*, theorizes about the role of the third person in art. He explains to his pretentious literary friends that his book is "the story of the third person, he of whom one speaks,—who lives in each of us, but dies not when we die" (50). The irony of this statement is that the narrator/writer of *Paludes* writes a first-person novel that ends with him taking the place of the third person, his character, Tityre, the man who is happy living in an empty marshland and who never yearns for anything better. The narrator first thinks he is basing his story on his friend, Richard; then he sees other people make their way into Tityre. By the end, it becomes clear that *Paludes* applies just as well to the narrator himself: his *je* becomes the *on*, the general third person strung through us all—that bit of us that survives our death.

Both Wilde and Gide were concerned with understanding the self—but always at the limit of the self (and of understanding). Lucey's reading of the confessional mode helps us understand Gide's contribution in a manner that goes against the narcissistic formalization that accompanies the codification of homosexuality as a recognizable

identity at the beginning of the 20th century. For both Wilde and Gide, the self is intricately caught up in aesthetic discourse. The abstraction of the "I" through first person writing can also be understood as an attempt to disperse the self, a reversal of the narcissistic structure, where the desire that gets linked to identity becomes a desire for death.[6]

Versions of Narcissus

Wilde and Gide each had their own versions of Narcissus that they developed independently. However, both writers similarly reverse the myth to depict an identity built on otherness that is only recognizable at its limits. After their first meeting in 1891, Gide writes, Wilde presented him with his Narcissus. In Wilde's parable, Narcissus is nothing but a reflection—and as he implies to Gide—the recognition is of an alienated self, a fragment that comes back to you from somewhere else. In Wilde's story, after Narcissus dies, the river reveals that it loved Narcissus because it saw its "waters mirrored in his eyes [*le reflet de mes eaux dans ses yeux*]" (137, 17).[7] Wilde prefaces his retelling of the myth to Gide by revealing his motive: Gide is a good audience because, like Narcissus, he "listens with his *eyes*" (137). Wilde of course was playing off of Gide's obvious impressionability; but the circumstances and the story speak implicitly about the strange and twisted paths of influence. In the river's version of the story, Narcissus matters less than its own reflection. Likewise, what Gide hears with his eyes when Wilde speaks is another version of himself repeated back to him. This predicament Gide

[6] This seeming other side of Narcissism Leo Bersani examines in *The Culture of Redemption* as a movement against the religion of art that makes up for a lack in life. In line with Bersani, I am claiming that under guise of a redemptive aesthetic—the dogma of Aestheticism—Gide along with Wilde is more interested in escaping the supplemental economy that claims art makes up for life, precisely because the seeming loss that characterizes indefinite life is only multiplied in the realm of narrative, and not crowned with univocal meaning.

[7] Wilde published a version of this story, *The Disciple*, as a poem in prose.

represents almost ten years later (thought only two years after Wilde's death) in *L'Immoraliste* (1902) when Michel recognizes his thoughts repeated back to him in Ménalque's ethics. Wilde, the older aesthete, delivered to Gide his own insights. Gide's image of Wilde as a "demoralizer" (*In Memoriam* 145) contributes to the character of Ménalque, who appears both in *Les Nourritures terrestres* (1897) and *L'Immoraliste* (1902). Ménalque is not exactly Wilde—he is also part-Nietzsche—but the weight of his influence on the main characters of both books mirrors the role Wilde played in Gide's life.

Wilde actually did repeat Gide back to himself. Earlier in the year that Wilde told Gide his version of Narcissus, in 1891, Gide wrote his own version of the myth, *Le Traité du Narcisse* before he ever met Wilde. One is tempted to interpret the fact of Gide's text as an uncanny foreshadowing of their momentous meeting. Gide wrote the *Traité* when he was still yearning to be a Symbolist novelist. He depicts Narcissus sitting at the river's edge staring into the water. Narcissus is brought there by the despair of "not being able to see himself": "And Narcissus, who did not doubt that his form existed somewhere, arose and went searching for the desired contours to envelop at last his great soul" (10 my translation). Narcissus wants to see himself whole, to give himself form, so he rests "at the edge of the river of time" (10 my translation). Gide combines the desire to see oneself with the desire to stop time. He plots out the static moment of Narcissus staring into the water along a timeline and then subtly transposes the passing of time into repetition: "Where Narcissus looks is the present. From the most distant future, things, still virtual, hurry towards being; Narcissus sees them, then they pass; they flow into the past. Narcissus soon finds that it's always the same thing" (11-12 my translation). The

discovery Gide depicts is that we desire form as a way to stop time, to make the constant flux of life into a recognizable and repeatable image. But in a footnote on the Symbol near the end of the *Traité*, Gide tells us that there is always a delay in the apprehension of form. He claims that "every phenomenon is the Symbol of a Truth" and these Truths "stay behind the Forms" (21 my translation). It is the duty of each to manifest this truth, but Gide cautions, "one must not recognize it until afterwards" (21 my translation). Recognition after the fact fuels the retroactive process of writing.

Richard Ellmann explores Wilde's influence on Gide by bringing together both writers' retellings of Narcissus with Wilde's paradox of life imitating art. Where Wilde is able to "bridge the divide between art and life," Ellmann claims he allays "the dissatisfaction of Narcissus with a world of images rather than of acts" ("Corydon and Ménalque" 96). In Wilde's theory, Ellmann suggests, "the artist sets forth models of experience which people rush to try out" (96). Gide also wanted to understand art as action, but instead of a causal relation, from art to life, I would point to Gide's attempt, which is very close to Wilde's, to overlay in the relation of life to art two times, anticipation and retrospection. Cause and effect are no longer distinguishable. Art gives models in anticipation, but also offers explanation after the fact. Gide wants to use art to confront the unexplainable—ultimately, death. Art, Gide learned from Wilde, provides a way to get to death, simultaneously to see how we cushion the unexplainable with explanation and to finally push through the inadequacy of explanations, where Gide finally ends up in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*.

Though, as Ellmann points out, Gide had ambivalent feelings towards Wilde, especially in terms of Wilde's literary output, Wilde's actual artistic influence on Gide is

often neglected. Wilde confessed "'the great drama of my life'" to Gide on the eve of his trial: "'I have put all my genius into my life; I have put only my talent into my works'" (*In Memoriam* 145)—and Gide agreed. But his devaluation of Wilde's work masks the deep influence that Wilde's example had on Gide's own literary endeavors. All of Gide's work can be read as a response to Wilde's failure, both his literary failure to produce something new and his personal failure to defend his homosexuality. Ellmann rightly suggests that we look for Wilde in Gide's work not where he obviously is, but where he disappears. Wilde's influence is not merely personal, caught up in the characters who bear resemblance to the real man, but also embedded within the narrative structures that Gide experimented with as he worked his way up to his first and only novel, thirty-four years after the two men first met.

The Debt of the author

From the beginning Wilde was a force of negation in Gide's life: after they met in Paris in 1891, and Gide spent his time following Wilde around, he eventually ripped out his corresponding diary pages. The famous aesthete and homosexual took on a role in Gide's mental struggles between his sexual inclinations and his Protestant upbringing. On December 11 and 12 in his diary, he scrawled "WILDE" across the pages.[8] The word itself sufficed, without any corresponding content. But most interesting is Gide's remark

[8] Gide transposes this act of tearing out pages of the journal at the end of *La Porte étroite* (1909), when Jérôme presents Alissa's journal. When the journal resumes, Alissa echoes Gide's own sentiment in relation to Wilde in terms of her feelings for Jérôme: "Sometimes as I listen to him talking, I seem to be watching myself think. He explains myself to me and discovers me to myself. Should I exist without him? I am only when I am with him . . ." (90). Though *La Porte étroite* is often read as Gide's final working-through of his Protestant upbringing and his *marriage blanc* to Madeleine, I am tempted to see underneath the austere religiousness another attempt by Gide to incorporate his feelings for Wilde and his work into his own writing. In his biography, Sheridan sums up the psychobiographical debate: while Justin O'Brien claims that Alissa is Gide, Sheridan claims that Alissa is what Madeleine might have become (230-1). O'Brien might be right, but only to the extent that we see Jérôme, the narrator, as one more of Gide's versions of Wilde in the negating effect he has on Alissa and her prose.

in a letter to Valéry: "since Wilde I hardly exist at all" (24 December 1891; in Fryer, 32-33). Earlier that month, Gide explained to Valéry, "Wilde contrives piously to kill what was left to me of soul, because he says that to know an essence, one must suppress it . . . The effort to destroy a thing takes its measure. Everything constitutes itself only by being rendered void [*Toute chose ne se constitue que de son vide*]" ([4 December 1891] in Ellmann 355). This process of negation is a paradoxical form of knowledge that matches Wilde's claim that life imitates art, where desire cancels itself.

Following Gide's own insight, we can see that neither the personal influence that Wilde had over the young Gide, nor Gide's later representations of Wilde as a character in his writing, attest most fully to Wilde's influence on Gide.[9] More important is Wilde's stylistic influence that changed the way Gide wrote, much like what Basil Hallward says of Dorian in Wilde's *A Picture of Dorian Gray*: "his personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style . . . He is never more present in my work than when no image of him is there" (14). Wilde becomes an invisible point in Gide's work that spurs him on to innovate and to tackle new material. On the same day that Gide wrote about Wilde's paradox in the *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*, he wrote a dialogue with the devil that illustrates this negative influence. He inserts some of these ideas in the last words of La Pérouse, Boris's grandfather and Édouard's old piano teacher. Gide says of this dialogue that it "might very well become the central subject of

[9] In "André Gide's 'Hommage à Oscar Wilde' or 'The Tale of Judas,'" Victoria Reid reads Gide's relation to Wilde throughout his career as a working-through of an anxiety of influence. Falling in line with defenders of Wilde's work, she suggests that Gide's personal recollections fulfill Wilde's claim that "it is always Judas who writes the biography." Interestingly, she suggests that Gide's reception of Wilde's influence is future oriented, like the coming to be of a prophecy. Citing Gide's comment about his Memoirs in his *Journal* in 1917 that "*Je les écris avant d'être accusé*," she argues Gide's public defense of homosexuality is "the disciple's desire to imitate the master's experience" (107). Rather than merely dismissing Wilde for his refusal to "come out," Gide launches his crusade as a desire for a similar martyrdom.

the whole book; in other words, the invisible point about which everything gravitates" (416-7). The devil is this formal empty point in Gide's narration around which the theory and the practice of the novel, the two major strands of narrative in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, gravitate. And behind this figure of the devil stands Wilde.[10] We see Wilde's trace in Gide's attempt to deal with the time of narrative and the relation of art to life. Gide did not perfect a new manner until *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, though it is evident in his work up until then that he was working at discovering a new way.[11] But *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* was unique for Gide; it was the only book he wrote that he gave the generic distinction of a novel. And with it Gide took something Wilde started in his own unique novel, *Dorian Gray*—and made it something more recognizably "modern." He turned Wilde's paradoxical aesthetics into a narratological imperative.

The movement from the first to the third person plays out most importantly on the level of form in both Wilde's and Gide's only novels, specifically as a matter of plot. The Narcissus myth is static: a boy staring at himself, a total image with no time. This is a common feature of the aesthetic novel, like Huysmans' *À Rebours*, which circles around the character Des Esseintes and his strange tastes with hardly any development. Wilde's invention was to try to make this static image move in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Rather than focus on the portrait, the unexplainable plot device that gets the story

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[10] Richard Ellmann connects Wilde's theory to Gide's use of the devil: "The idea that the devil should circulate in the book incognito, his reality growing stronger the less the other characters believe in him, is a corollary to Wilde's theorem. Beyond the evocation of a stagy devil, Gide's remarks reflect his eagerness to abandon the idea of self which should be sequential and predictable, and to accept fits and starts as his natural medium" (*Wilde* 355). I am following out Ellmann's suggestion here as an aesthetic development from Wilde to Gide that changes the form and content of the novel genre.

[11] For example, in "Wilde dans *Les Caves*," Pierre Masson takes a scene in *Les Caves du Vatican* and compares it to Gide's stories of his interactions with Wilde, while also discovering the trace of Wilde anagrammatically in character names. Masson's assessment is that *Les Caves* is Gide's "*plus bel hommage*" to the master. Certainly, *Les Caves* kicked off Gide's late period literary innovation that worked in tandem with his public defense of homosexuality; but I would argue that *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* more fully realizes and works through Wilde's influence, not because of any specific trace of Wilde but precisely because he is largely absent from the book.

moving, Wilde replaces the motivation for Dorian's self-transformation into a work of art with a novel: Dorian takes his cues from a "poisonous book," a version of *À Rebours*, in which he recognizes "a kind of prefiguring type of himself . . . indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it" (123). Wilde gives the aesthetic novel a plot—not one he invented: one part Narcissus, one part Pygmalion, one part Faust—but nonetheless, it is an important formal innovation because of its critical implications. Where Dorian suspects he has gained the supposed eternity or timelessness of the work of art, the instant captured in the portrait of him, Wilde actually binds him in finite time. What Gide takes from Wilde is the temporality of art: rather than an eternal aesthetic moment (Narcissus staring at himself), art moves us in time and its effects are finite (Narcissus reaching for himself and drowning). Ultimately, all Dorian gains is a deferral of the inevitable: his sins and experiences revisit him in an instant, retroactively, precipitating him to his end. The temporality of art is finite; the plot ends in death.

But here precisely is the problem with introducing a plot into the aesthetic novel, which typically concerns beautiful forms only. The plot becomes predictable; it is necessarily highly conventionalized. A certain moralism, derived from the Narcissus myth, is difficult to escape. Though Wilde does not make overt judgment, he too includes the escape hatch of killing off the questionable protagonist at the end.

Gide falls prey to the same trap of moralism in *L'Immoraliste*—his book written two years after Wilde's death which most superficially resembles and responds to Wilde's Aestheticism—though Gide doesn't kill off his hero like Wilde does. In the story, Gide hints at his own sexual awakening at Biskra through the character of Michel,

who recovers from a deathly illness to an overbearing sensuality.[12] The book's frame is a plea from Michel's friend to the Président du Conseil to find some kind of employment for Michel, who languishes in Algeria. Michel finds this sensual life dissipating and yearns for work to give his life structure. Gide makes a slight change in the moralist arc in this narrative. Michel, unlike Dorian, doesn't have to die, though he comes near to it. Instead, his suffering wife, Marceline, must die before he can make the change. His wife's death is a rebuke, but still Michel has the hopeful thought that "my real life hasn't begun yet" (169). Michel is not an artist but an academic; his "sin" is, more explicitly than Dorian's, his sexual inclination. Gide's overt insistence on Michel's sexuality is one way that he avoids the straightforwardly moralistic narrative, though Michel still seems to be punished.[13]

However Gide is able to undermine the moralistic arc of his narrative with a strange formal twist, by playing with the tense of Michel's narration. Towards the end of Michel's narrative, he lets the story's grammatical contours fall apart. Michel begins to list events without order or sense, much like Gide's earlier *Nourritures terrestres*, and he changes from the past tense to the present tense with these abstract broad strokes. At this grammatical turning-point in his narrative, Michel describes the weather in the present tense, though he is speaking of the past, he explains, "There's no use attempting now to impose more order on my story than there was in my life then" (158). He must get rid of

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[12] *L'Immoraliste* is much like the earlier *Nourritures terrestres,* a lyrical celebration of the senses—but now with a plot.

[13] In *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, sex becomes more explicitly paired with literature and the theory of the novel through Édouard's discussions with the psychoanalyst Sophroniska and through the sexual curiosity that drives Édouard on in his artistic pursuit of life. Still, Boris's death may be a moralistic judgment and another diversion of punishment, like Marceline's death in *L'Immoraliste*. In *André Gide and Curiosity*, Victoria Reid catalogs the various forms curiosity takes in Gide's work, from the sexual to the writerly. Interestingly, she reads suicide as the "ultimate act of curiosity" (54) since it extends to the limits of life and seems to directly confront reality.

"unendurable logic" to explain "how I became what I am [*comment je devins qui je suis*]" (170). Gide plays on the sense of fatality with his tenses, reversing Dorian's direction from a seemingly timeless present to a violent thrust towards the past.

"How I became who I am": this is the movement from first to third person, the same desire that Gide discovered in Wilde: to narrate one's own life, to give it the form of art. Both verbs, the simple past of *devenir* and the simple present of *être* give the sense of a completed action, almost substantive. The strangeness of the sentence lies in the first person conjugation of the simple past: "comment je *devins*." Michel takes on a narrator's voice in relating the story of his life, shifting from the personal to the impersonal.[14] The sentence glosses over the transition even when it seems to be staking a narrative claim from the past to the present. The plot falls out of Michel's hands. With this attempt at self-control comes that "latent necessity" of fate—the expected death at the end, like Wilde's forward march to his conviction. The plot therefore is not a sequential path from point A to point B, but rather a simultaneous holding together of the two points, the becoming and the being. Gide plays with this form, allowing his heroes to live, and ending his novels without resolving anything.

Like *L'Immoraliste*, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* plays with grammatical tenses, describing some scenes in the typical past tense of novelistic narration, but often slipping for pages at a time into present tense, not only in the journal entries, but also in the general narrator's voice. Both novels end on a sense of crisis that needs dénouement but is instead interrupted. But in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, Gide undoes the apparent control that self-narration seems to provide. Édouard explains the reasoning behind the

[14] Zakir Paul pointed out to me this peculiarity in the sentence. This is the same way Gide begins his autobiography, extending an impersonal and impossible narrative control to the very beginning of his life: "*Je naquis le 22 novembre 1869*" (9).

interrupted ending: instead of thinking the good novelist must from the beginning "know how [his book] is going to finish" he believes that every ending life gives us may also be a "fresh starting point." Therefore, he claims, "'Might be continued'" are the words with which he wants to end his book as if affirming infinite possibilities of life, even against the knowledge of the finitude of an end, however provisional (335).[15] Édouard repeats an insight he hears from his half-sister, Pauline. She tells him, "'It's the business of you novelists to try to solve [false situations]. In real life nothing is solved; everything continues. We remain in our uncertainty . . . In the mean time, life continues, continues, continues [*la vie continue, continue, continue*], as if nothing happened [*tout comme si de rien n'était*]'" (320, translation modified). Gide had the same feeling as Édouard about the ending of his own book, but he puts it differently in his *Journal*: "It must not be neatly rounded off, but rather disperse, disintegrate [*s'éparpiller, se défaire*]" (449). Though it seems that Gide (and to some extent Édouard) want to borrow from "continuous" life, characterized for the most part by the feeling "as if nothing happened," Gide discovers the novel as the art form that allows most clearly for life to take on the simultaneous feeling of meaning and "incertitude," of making and "unmaking" itself.

The irresolution of the ending, just like the twisting of tenses, provides the most salient critique of the moralistic narrative. Here, it would also seem, Gide parts company with Wilde, since irresolution is a hallmark of amorphous life, not beautifully formed art. However, I would argue, Gide stays true to Wilde's paradox of life and art, with an important revision. Where Wilde wanted to explain everything—this was part of the drive to make life a work of art—Gide wants to confront the inexplicable. Gide

[15] This is the same thought behind the Biblical citation that gives the title to Gide's memoir, *Si le Grain ne meurt*: only when the seed dies will it bear fruit.

transforms his debt to Wilde—what he owes to his influence—into a surplus through the multiplication of endlessly mirroring plots without a neatly rounded off contour in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*. In other words, around the empty point that Wilde's aesthetics masks, Gide has constructed an exhaustive and exhausted drive for narrative; ingeniously, though, it is a drive that does not work towards simple explanations but rather towards an aesthetics of alternatives, equally unknown but still beautiful. This novel is the most innovative retelling of Narcissus, since it is purely formal. Everything in the novel is reflected, doubled, tripled, good and bad, conventional and unexplainable. Gide diverts the forward motion of the plot by employing a regressive mode of storytelling that shifts among third person narrative, journal, letter and dialogue and by pairing characters into shifting couples so that each person has many counterparts that simultaneously deflect and reinforce the particularity of their narrative arcs. There are so many plots and characters that it is difficult to follow the story let alone paraphrase it. But this difficulty in the act of reading a work of fiction produces the feeling of life in the present tense: the moment where it seems to slip out of our grasp is when we most desire to narrate our lives.

This is the debt of the author, as Wilde taught it to Gide. We can gauge Wilde's formal influence in Gide's fragmentation of him throughout his work. In *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, multiple characters conjure Wilde by echoing his philosophy, just as Gide himself shows up in traits and experiences of multiple characters throughout the novel. Gide improved on Wilde's impetus to give the static aesthetic novel movement and a plot—to show exactly how life imitates art—by dispersing and refracting the strands of the plot into semi-recognizable threads. Only then do the lines of the narrative make

sense. In *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, Gide called the unexplainable the part of the devil. And the impulse behind this desire to eventually know what he did not know at first will have also been his debt to Wilde.

Theory of Influence

Though Gide may have been more influenced than he thought by Wilde, he formulated a theory of literary influence in a lecture he gave in 1900 in Brussels, entitled "De l'influence en littérature," that explains many of the same ideas at play in his relationship with Wilde. Gide's thinking about influence once again tells the story of Narcissus in the form of the self-actualizing author. However, Gide will question the stable positions of self and other in the paths of influence, perhaps as a result of the overwhelming influence Wilde had on him. In the end, Gide's theory of influence confronts us with the desire for something inherently unexplainable.

In his lecture, Gide argues against the "modern" belief that the writer's personality is so fragile that it must be protected from anything like influence. Instead, he modifies the paradoxical verse from the Gospel: "'Whoseover shall seek to save his life [his personal life] shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.' (Or, to translate more faithfully the Greek text: '. . . shall make it truly alive.')" (31).[16] The "privative personality" (29) of the author will only end up denying itself right out of existence. Behind this parable, Gide plays a subtle game of self and other, which characterizes his understanding of the pathways of influence. Influence is another reversed Narcissus, where one welcomes the other who comes to explain oneself.

[16] Gide rehearses the common dialectic of modernism that Perry Meisel outlines in *The Myth of the Modern* as the search for originality against the acceptance of belatedness.

Gide sets up the problem of influence through a description of the act of reading. After finishing a book and putting it away, there is still something that remains: the book has "penetrated so deeply into me that I cannot distinguish [*distingue*] it from myself" (26 translation modified). Self and other become mixed in an act of incorporation. "Henceforth I am no longer the one I was before I knew it" (26 translation modified). The moment of reading loses its specificity and now extends across the reader's entire life. Even if one forgets the words or having read the book entirely, it doesn't matter, Gide exclaims: "I can no longer become again the person I was before I read it" (26 translation modified).

Here, it seems that the "I" that reads has truly changed. Gide asks, "How can its power be explained?" (26 translation modified). And his answer centers precisely on the act of explaining. He undoes the direction of influence so that it no longer comes in from an alien territory: "Its power comes from the fact that it has merely revealed to me some part of myself of which I was still in ignorance; for me it was only an explanation—yes, but an explanation of myself" (27 translation modified). Influence is now a kind of "mirror" that works by resemblance to make explicit to us what is merely latent in ourselves.[17] Lucey points to the potential of the first-person to escape the static solipsism: Gide's "I" is paradoxically future-oriented, in the process of becoming what it already was.

Gide hinted at this mirror play of explication between self and others in the preface to *Paludes* five years earlier. He begins the book by stating, "*Before I explain my book to others, I am waiting for others to explain it to me*" (13). Even the author (the

[17] Gide often makes this statement about works that really matter to him, notably in reference to Wilde (more on a personal level), Nietzsche, and Freud, whom he calls in his journal, "*cet imbécile de génie*" (June 19 1924; in Debreuille, "La psychanalyse en question dans *Les faux-monnayeurs*).

supposed influencer) needs an explanation to come from elsewhere. Gide refers to a surplus of meaning in the book that escapes the author, which he calls “the part that belongs to the unconscious, which I should like to call, the part that belongs to God” (13). For Gide, who is apparently writing this preface in his own voice, even his own book works in the manner of influence, in anticipation of a “revelation” of what was hitherto unknown in him.

In “La Part de l’inconscient, la part de Dieu et la part du lecteur,” Diane Setterfield uses the preface of *Paludes* as a starting point to situate Gide’s understanding of the role of the reader in relation to his work. However, as she tracks this role through various early works of Gide’s, she discovers that instead of a reader in the form of an other who reveals the author to himself through judgment and interpretation, Gide’s reader is just another avatar of himself. This follows the subtle shifting of emphasis in Gide’s depiction of influence, where, in neo-Platonic fashion, the book only reveals to you what you already knew. Setterfield therefore diverts the path of influence from a movement between self and other into a temporal alteration. As an example, she plots out the three voices in *Les Nourritures terrestres* (the *je* of the author, the *tu* of the addressee, Nathanaël, and the *il* of the Wildean teacher, Ménalque) along a temporal scale: “The transformation will come when Nathanaël, the unconscious, future self, having read the narrator, detaches himself from him. Nathanaël will become in his turn ‘I,’ and the ‘I’ of the narrator will become from him ‘he,’ just like Ménalque is currently ‘he’ for the narrator” (109 my translation). Setterfield then distills this into a timeline for the subject: “‘I’ is only the present moment of being, always surrounded by the ‘he’s’ and the ‘you’s’ that do not exist, but which are the virtualities of being” (109 my translation).

What Setterfield writes about the relationship between Gide-the-author and Gide-the-reader works equally well for Gide's understanding of influence. We can pick up on her emphasis on time to understand Gide's theory of narration. But where Setterfield pulls the rug out from any real other in Gide's schema, I would suggest that there is a real shock of otherness at the root for Gide's desire for explanation—a shock that calls forth narration. Indeed, this otherness tends to get smoothed over in the austere, polished surface of Gide's prose. The "virtualities" of being—hypothetical futures and pasts—are what make up the drive to narrate in Gide's work, best exemplified in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, which coordinates multiple narrative instances through its numerous characters that all converge on a present intrigue. Gide latches on to the present moment in an attempt to expand it and bring all actions into the retroactive mode of narration. In *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, as in *L'Immoraliste*, Gide slips back and forth from the narrative past tense to the present tense, which obscures the passage from story to life and back again.

Plotting the paradox

Accessing the paths of influence from a temporal rather than intersubjective perspective brings us to the realm of narration: we typically think of story as a succession of events over time, but Gide shows that linear temporality is less important than retroaction. Early in his career, Gide reflects on another kind of influence—"the influence the book has on the author while he is writing it" (in Dällenbach 14)—which becomes an integral part of his narrative process. For Gide, writing is an act in the world and as such is subject to the physical laws of action: "Our actions have a retroactive effect on us"

(14).[18] The strange thing in Gide's idea is that "the retroactive thing" is not a real object in the world, but rather "a subject one imagines" (14). The structure of reality is indebted to the imaginary. Writing is thus "an indirect method of action on oneself" (14 translation modified). Interestingly, Gide is not only talking about the influence the act of writing has on the writer but also the way the content of the story shapes the writer. This reaction itself, Gide says, is "also just a tale" (14). In other words, the story itself consists of the retroactive movement, which collapses form and content.[19] This is why Gide continually returns to metafictional structures. The paradox of life and art integrates form and content, giving art precedence over reality.

Gide theorizes about the retroaction of writing in an attempt to explain his work, *La Tentative amoureuse*. He equates retroaction with the conventions of the "typical psychological novel," whose subject is someone who tells a story while feeling something (in his example it is "an angry man") and which maintains "a continuing relationship" between the feeling and the story (14). In this journal entry, Gide gives a name, for the first time, to the form he likes so much, the story *en abyme*, or the story within or about the story. What he likes, he explains, is "to find thus transposed, at the level of the characters, the subject of the work itself" (7). In other words, the structure of the book is repeated internally on the level of plot. His examples are varied so that it is

[18] Gide relates this idea to a quotation from George Eliot, showing another path of influence.

[19] It might be worthwhile to take a moment to reflect on the argument that traces some kind of progress or development in Gide's writing. Following Gide's own understanding of the progression of his work, two of his biographers, Jean Delay and Alan Sheridan, look at Gide's work as a dialectic that interacts with his life. On the other hand, critics like Lucey want to counteract any normative sense of development—especially when someone like Delay looks to find psychological excuses for Gide's homosexuality,(like his claim that Wilde perhaps caused it). Roland Barthes sums up the other view nicely in "On Gide and his Journal": "Gide is a simultaneous being" (6). Still, Barthes reminds us, he has only revealed himself in succession, so that his works, too, are all "contemporaries." Thus, if Gide is, as Barthes claims, "at the intersection of great contradictory currents" (6)—and most Gidean critics note his incessant ambiguity—then there are two sides of his work: the simultaneous and the successive, the static and the dynamic. What I want to trace is precisely Gide's concern with the interaction of life and art, which has the form of Wilde's paradox: at once dialectic and incommensurable.

difficult, as Lucien Dällenbach has shown, to get a unified sense of what the story *en abyme* is precisely; but one example he gives is the play that Hamlet uses to represent Claudius's actions back to the king in order to prick his conscience.[20] Set within the context of Gide's thoughts about retroaction, we see that what interests Gide is precisely the attempt to represent the force of influence: to depict the real effect works of art (imaginary) have on the life not only of the author, but also the reader. *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* is the culmination of Gide's project, but the aim itself is made ironic. Édouard wants to represent that act of representation and its influence on life—what we read is the reality he tries to represent, which is already a representation.

If we gather together the various threads of Gide's thinking about influence and writing, we can see that at the heart of the attempt to represent the act of representation is the tension created by our temporal predicament. Gide wants to encapsulate in an instant the indefinite passing of time, the desire he allegorizes in his own version of the Narcissus myth. We can see Gide experiment with the effects of retroaction in an anecdote that Dällenbach picks up from Gide's journal. Dällenbach presents it as a literal attempt to capture himself in the moment of writing. Gide reports that he would sit in front of a mirror as he wrote in order to see himself in the act of writing. But, Dällenbach points out, Gide only sees himself in between each sentence. Therefore, Dällenbach claims there is a tension between these two "reflexions [*spécularisations*]": "whereas the visual experience of looking in a mirror is instantaneous, the writer and his reflexion

[20] See *Le Récit spéculaire: contribution à l'étude de la mise en abyme*, where Dällenbach explores the different possible meanings and forms that the mise en abyme might take according to Gide's theory as well as to his practice. Since Gide's first coining of the term, there have been countless studies of the figure of *mise en abyme*, with Dällenbach as an important standard. The afterlife of *mise en abyme* might be its own version of counterfeit since, as Dällenbach points out, it's hard to know what really is a *mise en abyme* even though many claim to clearly identify the structure.

[*double*] can only speak to, and answer, each other *in turn*" (17). The repetition of the image covers over a difference; the Gide writing and the "Gide" in the book are not the same: his "I" becomes an other. That Gide then develops this into a theme and a form for his writing, the *mise en abyme*, Dällenbach relates to Gide's desire to resolve this tension, to find "the reconciliation of contingence and necessity, of vitalism and symbolism, of reality and ideal, and of life and art" (34). Gide writes to find himself, but in the act, always finds himself already having moved on (or moved into the *on*). This temporal slipping away mirrors the path of influence that tries to explain the self through the other. In the end, Gide shows, one cannot be certain what one has grasped. With the novel, this disjunction becomes the theme: art gives and takes away life's contours, leaving us in the realm of the unexplainable, where we must face Boris's outrageously real death.

In the context of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, what becomes important is not the harmony, but instead the difference between these two planes—the predicament of always coming up short. Dällenbach schematizes the difference between Gide and his avatar, Édouard, as well as between their respective books entitled *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*: "The two novels are separated as potential is from action, the two authors separated as theory is from practice" (32). There is a simultaneous identity and discontinuity between the pairs. However, I would argue that, by the time of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, the emphasis turns away from the desire to see the origin of the work towards the recognition of its limits and an anticipation of its end. In other words, with *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, Gide makes us confront our desire for explanation by forcing us to face the apparently unexplainable.

Instead of being self-satisfied, totalized by its auto-representation, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* turns toward the open-ended. Just as Gide remarked at the end of his *Narcisse*, one is driven to reveal what one should keep secret because "one suffers from admiring alone and because one wishes others would adore too" (27 my translation). Gide's subtle shifting in his theory of influence, from the other to the self (to the already known), reverses like his Narcissus in the failure to contain a story in a continuous and defined form. But, I would argue, this is the rigor of Gide's thinking: the failure of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* is its success.

In the second notebook of the *Journal des faux-monnayeurs*, Gide comments, "I must be careful to respect in Édouard everything that makes him unable to write his book" (433). He tries to untangle his book from Édouard's, as well as himself from his novel-writing character—again a play between different versions of the self. Édouard is a "character all the more difficult to establish since I am lending him much of myself. I have to step back and put him at some distance from me to see him properly" (434). Perhaps this need to differentiate is what makes Gide turn Édouard into "a dabbler, a failure," but Gide gives a more significant reason: "He understands a great many things, but he is forever pursuing himself—through everyone and everything. Real devotion is almost impossible for him" (433-4). Gide's alter ego is too egotistical; this is what separates him from his creator.[21]

The struggle between Gide's representation of his own life and of the life of others is staged on every level of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*. Gide reflects on this dialectic in

[21] Interestingly, Wilde criticized *Les Nourritures terrestres* to Bosie for the opposite problem, which creates a paradoxical tension with his demand to Gide not to say "I": "André Gide's book fails to fascinate me. The egoistic note is, of course, and always has been to me, the primal and ultimate note of modern art, but *to be an Egoist one must have an Ego*. It is not everyone who says, 'I,I' who can enter the Kingdom of Art" (in Ellmann "Corydon and Ménalque" 89).

the *Journal*, duplicating the pairs along different lines such as Gide and Édouard (or other characters that stem from Gide's life), Gide and the narrator, Gide and the reader, and then finally Gide and the Devil. The second notebook ends with Gide reproducing a quotation from Thibaudet that his friend (and the dedicatee of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*) Roger Martin du Gard sent him:

> "It is rare for an author who depicts himself [*s'expose*] in a novel to make himself a convincing figure [*un individu ressemblant*], by which I mean a living person. . . The authentic novelist creates his characters according to the infinite directions of his possible life; the false novelist creates them from the single line [*ligne unique*] of his real life. The genius of the novel makes the possible come to life: it does not revive the real." (451)

Gide's interest in the novel resides in "the possible," though he shows with *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* that the "unique line of real life" is not so straight and circumscribed. The interaction of life and art makes it impossible to distinguish the real and the possible lives in their "infinite directions." Gide remarks that Thibaudet's thought seems "so true that I am thinking of setting these sentences at the head of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* as a preface" (451). Though he doesn't actually use this quotation as a preface or even as one of the many epigraphs that open up chapters in the book, the idea reverberates throughout the novel. In fact, Gide even echoes the sentiment earlier in the *Journal*: "All those heroes I have hewn out of my own flesh lack this one thing: the modicum of common sense that keeps me from carrying my follies as far as they do" (442). The character difference is minor, just a little common sense, but the effects, Gide claims are much different—the

exact difference between his life and his books, which ultimately is a process of influence.[22]

Gide's understanding of influence has a retroactive temporality: it explains what already is. But the past tense still has a future orientation since it is only recognizable after the fact. In the matter of plotting, however, Gide gives priority to anticipation. He wants to set up the unexplainable (if only for it to be explained away after the fact). Retroaction and anticipation are the two sides of the paradoxical relation of life and art, and we can understand them both through the figure of death. On the one hand, art is an attempt to understand life. Here, it takes on the retrospective view of the deathbed recapitulation of life in its final moments. On the other hand, art structures life in the present; it is a process of becoming. Here, art faces us with the unknown, the death that never comes in life. Gide's master stroke is to take these two times together at the same moment. He begins to work on this with *Les Caves du Vatican*, but perfects the method with *Les Faux Monnayeurs*. In both books, we see that the flipside of influence is desire—what leads us to look forward and backward in time, or from self to other.

The unexplainable

Gide's search for the unexplainable gets its full expression in Boris's suicide in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*. Before that, Gide was still experimenting with the novelistic possibilities of unexplainable action. The approach he perfects for *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* first gets tried out in the apparently motiveless crime of *Les Caves du Vatican*, otherwise

[22] The tradition of biographical readings, from Jean Delay, the famous psychobiographer of Gide, to Alain Goulet, misplaces the emphasis in its attempt to relate Gide's work to his life. What counts more is how Gide used his writing to *alter* his life, as Blanchot argues in "Gide and the Literature of Experience," not how he tried to preserve his life through representation.

known as the *acte gratuit*.[23] Even though Gide doesn't consider *Les Caves* a novel, the desire for the unexplainable is a novelist's desire, voiced by the writer Julius de Baraglioul. This desire then drives Gide on to write *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, though in the later book we will see this drive exhausts itself and the novel genre with it. In *Caves* the search for the unexplainable is planted in both the emptily successful author, Julius de Baraglioul and his half-brother, Lafcadio, who Gide almost used as a narrator for *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*. Gide explores the coincidence of fate and chance in *Les Caves*, building a work out of four intersecting plotlines. We will focus on Julius and Lafcadio, who are brought together by Julius's father's acknowledgement of the fact that he fathered Lafcadio and Julius's novelistic curiosity in knowing the bizarre and alluring young man.

Julius has a writer's epiphany when he imagines a crime with no purpose, inspired by the assassination of his brother-in-law, Fleurissoire. For Julius, however, it is only a momentary awakening; he soon falls back into his austere morality. In the meantime, Julius wants to break from the overly rational character he had created up to this point, to get at something like an aestheticism of crime, something with no purpose but itself.[24] The concern that the explanation for any act requires an infinite motivation, which Gide raises in his *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*, finds an earlier expression in Julius's

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[23] Gide himself uses the term *acte gratuit* to identify this problem of (plot) motivation in the three texts he classifies as *soties*: *Paludes, Le Promethée mal enchaîné,* and *Les Caves du Vatican*. On one level, the idea of the *acte gratuit* signifies Gide's dream to escape the conventions of plot to get beyond good and evil—at least momentarily before returning to the moral dialectic. For an interesting look at the *acte gratuit* as another Gidean *mise en abyme* that replicates the act of writing, see Marie-Denise Boros Azzi's "L'Acte Gratuit: Une Mise en Abyme du Processus Créateur chez André Gide." See also Sheridan 273 for a good outline of the problematic as it appears in the various writings.

[24] The link of aestheticism and crime is not Gide's invention; Wilde too was interested in this. See "Pen, Pencil, and Poison" in *Intentions*. Jean-Michel Rabaté provides an extensive examination of the link between aesthetics and murder in *Given: 1˚ Art 2˚ Crime*, begins with De Quincey's investigation of the aesthetics of murder and goes on to suggest a link between murder and interpretation.

frustration with the characters he creates. He is caught between the "excessive logic" and the "insufficient definition" of his characters (167). Instead, he wants to imagine a character without consequence.[25] The *acte gratuit* is an attempt to resolve the novelist's paradox in relation to his characters' logic and indetermination, two strands that bespeak their emptiness since they have no lives outside of the text. Thinking of interest as a motivation for human action, Julius tries to push beyond good and evil, to imagine a disinterested action. He explains that disinterestedness, typically a hallmark of good works, could just as equally be bad.

Lafcadio meditates the same idea of the motiveless crime before Julius. In fact, Lafcadio commits the crime that inspires Julius; he kills Julius's brother-in-law, the hapless Fleurissoire, who is caught up in a con game that purports the Pope has been stolen by the Freemasons. We could conceive of the pair Julius and Lafcadio as representing the relation between the author and his character, except that they both exist on the same plane in *Les Caves*—and Lafcadio's act precedes Julius's idea, returning Wilde's paradox to the typical mimetic principle of art imitating life. When Gide gets to *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, he makes a similar differentiation by showing us Édouard's process of turning the events of Gide's novel into his own novel. In *Les Caves*, much like Édouard, Lafcadio is spurred on by curiousity. He doesn't only want to imagine "*what would happen if*" but instead shove himself into the "little hiatus [*petit laps*] through which the unexpected creeps in" (179). He first begins to think about this when he considers killing an old woman he meets while walking through Italy, but the horrible

[25] Inconsequential is a key term for Lucey's reading of the escape from a normative narrative of sexuality; this is the story told around or behind the story in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, in dreams or belatedly. See *Gide's Bent* 117 and *passim*.

vulnerability of Fleurissoire provokes him even more.[26] Lafcadio first thinks, "'What is there in common between me and that dirty maggot?'" (181 translation modified). This question is that literary question that Gide has posed to himself throughout his work, how to make it from the "I" to another. For Lafcadio, the "problem" that poses itself is precisely a literary one: "to make a tear in that destiny [*faire accroc à cette destinée*]" (190 my translation). The ambiguity of whose "destiny" in particular, Lafcadio's or Fleurissoire's, doesn't really matter; the real problem is whether Lafcadio's gratuitous act can break through the narrative restraint held on him by the book. He leaves the decision up to chance (or what he thinks of as chance): he will push Fleurissoire out of the train if he sees a light before he counts to twelve—which of course happens.

Lafcadio's crime falls back into the narrative Fleurissoire was living of a stolen Pope and Julius reverts to his moralistic norm. The reversion to moralism is the exact problem that Wilde struggled with in *Dorian Gray* and that Gide tried to overcome in *L'Immoraliste*. Plots rely on cause and effect, on the chain of explanation. The *acte gratuit* is difficult for the novel to abide, since it provides a gap in the representation. But the fact that Gide doesn't allow Lafcadio's crime to remain as pure as it seems is not a moral but an aesthetic critique. As Lafcadio and Julius discuss the event, it becomes unavoidable to recognize that Lafcadio's apparent freedom is an effect of narration. Gide has all the strings.

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[26] Lafcadio thinks of himself as "In love with what might be [*Amoureux de ce qui pourrait être*]" (179, 187). Pairing him with Édouard, who became Lafcadio's substitute in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, we could connect this to Édouard's thought that his *Faux-Monnayeurs* could end with the words "Might be continued." It is not really a desire for continuity but for the unforeseeable, the way life always disrupts expectations. Both Lafcadio and Édouard hold on to a way out of the rigid time of grammar into a different mood: the conditional suspends time, truth, and judgment.

The subtext of the actual crime, Lafcadio's fatal push of Amédée Fleurissoire off of a train, is perhaps a kind of "perversity" that often gets linked to aestheticism, a pleasure for pleasure's sake.[27] Lafcadio seems to take a stance against perversion. He eyes the older Fleurissoire for a while before he decides to kill him. Tied in with this planning are his memories of older men who lusted after him (and to whom he gave himself perhaps willingly). These moments provoked the ire of Gide's friend, Claudel, who admonished him to cut them from his book.[28] What we have here, interestingly, is a reversal of the typical Gidean gaze: instead of an older man looking at a younger man, we see the other way around. In Gide's biography, it never happens this way. We never hear of his falling under the sway of an older man—except for his relationship with Wilde, which drove him to the edge of madness and was not physically sexual. Gide's sexual preference is always tied to younger boys and specifically boys somehow below him, from his first experiments under the table with his lower class neighbor, to his sexual exploits with young Arabs in North Africa. Only here do we see what the other side might look like, narrated from the point of view of the younger man, and it is a random outburst of violence. Lafcadio even comes to call the murder an *aventure,* the same word Gide used to describe his wandering sexual exploits, but here the word refers to death not sex.

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[27] This is yet another Wildean paradox. I use the word "perversity" not to impute a moral judgment; instead, we can trace it to Wilde's claims in *De Profundis*, which is a theoretical explanation that combines his sexual and literary tastes under the guise of a moral judgment: "What the paradox was for me in the sphere of thought, perversity became for me in the sphere of passion" (913). The connection Wilde draws between sex and writing is one of form.

[28] Sheridan cites from Claudel's letter asking Gide to suppress the offending passage, which "display[s] on all the walls of Paris, a text that, for everyone, will be tantamount to a definitive, official admission . . . No writer, even Wilde, has done that" (275). However, here Gide actually follows Wilde's advice not to say "I."

For Gide, both sex and death become the eminent locations for interrogation of the effect of the novel on life. If we can make a parallel in Gide's yearning for the unexplainable by connecting it to his continual search for sexual encounters, we see that Gide's desire takes on the shape of content, specifically a search for new plots.[29] But what actually happens in *Les Caves* gives the lie to this search. Lafcadio's crime brings together, seemingly coincidentally, all the threads of the narrative into one point of convergence. At once, we are forced to think that there cannot be anything like a completely motiveless crime (no motive is still a motive); but we also feel most tellingly the construction of the writer, Gide's fingers tying everything together (and perhaps poking fun at his characters' desires).

Still, Gide leaves it ambiguous whether the possible contrivance of fiction, felt either in conventional plots or in outrageous exceptions, is less real than reality. In *Les Caves*, when Julius momentarily feels himself freed from his bourgeois morality (and his attempts to gain entrance to the Académie), he discovers that "I used to demand logic and consistency from my characters, and in order to make quite sure of getting them, I began by demanding them from myself. It wasn't natural. We live as counterfeits rather than not resemble the portrait of ourselves which we ourselves have first drawn" (195-6, translation modified). In a theory that echoes the plot of *Dorian Gray* Julius calls life "counterfeit," but this is the reality he has tried to portray in his novels through stories

[29] Gide's worry that his work was too closely connected to his life becomes the impetus for his constant travelling: he seeks other real events to go into his fiction. Sheridan cites an interesting entry from Gide's journal: "Why, how did I let myself be held back for so long in my youth? . . . Why did I not meet, when I was twenty, the man who would have taken me off with him? The man whom I would have followed to the ends of the earth! But no one talked about travelling then; to have been to Algeria was quite an achievement" (December 30 1930, 433). Gide apparently doesn't consider Wilde that man, even though he played a similar role in Gide's life, centered in Algeria and the realm of fiction. But this is a strange flip of Gide's typical relation with a younger man; here he imagines himself in the role of the ephebe rather than the master.

that can be traced from cause to effect. Julius turns Narcissus back towards the past, so that our lives are really attempts to mimic a past, "static" version of ourselves.

Gide pushes the theory of counterfeit further (into irony), when Protos, Lafcadio's friend and former accomplice, who is disguised as a professor of comparative criminology, Defouqueblize, lectures Lafcadio as if he were drunk and confessing a truth to him: "People who are in society, like you and me, owe it to ourselves [*se doivent*] to live as counterfeits" (217 translation modified). Living as a counterfeit is a duty, albeit a paradoxical duty, a debt one "owes" oneself. Protos, like Julius, speaks of the "image" one must uphold despite a lack of true resemblance. The only opportunity for sincerity to appear, he claims, is as a result of "a change of scene—a moment's forgetfulness": "A cessation of continuity—a simple interruption of the current" (218). The lack of consequence allows for the reality to shine forth both in life and in fiction, since the unexplainable can be a sign of the real. Protos then picks up a theme that will be developed in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, giving bastards the advantage for being born outside the "straight line" of respectability.[30]

When Julius presses him about the murder, Lafcadio exclaims, "What's the use of wanting me to explain to you what I can't explain to myself?" (235). Originally Gide planned to have Lafcadio narrate *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, but as he worked on the composition, Lafcadio disappeared in favor of the author, Édouard. Lafcadio disappears, yet the tension he announces, between the inexplicable and the desire to explain, is the narrative crux of the novel.

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[30] Protos launches into this tirade after propositioning Lafcadio, who assures him that offers made while travelling "do not lead to consequence [*ne tire[nt] pas à consequence*]" (224 my translation). Here is an alternate reality, without use, without effect on "real life," and it is importantly linked with the possibility for sex—homosexual, non-normative, and non-consequential adventures that Lucey points to in his reading of Gide.

Sincerity and Authenticity

Long before Gide even began writing *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, he had cut out the *fait divers* that gave him the idea for Boris's tragic ending. The cruel game that ended in suicide, the real version of Gide's cruel game with Fleurissoire that ended in his death, became the projected endpoint of the novel. Everything, no matter what that was, would have to work up to this, another *acte gratuit*. The death of the "real" Boris provided the charge of the inexplicable to put into motion the various plot lines of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*. But the excess irrationality of this child's demise doesn't ever resolve itself into a satisfactory explanation. Instead, we can see the fugue structure of the novel as so many repetitions of this concluding primal scene, so many little traps (again, like *The Mousetrap* in *Hamlet*) to set up the desire of explanation.[31] The principle of the unexplainable, the inevitable death, puts *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* in motion.

Since the title of Gide's (and Édouard's) book implies the longstanding Gidean concern of sincerity and inauthenticity through its reference to false money, many critics take this dichotomy as a controlling metaphor for reading the novel. If we use this metaphor, we can attempt to broadly characterize and thus simplify what is an overly complex novel of multiple interweaving plots. *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* follows two teenagers, Bernard Profitendieu and Olivier Molinier, through twisting and intertwining paths of self-discovery. Bernard leaves his childhood home once he finds out he was an illegitimate child and eventually finds love for his father and his own identity. Olivier wants to be a writer (as do most of the characters) and also feels sexual longings for other

[31] Édouard wants his *Faux-Monnayeurs* to have a similar structure to Bach's *Art of the Fugue* (237). In *Gide's Art of the Fugue*, Karin Nordenhaug Ciholas uses this structure to analyze Gide's novel thematically, in order to show that Gide's structure was sound and that the novel was not merely an excuse for the theories that so often distract the critics from the plot.

men, notably Bernard and his uncle, Édouard, the novelist. Though Bernard becomes Édouard's secretary for a time, and Olivier likewise the secretary of the pompous aesthete and foil of artificiality for Édouard's sincerity, the Comte de Passavant, eventually Olivier and Édouard come together. Along the way, Gide follows out and hints at countless other plots that involve the family members and friends of each character. Gide uses one of his favorite methods to complicate matters with the journal of Édouard, where we find simultaneous observation of events and theorization of Édouard's own experimental novel called *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, The actual counterfeiters are a group of young men, including Olivier's brother, Georges, who also deal with prostitutes and eventually force Boris to kill himself at the pension where they take courses.

Édouard first wants to use the metaphor of false money to figure the insincerity of his fellow writers, but then the idea of the counterfeit itself becomes "inflated" until it encompasses any pair that could be labeled real and fake. Jean-Joseph Goux's influential reading in *Les Monnayeurs du langage*, ties Gide's novel historically to the removal of the gold standard as the basis of the economy, which, he argues, leads to a new understanding of structure of authority, most importantly language and paternity. In other words, the novel depicts a loss of foundation and the free economy of signifiers. Goux pits Gide's novel against the traditional realist novel, claiming Gide's work for a modernism that escapes naturalist mythology.[32] However, Derrida has pointed out that Goux's argument periodizes literature in a way that ends up "naturalizing" the realist literature he claims Gide is critiquing (*Given Time* 110). That is, ultimately, even Goux

[32] Goux claims that Gide works for "the death of the novel as a genre" (6) with his upholding of abstraction over reality. My argument could be characterized by a slight reversal: in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, Gide shows how death forms the novel as a genre, fueled by the desire to negate, to self-destruct.

ends up making a choice between sincerity and authenticity, even if it is in favor of the fictive.

To claim, however, that this economy demands an either/or choice simplifies matters. In *Gide's Bent*, Michael Lucey shows that the issue of the counterfeit quickly becomes an apparatus that serves to ignore Gide's frank depiction of homosexuality in the novel and, at least surreptitiously, reaffirm a heteronormative view of sexuality. In an attempt to escape this dynamic of sincerity and artificiality, Lucey pits against the typical developmental progression towards heterosexuality a "pulsative, intermittently observable experience that cannot be successfully captured by any narrative model" (18) that is often homosexual. Lucey claims that Boris is the ultimate victim of the consequential narrative of sexuality. But Boris's death also provides an entrance to the text where the two apparently opposing strands overlap.

Writing in his autobiography, *Si le grain ne meurt*, Gide complicates this question of any straightforward narrative structure:

> No doubt there is in me some intellectual need that inclines me to simplify everything to excess for sake of tracing my lines with greater purity; all drawing necessitates choice; but what hampers me most is having to represent as successive states that are really one confused blend of simultaneity. I am a creature of dialogue; everything in me conflicts and contradicts. Memoirs are never more than half sincere . . . everything is always more complicated than one makes out. Possibly even one approaches the truth more closely in a novel. (234 translation modified).

Gide points to the novel as the place where the ambiguous "truth" can be approached, where paradoxical trends can exist "simultaneously," rather than forced into a linear "succession." Following this insight, Gide ties sexuality (or desire) to death specifically in an attempt to question and renew the form of the novel in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* by creating a narrative tension between convention and unexplainable occurrence.

The devil of narration

At the center of the tension between narrative and the unexplainable—the "invisible point" around which *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* "gravitates"—is Wilde's influence, which Gide gives the name of the devil in the novel. The devil figures Gide's engagement with the theory of the novel through Wilde's paradox. Gide wants to confront unexplainable life through art. The devil is a metaphor that collapses art and life together by overlaying the real with the imaginary. However, this doesn't mean Gide found some sort of solution to Wilde's paradox of life imitating art. He maintains the ambiguity of being unable to decide which one is really imitating the other. The narrator in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* names the influence of the devil to explain different characters' actions: Vincent Molinier's abandonment of Laura Douviers or the influence of the Wildean Comte de Passavant and the evil Lady Griffith influence on Vincent. However, this more obvious imputation of an evil impulse to the devil does not quite catch the more nuanced employment Gide makes of the idea.

We meet the devil within the first few pages of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*. Gide opens the novel with a moment of failed self-narration. Bernard Profitendieu has just discovered through a love letter his mother had hidden that the man he has considered his father and who raised him is not really his father—though we don't know this for another

page. We first meet Bernard as he says to himself: "'The time has now come for me to hear a step in the passage'" (3). Since he is doing something suspicious, searching through a secret drawer that was hidden underneath a clock he had just happened to try to fix, Bernard expects to be caught. As if he was writing the occurrence in a story, he picks this moment as the time for him to be caught. But the actual narration refuses it.[33] As the first paragraph continues, a narrator seems to take over from Bernard the act of storytelling, since we get more background information. However, the narrator seems to give up his own duties when he informs us that his "family respected his solitude—not so the demon!" (3). The mention of the demon on the first page announces, albeit somewhat obliquely, the most pertinent theoretical track of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, regardless of the actual theorization that goes on in Édouard's journal and conversation. Apparently Bernard isn't really alone. Not only is there a demon included in his solitude, but we and the narrator are also privy to his thoughts and actions, which, in his attempt to narrate himself, come in and out of contact. The demon stands behind Bernard's attempt at control, providing another explanation at one remove for his actions. Only the demon in this regression of narrators seems to be omniscient.

As opposed to *Les Caves,* the demon stands behind the *acte gratuit* in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs.* In the event that kicks off the convergence of the various plot threads in the novel, the demon spurs on Bernard to take Édouard's valise. Bernard doesn't quite know

[33] An alternative reading of Bernard's self-narration would see it as Gide's attempt at representing the character with an interior monologue or stream of consciousness. At times, we get the same kind of fragmentary thought replication that someone like Joyce uses in *Ulysses*. Gide's stream of consciousness, however, has a very artificial air to it that would make it embarrassing to take as a faithful representation of normal thought (he gets the tone much better in *Les Caves du Vatican*). But rather than class this as a failure, we can see it as Gide's emphasis on the artificiality of novelistic discourse—as well as the novelistic influence on our own thoughts. The foregrounding of artificiality speaks to Gide's heritage in Aestheticism, even as he employs a typically Modernist form. Gide is never interested simply in representation, but the relation of representation to the represented.

what he is doing when he first begins to follow Olivier and Édouard at the train station. When Édouard drops his baggage ticket an irresistible opportunity presents itself to Bernard. He addresses himself now in the second person: “Bernard, Bernard, what thought is this that is tickling you? It was only yesterday that you were rifling a drawer. On what path are you entering? Consider, my boy, consider. . . .” (81). He is no longer narrating himself, but splitting himself to look at two sides of the situation. He takes up the same words again to urge himself on in the desire to insinuate himself between Olivier and Édouard, to get the plot of the book rolling: “Consider that the cloak-room attendant who took Edouard’s luggage will be gone to his lunch at 12 o’clock, and that that there will be another one on duty. And didn’t you promise your friend to dare anything [*tout oser*]?” (81 translation modified). His voice changes over from reflection to plotting as he makes a plan for the theft, which is a signal that the external influence of the demon directs his thoughts.

When Bernard in fact goes to reclaim Édouard’s valise, he begins to worry that he will lose his cool. However, the narrator assures us, “the demon will not allow him to be lost [*ne permettra pas qu’il se perde*]; he slips between Bernard’s anxious fingers, as they go searching from pocket to pocket with a simulacrum of feigned despair, a fifty-centime bit, which had lain forgotten since goodness knows when in his waistcoat pocket” (82 translation modified). The sentence shifts from the future to the present tense and ends with a remainder from the past: the first part assures us that the demon looks after Bernard—he is watching over the character just like we are. The second part of the sentence marks a clear intervention in the book. The demon slips the coin into his pocket—and then the narrator tries to explain it away as forgotten but already there

(leftover from a previous time).[34] The coincidence of these three phases of time—past, present, and future—in the hands of the demon are Gide's winking admission that he holds the narrative in his hands while simultaneously refusing to provide laborious explanation for events that seem unlikely.

Bernard himself gets the sense that he is being watched, as he is by at least three parties (us, the narrator, and the demon). He asks, "does one ever know who observes you?" (83 translation modified). Perhaps his self-consciousness is merely an attribute of committing a wrongful act like this: he watches himself and his fear of getting caught is his conscience trying to avert him. But he also observes everything. He reads Édouard's journal, which at the same time provides the reader with insight into the various strands of the plot suddenly converging, simulating and producing the retroactive narrative process Gide perfects in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*. With Bernard's reading of the journal, the form and content of the novel coincide in Gide's preferred figure of *mise en abyme*. Bernard's gratuitous acts of taking the valise and reading the journal are purely novelistic: he finds a way to intervene in a story that so far doesn't seem to concern him. He makes a fiction out of his life. This is the desire, bearing the name of the devil in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, which spurs on the excessive plotting of the book. Each action, unexplainable, demands narrative to retroactively explain it. Gide's innovation is to show that this explanation can never fully exhaust the shock of the unexplainable.

In the *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*, which records Gide's progress as he writes the novel, Gide clues us into the participation of the demon in his book. The demon, or the devil—both stand in for an idea of evil, like in Julius's theory of action in *Les*

[34] This is another counterfeit coin, though not circulated intentionally to disrupt the novelistic economy. It is the artificial currency of narration that molds the lives of the characters into the bounds of a novel.

Caves—becomes a placeholder in the book, the empty spot that, if visible, understandable, readable, would make everything make sense. The entry following Gide's endorsement of Wilde's paradox that nature imitates art, dated from the following day, bears the heading "*The treatise on the nonexistence of the Devil*." There Gide notes, in a formula resembling the negative dialectic he learned from Wilde, "The more we deny him, the more reality we give him. The Devil is affirmed in our negation" (416). He mentions a dialogue with the devil that he wrote, which is reproduced as an appendix, but this (absent) spot sets the book in orbit and shapes it into a circular logic.

The dialogue, "Identification du Démon," connects this quantity called the devil/demon back to the novelistic enterprise, in words very similar to the way Julius de Barglioul describes it. The main speaker claims the idea of the devil is "as a puerile oversimplification, an apparent explanation, of certain psychological problems—for which my mind vigorously rejects any solutions other than the perfectly natural, scientific, and rational ones" (466). The devil is just a figure that can be imported to "simplify" a gap in "rationality." But, importantly, the devil also induces a circular logic, since it is a force of negation. The speaker cautions about his own explanation of the devil as explanation, "the Devil himself would agree with me here; he is delighted; he knows he has no better hiding-place than behind such rational explanations, which relegate him to the plane of the gratuitous hypothesis" (466). The major difference in this newer theory of "gratuitousness" is a move from the act to its explanation. The second voice says that the "alias [Satan] prefers" ought to be "the Gratuitous Hypothesis" (466); all of these complex explanations he believes, since it would be ridiculous to credit the

inexplicable to the devil, only push the devil into another corner, the extra explanation.[35] Once he admits the devil's existence "from that moment everything seems to be clarified, I seem to understand everything; it seems to me that at one fell swoop I discover the explanation of my life, of all the inexplicable, of all the incomprehensible, of all the dark corners of my life" (466). By putting in place one supposition, the "inexplicable" becomes an understandable "whole"— a momentary shift in perspective. However, in typical Gidean fashion, the demand is to hold both views at once: this little extract ends with the second voice claiming he'd like to write a dialogue—just like the one we are reading, but with a different first line, which the devil himself speaks: "'*Why should you be afraid of me? You know very well I don't exist'*" (467).[36]

Believing in the devil—which negates his existence by affirming it—brings with it a momentary clarity to life. The devil is a hypothesis, a value whose existence can only be inferred. In this locus we find once again the desire for explanation, which is the desire for fiction. The devil is a function of time. Imputing his existence, Gide is able to de-form the novel from a conventional chronological sequence. He takes away the causal chain, the necessity of consequence, the succession of time. Letting this empty spot remain

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[35] This is also how Édouard views Sophroniska's psychoanalytic "cure" of Boris, which is just another failure: "to my mind, the malady has simply taken refuge in some deeper recess of his being, as though to escape the doctor's inquisitorial glance, and now it is his soul itself which is the seat of mischief" (210).

[36] Jill Robbins points out that Gide here is rewriting Ivan Karamazov's interview with the devil in Book Eleven of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Gide placed Dostoevsky in ranks with Nietzsche and Wilde as an important influence in his thinking of writing. In his lectures on Dostoevsky, delivered in 1922 at the *Vieux Colombier*, three years before the publication of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, Gide claims "There is no work of art to which the Demon is not a co-signatory" (147). He also cites Wilde's paradox of life imitating art to explain Dostoevsky's emphasis on fundamental ambiguity. For Gide, who claims he "loathes paradoxes," any new idea "invariably wears the guise of paradox" (146). Gide derives the idea of the *acte gratuit* from Kirilov's suicide in *The Possessed*. It is interesting to note that Gide's formal interest in "one of the rarest manifestations of Dostoevsky's artistry" is the way he interrupts the "evolution of the plot" (157). As Gide admits, the French novelist "wants to simplify" due to his "desire . . . for *stylization*" (107), but this structural tension or paradox is exactly what Gide seeks to replicate in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*: the simultaneous awareness of the motion and conventions of plot and the excess of detail and importance that seems to stick against it.

unfilled, except by an enigmatic and unprovable name, allows the novel to take on this form, which in Gide's mind is simultaneously closer to life in its inconsequential incomprehensibility and truer to art in its demolishment of outdated and improper conventions. Once again, it is the form of Wilde's paradox in all its ambivalence, where art and life try to outdo one another in imitation.

In the end, La Pérouse tries to convey to Édouard the ultimate ambivalence of the attempt to explain or narrate one's life, as he tells him about his own botched suicide attempt:

> "Something completely foreign to my will, stronger than my will held me back. As if God didn't want to let me go. Imagine a marionette who should want to leave the stage before the end of the play. . . . Halt! You're wanted for the *finale*. Ah! Ah! you thought you would be able to go off whenever you liked! . . . I understood that what we call our will is merely the threads which work the marionette, and which God pulls." (250 translation modified).

La Pérouse overlays what may seem the ultimate act of "will," suicide, into a staged scene of a marionette theater with God pulling the strings, turning the potential *acte gratuit* into an unreadable concatenation of fate and chance. When La Pérouse tries to demonstrate this ambiguity to Édouard, he devolves into a circular explanation that cannot be proved: "'I say to myself presently: "Now I am going to raise my right arm"; and I raise it.' (And he did raise it.) 'But it's because the string had already been pulled which made me think and say: "I'm going to raise my right arm."'" (250 translation modified). Gide's interest lies in the parenthetical comment that Édouard interjects in his

diary account of this event: “(And he did raise it)” (250). Self-narration is a forced attempt at control which must fall into this circular logic that relies on the gratuitous (extra) hypothesis of another knowing thing somewhere in the background holding the reins. La Pérouse takes up this argument as he is trying to die and finds he cannot will himself to do so. Soon, however, we see that the shock of death is the ultimate unexplainable factor that does away with any simplistic narration as his grandson Boris effectively disproves his theory.

A Map of Ambivalence

Still, a novelist might not know exactly what he or she is writing about as he writes—this is precisely Édouard’s method, the traditional mimetic representation: “‘I wait for reality to dictate to me’” (188). But since Édouard never produces his novel, his writing appears more like a private cathartic process to deal with life. Gide’s goal in representing Édouard’s quest for representation turns the tables around, as Gide acknowledges, to where life imitates art. Within the novel, Gide provides the character Bernard as a critic of this reversal, for Bernard has grown sick over his attempts to live life like a literary character.

The effect both Gide and Édouard want is to neutralize the difference between reality and fiction; what he aims to show us is how fiction acts upon the world—and Bernard is the instrument for this demonstration. Since there are multiple interpretations of reality—Bernard against Édouard, for example—who can say which is the true one? Bernard is Édouard’s foil as well as his secretary. He takes the novelist to task for his theories and, not coincidentally, their confrontation occurs at the exact middle point of the book, when Édouard, Bernard, and Laura are in Saas-Fée for Laura’s confinement. In

this section, Gide presents the most elaborate unfolding of Édouard's theories, with Bernard's adolescent searching as a counterpoint (and Boris, eventually, as an after-effect of the theory, putting it to the test in the end).

The critique of Édouard begins in the novel and then gets picked up by the critics after Gide published it. In other words, Gide anticipates the critical response to his book. When Laura and Sophroniska ask Édouard to speak about the novel he is writing, Édouard shies away from the "usual fatuity of authors" (185) who talk about their work, but in the end he gives the most condensed version of his interrogation of the novel form in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, beyond the journals. Édouard claims that although the novel is "the freest, the most *lawless*" literary genre, it "has always clung to reality with such timidity" (185). His critique of realism leads him to uphold the general over the particular, breaking the rule of the detail that ordered the Naturalist school and its "slice of life" (187).

Although Édouard organizes all of these terms into seeming choices, it is a mistake to think that he actually chooses one side over the other. Laura and Sophroniska both suggest this and Édouard objects. He is more interested in holding the two together, expressing a paradox like Wilde's, as Gide does in the *Journal*. Another way to formulate the paradox is Édouard's example from Racine, "the discussion between Mithridate and his two sons . . . it's a scene in which the characters speak in a way we know perfectly well no father and sons could ever have spoken in, and yet (I ought to say for that very reason) it's a scene in which all fathers and sons can see themselves [*se reconnaître*]" (186). He reframes this paradox in terms we've already seen as "that very struggle between what reality offers [the novelist] and what he himself desires to make of it"

(187-8). Édouard does not want to produce a completely pure, abstract novel, but rather a novel that represents simultaneously its distance and proximity to reality. Like Gide writing in front of the mirror, he wants to catch the process of representation in the act.

Against Édouard's theoretical bent, Bernard wants to find the real life. But Bernard's qualm is still explicitly literary: for him life either disappoints in relation to art or it imitates art too much. He complains to Laura, as he confesses his love for her, of his disappointment with the actual feeling of love as compared to its literary expression. He admits, "'I really thought I should only be able to love in a savage, devastating way, à la Byron'" (198). But this was a self-deception. Bernard says, "'I was playing the part of a dreadful character [*affreux personnage*] and making desperate efforts to resemble him'" (198 translation modified). He brings us back to the opening scene where he tried to narrate himself into a novel (and it worked). Now he regrets taking leave of his family so abruptly and proudly. His complaint is to "'have in [his] head quantities of phrases from great authors, which come irresistibly to one's lips when one wants to express a sincere feeling'" (198): Bernard wants out of the novel, so that he can invent his own language to express his totally new and original sentiment.

Ironically, though, Bernard finds he can still only define himself in contrast to others. He wants to write a story of someone who "'starts by listening to everyone, who consults everyone like Panurge, before deciding to do anything'" (195). This is the character that is fully open to influence—not the deferred recognition of influence that Gide outlines, but the direct application of theory to practice. But Bernard thus provides a self-enhancing moral for this story: "'after having discovered that the opinions of all these people are contradictory in every point, he makes up his mind to consult no one but

himself, and thereupon becomes very strong'" (195 translation modified). So Bernard's story of influence ends—in a very adolescent way—with the supposed formation of a self-standing individual. Bernard's writing takes the form of a notebook where "'I write down an opinion on the right hand page, whenever I can write the opposite opinion, facing it, on the left hand page'" (195). The notebook is really a map of ambivalence, a principle of reaction without reflection as opposed to Gide's theory of writing as retroaction. Where Bernard can only go in the opposite direction, Gide seeks instead a simultaneous exchange of influence.

Bernard wants a way out of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, particularly as he finds he distrusts Édouard's theories about art and life. In the elaborate relativist world that Gide constructs with his novel, through the seemingly endless series of characters and points of view, all gravitating around an unknown center (no truth, no fundamental principle at work), Bernard needs to find a resolution to the novelistic ambivalence, which is palpable in Édouard's interaction with the world. Even though Bernard finds himself spurred on by the same devil behind many of the actions in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, he cannot accept the possibility of an *acte gratuit.* He seeks logical explanations and clear ideologies.

Strangely, as Lucey points out, Bernard is often the critics' darling in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, since he tries to escape Édouard's novelistic grasp. He is a rugged individualist with a strong moral sense, who wants to "be worth exactly what one seems to be worth" (201). He voices the desire to escape the counterfeit economy of truth and fiction that Gide sets up and Édouard investigates: there has to be one way to act that is right. By taking Bernard's side, the critic goes against Édouard, the novelist—whom even Gide calls a failure.

Lucey argues that the critics' upholding of Bernard as the model character has at least implicit, if not explicit, heteronormative bias. Behind all of the theoretical and moral propositions both Bernard and the critics adduce against Édouard's Protean nature and his radical novelistic enterprise in favor of a more codified identity, is a certain repudiation of sexuality, comparable to Sophroniska's attempt to cure Boris of his masturbation. Bernard struggles with his philosophy at the same time as he struggles with his feelings for Laura. It must not be a coincidence that he ends up with an empirical realism and heterosexuality. But this either/or only simplifies what Gide tries to depict and create in the novel. He does not force the reader to choose between the strong straight adolescent male and the borderline pedophilic and incestuous, homosexual uncle. There is room for both.

Bernard tries to force Édouard into a corner, by tying him to the title of his book, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*. Bernard asks who these counterfeiters are and Édouard says he doesn't know. The narrator steps in to explain:

> In reality, Édouard had in the first place been thinking of his fellow novelists when he began to think of the counterfeiters, and in particular of the Comte de Passavant. But this attribution had been considerably widened . . . If he allowed his mind to follow its bent, it soon tumbled headlong into abstractions, where it was totally comfortable. Ideas of exchange, of depreciation, of inflation, etc., gradually invaded his book. (191-2)

In the narrator's attempt to explain, Édouard's metaphor becomes so "widened" and "abstract" that it doesn't really provide a clue beyond cliché for how to interpret the

novel.[37] We must distinguish between Édouard's book, which is never written, and Gide's, which we are reading. There are counterfeiters in Gide's book as in Édouard's; fake money appears both thematically and discursively, without ever making a final or explicit interpretation necessary or possible. For precisely this reason, the critic feels it is his or her burden to explain it away—the very title of the book demands it.

Still Bernard gets the jump on the critics. Édouard asks him if he has ever held "a counterfeit coint [*une pièce fausse*]" in his hands: "'imagine a false ten-franc gold piece. In reality it's not worth two sous. But it will be worth ten francs as long as no one recognizes it to be false. So if I start from the idea that . . . '" (192). But Bernard interrupts, "'why start from an idea?'"—and he produces a real false coin. The irony of this gesture—of Bernard's attempt to ground Édouard's theory in reality by producing a true fake—opens up the circular economy of criticism that anyone who tries to talk about *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (character or reader) cannot escape. Bernard wanted to show Édouard the coin to help him with his novel, but when he sees Édouard's discomfort he asks for the coin back: "'I'm sorry that the reality doesn't interest you.'" Édouard responds, "Yes . . . but it disturbs me [*elle me gêne*]'" (193).[38]

Bernard's summary, "'That's a pity'" (193), could put the nail in the coffin and finally proclaim the ridiculousness of Édouard's theory. However, Gide is trying to make a more complex point. Bernard's search for sincerity is really a red herring. Bernard simultaneously wants out of the novel—to be free and lawless himself—and to be

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[37] Goux makes the most rigorous application of this metaphor to an interpretation of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*. But if we really follow Édouard's comment that he wants to pit rival interpretations against each other, we cannot uphold a pure novel against a realistic novel. Thus, Gide's own novel has both elements and they play off one another, only increasing the pleasure of the reading experience.

[38] Debreuille's interpretation of Gide's mobilization of psychoanalytic theory as a rival to the novel theory in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* aims to explain why reality bothers Édouard. Debreuille points out that the novel is not interested in reality but rather in the relation of desire to reality (5). In the end, the novel doesn't aim for a cure and is therefore richer than a psychoanalytic case.

completely moral and rulebound. He upholds ego and reality. Gide doesn't tell us this is wrong; in fact, his contradictory impulse ties into Gide's own reflective theory of writing, where every action is a reaction—or more temporally complex, a retroaction. Édouard therefore is not on the other side of Bernard; they are not opposite. Édouard doesn't abjure reality; the *gêne* it causes him is an encumbrance, the same feeling that he expresses after Boris's death. In fact, death typifies the bother reality causes, which prescribes the limit to the novel as a genre, but also instigates its attempt to catch life in a representation. Here, we return to the problem that ends the book and which began our investigation: why does Édouard want to exclude Boris's death from his book? And why does Gide keep it in?

Boris's Final Lesson

According to Édouard, the "drama of our lives" is "the rivalry between the real world and the representation of it which we make to ourselves. The manner in which the world of appearances imposes itself upon us, and the manner in which we try to impose on the outside world our own interpretation" (205). This drama is the plot of Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, the "'deep-lying subject [*sujet profond*]" (205)—which takes its cue from Wilde's paradox about art and life, and more specifically from Wilde's own tragedy of putting his genius into his life and only his talent into his works. The relationship of imitation is no longer a static mirroring; it exists in time. Édouard notes that the "resistance of facts invites us to transport our ideal construction into the realm of dreams, of hope, of belief in a future life, which is fed by all the disappointments and disillusions of our present one" (205). This is the same blindspot of deferral that Dorian inhabited, and because of that Boris's death must necessarily intervene, to confront the novel with

the inherently unexplainable. No matter how Gide represents Boris's death, in the detailed descriptions of the events leading to it, there is something uncontrollable, unthinkable there. The novel, Gide tells us, expresses the desire to reach this ultimate place—the empty point that creates and escapes representation.

Gide mirrors Édouard's novel theory with Sophroniska's version of psychoanalysis in order to bring out another version of the paradoxical relation between reality and fiction. At the root of the literary endeavor is the same ambivalence that each person faces at the demand of society and that Freud insisted was inherently sexual. Civilization demands we give up our fantasies to the demands of reality; this is the education process that instills morals and makes Boris give up masturbation. It is also the critique that demands realistic representation in the novel and clearly delineates between life and art. Édouard—like Boris, who forms symptoms to replace his sexual outlet—seeks a way to let the demand of reality coexist with the possibilities of fantasy. The difference is that Édouard seeks a healthy outcome through his writing. Central to this project is an understanding that in and around the demands of reality, we construct our world like a fiction, taking on the identities of characters and interpreting the world through artistic conventions.[39]

Sophroniska explains to Édouard that Boris's masturbatory habits, which were introduced to him by a "schoolfellow one or two years older than himself—one Baptistin Kraft," are in Boris's eyes "'magic'" (206). To Boris and his friends, magic allows one

[39] Jacques Lacan's review of Jean Delay's psychobiography of Gide, "Jeunesse de Gide, ou la lettre et le désir," deals with the material of life for literature, on the assumption of "*la vérité de la fiction*" (753). Lacan looks at Gide as an analyst who traces the splitting of the subject, who sees the way the letter carries forth and repeats desire. Gide's irony, he claims, is that love is struck by "*cette touche mortelle*" (763), bringing together desire and death in language in the endless search to discover a meaning that does not exist.

"in some mysterious way to gain possession of what one wishes for [*ce que l'on desire*], that it unlimits power" (206 translation modified).[40] Or, as Édouard translates into more literary terms, "They believed in all good faith that they had discovered a secret which consoled real absence with illusory presence" (206 translation modified). Édouard subtly sublimates their sexual fantasies into his own favored conflict between the real and the fictional. But he is not far off in making it a literary proposition. The magic Boris and his friends used was a "*talisman*" or "formula of incantation," composed five strange words, "GAS. TELEPHONE. ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND ROUBLES." (207). When Édouard asks the meaning of this strange talisman, Sophroniska responds, "'But it means nothing—it's magic'" (207). However, the meaningless in this case has a very real effect for the children using it. Boris himself is a paradox that evades explanation. When Édouard first meets him, Boris seems not to have learned the principle of non-contradiction. Édouard overhears him saying, "'Yes, I will. No, I won't'" and "'it's too hot, it's too cold'" (174). Apparently, the cure for Boris is to resolve these oppositions, to provide meaning for his words—and to give up masturbation. But then his nervous symptoms arise; though the habit of masturbation is meaningless and useless, it is still somehow necessary for his health. Fiction impinges on reality.

Boris's problems and the parroted discourse of psychoanalysis that surrounds it clues us in to another possible name for the devilish impulse that conveniently sets the plot moving in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*: sexual desire. Because of desire, Bernard is a bastard; likewise, Olivier's desire leads him to take Bernard in after he leaves his home;

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[40] Boris's friend's name is worth noting: Baptistin, on the one hand, is a name Gide uses in *Les Caves*, for the corrupt guide that takes Fleurissoire to the pension/brothel where Carola and Protos get hold of him. He is an inconsequential character otherwise, but the name brings up chance and bad influence. On the other hand, the conjunction of baptism and *puissance* (or in German, *Kraft*) overdetermines the eventual religious-moral power that makes Boris a neurotic.

desire leads Vincent to consummate an illicit relationship with Laura resulting in her pregnancy and then leads him to leave her for Lady Griffith; and on the side of the writers, desire is what drives Édouard on in his search for real life events, as it is what moves Passavant in his search for a secretary and journal editor. The drive for sex stands behind most of the events of the novel and can fill the same empty spot as Gide's devil. The remnants of Gide's Protestant upbringing lead him to call this drive evil or sin. *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* is the third in a series of books that Gide published that confronted homosexuality frankly, including *Corydon* and *Si le grain ne meurt*. The special development of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* is that it is the only novel, and so Gide explores the workings of fantasy against reality and broaches sex in a more diffuse and all encompassing way.

In the character of Boris, I would argue, Gide is not only commenting on the violent effects of explaining away difference or regulating non-normative sexualities; he is also figuring a paradoxical desire that underwrites Gide's own novelistic practice as well as the form of the novel itself: a desire for death. The novelistic desire for explainable narrative actually leads to a desire for the limits of comprehension, the *acte gratuit*. The desire for death is the model of this paradox, since it is simultaneously a desire for totality—a completed and understandable life—and a desire for nothingness. At one point, Bernard, citing once again *The Brothers Karamazov*, decides the best form of self-expression is an act of suicide: "'killing himself out of enthusiasm, out of sheer excess of life'" (273); consequently, Olivier attempts suicide after an embarrassing drunken fight is followed by his first night spent alone with Édouard. But to uphold

suicide again simplifies matters. Boris figures the contradiction: in effect, he commits suicide, but he is really forced into the action by peer pressure and taunting.

The common substrate we have for sex and for the devil—and for fiction as well—is desire. But where critics have thoroughly explored the desire for sex in Gide's novel, the final connection, a desire for death leading to Boris's death, has not gotten as much attention. The tragic end seems to bear a moral judgment, returning Gide to the moralistic aesthetic plot that punishes characters for choosing art over life. But Boris is innocent; he pays the price of death for Édouard's interventions. Though Boris is punished, his death indicts the whole remaining cast of characters.

Édouard does not want Boris's death in his novel because it lacks explanation; but Gide seeks the unexplainable, and thus he leaves the death in. At the end of the first notebook of the *Journal*, Gide writes "of the need to go farther and farther back to explain any given incident. The slightest act requires infinite motivation" (424). Gide admits that not all acts can be completely explained. I would argue that he paradoxically wants to structure his novel through this lack of form. Near the end of the second notebook, he writes "on all sides life offers us many beginnings of drama, but only rarely do these continue and take shape as the novelist is accustomed to spin them out. And this is exactly the idea I want to give in this book, which I shall have Édouard express" (447). Gide wants to capture the uncertainty of the present, which causes us to defer an explanation—or a plot line—to the future.

Boris's suicide is unexplainable because it relies upon the same paradoxical logic that nature imitates art, that the future decides the past, that one might be able to narrate one's life. In an attempt to explain, we may trace back Boris's forced act of suicide and

assign guilt to Sophroniska or to Édouard. However, Boris himself has a deep sense of guilt: he feels responsible for his own father's death, a guilt he tries to relieve through the magic of masturbation.[41] Since Boris believes that words have creative properties, it's no wonder that, when invited to join the "Brotherhood of Strong Men", he will act out their motto, "The strong man cares nothing for life [*l'homme fort ne tient pas à la vie*]" (383). None of the explanations halts the forward motion that leads Boris to his death just as none of them can fully satisfy as explanation.

Ultimately, the character and plotline of Boris indicts the novelistic desire to intervene in life, to explain and give it form. This accusation comes in the shape of unexplainable death—the necessary narrative counterpart of "might be continued," which paradoxically gives the sense of continuation while effectively ending its possibility. As with Dorian, there is no reason—no reason for the deal with the painting, no logical reason for his death. There is only the tension Édouard seeks to recreate, of outrageous reality over against our constructions of it.

Édouard can't resist the novelist's desire to intervene, like God or the devil, to take on the responsibility of the unfolding of events. This desire leads him to bring Boris from Switzerland to Paris, to see what will happen when he reunites the troubled child with his near-demented grandfather. When Édouard decides to leave out Boris's suicide from his novel, he implicitly acknowledges this guilt. Death is another empty place that holds up the structure of the novel, a debit to Édouard's fund of representation. The fact

[41] Catherine Savage Brosman sums it up nicely: "The contrast between appearance and reality is supported by the plot thread of Boris's death, which is clear only at the last but was in preparation all along; each character's contribution to the event reveals something of him" (776). She ties this to the narrative voice: "Use of the present tense diminishes the sense of authorial manipulations; there is comparatively little analysis, though we find occasional third-person and first-person authorial statements on character" (776). Gide uses the same grammatical shifting as in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, switching between past and present tense, not only in the form of Édouard's journals, but also in the semi-impersonal frame narration. The narrative arc—the plot—escapes his total control.

that Gide overrides Édouard's exclusion—a decision parallel to including the "invisible" demon in the action of his novel—points to this death as the limit of representation.

The narration traverses this limit in an interesting way. This is the paragraph that tells of Boris's death:

> The shot went off. Boris did not drop at once. The body stayed upright for a moment, as though caught in the corner of the recess; then the head, falling on to the shoulder, bore it down; it collapsed [*tout s'effondra*]. (391)
>
> [*Le coup partit. Boris ne s'affaissa pas aussitôt. Un instant le corps se maintint, comme accroché dans l'encoignure; puis la tête, retombée sur l'épaule, l'emporta, tout s'effondra.*] (489)

If we trace the subjects of this series of sentences we see a strange trajectory: *le coup*, Boris, *le corps*, *la tête*, *tout*. The narrative aggregates all of the elements involved. The gunshot meets Boris—and then the personal subject disappears. The body goes to pieces, no longer held together by life, and then it dissolves into the abstract whole. In a twist of Gide's circular logic, the last empty point—the last refuge of narrative—is death, which we only glimpse momentarily before gravity brings the body down.[42] This is a moment that cannot be accounted for: as Édouard put it, it is the *sujet profond* around which the work gravitates.

[42] Lucey wonders if the passage from Boris to *tout* is a change of perspective to an outside. For Lucey, there is an inescapable "severity" in the "description," that resides in "the body's consequential relationship to gravity" (141). The lesson Lucey pulls from this emphasizes "the violence of a narrative consequential progress-oriented view of sexuality of which Boris is the most notable victim" (141). Someone has to pay the price, which is apparently death, of the attempt at self-narration that we watch all of the characters undertake.

Armand Vedel, Laura's brother who still lives in his father's pension, provides a theoretical context for this horrible moment of narration where Boris's life gets extinguished.[43] He tells Olivier, "'I should have tried to find throughout nature the dividing line [*le point limite*], below which nothing exists'" (287). His example is another *fait divers*, similar to the story of Boris that inspired Gide to begin composition of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, which could have a whole different novel written around it:

> "The newspapers the other day had an account of a workman who was electrocuted. He was handling some live wires carelessly; the voltage was not very high; but it seems his body was in a state of perspiration. His death is attributed to the layer of humidity which enabled the current to envelop his body. If his body had been drier, the accident wouldn'y have tkane place. But now let's imagine the perspiration added drop by drop . . . . One more drop—there you are!" (287)

This example of a death caused by one single drop of sweat is especially interesting because it locates the "extreme instant" between "being and non-being" (360 my translation) as the transmission of a shock. The shock is the push that moves from life to death and that also puts the narration into motion. It's the shock of tragedy that sets Gide writing. Armand uses another term that Édouard employs in relation to his novel to pinpoint this line: "the limit of resistance" (287), like the resistance of facts to the interpretation we try to make of them (which is literature). This limit is also the line between life and death. Boris physically embodies this limit point, the folding in of itself

[43]Goulet fits Armand into the chain of representations of Gide's friend who committed suicide; the conversations that Olivier has with Armand towards the end of the novel echo the ones Gide reports in his journal and in letters around his friend's death. Armand announces the experiment; Boris is forced to carry it out.

of time and narrative, just like the contradictory language he uses, simultaneously positive and negative, to narrate his life.

The extremity of self-narration, the retroaction that Gide's discovers in his writing process, is the moment of death. When an act is complete, narrative can fold time in on itself and reflect on what has happened. Maurice Blanchot critiques Gide for writing in his journal, "'The reasons which lead me to write are many, and the most important are, it seems to me, the most secret. Especially, perhaps, this one: to shelter something from death'" (July 27, 1922 in *The Space of Literature* 94). Blanchot translates this as "to write in order not to die," an attempt at survival. And indeed, Gide writes at the end of the first notebook of his *Journal*:

> The problem for me is not *how to succeed*—but rather how to *survive* [*comment* ***DURER***].
>
> For some time now I have aimed to win my case only on appeal. I write only to be *re*read. (424)

Gide's idea of survival, to "endure" through a deferral to the potential understanding of the future that "rereads," is not a true shelter from death. This is precisely the switch from first to third person as the narrator from *Paludes* conceives it: what survives us is impersonal. On the seams of life is this desire for narration, to get from "I" to "others"—and which we know from Ovid's version of Narcissus, the desire for the supposed other is really a desire to meet one's end, a desire for death. Blanchot defines this as the "experience" of the work (or the work as experience), which when it is successful is an attempt to alter one's thoughts—to make them other. Narcissus tried to meet another,

though it was only himself, and then finally death. In modernist fashion, it is the attempt that matters, in the literary experiment.

The search for duration is the same desire that underwrites Gide's writing. But contrary to Édouard's hope that his book ends without a sense of finality, the duration Gide achieves is not indefinite or unending. The process of narration tries to fix a moment, since the present is always gone: to make the moment definite, finite, over, and then move on. The epitome of this is the moment of death. Boris's death is the ultimate test of the literary enterprise. Gide takes the story from the newspaper and tries to write a book around it, to somehow incorporate a shocking and unexplainable event within a narrative—but the novel cannot cushion the force of the gunshot. There is necessarily an empty point that is shocking in its meaningless, but that we still crave. Gide can multiply attempts and explanations, transforming life into art or vice versa; but what results is not so much the passage of time but a kind of repetition. Before Boris shot himself, he was forced to practice it (in French, *une répetition*). The attempt to control life boils down to an attempt to make precise the moment of death.

What results from the desire to find the unexplainable is the exhaustion Édouard expresses in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*: the exhaustion of the novel form. While writing a novel exhausts Édouard—he can't quite manage it—Gide, on the other hand, wants to exhaust all of the possibilities the novel offers and reflect on the way the imposition of its form changes reality. That is why even as Gide doubles the already complex plot with theoretical reflection on the novel—and then publishes even more reflection in his *Journal*—we still take an immense pleasure in reading the book. *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*

answers both our narcissistic desire and our desire to reach out to the world.[44] We get to remain still and move on at the same time. The novel needs to find new territory, to narrate us across the limits. The reason we narrate ourselves and think of our lives through characters—the reason there is God or the Devil—is to try to make sense of all of this. The sexual explanation is the desire—the same fuel—that drives plot on and allows it to end. Édouard wants to end the novel with a possibility of continuation, but no matter what, the novel is not continued (or even finished by him). What we really desire when we desire sex or fiction is death, an end that means there is nothing to explain anymore.

[44] We could chock this up the sexual insatiability Gide's recounts in *Si le Grain ne meurt*, where he has to supplement sexual encounters with continual masturbation, in an attempt to "prolong" his "ecstasy" (289). Gide admits this while acknowledging that it might lack "likelihood [*vraisemblance*]" (289). But he counters, "it is not likelihood I am in quest of, but truth" (289).

IV. Lytton Strachey and Biography as Learning How to Die

Judgment and Sympathy

Lytton Strachey is best known as the father of the New Biography, the shorter, ironic reaction to the pious volumes of Victorian hagiography that he inaugurated with his 1918 bestselling book, *Eminent Victorians*. In the middle of WWI, Strachey's groundbreaking collection of four short biographies of notable Victorians countered patriotic fervor with an irreverent look at the mainly religious hypocrisies of the preceding generation. Strachey's work fits into a new wave of biographical and historical writing dating from the turn of the century that explicitly questioned whether biography, like history, belonged to the realm of science or of literature. After the Victorian emphasis on making humanistic discourses scientific, the Modernists took a more artistic take on the facts and events of life and history. However, even the artistic biographers, like Strachey, Harold Nicholson, and André Maurois, were still, at least explicitly, at pains to show that they were beholden to fact.[1]

While Strachey was the first of the Bloomsbury group to find success, both artistically and financially, his contemporary reputation seems to have destined him to a later eclipse. In fact, whatever seemed revolutionary about his work at the time has given way in the rare instances of critical attention paid to Strachey to his non-traditional lifestyle. Strachey himself would not have taken this interest in his life over his work amiss—he had a gossip's interest in famous people's personal lives over their work. But Strachey's seeming lightweight style cannot be so quickly brushed aside; his major texts, *Eminent Victorians*, *Queen Victoria*, and *Elizabeth and Essex*, still bear within them a

[1] Ray Monk provides a good overview of this history and its theoretical implication sin his essay "Life Without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding."

revolutionary power that places them in the literary heritage moving from Aestheticism to Modernism in a rethinking of the relationship of life and art through formal innovation. Strachey, I claim, retains his rank in experimental modernism precisely because he writes life over to the realm of narrative. In answer to his hypothesis in the preface of *Eminent Victorians* that "it is perhaps as difficult to write a good life as to live one" (xiv) Strachey merges aesthetic and ethical judgment with the lesson that the good life is one that is well-written, not well-lived.

Following the dichotomy of art and science that troubled new biographers, much of Strachey criticism has either defended his artistic license by verifying the facts he used or has tried to debunk the debunker by showing holes in his scholarship. The latter negative criticism has tended to devolve into *ad hominem* attacks that berate Strachey's effeminate style, part of the negative reaction to Bloomsbury led by Wyndham Lewis and F.R. Leavis; but even recently, for example, John Fern, in his short overview, *Lytton Strachey,* hardly masks his uncritical dislike for Strachey's style. On the positive side, Barry Spurr has provided a thorough appreciation of Strachey's style and works, making an argument that Strachey's homosexuality influenced a rethinking of gender positions and an innovation in an arch and ironic style he calls, "Camp Mandarin," a paradoxical mixture that loads weighty vocabulary with ironic barbs, particularly aimed at taking down stratified gender roles. "Introducing the vocabulary and cadence of Mandarin," Spurr writes, "Strachey proceeds subtly and wittily to pervert and violate its conventions, manipulating the solemnity of the Ciceronian, Gibbonian dialect to produce a voice placed, as it were, midway between the male and female ranges and sounding, at once, like both and like neither" (32). Spurr's conception of Camp Mandarin emphasizes the

personality that comes through in Strachey's writing, not only of his subjects, but of himself (or his narrator). Similarly, I would argue that Strachey's project of placing biography within the realm of literature by importing novelistic conventions leads to a more personal quest of writing his own life into the realm of literary history.

Against Spurr's positive view of Strachey's gender-bending style, Julie Anne Taddeo, in *Lytton Strachey and the Search for Modern Sexual Identity*, even questions the championing of Strachey as a forward thinker merely due to his homosexuality or his Bloomsburian ménage-à-trois with the painter Carrington and Ralph Partridge. Ultimately, she claims, Strachey upholds a patriarchal lifestyle, witnessed in the traditional female role Carrington took on as Lytton's caretaker. Likewise, in Strachey's work, Taddeo points to his use of satire as a power play that actually reinforces traditional gender roles and Victorian mores. However, in order to make this argument, Taddeo necessarily simplifies Strachey's work. By taking them as documents or straight biographies, she overlooks the contribution Strachey makes to literary history in his systematic mixing of fiction and history. Zsuzsa Rawlinson counters this argument with thorough appreciation of Strachey in *"The Sphinx of Bloomsbury,"* which resituates Strachey as avant-garde by showing how he anticipates post-modern questioning of master narratives in his foregrounding of history as an interpretive process. As these examples show, Strachey criticism, for the most part, remains stuck in deciding whether his writing is really good or bad, rather than trying to show what his work actually does.

An important exception to the typically evaluative critical heritage, Perry Meisel provides a masterful reading of Strachey in *The Myth of the Modern* that theorizes Strachey's work as part of the recognizable Modernist trope of reflexivity. Strachey, he

claims, “destroy[s] our distinctions between art and action by means of an interpretation of life that sees the world itself as a text or a complex of languages, and that exacts from all human endeavor the single and enduring feature of reading and interpreting signs” (198). He goes on to show how Strachey narrates through his biographies the origin of the concepts he puts into motion, such as psychological interiority and the reciprocal relation of the public and the private. According to Meisel, Strachey’s irony consists of a narration that simultaneously uses and questions every term that goes into the fabric of its story. Importantly, Meisel determines Strachey’s place among the more widely read High Modernists by outlining his reflexive theorizing of his process in his writing. In fact, Meisel claims that Strachey’s prose is the most refined example of Bloomsbury reflexivity, a smoothness that he suggests may have doomed it to lose its revolutionary effect. Picking up on the Aesthetic heritage that informs Meisel’s reading and the blurred boundary Meisel exposes between textuality and life in Strachey’s work, I will show how Strachey’s biographies attempt to work out the proposition that life imitates art by a reversal of priority, from life to biography. Strachey, I argues, depicts life and death as after-effects of literary conventions.

Michael Holroyd’s critical biography, *Lytton Strachey: The New Biography* (the latest revision of many since its first publication in 1968), was the first work to provide a clear-eyed view of Strachey’s writing alongside a truthful account of his homosexuality Holroyd convincingly connects Strachey’s life with his writing by outlining a compensatory relation between his often bedridden invalid state and his imaginative explorations of different, sometimes more adventurous lives in the recent and distant past. Following Holroyd’s lead—and informed by Paul de Man’s claim that “the

autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life" ("Autobiography as De-Facement" 69)—Esther Sánchez Pardo has explored how for Strachey "shaping other people's lives expresses a desire to be able to shape one's own" (274). To do this, Sánchez-Pardo utilizes a Kleinian psychoanalytic terminology of projective identification and melancholia to trace Strachey's abjuration of disease and death in his search for beautiful form in the narration of others' lives.

In outlining Strachey's apparent fear of death as a motor for his biographies, Sánchez-Pardo compares him to Wilde, claiming that "the drama he enacts in his biographical writing is not far from that exposed by Wilde in *The picture of Dorian Gray*" in which "Dorian comes to prefigure the image of the homosexual cast in the domain of art in the uncanny transference of bodily decline and decomposition to the canvas while its subject remains unchanged" (284). Sánchez-Pardo is right to point to a similarity in Wilde and Strachey's projects; however, her reading of *Dorian Gray* only attends to its potential as moral allegory. Instead, I would suggest, Strachey falls in line with our alternative reading of *Dorian Gray*, behind the supposed quest for immortality, by expressing in his work a desire for death. In other words, I suggest that Strachey's biographies are an attempt to learn how to die. Therefore, while they do have a therapeutic quality, it is no longer simply caught up in the compensatory or redemptive economy that both Holroyd and Sánchez-Pardo outline.

By fitting Strachey in line with the Aesthetic heritage of Wilde, we can reevaluate Strachey's biographies as a revision of the aesthetic novel of the late nineteenth-century, such as Pater's *Marius the Epicurean,* Huysmans' *À Rebours*, or Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, all of which depict the main character through a catalog of his taste. Rather

than scrupulously follow the life of his subject in a linear narrative, Strachey paints an emblematic portrait, one that is economical in events that go further towards expressing personality. Therefore, his biographies have less forward momentum. His emphasis on omission, selection—in other words, editing—radically alters the temporal sequence of a life that is lived, and allows it to take on the nonlinear shape of a modern novel. Strachey imports literary conventions of plot and the novelist's manipulation of narrative voice in relation to the character's interiority to try to understand the lives of real people. As long as Strachey's reputation rests solely on his acute critical attacks best exemplified by *Eminent Victorians*, the more innovative project he undertook is missed. I will suggest that Strachey followed Wilde by seeking in his biographies an aesthetic identification with history. He does this in order to read the pattern of lives in the repetitive and dull facts of death. Strachey's novelistic view of life rests on an aesthetic interpretation of death as a repetitive formal element, a final narrative convention.

That Strachey discovers biography as the best literary genre in which to confront death is perhaps not surprising. Woolf opens her late essay, "The Art of Biography" (1939), which questions biographies aesthetic claims through a reading of Strachey, with a meditation on the mortality rate of biographies. She poses the question of whether biography may be thought of as an art by framing it through its own life and death: "There it is, whenever a new biography is opened, casting its shadow on the page; and there would seem to be something deadly in that shadow, for after all, of the multitude of lives that are written, how few survive!" (116). Written lives are finite just like real lives, but, Woolf argues, unlike fictional lives. The life of biography, Woolf claims, is "a different life from the life of poetry and fiction—a life lived at a lower degree of tension.

And for that reason its creations are not destined for the immortality which the artist now and then achieves for his creations" (122). Even Strachey's Queen Victoria, who Woolf thinks "will be Queen Victoria, just as Boswell's Johnson is now Dr Johnson" (119), will die eventually. The mortality of biography, Woolf claims, is due to the transience of the facts on which it is based. Unlike the "facts of science," the facts of life are not "always the same": "They are subject to changes of opinion; opinions change as the times change" (121). But Strachey actually does find the facts of life to be the "same," and in the conventional pattern tries to unlock for biography the comparable richness of fiction. Paradoxically, the repletion primes the exception; Strachey finds beautiful particularity amidst the most general contours.

Against Woolf, therefore, I ask, what would it mean to take the mortality of biography not as a detriment to the genre, but instead as its powerful potential? Biography then would be capable of to replicating the impending sense of time that bounds finite life and that, in its exploration of the expandable yet limited moment, the modern novel has tried to replicate. The structure of Strachey's literary apprehension of the life (and his fictional representation of time) is revealed in the instance, often repeated throughout all of his texts, of the conditional or hypothetical speculation, characterized by the words "what if?" or "had it been otherwise." This is the ossified version of our own wondering midlife what might befall us in the future. When he presents alternative scenarios to fact, Strachey is not just building tension in his narrative by delaying the well-known inevitable sequence of events, he is activating the imaginative multiplicity of lives that was so important to Wilde's Aestheticism and to Woolf's narrative method.

This acutely felt tension of fate and chance provides the most basic contours of the novel in its narration, but it also makes up the drama of real lives, as Strachey demonstrates.

Strachey depicts history as a process of repetition of this drama in countless lives and he discovers beauty in the pattern. The pattern allows for self-understanding in purely fictive modes. Strachey's fantasy of substitute lives turns biography into literature by allowing history to work the same way as fiction. He models the novel reader's response to narrative in his telling of the past as an attempt at interpretation. We read with sympathy and judgment, simultaneously close and distant, as a way to come to grips with death and the passage of time. Strachey writes himself and his readers into history with a free indirect style of narration, utilizing the novel's sympathetic foundation in the process of identification with the hero to make the story of these real lives felt with all the imaginative qualities of fiction. The simultaneous view of the events that go into making up a life is a privilege of retrospection that Strachey, as a biographer, never tires of exploiting. But this retroactive position reveals a literary wish at the heart of factual life-writing. The impetus to form a testament to a life is the desire to see it all—all at once. Life, Strachey shows us, is an aesthetic category rather than a standard of truth that verifies the biographer's material. The written life allows us to see our own lives as meaningful by plotting them out in historical pattern and novelistic conventions. If our wish is survival, what we really gain through art is a sense of living through our own deaths, the limiting structure of finitude only available after the fact.

Most critics develop Strachey's biographical process solely from the famous preface to *Eminent Victorians*; however, I will argue that to get a full picture of Strachey's endeavor, we must trace his theorizing in his later books. His first literary

achievement is so barbed because it must be polemic, to clear the space for the more fully conceived biography of *Queen Victoria* and the experimental fiction of *Elizabeth and Essex*—but these two later books fully establish Strachey's achievement. I will begin by looking at Strachey's narrative voice and his famous irony that simultaneously distances and connects him to his character. In *Eminent Victorians*, I argue, this irony depicts a desire for control over life in the form of a plotted narrative. Next, in *Queen Victoria*, I will explore Strachey's use of novelistic conventions of romance and death to tell the Queen's life. After Prince Albert's untimely death, Strachey uses Victoria to theorize his biographical processes as a "beautiful economy" that swaps the truth of fiction for the linear retelling of facts. Victoria herself embodies Strachey's process of summary and preservation, particularly in Strachey's most famous sentence, which narrates Victoria's death. Finally, in *Elizabeth and Essex*, I will look at the narrative structure of repetition that Strachey uses to tell the story of the torturous love affair between the Queen and her favorite courtier, whom she eventually condemns to death. Through Elizabeth's inevitable decision to do away with Essex, Strachey provides us with theory of history as a repetition based on death, the model through which we attempt to understand our lives. Strachey's biographical endeavor, I will argue, is less attached to the truth of the past than the therapeutic relation of history to the present. If life imitates art, it does so in order to learn how to die; by reading of the deaths that have come before, we prepare ourselves for the banal repetition of the fact of death as well as the particular difference that makes death always fictional.

The Novel Biography

Despite his remaining legacy, Strachey is not merely a cynical debunker who judges his subjects harshly. To re-evaluate Strachey's legacy, we must read his biographies as novels. In *Eminent Victorians*, Strachey explores the desire to maintain control over life by fitting it into a narrative. He shows his subjects' own attempts to give life meaning through the conventions of fate and chance. Strachey uses irony to allow multiple views of the same event, to show the multiple opportunities life affords to an aesthetic view and to prove that whatever interpretation receives priority is ultimately arbitrary. Strachey's ironic tone takes particular aim at the hypocrisies inherent in the religious thinking of his subjects, as they try to reconcile worldly ambition with spiritual ideology. However, beneath his attacks, Strachey points to the more poignant desire to assume control over life by imagining a God who knows the contours of the story as both author and final judge. Strachey takes over God's eminent position with the voice of his narrator: looking from the divine position at a complete life (judgment), but also identifying with the feelings of the subject in the unknown process of living (sympathy).

Strachey's reputation as a debunker is tied indelibly to his trademark irony. However, to take his ironic tone as merely critical simplifies matters. Instead, I would suggest, his irony contains an ambiguity that adds complexity to his biographies: it is simultaneously judgment and sympathy. In an early appreciation of Strachey, Edwin Muir notes that "Every stroke of irony in his books is weighed not for its effectiveness but for its justice" (126). Muir claims that Strachey shows "understanding and sympathy" and is willing to "pardon" even those who believe (125). Muir delineates two moods in Strachey's writing: the consciously ironical, which he likens to satire; and the

involuntarily ironical. It is the latter which is Strachey's triumph, according to Muir, for with it "he sees the drama of existence as a transitory, illusory process which has happened so often that it has now but an apparent reality" (122). In Strachey's hands, then, "Life . . . is an illusion" where "destiny seems to be arranging for [the incidents'] unconscious effect" (122). Muir shows how Strachey replaces religious belief—so important for his subjects—with irony. Irony provides an alternative to certainty that frees up the life for the kind of narrative treatment Strachey desires. It allows for multiple views of life by maintaining the unknown and known together.

The multiplicity of interpretations life may yield results from an ambiguous experience of time that Strachey constantly exploits in his narrative process. The first biography of *Eminent Victorians*, "Cardinal Manning," opens by mentioning when Manning was born (1807) and when he died (1892), but then goes on to imagine his life and his career at various times in history. "In Manning, so it appeared," Strachey hypothesizes," the Middle Ages lived again" (3). The displacement of Manning in history simultaneously generalizes the patterns of his life and particularizes the effect he had in the actual time period in which he lived. The flexibility Strachey imbues to the life story plays against the sense of the inevitability history has when viewed retrospectively. Strachey jokes that "it was as if the Fates had laid a wager that they would daunt [Manning], and in the end they lost their bet" (4). In Strachey's hands, rigid fate bends to the will of a good story. The way Strachey ranges forward and backward in time over the life of each particular subject, circling around the sequence of events but never giving up the subject's own view of things, allies his work with the experiments in time and narrative that characterize High Modernist fiction. He uses the same temporal paradox of

anticipation and retrospection we have seen in Wilde and Gide. Strachey's characters view life one way and give it definite shape through their belief—but this is merely illusion. Muir frames it nicely: "The drama of his characters is in moments like these, which seem to be free, but are not" (124). Still, from the biographer's vantage point, these lives take shape as if arranged. Strachey's discovery is to exploit this seeming arrangement for its artistic potential.

There is a literary heritage to the God's eye view of life Strachey gives his narrator. Flaubert, whose biting irony may be seen as a progenitor of Strachey's, describes his idea of the artist in a letter to Louise Colet: "the artist in his work should be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere" (December 9, 1852). Even in this statement, there is an inherent irony—a kind of dramatic irony for humanity, or for the characters in Flaubert's fiction: the Artist-God is present, but invisible. He looks on but does not intercede, which gives silent affirmation of even the cruelest tricks of fate. But this is precisely where Strachey's irony diverges from Flaubert's. Strachey's narrator makes his presence and personality known. While both authors attack bourgeois values through irony, they go about it in opposite ways. Flaubert's relation to a character like Emma Bovary is quite similar to Strachey's relation with his Victorian subjects: there is simultaneously deep sympathy and harsh judgment. Flaubert's narration is so pared down in affect that the irony is barely perceptible. Strachey, however, will interject his voice in the middle of presenting an argument that one of his subjects became embroiled in and try to show the illogical conclusions made from seemingly logical premises. The judgment comes out in the open in these cases.

While Strachey's prose is extremely polished, like Flaubert's, it is much more expressive and thus ineluctably becomes a medium for the communication of Strachey's personality.[2] Flaubert is recognized as the godfather of the Modernist standard of impersonality that writers like Joyce, Eliot, and Woolf upheld; but the lesson Strachey learns from Flaubert has more to do with communicating personality, his own as well as his subjects'. The critic Johnstone puts it differently, in order to distinguish Strachey from the great authors of works of fiction who excel in character drawing: "We are aware that the author [Strachey] stands above his characters, examining them; his identity is not wholly consumed in the act of creation" (122). For Johnstone this is an evidence of "strain" and thus inartistic. Strachey's narrator takes on the position of God, but not the impersonal distance. He is a character within the narration itself.

The most emblematic instance of Strachey's opposition of impersonal and personal forms of power comes by way of a striking analogy he makes with the power of the Judeo-Christian God, tweaking Flaubert's image of the ideal narrator. In the third biography of *Eminent Victorians*, "Dr. Arnold," which details the life of Matthew Arnold's father, the headmaster of Rugby School, Strachey parodies Arnold's Christian moral seriousness in the way he describes the headmaster's rule:

> He himself, involved in awful grandeur, ruled remotely, through his chosen instruments, from an inaccessible heaven. Remotely and yet with an omnipresent force. As the Israelite of old knew that his almighty Lawgiver might at any moment thunder to him from the whirlwind, or

[2] In terms of the comparison between Strachey's and Flaubert's irony, one method they employ similarly is the ironic quotation. Flaubert's italicized clichés serve the same purpose as Strachey's echoing of his subjects' words against themselves. Strachey will also set a well-worn cliché to work, knocking a character out of supposed eminence, or stretching its metaphor to a ludicrous conclusion.

> appear before his very eyes, the visible embodiment of power or wrath, so the Rugby schoolboy walked in a holy dread of some sudden manifestation of the sweeping gown, the majestic tone, the piercing glance of Dr. Arnold. (161)

Arnold rules "remotely" and is "omnipotent," like Flaubert's narrator; but he can "manifest" his presence at will. Arnold's ultimate legacy, Strachey shows, were his "instruments" of power: the prefectors, or sixth form boys who would watch over the younger students. By deputizing these students, he can stay mostly unseen and avoid ruling like his predecessor, "by sheer force of character" (158). The rarer appearance of his "visible" power makes it all the more lasting in impression. Strachey remarks that "every line of his countenance, every shade of his manner imprinted themselves indelibly on the minds of the boys who sat under him" (161). While Strachey is very interested in the machinations of this invisible power, in the description of Arnold we see him moving towards the kind of power that pleases Strachey most, which is inextricably tied to the person in control.

The emphasis Strachey places on personality moves his work away from the typical biographical province of fact towards the imaginative realm of fiction. He gives up professional objectivity in an attempt to make the subject seem real, usually through telling details. For example, Strachey's biography of Arnold was criticized for being a caricature: Strachey may have overreached fact in his attempt to present the personality of the man through his physique. He writes of Arnold "His outward appearance was the index of his inward character" (157), a "fact" that seems to be true for almost all of Strachey's subjects. This is followed, in Arnold's case, with the contested jab: "His legs,

perhaps, were shorter than they should have been" (157). This description has been cited as a misstatement of fact on Strachey's part. But it is there for effect and fits in with Strachey's interest in physiognomy.[3] Strachey does not institute an essential distinction between the person and language, between the life and its writing. It may be dangerous to toy with facts—perhaps Arnold had normal legs—but it is precisely this kind of telling detail that allows Strachey the "becoming brevity" necessary for an artful biographer (xiv). Strachey mounts an assault on the stability of truth and fact in the name of biography and history.

Novel Tenses

Though Flaubert seeks impersonality where Strachey wants to discover personality, both writes have the reputation of being masters of irony in their respective genres. The use of irony complicates the relationship between the narrator and his subjects or characters, blurring the lines between sympathy and judgment. Flaubert's novelistic style had a great influence on Strachey's own prose, specifically in the use of free indirect style, the grand tool of mixing ironic distance and ambiguous sympathy.

Proust's analysis of Flaubert's style helps set up the important novelistic terms with which to situate Strachey's narrative voice. Proust focuses specifically on Flaubert's use of the imperfect tense, which begins to take over the whole time of the narration, even definite events. Flaubert's indirect style mixes the speech of characters with the narrative description, just as Strachey's does. According to Proust, this gives the narrative the ability to condense the lives of characters into a single imperfect verb: "this everlasting imperfect [*cet éternel imparfait*] then, comprised in part of the characters'

[3] Barry Spurr comments on Strachey's ironic use of real names: in a strange overdetermination of fact, it seems as if history was waiting for Strachey to make novels out of it (146).

own words which Flaubert is in the habit of reporting in indirect style so that they merge with the rest . . . The imperfect serves to record not only what is said but people's whole lives" (265). What Proust describes in Flaubert amounts to a narrative mastery over the life of a character. Everything gets sucked into the present moment in his style, even "a long account of an entire life" so that the characters seem not to take "any active part so to speak in the action" (265). Strachey borrows this method, absorbing action into description to such an extent that even a specific event begins to take on an extended significance. As Proust explains, the time is prolonged—and so is the meaning. The condensation gives the contents of narration symbolic potential since they sum up the passing of time and consequently a variety of feelings and events. Each detail in itself is literally telling, as if it contains a hidden spring of narration that might let loose at any moment.

Strachey's incorporation of Flaubert's narrative style helps him revolutionize the genre of biography by condensing life stories into something akin to portraits.[4] Just as Proust notices in Flaubert, action in Strachey dissolves into description. Strachey is most powerful when he is describing his characters, pulling up their habits into dynamic portraits of them that blur the lines between stillness and motion. The most masterful effects of Strachey's narration occur grammatically, just as Proust shows in Flaubert. Strachey uses an economy of description in order to maintain his "becoming brevity." To do this, he condenses indefinite amounts of time into single descriptions. With one sentence, Strachey conveys a sense of routine, of time passing, and thus builds up a life

[4] There is another British heritage of Flaubert's style found in Walter Pater, who wrote about Flaubert and also composed fictional biographical portraits.

with the energetic thrust packed in the syntax, rather than through an extended and meticulous plotting out of incessant detail.

An extract of description from *Queen Victoria* will show Strachey's narrative economy that condenses time into habit. Strachey describes the Queen's sadness as she departs from her Scottish country home, Balmoral, to return to London. In a series of sentences, he compiles a portrait of domestic bliss that pits habit against the crunch of time:

> Strong, vigorous, enthusiastic, bringing, so it seemed, good fortune with her—the Highlanders declared she had "a lucky foot"—she relished everything—the scrambles and the views and the contretemps and the rough inns with their coarse fare and Brown and Grant waiting at table. She could have gone on for ever and ever, absolutely happy with Albert beside her and Brown at her pony's head. But the time came for turning homewards; alas! the time came for going back to England. She could hardly bear it; she sat disconsolate in her room and watched the snow falling. The last day! Oh! If only she could be snowed up! (200)

The movement of these few sentences is complex, both internally for each sentence, and amongst them as a group. The first sentence bursts its grammatical structure. The root of the sentence is "she relished everything." This appears in the center between dashes, which connect aggregates on either side: first, a series of adjectives with the emphasis on a gerundive description, "bringing;" then, a series of nouns linked by repetition of the conjunction "and." The time of Victoria's relishing is indistinct, as are the objects and events she relishes. One specific action, her foot being deemed lucky by the Highlanders,

occurs amidst a swarm of images of repeated experience and thereby loses its distinction and verges towards the symbolic. In the next sentence, the verb “could” also condenses three different times: the imperfect past as a description of her feeling, the present conditional of her desire, and the future this implies. The verb is then modified by the adverbial phrase “for ever and ever,” which is a wish for the time to continue without end. The events flow through her into an indefinite past, recalled by memory, and linked to a longing for repetition in the future.

The overall effect of the paragraph complicates the reader’s sense of the time of narration. Strachey transforms biography from a linear description of important events to a more impressionistic concatenation of feelings and images. First he plants us in a concrete description: Victoria sits in her room wishing not to return. However, even this moment contains a grammatical ambivalence. The verbs could equally describe a specific event or a repeated experience. Strachey ironizes this with Victoria’s exclamation “The last day!” The continuity of experience that builds up in this series of sentence comes to a point in the expectation of an end. But, interestingly, the way Strachey twists the sense of time is to specifically comment on the passing of time. This is an essential part of Strachey’s irony, as Meisel has shown, to investigate the very terms he uses. We move from an indirect narrative description of Victoria’s thoughts, which still occurs in the third person and thus externally, to the form of an exclamation, seemingly reproducing her actual thought. But Strachey actually prompts Victoria’s thought: she echoes his phrase “the time came for turning homewards,” with her own, “the time came for going back to England.” A specific time, that of return, is indicated, but through an indefinite past in the verb “came.” This is a repeated occurrence, coming again every time the royal

family must return from their holiday in Scotland, but also coming to Victoria from Strachey.

The temporal dilemma Strachey depicts through Victoria's departure from Balmoral epitomizes the paradoxical time of the genre of the novel itself, as it condenses lives within its confines and expands itself within our own lives. Proust ends his essay on Flaubert with an apt description of the effect reading novels has on one's life and gives us an idea of the underlying desire that drives Strachey's project:

> When we have just finished a book, not only would we like to go on living with its characters . . . but also our inner voice, schooled all the time we have been reading to follow the rhythm of a Balzac or a Flaubert, would like to go on speaking as they do. We need to give it its head for a moment [*Il faut la laisser faire un moment*], to allow the pedal to sustain the note, that is, to produce a voluntary pastiche so that afterwards we can become original once more and not produce involuntary pastiche all our lives. (268-9)

The time, tense, and "rhythm" of the description continue to "prolong" itself even in the reader's head, threatening to turn his or her life into a "pastiche." Proust warns against allowing this feeling to take over. One may wish to remain with the characters and to give in to the voice that begins to narrate one's own thoughts. However, it may result in the loss of control over one's life, which would then risk turning into a second rate imitation. Yet this is precisely the effect Strachey wishes to attain with his biography. Strachey fuels his biographies with the dangerous fantasy that Proust warns against, even

though this loss of identity implies a kind of death. Living through fiction merges the individual with convention.

As he bends the rules of biography, Strachey blends fiction and fact, if only through the mix of novelistic conventions with the material of real life. This is not so far off from the novel's usual terrain. The major difference is that Strachey's narration is rooted in verifiable facts that belong to public and common history. He therefore takes a role in determining how we, the inheritors of this history as well as his readers, will live. Paradoxically, by writing biography based in fact, Strachey makes explicit a power that remains implicit in the realm of fiction, which has all of the insidiousness Proust imputes to it: life imitates art, beyond our control. The true revolution in Strachey's biography consists in his transfer of the pleasurable identification one experiences in reading a novel into a genre that makes claims to objectivity and historical accuracy.

Narrative Control of Life

Behind his interest in the force of personality, Strachey wants to investigate the way impersonality creates the kind of power that becomes representative in a figurehead. The conflict between impersonal and impersonal power repeats Strachey's own aesthetic struggle, taking away the judgment of life from the domain of religion and freeing it up for art. *Eminent Victorians* might be divided up along these lines. Strachey tracks the invisible power of Cardinal Manning and Dr. Arnold and the visible power of Florence Nightingale and General Gordon. However, as Spurr and others have shown, the real interest lies not in his subjects, but in Strachey's narrator, who is both visible and invisible. Everything Strachey does in this book, as a narrator, reflects back on his own position of power as a biographer. Using this double reading—what Meisel calls

"reflexive realism," reading description as an implicit theory of narration—I will examine Strachey's application of narrative process to life as a paradoxical desire both to make life definite and to multiply its possibilities.

Strachey wrests the genre of biography out of the moralizing grasp of religion in order to secure it in the realm of art. "Cardinal Manning," the longest of the four biographies in *Eminent Victorians*, provides a metadiscourse with which to read this achievement. At the heart of the matter is control over interpretation of the Bible. But implicit in this interpretive problem is the biographical narrator's own power of interpretation—and the possibility of submitting a life to judgment.

Manning's search for stable and incontrovertible meaning eventually leads him to defect from the Church of England to the Roman Catholic Church. However, whether he is a member of the Anglican or of the Catholic Church, Manning is constantly beset with doctrinal problems of interpretation, from the question of baptismal regeneration to the rule of papal infallibility. The temptation of conversion, however, is an attempt to settle such ambiguity in meaning. Strachey presents Manning, received into the Roman Catholic Church, finally with "his mind . . . at rest" (44). In Manning's own words, he feels that he has found a foothold:

> 'The *Θεολογια* from Nice to St. Thomas Aquinas, and the undivided unity suffused throughout the world, of which the Cathedra Petri is the centre,—now 1800 years old, mightier in every power now than ever, in intellect, in science, in separation from the world; and purer too, refined by 300 years of conflict with the modern infidel civilisation—all this is a fact more solid than the earth.' (44)

The shift from one doctrinal language to another, from the Greek "theology" to the Latin church and finally to the English empirical insistence on facts, belies the solidity that Manning seeks to impose. Manning's sweeping history of the Church's constancy emblematizes the tension Strachey exploits in his biography between repetition and change. Strachey never lets facts stand so solidly. As Meisel argues, in Strachey's world, "fact and fiction are simply rival interpretations of the same evidence" (194). Manning will find that even the solidity of the Catholic Church can be rocked.

As a counterpoint to Manning's seeming security in the religious meaning of words, Strachey uses Cardinal Newman as an example of literary language. Newman's powerful rhetoric gets him in trouble first with the leaders of the Anglican Church and next with the authorities in Rome. Newman belies the belief of the Church of England "that it was possible to contain in a frame of words the subtle essence of their complicated doctrinal system" (23). Strachey explains, "They did not understand that verbal definitions in such a case will only perform their functions so long as there is no dispute about the matters which they are intended to define" (23). This case, Strachey shows, is only when "there is no need" for words (23). Newman's "new and untraditional interpretation" causes an uproar because it showed that words "were a mass of ambiguity, and might be twisted into meaning very nearly anything that anybody liked" (23). Strachey slyly frames this as a doctrinal problem, but it is also symptomatic of the interpretative process that allows Strachey to form his biographies from the words left behind after the death of his subjects. No matter what one says, Strachey, like Newman, may object that he is "only taking" the subject "at its word" (23). In writing Manning's

life, Strachey treats his words with the same rhetorical potential as Newman's. He points to the ambiguity in the apparently decisive statements of a religious man.

Manning cannot withstand ambiguity. In his world, interpretation must lead to action. However, the narrative motor that Strachey uses to get "Cardinal Manning" going is a fundamental paradox—or, one could argue, hypocrisy—that defines Manning's life. Manning has an ambiguous nature, according to Strachey, which consists in the incompatibility of worldly ambition and religious self-abnegation. How can he reconcile his desire for power with his responsibility to the Church? This problem plagues Manning as soon as he sets foot on the path of a religious career. Strachey cites Manning's "secret thoughts" as committed to his diary:

> 'I am conscious of a desire . . . to be in such a position (1) as I had in times past, (2) as my present circumstances imply, (3) as my friends think me fit for, (4) as I feel my own faculties tend to.
>
> 'But, God being my helper, I will not seek it by the lifting of a finger or the speaking of a word' (54).

Manning's "desire" is great, but he throws the responsibility on God, his "helper." Commenting on this passage, Strachey shows Manning's ingenious (or rather disingenuous) resolution of the problem. Strachey's narrator first puts on a cover of naïveté in his summary of this diary entry: "So Manning wrote, and thought, and prayed; but what are words, and thoughts, and even prayers, to the mysterious and relentless powers of circumstance and character?" (54). By rooting the problem in Manning's character, Strachey seemingly overlooks the casuistry implicit in Manning's words, as if Manning could not help but be what he was doomed to be.

The irony of Manning's situation comes from the steps that intercede between his claim to seek nothing in answering his desire and his final trust in divine will. By leaving it up to God, he is not exempting himself from success. He is only seemingly absenting himself from authorship of that success. But now, Strachey steps in to rewrite this life as an exposure of the narrative desire for control. Strachey's narrator exposes the ambiguous structure of power that underlies religious thinking—and thereby draws it closer to the form of fictional narrative. Strachey points out that, faced with the possibility of gaining a foothold of power in the Church, "the voice of self-abnegation must needs grow still and small indeed. Yet it spoke on, for it was one of the paradoxes in Manning's soul that that voice was never silent" (55). The fundamental paradox is that Manning must ever "satisfy his most exorbitant ambitions in a profundity of self-abasement" (55). Strachey undoes this apparent duality (there are a few now in tow, ambition/self-abasement, words/character, and circumstance/character), or rather shows how Manning himself has tried to synthesize them:

> And so now he vowed to Heaven that he would *seek* nothing—no, not by the lifting of a finger or the speaking of a word. But, if something came to him—? He had vowed not to seek; he had not vowed not to take. Might it not be his plain duty to take? Might it not be the will of God? (55)

In this series of questions, Strachey shows how Manning finally evacuates responsibility for the fulfillment of his ambition as he invokes the will of God. The power of Strachey's narrative style comes from the ambiguity of voice in his rhetorical questions, which could be asked by the character in earnest or by the narrator or reader as a critique of the character's decision. On the one hand, by recording the subject's thought process as a

series questions, Strachey protects himself from error in the phrasing of hypothesis. However, the form of the question also marks the biographer's incredulity. Ultimately, the reader shares with the narrator God's position, holding the power to decide who is saying what—and thus to draw the relevant conclusions.

When Strachey highlights the apparent hypocrisy of faith, there is another side of his reading that escapes cynicism: the drama that each subject faces in *Eminent Victorians* is really a desire to control life. Strachey sympathizes with the desire to know, to have a divine view of life that is complete. But as Strachey substitutes God with his narrator, the logic of his subjects can become ridiculous. In "The End of General Gordon," the final biography in *Eminent Victorians*, Strachey explains this paradox that instigates each narrative in the book:

> Fatalism is always apt to be a double-edged philosophy; for while, on the one hand, it reveals the minutest occurrences as the immutable result of a rigid chain of infinitely predestined causes, on the other, it invests the wildest incoherencies of conduct or of circumstance with the sanctity of eternal law. (196)

Between the "rigid chain" of excessive logic and the inscrutability of "the wildest incoherencies," what Strachey points to is an overwhelming and overwhelmingly understandable desire. There is a comfort in being able to ascribe causes and to have faith that things happen for a reason. But the expense—as Strachey shows for all of his subjects—is that one can excuse a wide range of wrongful actions in this way. By pointing out the ridiculousness of these excuses—which can be seen more clearly retrospectively—Strachey usurps this yearned-for narrative power.

Whenever Strachey's narrator evokes Providence in the course of narration, we may read it as his reference to his own process of writing. Strachey can play with his subjects' credulity because he has the unfair advantage of hindsight. He inserts himself—or his narrator—in the place of divine judgment towards which his subjects directed their lives. For Strachey, no less than for Manning, Nightingale, Arnold, or Gordon, religion becomes the battleground where the fight for interpretative control is waged. Strachey's ironic narrator evacuates the place of God, but still keeps the empty structure in place from which to comment on the way the past generation lived their lives.

Still Strachey leaves the ultimate understanding of life ambiguous, doing justice to his subjects' beliefs rather than merely ridiculing them. Thus his narratives do not provide the mastery his subjects desire; they are only one potential interpretation of a life. A good example of the double process of Strachey's irony, which simultaneously sets up and takes down the possibility of belief, is found in his response to Manning's letter to Nightingale on her departure for Constantinople. Manning writes, "'God will keep you . . . and my prayer for you will be that your one object of Worship, Pattern of Imitation, and source of consolation and strength may be the Sacred Heart of our Divine Lord'" (107). So ends the paragraph. On the next line, Strachey writes, "To what extent Dr. Manning's prayer was answered must remain a matter of doubt" (107). The irony works in the understatement. Strachey doesn't reject the prayer outright; it is merely a matter of doubt. After a semicolon, he adds, "but this much is certain, that, if ever a prayer was needed, it was needed then for Florence Nightingale" (107). Depending on one's interpretation of the ensuing events, one might venture that Manning's prayers were indeed answered. Strachey doesn't remove this possibility.

Pathetic Fallacy or Papal Infallibility

By replacing the certainty of divine judgment with his own ambivalent narrator, Strachey does not reinstate the certainty of life's narrative contours. His biographical process questions the very possibility of life becoming narrative by representing the relation of life to narrative as one of desire. Since Strachey's narrator is also subject to this desire, we may classify him as unreliable, an obvious departure from the claims to objectivity typically taken by the biographer. In the Manning biography, Strachey represents the fundamental fallacy of truth claims in his exploration of the doctrinal question of papal infallibility. The Pope, as God's representative on earth, claims never to be wrong; as Strachey describes this claim, he slyly exposes the way his narrator codifies and enforces our own response and belief in his narrative.

In the matter of papal infallibility, Strachey takes the aesthetic view rather than the rational or epistemological one. He actually objects to the hedging of papal authority because it compromises the "charm" of the office. Punning on "Papal Bull," Strachey boils the problem down to a "palpable" "distinction": "the Vicar of Christ, when, in certain circumstances and with certain precautions, he has once spoken, has expressed, for all the ages, a part of the immutable, absolute, and eternal Truth" (72). Strachey does not explicitly object to this monopoly over truth, instead he deflects his rhetoric into a formal claim against the apologists: "If the Pope were indeed nothing more than a magnified Borough Councillor, we should hardly have heard so much of him. It is not because he satisfies the reason, but because he astounds it, that men abase themselves before the Vicar of Christ" (73). Strachey's view becomes clearer as he describes the outcome of events. The question of Papal Infallibility is primarily a question of

interpretation. The joke is that the official claim for infallibility as an article of faith must necessarily rest on a fundamental ambiguity (Strachey's favorite location in any argument). Strachey forces us to confront this ambiguity as a metaphorical process.

Strachey uses the problem of papal infallibility to demonstrate the similar stretch of belief that his subtle narration demands of his reader. He narrates the vote casting of the Vatican Council on Papal Infallibility by means of a pathetic fallacy: "As the first of the Fathers stepped forward to declare his vote, a storm of thunder and lightning suddenly burst over St. Peter's. All through the morning the voting continued, and every vote was accompanied by a flash and a roar from heaven" (79-80). In the process of description, Strachey questions the possibility of even constructing a pathetic fallacy since it relies on the forceful claim to be able to decide on an interpretation for something that is essentially ambiguous. The "thunder and lightning" is ultimately an unreadable sign from God: "Both sides, with equal justice, claimed the portent as a manifestation of the Divine Opinion" (80). In the end, Strachey shows that the fallacy is for anyone to claim infallibility.

While pointing out a fallacy may yield a logical pleasure, Strachey does not shy away from pointing out the real danger inherent in questioning authority. Since he makes the move from divine to worldly power, the real effects of the narrative process becomes evident. In matters of religion, Strachey cautions, "to admit doubts . . . is surely dangerous" (80). Strachey takes over here and parodies the language of the Church in response to heretical views. The ambiguous possibilities of interpretation do not lead to ambivalent results: "while the offence remained ambiguous, there was no ambiguity about the penalty. One hair's breadth from the unknown path of truth, one shadow of

impurity in the mysterious light of faith—and there shall be anathema! anathema! anathema!" (81). Even where the theologians are scratching their heads over matters of doctrine, the Church can back up whatever policy it wants with threat of excommunication.

The Church's ultimate threat points to the way worldly power can back up an unambiguous interpretation. Behind excommunication, of course, stands execution. In a mess of confused meanings, the only certainty is death. This most eminent fact, however, is precisely what instigates the desire for narrative, to fictionalize the life in the mean time. This drama of facing death provides the theoretical climax of Strachey's next major work, *Queen Victoria*, as she seeks futilely to preserve everything in face of the wreckage of time.

The Victorian Novel

In his first full length biography, *Queen Victoria*, Strachey moves even closer to the novel genre. The great power struggle that occurs during Victoria's reign—all over Europe—is one between absolutism and republicanism. The progress towards political democratization finds its mirror in the development of the novel. As the bourgeois genre of choice, the novel imports to its readers' lives the significance of kings and queens. Strachey undoes this democratization by returning the novel to the province of royalty. But this move is not recidivist. What Strachey is up to here parallels his revolutionary stance in *Eminent Victorians*: he uncovers and highlights the power structure at the heart of the novel—and thus at the heart of bourgeois values. The interest of royalty is bound up in succession—marriage and death, the same plot points that typify the novel.

From *Eminent Victorians* to *Queen Victoria* there is a significant development. Strachey's ironic detachment, which allowed him to wrestle narrative power over life from God, when confronted with the worldly power of the Queen, finds itself less distant. As Strachey blends biography with the conventions of fiction, he begins to project himself into his work. The struggle of writing *Queen Victoria* becomes personal—and as Strachey quips to his friend John Maynard Keynes, the stakes are death: it "seems to me still rather doubtful whether I shall kill Victoria or Victoria me." (November 11 1920, in Holroyd 477). There is a definite danger in the territory Strachey now traverses. Strachey interferes in his biography. He is not content to merely let history unfold once again, but must direct it himself.

In "Surviving Victoria," Jay Dickson frames his reading of Strachey's biography through the power struggle Strachey himself announces between himself and the Queen. Since Strachey structures the book around Victoria's struggles with her successive ministers—almost every chapter bears the name of one of these men as its title—Dickson puts Strachey's relation to the Queen in the same line. Dickson is interested in tracing the conquest of Strachey by Victoria, which was a common critical opinion after *Queen Victoria*'s publication due to the surprising sympathy Strachey had for his subject. After what Strachey names "the central turning-point in the history of Queen Victoria," her beloved Prince Albert's death (222),Victoria goes into a protracted and inconsolable mourning, which, Strachey claims, draws a "veil" or a "darkness" over the second half of her reign. For Dickson, Strachey's acquiescence to this darkness continues the Queen's melancholia. However, I would argue that it is only after the Prince's death that Strachey

actually discovers his biographical principle in the Queen, allowing him to turn the biography into a novelistic Modernist experiment in crossing life with art.

Strachey tells the reader that after this veil of death "descends," we only glimpse the Queen at "fitful and disconnected intervals," and therefore we must be "a brief and summary relation" (223). What Strachey relates as a lack of factual evidence is really the economic principle of biography that he believes one must uphold in order to make the hitherto dry genre a true art form. The discovery then of *Queen Victoria* is that this aesthetic principle is linked necessarily to death. We have to dig under Strachey's surface meaning, which passes off the slimness of the remainder of the book as a scrupulous clinging to sources on the part of the biographer, in order to find Strachey's movement from history to novel.

The key moment of *Queen Victoria*, in which we can see Strachey's "beautiful economy" at work, is the famous last sentence of the book, Victoria's death scene, in which Strachey narrates in a recognizable Modernist style of stream of consciousness the last thoughts of Victoria. Holroyd notes that Strachey wrote Victoria's end first, composing the rest of the book in view of this triumphant summary.[5] We can see in this last sentence the epitome of Strachey's process since it narrates backwards through Victoria's life using Strachey's biographical economy: he chooses symbolic moments that embody her specific characteristics. Strachey thus composes the book as a mirror image, beginning at the end, which in fact goes backwards, and then starting over again.

[5] "On 24 January, Lytton wrote to Geoffrey Whitworth telling him that the book was almost finished. There remained one more task, and that was rather peculiar. It consisted in fitting on the final paragraph, the famous death-bed scene of the Queen which was the very first paragraph he had written and towards which the rest of the book had been pointed" (478).

Beginning with a hypothetical "perhaps," Strachey narrates his way into the last vestiges of Victoria's mind:

> Yet, perhaps, in the secret chambers of consciousness, she had her thoughts, too. Perhaps her fading mind called up once more the shadows of the past to float before it, and retraced, for the last time, the vanished visions of that long history—passing back and back, through the cloud of years, to older and ever older memories—to the spring woods at Osborne, so full of primroses for Lord Beaconsfield—to Lord Palmerston's queer clothes and high demeanour, and Albert's face under the green lamp, and Albert's first stag at Balmoral, and Albert in his blue and silver uniform, and the Baron coming in through a doorway, and Lord M. dreaming at Windsor with the rooks cawing in the elm-trees, and the Archbishop of Canterbury on his knees in the dawn, and the old King's turkey-cock ejaculations,[6] and Uncle Leopold's soft voice at Claremont, and Lehzen with the globes, and her mother's feathers sweeping down towards her, and a great old repeater-watch of her father's in its tortoise-shell case, and a yellow rug, and some friendly flounces of sprigged muslin, and the trees and the grass at Kensington. (317)

The effect of the sentence comes in its "retrac[ing] for the last time" the accumulation of its references, the significant events and objects of the Queen's life Strachey has detailed up to this point. The summing up of her life is now a shared experience: we have

[6] Strachey pulls off a crude joke here. He is always more than happy to make sexual innuendoes. In the most solemn of moments, an image pops up that could be taken as quite explicit (but might also be explained away). But we can see the "ejaculation" in the form of the sentence that builds to a climax as it runs on—and peters out with Victoria's death. Once again, we are on the familiar novelistic terrain, sex and death.

identified, like Strachey, with the dying Queen as her narrative line comes to an end through repetition.

Some critics bristled at the invasion into the Queen's dying thoughts Strachey makes here since it clearly departs from verifiable facts. The debate can be best exemplified by looking at two similarly titled reviews: E.M. Forster's positive assessment in "English Prose Between 1918 and 1939" (1944) over against Herbert Read's negative evaluation in "English Prose" (1926). Forster applauds Strachey's ability to make his subjects "come alive, like characters in a novel" (281). He particularly likes this last sentence of *Queen Victoria* since it evokes "the new psychology" (psychoanalysis) "with its imaginings of the subconscious" and thus it "could not have been created at an earlier date" (283). Almost diametrically opposed to Forster, Read finds Strachey's characterization lifeless and flat. He compares Strachey's sentence to a passage from Joyce's *Ulysses* to Strachey's detriment. In Strachey's sentence, Read claims that in the "eighteen images or analogies" in the eighteen lines, "not one . . . is original . . .freshly felt or sincerely evoked," whereas when we read Stephen Dedalus's interior monologue, we "come into contact with the vibrating reflex of an actual experience" (93). Going beyond the impasse of two opposing views, we can learn something from Read's perfunctory dismissal, by analyzing the shifting of categories at play. Where Strachey's work is ostensibly true and Joyce's fictional, Read evaluates through a reversal: Strachey's fact becomes empty and Joyce's fiction becomes true.

Victoria's death sentence enacts Strachey's concept of biography. One would not be able to know what went on in Victoria's mind, of course. What Strachey does in this last sentence is to put work a familiar idea of death, that, as one is dying, one's life

returns to play back before one's eyes. But Strachey is not merely employing a platitude of the effect of death. As we pass clearly from biography to fiction, we also pass from mere description to theorization. Dickson argues that Victoria's death "retroactively assures agency for her life's events" and thus Victoria gains mastery over her own biography (94). Dickson reads the sentence as an example of "écriture feminine," along the lines of Molly Bloom's soliloquy at the end of Joyce's *Ulysses*. By placing Strachey's rendition of the Queen's death in this modernist lineage, Dickson argues that Strachey fantastically proclaims Victoria the mother of modernism as well.

However, I would suggest that Strachey's recognizably Modernist narration of Victoria's death figures exploits the ambiguity of fact and fiction to effect a strange identification between biographer and subject. This last sentence retroactively alters our whole reading of the book by showing that it is impossible to decide who is speaking at any point in the biography, Strachey or Victoria. As this sentence shows, the subtlety of this narrative identification is enabled through death.

Death Principle

In *Queen Victoria*, Strachey examines and discards a series of models of death performed by the Queen, whether in her mourning for Albert or her fear of her own death, and finally discovers a structure that exemplifies his own aesthetic theory of life. The first model of biography is the one that Strachey is famous for overthrowing: the monumental and antiseptic hero worship. In order to foster "proper" "appreciation" for the deceased Albert, Victoria commissions biographies of him. Instead of a limitation, Victoria seizes his death as a possibility, for complete representation: "[D]eath had removed the need of barriers, and now her husband, in his magnificent entirety, should

stand revealed to all" (235). Predictably, Strachey critiques Victoria's futile endeavor; he claims that really Victoria wanted to "faithfully put before the public the very image of Albert that filled her own mind," which was characterized by "her passion for superlatives" (236). Her biographical principle of totality is doomed to failure since the public does not want to see Albert as "embodied perfection" (237). Strachey notices here a "curious irony": the "impeccable waxwork . . . fixed by the Queen's love in the popular imagination" actually erased the "creature whom it represented—the real creature, so full of energy and stress and torment, so mysterious and so unhappy, and so fallible and so very human" (237-8)—in other words, the Albert that interests Strachey for all of his complexity. Unfortunately, that man "had altogether disappeared" (238). Strachey is not all criticism though; he allows that Victoria's story-book version has its reality—in her mind. Strachey pairs Victoria's clean version alongside the more ambiguous person that he discovers Albert to be in his own research, allowing his text to encompass multiple views of his Albert's personality.

Towards the end of her life (and the book), Victoria discovers a second means for shoring up fragments against ruins. This biographical principle is one of collection and preservation, a similar principle to the final sentence's accumulation of Victoria's memories. As she looks over the "endless catalogue" of her possessions, Strachey writes, Victoria "could feel, with a double contentment, that the transitoriness of this world had been arrested by the amplitude of her might" (300). Strachey explains Victoria's penchant for collection as an outcropping of her personality:

> The collecting instinct has its roots in the very depths of human nature; and, in the case of Victoria, it seemed to owe its force to two of her

> dominating impulses—the intense sense, which had always been hers, of her own personality, and the craving which, growing with the years, had become in her old age almost an obsession, for fixity, for solidity, for the setting up of palpable barriers against the outrages of change and time. (298)

Victoria's collection becomes an autobiography through things, following the predilection realism has for the telling detail, as if the things surrounding her might act as "barriers." In the objects of her collection, "she saw herself deliciously reflected from a million facts, felt herself magnified miraculously over a boundless area" (298). But, this multiplication also implies a disintegration of her personality: "then came the dismaying thought—everything slips away, crumbles, vanishes; Sèvres dinner-services get broken; even golden basins go unaccountably astray; even one's self, with all the recollections and experiences that make up one's being, fluctuates, perishes, dissolves . . ." (298-9). The act of preservation leads to a strange multiplication, seen in the fragments implied by the series of verbs: crumbles, vanishes, fluctuates, perishes, dissolves. Just as her endorsed biographies of Albert escaped her intentions, her own preservation through things cannot keep her in place.

Strachey makes it clear that Victoria's two principles of biography are attempts to escape the aesthetic element of biography that he upholds, which does not fix the person immobile forever. In her memorialization of her husband, Victoria wants to escape potential ambiguity: "Words and books may be ambiguous memorials; but who can misinterpret the visible solidity of bronze and stone?" (238). Likewise, she starts collecting since it provides activity of "a less intangible quality than the study of

literature or the appreciation art" (298). But she finds that her collection is as ambiguous as the words that were insufficient to arrest the past. The attempt to freeze life results only in an unrelenting focus on death. "Inevitably," Strachey comments, "it was around the central circumstance of death—death the final witness to human mutability—that these commemorative cravings clustered most thickly" (301). Victoria's pain becomes pathetic, no longer an outcropping of her inherent majesty: "Might not even death itself be humbled, if one could recall enough?" (301). Instead of facilitating the triumph of life, Victoria surrounds herself with the world of the dead: "The dead, in every shape—in miniatures, in porcelain, in enormous life-size oil-paintings—were perpetually about her" (299). The most troubling form of Victoria's craze combines her monumentalization with her collection: she insists that "every bed" she slept in "had attached to it, at back, on the right-hand side, above the pillow, a photograph of the head and shoulders of Albert as he lay dead, surmounted by a wreath of immortelles" (301). The accumulation of things becomes the accumulation of the dead, which in itself marks the passing of time. Victoria's impotent re-creation of the place of Albert in her bed even misses the mark: it is the dead Albert perpetually resting beside her.

In answer to these two failed attempts at preservation, Strachey finally provides a third biographical model, which incorporates death as its impetus and its structure—and it is this model that I would suggest Strachey uses in his novelistic narration that, in free indirect style, narrates so close to Victoria herself. This is the true economy at work in the last sentence, as it blurs between Victoria and Strachey. This model could be called either dictation or identification. Victoria's actions provide Strachey with this third model, despite her other less successful attempts to confront and triumph over death. Victoria

submits herself to what Strachey calls Albert's "posthumous domination" (289); she is a living memorial and conduit for her dead beloved. After his death, she decides that "what she had to do was to make her own the master-impulse of Albert's life" (229). She therefore continues his life through hers. Victoria is once again a conductor of life. "'[*N*]*o one* person,'" Victoria declares, "'is to lead or guide or dictate to *me*,'" except of course the late Prince, who she "would follow . . . in all things" (230).

Dictation as a model of writing plays on several levels of the text and thereby confuses the solidity of the identity of characters and the narrator. Victoria took dictation even before the death of her husband. Strachey hypothesizes about the domination of the young Victoria by her governess, the Baroness Lehzen:

> Nobody knew—nobody ever will know—the precise extent and the precise nature of her influence. She herself declared that she never discussed public affairs with the Queen, that she was concerned with private matters only—with private letters and the details of private life. Certainly her hand is everywhere discernible in Victoria's early correspondence. The Journal is written in the style of a child; the Letters are not so simple; they are the work of a child, rearranged—with the minimum of alteration, no doubt, and yet perceptibly—by a governess. (56)

Lehzen edits Victoria's letters: there is the pure source and then the "rearrangement." Of course, Strachey undertakes the same activity in his presentation of Victoria's life. The distinction between what is truly Victoria's thought or feeling becomes impossible as her

life gets arranged politically (in the case of Lezhen) or artistically (in the case of Strachey).

As opposed to the posthumous domination of Albert, Victoria herself goes back over her own life to order it (and edit it) according to her later feelings. But even Victoria cannot tell her true feelings, especially when it comes to rereading her earlier journals. This is the fundamental problem of time and character that Woolf claims makes biography an unstable genre—but Strachey shows that this instability is also its chance to accede to the imaginative re-creation possible in the novel form. Though Strachey has claimed for his subject a certain amount of constancy that makes the narrative of her life an easily orchestrated procedure of similar events, he shows us the subtle shifts in understanding that accompany her along the way—that alter her internal landscape if not her external actions. After her marriage, Victoria provides marginal comments in her early journals that reinterpret her feelings of youthful love: "The past—the past of only three years since—when she looked back upon it, seemed a thing so remote and alien that she could explain it to herself in no other way as some kind of delusion—an unfortunate mistake" (126). Rereading her younger self pains Victoria, so she comments in the margins in order to distinguish what she "'*then fancied* was happiness'" and what she now knew was "'REAL *happiness*'" (127). Strachey can't help but interject here: "How did she know? What is the distinction between happiness that is real and happiness that is felt?" (127). Masterfully, by neutralizing the distinction between reality and feeling in this one word of "happiness," Strachey announces the fictional status of any biography. What matters, true or false, are the telling moments that encapsulate a life.

The moment of Victoria looking over her journal and correcting herself focuses the temporal tension that structures *Queen Victoria*, moving it from Victorian to Modern novel. In the first half of the book, Strachey follows Victoria's successive romances and confrontations with her ministers until she finally marries Albert: the novel takes on the linearity of a marriage plot. Behind this as well is the drama of succession, the deaths that pass the crown on from one heir to the next, landing on the unlikely Victoria. However, Strachey's innovation comes into force in the second half of the book when the "veil descends," and death comes in to restructure the biography as an atemporal summing up. *Queen Victoria* defuses the plot like an aesthetic novel and then functions like a portrait of the Queen that passes years in the midst of sentences.

A Beautiful Economy

Strachey latches on to Victoria so eagerly because she is a perfect figure, simultaneously a novelistic character and a biographical subject, toeing the line in her own as well as the public's imagination between fantasy and reality. Victoria is an empty structure of projection, but also a kind of recording device. Strachey's old teacher and friend, Walter Raleigh wrote to him after the publication of *Eminent Victorians*, to suggest that he tackle the great queen for his next book: "How can an adjective have meaning that is not dependent on the meaning of its substantive?" (May 13 1918, in Holroyd 440). But Victoria seems to be more than a static noun, despite her stateliness. She is also a verb: an action of impression, dictation, and preservation, all of which lie at the heart of Strachey's biographical writing.

Strachey theorizes Victoria's symbolic stature as a type of narrative economy in terms of the relation of fiction to biography. He is prompted by an anecdote that has the

form of a knock-knock joke. Albert angrily locks himself in a room after a disagreement. When Victoria knocks to be let in, he asks "'Who is there?'" and she answers "'The Queen of England'" (119). This exchanges repeats "many times" before Victoria takes up a "gentler knocking" and finally gives this answer to Albert's "relentless question," "Who is there?": "'Your wife, Albert'" (119). She is then let in, for she has assumed the correct title from Albert's point of view, the wife not the Queen. Before telling this story, Strachey theorizes its place in the text: "One story, indeed, survives, ill-authenticated and perhaps mythical, yet summing up, as such stories often do, the central facts of the case" (119). While acknowledging the possibility that what he is about to narrate is not a fact, Strachey also insists on its usefulness for the purposes of narration. Sometimes a good fiction is worth an exhaustive account of the facts in order to convey the sense of reality. This might be the reigning motto of Strachey's biographical work. While it may seem that Strachey attempts to disarm criticism here with scholarly attention, I would suggest that he is really letting his artistic vision slip through the factual cracks. He cannot resist telling such a wonderful story—and he thus neutralizes the question of truth and fact in favor of a more powerful way to confer a sense of reality. In the midst of the struggle for domination within the marriage, this story plots out explicitly the difficulty of containing such vastly different roles in one person, a wife and the queen. The most difficult aspect of Victoria's life is the reconciliation of her personhood with her royalty. Strachey of course exploits this to the fullest. Victoria is simultaneously a particular life and a representative one, embodying a culture, a time, a nation, but also the effects of passion, the bliss of domesticity, and the pains of death that everyone experiences.

But Victoria's success, as a Queen and as a novelistic character, is that she is a figure of identification. Strachey can use the veil of death to recreate a life for her, to project himself (and his reader) into historical reality through an act of fiction. He writes about the "pleased" reception by the "middle-classes" who saw in Victoria's mix of mediocrity and majesty, "reflected as in some resplendent looking-glass, the ideal image of the very lives they led themselves" (144). Queen Victoria is a principle of mimesis, an aesthetic object of projection. But rather than a merely faithful or realistic representation of their lives, the people liked in Victoria the addition of grandeur. This supplementary quality is precisely what Strachey sees in the combination of art and life: "Their own existences, less exalted, but oh! so soothingly similar, acquired an added excellence, an added succulence, from the early hours, the regularity, the plain tuckers, the round games, the roast beef and Yorkshire pudding of Osborne" (144). Victoria was a form to imitate because she was "the embodiment, the living apex of a new era in the generations of mankind" (144).

The novel's typical terrain of the seemingly common concerns of life become inflated with royal prerogative. Strachey comments that "It was inevitable that the Queen's domestic activities should occasionally trench upon the domain of high diplomacy" (290). It is particularly in the domestic sphere that Victoria wields her most uncontested power. But she is somewhat more than the typical housewife she imagines herself as in relation to her husband, Albert. In this "something" more lies her immense power:

> The little *hausfrau*, who had spent the day before walking out with her children, inspecting her livestock, practicing shakes at the piano, and

> filling up her journal with adoring descriptions of her husband, suddenly shone forth, without art, without effort, by a spontaneous and natural transition, the very culmination of Majesty. (129)

By the end of her reign, Strachey writes, the "Queen was hailed at once as the mother of her people and as the embodied symbol of their imperial greatness" (287). Victoria walks the line between general and particular. She symbolizes both the everyday domestic virtues of the family and the immense imperial power of Britain. This is what the novel does to life—it crowns the mundane with exemplarity.

Strachey harnesses this multivalent power of the general and the particular to endow life with the structure of a novel. His success comes from the same death principle of "posthumous domination" that Victoria claimed in relation to Albert. From a narratological point of view, we can see this as Strachey's masterful use of free indirect style that writes us into Victoria's mind, her thoughts and feelings. The supreme power writing has over life is its ability to undo the effects of time; rather than giving us the external depiction of the Queen through the famous events commonly available to history, he imagines her thoughts and feelings. Strachey uses the narrative techniques of the novelist to maintain artistic control over the real life he narrates. The economy of detail and description—of fictional truth over reality—allows Strachey to sum up a life, to give it artistic form. Rather than drowning the life in strict attention to detailed facts and scrupulous linear narration, Strachey organizes, selects, and omits.

Victoria acts as Strachey's cipher, the model of impression and the empty point of the narrative (who is also the main subject of the book and most of the sentences), which facilitates our identification with her. We are no longer kept at the distance of critical

judgment but involved in the movement of the text itself. Strachey constantly wants to get at Victoria's character, to convey a sense of the person even to the detriment of fact. Since Victoria leads her life devoted to sincerity, Strachey is able at any moment to write "There she was, all of her" (311).[7] Victoria embodies Strachey's biographical economy, the "becoming brevity." She is a summary of herself. Strachey is able to synchronize her whole life in a sentence because "[t]he girl, the wife, the aged woman, were the same: vitality, conscientiousness, pride, and simplicity were hers to the latest hour" (313).

The mastery of Strachey's description is an evocation of timelessness in the middle of a discussion of the experience of time. The effect of this contains the revolution of Strachey's biography: he gives the narration of a real life the temporal qualities of a novel. Johnstone comments that *Queen Victoria* resembles a novel precisely because in it "the arrangement of events according to their sequence in time, is unimportant" (313). Instead of "a sequence of events," he explains, "we see . . . a group of solidly realized characters, arranged with consummate art around the central figure of the Queen" (313). However, I would claim that Strachey is not giving up time but rather finding a new way in biography to give the impression of accumulated or lived time to the reader, borrowed from novelistic narration, rather than providing a detailed list of facts. Time is not given up, but summarized in those swaths of description using imperfect tense.

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[7] In *Mrs. Dalloway*, published four years later, Woolf closes with an echo of this line: "For there she was." An interesting parallel may be drawn between Victoria and Clarissa as eponymous heroines. Both of them embody a principle of narration for their authors, putting to practice a theory of writing. Victoria is everpresent in her ability to pull together memories. Even when she is dying, she occupies a strong center: "it was clear that her dwindling forces were only kept together by an effort of will" (316). Clarissa is more of an invisible center, a self-effacing hostess—but with a similar effect. Like Victoria, she enacts the process of memory through association. One might characterize the shift as one from Victorian to Modern times. Yet Clarissa is still more reminiscent of the Victorian feminine ideal of the "angel of the house," who rules her domestic sphere quietly. Since Strachey dedicated Queen Victoria to Woolf, we can see this passage as a kind of communication of technique between the two authors. Though Strachey favors personality where Woolf seeks impersonality, they both are fascinated by the ambiguity of these machinations: what goes on behind the scenes in relation to its visible manifestations.

Strachey is the last man in Victoria's life. Like Albert, he decides to "'sink his *own individual* existence" (187) into Victoria, blurring distinction between writer and subject. The final model of his process that Strachey leaves us with, before Victoria's death scene, is her last romance was with the minister Disraeli. Strachey describes Disraeli as "actor and spectator both, the two characters . . . so intimately blended together in that odd composition that they formed an inseparable unity, and it was impossible to say that one of them was less genuine than the other" (266). The image of Disraeli, who watches himself work, aptly depicts Strachey's narrator, who is also both a spectator of the life he tells and retroactively an actor within it. It is not merely detachment that allows the life to take artistic shape; Strachey must take a hand in the arrangement. His reflexive process, a hallmark of Modernism, is actually a way for him to write himself into the past.

A Diagnosis of History: Elizabeth

In his first two major books, Strachey wages a war in the name of biography as an art against the powers of narration. In *Eminent Victorians,* he usurps control over the telling and the judgment of life and death from God. In *Queen Victoria,* when Strachey takes his biographical principle from Victoria's instinct for preservation that drives her futile attempt to arrest time and defer death, he turns it into a narrative principle of economy that absorbs passing time into descriptive moments. With *Elizabeth and Essex*, however, after apparently having won the freedom for total experimentation, Strachey abjures his winnings and gets rid of narration altogether. Biography, he shows, is the work of fantasy, even though it is based entirely in fact. The fantasy consists in this: the plot is already known before hand. Therefore, by the end, Strachey reduces the plot to

nothing but a series of expressions of character. In the expansion of these moments, the person can "live" again, but not the life of the living—the life of the dead, as a literary character.

Elizabeth and Essex is more experimental and therefore more emblematic of Strachey's innovation. He emphasizes form over content in this book. *Elizabeth and Essex* is subtitled, in an allusion to *Hamlet*, "A Tragic History." Critics are often mislead by the subtitle to interpret the book as a drama, especially because Strachey had indeed written a draft of a play entitled *Essex*. Holroyd calls it Strachey's *Antony and Cleopatra*. However, this reading neglects the second part of the subtitle, the history, which places the text in a narrative genre. Strachey's subtitle is also a reference to *Hamlet,* and this connection gives us insight into the plot device he uses to structure his book. Strachey borrows from Hamlet his indecision and incessant deferral before an inevitably bloody conclusion and turns this into the key trope of ambiguity in *Elizabeth and Essex*. The narrative of *Elizabeth and Essex* is merely a series of repeated scenes, a hall of mirrors where Essex and Elizabeth have it out repeatedly until she kills him. Strachey employs almost nothing else but the skill Muir lauded: the representation of well-known historical figures in all the complex ambiguity of their now inevitable fate.

The young Essex is Elizabeth's favorite courtier in her old age, when her looks have faded and she is anxious about being old. Essex's love for his Queen is not physical. He is caught up in a power struggle—between the sexes as well as between nobility and royalty. Essex continually pushes the limits of propriety with the Queen, retreats at the sign of her anger, then wins her back. Behind the scenes, Essex tries to gain political influence by pitting the Bacon brothers, Anthony and Francis, against Elizabeth's top

adviser, Burghley, and his son, Robert Cecil. Elizabeth alternately rewards and punishes Essex, but once Essex leads a half-hearted rebellion through the streets of London, the Queen puts a final and irrevocable stop to the repetition of separation and reconciliation with his execution. The tragedy consists of the tense delay of this tragic end.

In Elizabeth, Strachey complicates the theory of biography he created through Victoria's relation to death. Like the later queen, Elizabeth is simultaneously a person and a figure. The "whole structure" of this last major work, like the state itself, "hangs" "upon the life of Elizabeth" (79). Therefore, for Strachey's narrator, as for Elizabeth's ministers, "every other consideration must be subordinated to the supreme necessity of preserving the Queen's life" (80). But Elizabeth is more slippery than Victoria, if only for the lack of sources left to posterity. In fact, Strachey defines the Elizabethans precisely through their "inconsistency" (9), an "incongruity between their structure and their ornament" (10). The best example of this inscrutability, "the supreme phenomenon of Elizabethanism," is "Elizabeth herself": "From her visible aspect to the profundities of her being, every part of her was permeated by the bewildering discordances of the real and the apparent" (10). Strachey's "Elizabeth herself" is a condensed irony. She is so slippery he can hardly pinpoint her with that easy reflexive formulation. Queen Elizabeth is "an image" and "yet, by a miracle . . . actually alive" (10). While Victoria felt this tension in her own being, Elizabeth wears the ambiguity as both a protective and a political measure. Strachey's Elizabeth is the ultimate embodiment of the ambiguity he always uses to develop the momentum of his narrative.

Contrary to what Strachey proclaims as the fundamental ambiguity of Elizabeth "herself," he makes the bold move of providing a psychological interpretation and

potential physical grounding for her vacillation. Under the guidance of his brother and his wife, James and Alix Strachey, translators and students of Freud, Strachey advances a diagnosis of hysteria for Elizabeth. In *Bloomsbury/Freud*, Meisel and Kendrick put a letter from Alix to Lytton detailing the condition of "vaginismus" side by side with Strachey's description of Elizabeth, to show how directly he applied their psychoanalytic knowledge to his story (309). In true psychoanalytic fashion, Strachey outlines the etiology of Elizabeth's neurosis as "the result of the profound psychological disturbances of her childhood" (24), i.e. her father's violent love affairs as well as a childhood instance of near rape. Strachey allows us to look "below the robes" (11), claiming "her sexual organization was seriously warped" (20), which lead to "a condition of hysterical convulsion, accompanied, in certain cases, by intense pain" when it comes to "the crucial act of intercourse" (24). Elizabeth's hysteria, Strachey suggests, is one way to understand Elizabeth's failure to take a husband despite her amorous nature. Of course, this interpretation brought forth—and still brings forth—critics' wrath or at the very least ther disagreement.[8]

From the initial diagnosis of hysteria to the Oedipal reading of Elizabeth's decision to execute her beloved Essex, Strachey uses psychoanalytic vocabulary as a means to sum up the story. In the epigrammatic fashion of Aestheticism, a formula takes the place of long narration: "For years she made her mysterious organism the pivot upon which the fate of Europe turned" (25). Strachey's hypothesis of her condition turns linera plot into a circular and repetitive structure. The repetitive formula of love and discord

[8] For a recent example, Ray Monk claims that Strachey's failure in *Elizabeth and Essex* is not its fantastic or fictional supposition but rather its attempt at "making biography the handmaiden of a particular science (or, in this case, a supposed science" by "its appeal to Freudian psychoanalysis as an explanatory framework" (540).

between Elizabeth and Essex is due not only to Essex's impetuousness, but also to Elizabeth's physical reaction to lovemaking. Following the beautiful economy of *Queen Victoria*, Strachey substitutes interpretation for a traditional chronological narrative.

Meisel argues that, though Strachey's diagnosis of hysteria looks like "extreme psychological reductionism or individualizing of historical events," this is precisely what Strachey critiques. In other words, Meisel writes, "the book's psychoanalytic project is its beginning, not its end" (216). For Meisel, Strachey's process, throughout all of his major work, remains a narration of "its own conditions of emergence, the origin of precisely those distinctions between public and private, particularly between power and sexuality, that put the protopsychological categories that enable it into place for the first time in Strachey's history of English ideology" (226). In Strachey's hands what might appear as a crude Freudian analysis of Elizabeth becomes a more powerful psychoanalysis of history, anticipating Freud's readings of Biblical history in *Moses and Monotheism*. Strachey turns Elizabeth's ambivalent physical structure into a narrative process of delay and repetition that pits life against death and fact against fiction.

Freud himself summarizes the economy of fact and fiction at the core of Strachey's experiment in a letter to the author after the publication of *Elizabeth and Essex*. Freud lauds Strachey's application of the psychoanalytic tenets of interpretation to the writing of history:

> You are aware of what other historians so easily overlook—that it is impossible to understand the past with certainty, because we cannot divine men's motives and the essence of their minds and so cannot interpret their actions. Our psychological analysis does not suffice even with those who

> are near us in space and time, unless we can make them the object of years of the closest investigation, and even then it breaks down before the incompleteness of our knowledge and the clumsiness of our synthesis. So that with regard to the people of past times we are in the same position as with dreams to which we have been given no associations—and only a layman could expect us to interpret such dreams as those. As a historian, then, you show that you are steeped in the spirit of psychoanalysis. And, with reservations such as these, you have approached one of the most remarkable figures in your country's history, you have known how to trace back her character to the impressions of her childhood, you have touched upon her most hidden motives with equal boldness and discretion, and it is very possible that you have succeeded in making a correct reconstruction of what actually occurred. (Holroyd 615)

Freud's analysis uncovers in Strachey's process a central paradox. Strachey, Freud claims, realizes the severe limitations of knowledge, but in so doing is able to possibly reach a "correct reconstruction." Freud's evaluation of a "correct reconstruction" is not based on its truth value, but rather its therapeutic effectiveness in making sense of behavior through the construction of a narrative. In other words, a mixture of fiction and fact drives Strachey's work forward.

The major absence in Strachey's work, from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, is the criterion of therapeutic effectiveness. As Freud explains in one of his last essays, "Constructions in Analysis," the fact that a construction helps a patient outweighs the potential that it may be incorrect. Though the therapeutic context is too late for Elizabeth,

I would suggest that the theory of repetition that Strachey discovers in Elizabeth's biography, through her physical makeup as well as her behavior, provides a way for Strachey to insert himself into history, a type of imaginative if not practical therapy. This process of historical repetition is both narratological and fictional—and as Strachey discovers it is based on death. Everything comes down to the decision to kill Essex; the story of desire becomes a yearning for death. The intersection of fiction and fact is not only part of Strachey's method, it is a constant theme in the book itself and we see this particularly in the way Elizabeth pits her life against death.

Fact and Fiction, Life and Death

Woolf's appraisal of *Elizabeth and Essex* in "The Art of Biography" centers on Strachey's dangerous mixture of fact and fiction. *Elizabeth and Essex*, she claims, is a failure because in it "fact and fiction refused to mix" (119). Whereas in an earlier essay on biography, she defined life as "that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow" ("The New Biography" 100)—indeed, a mixture of fact and fiction—her later view revises her conception of fact. Since she thinks Strachey reaches the limits of what is possible in biography, Woolf now marks a difference between the fact of biography and the fact invented by the artist.

Woolf invokes the instability of interpretation that we have seen Strachey use to frame almost all of his biographical narratives. Due to the inherent ambiguity, Woolf sees life escape the biographer's grasp (like Mrs. Brown does the fiction writer's). In Woolf's estimation, Strachey, like Essex, does not live to tell the tale of the mixture of fact and fiction. Still, Woolf describes an important way that biography relates to fiction in terms of a repetition of time:

> For how often, when a biography is read and tossed aside, some scene remains bright, some figure lives on in the depths of the mind, and causes us, when we read a poem or a novel, to feel a start of recognition, as if we remembered something that we had known before. (123)

Structurally, Woolf makes an argument similar to the anachronistic method of interpretation Strachey unfolds in *Elizabeth and Essex*. The meaning of biography works as a sort of afterlife, a slight return of recognition in future reading.[9] But what Strachey shows, perhaps to Woolf's chagrin, is the pleasure inherent in the danger that a real life veers into the realm of fiction after death through its aesthetic repetition.

Elizabeth rules through repetition and Strachey uses this to order his narrative accordingly. Her ambiguity is not just enigmatic, a textual phenomenon calling for interpretation. Strachey attempts to explain Elizabeth's inscrutability in a different way: "The secret of her conduct was, after all a simple one: she had been gaining time" (14). This secret seems also to be underlying Strachey's entire biographical enterprise; it is another way to describe the retroactive work of narration. Elizabeth's "life passed in a passion of postponement," Strachey alliterates (15). Even this stylistic indulgence articulates the life principle that Strachey locates in the Queen: life is the time that takes shape before death. But it only becomes transmissible, available to narration, once the deferral is done. Life is postponement and delay. Life *is* only in relation to death.

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[9] Woolf's relationship to Strachey takes on a similar note in a diary entry she wrote thinking of his death: "It is like having the globe of the future perpetually smashed – without Lytton – & then, behold, it fills again" (Holroyd 682). But here she gets closer to the way Strachey's writing works. While Woolf criticizes Strachey's attempt to flout the limits of biography in *Elizabeth and Essex*, the major points of her argument line up with Strachey in such a way as to show the closeness of their thought. In the same year of the publication of *Elizabeth and Essex*, Woolf published her own experiment in biography, *Orlando*, which could be read as a reversal of Strachey's terms, substituting immortality for his emphasis on death. But the immortality Woolf seems to claim for fiction in relation to the imminent mortality of biography contradicts the way she approaches the meaning making of her own fictional works. In practice she and Strachey are much closer, as they employ the same repetitive temporality of interpretation.

The delay that characterizes Elizabeth's life, Strachey shows, is also in the service of death. Even Elizabeth's vitality is ambiguous. Her rival, King Philip of Spain, has the same characteristics, but in him, they signify death:

> In spite of superficial resemblances, she was the very opposite of her most dangerous enemy—the weaving spider of the Escurial. Both were masters of dissimulation and lovers of delay; but the leaden foot of Philip was the symptom of a dying organism, while Elizabeth temporised for the contrary reason—because vitality can afford to wait. (16)

Life looks just like death and Strachey can only straighten the two out by insisting that Elizabeth "was tremendously alive" (16). But Strachey's insistence does not settle the ambiguity, for, as we have seen in all of Strachey's navigation of minor differences, one easily swings back into the other. Either view is available: life is delay and death the final end; or death is a process and life can only be seen afterwards. The important point for Strachey is that the two terms only exist as a pair, ambiguous in their juxtaposition.

Essex too is the victim of a "double nature" (4) that pairs seemingly effervescent vitality with withdrawn deathlike broodiness. The duality of Essex expresses itself in his "physical complexion": "The blood flew through his veins in vigorous vitality; he ran and tilted with the sprightliest; and then suddenly health would ebb away from him, and the pale boy would lie for hours in his chamber obscurely melancholy, with a Virgil in his hand" (4). Essex's penchant for unthinking uproarious action and then self-pitying reflection meets its match in Elizabeth's shifting of marked affection and then vicious public upbraiding.

Retroactivity forms the structure of *Elizabeth and Essex* as a whole. Essex is presented as a last gasp of the middle ages during the height of the Renaissance. Strachey delineates this as a strange historical problem of the intersection of the particular and the general: “the spirit of the ancient feudalism was not quite exhausted. Once more, before the reign was over, it flamed up, embodied in a single individual—Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex” (2). But this flame has “no substance” since it comes from the past. Instead, the spirit of the old time concentrates itself in one person and makes him a handy symbol for Strachey’s story: “the spectral agony of an abolished world is discernible through the tragic lineaments of a personal disaster” (2). Like Queen Victoria, Essex sums up a bigger historical pattern in the story of his life. The difference then is that Essex is untimely, out of step with the present moment. Charles Richard Sanders describes Essex as “an anachronism, seeking glory through manners and means no longer effective” (243). Through this figure, Strachey diagnoses a larger pattern in the smaller story; the meaning only comes afterwards. The structure of the anachronism follows closely the imaginative projection Strachey attempts to pull off in his historical-biographical writings. Rather than the typical Modernist mantra of novelty and progress, underlying all of Strachey’s work is a temporal disjunction, a feeling of being out of time. To imbue the writing of history with the forms of the novel is a temporary cure to this ailment, for it allows for a feeling of escape. However, it also noticeably delineates the limitations of one’s own life.

If Essex embodies both a principle of action and of stasis and Elizabeth lives through hesitant delay, then finding a good way to tell a story of their relationship will be admittedly difficult. Strachey initiates his book with a wish, after the first signs of love

between the Queen and her courtier: “If only time could have stood still for a little and drawn out those halcyon weeks through vague ages of summer!” (6). The wish for time to stop is commonly a kernel of the aesthetic novel, as we have seen in the notorious wish that begins *Dorian Gray*. Strachey protests the impossibility of the fulfillment of this wish in what reads like an outline of the text to come:

> Human relationships must either move or perish. When two consciousnesses come to a certain nearness the impetus of their interactions, growing ever intenser and intenser, leads on to an unescapable climax. The crescendo must rise to its topmost note; and only then is the pre-ordained solution of the theme made manifest. (6)

Time must go on and Strachey paints the disastrous end of the affair of Elizabeth and Essex as inevitable right from the beginning as the resolution of a harmony. Yet underneath the seemingly linear development Strachey traces is in fact a structure that changes the passing of time into a kind of stuttering process of repetition.

Strachey’s method of temporizing, akin to Elizabeth, utilizes the familiar aesthetic structure of overlaying anticipation with retrospection. I would suggest that this method is the counterpart to Strachey’s famous irony, a kind of temporal irony. In the present moment, he looks back at the past as if consciously arranged, though it is obviously not so, and into the future as if it is simultaneously open and inevitable. Strachey often invokes the death of his characters in the midst of their life, before their time, to replicate the tension of the unknown. This novelistic approach to history constantly makes the reader aware of the inevitability of factual events while also keeping the uncertainty of the present moment of his characters on the surface.

Repetition and the Aesthetics of Death

The simultaneous anticipation and retrospection we have become familiar with in the aesthetic heritage of Wilde becomes in Strachey's hands a novelistic theory of history as repetition: life imitates art. However Strachey seems to delineate between fact and fiction at the same time as he marks the distinction between life and death: when Elizabeth decides to execute Essex. Like Essex, Elizabeth has walked the narrow line between fact and fancy, courting the same danger in her opposition with Spain. But for her, fact and fiction cannot be intermixed. She "existed in a universe that was composed entirely either of absurd, rose-tinged fantasies or the coldest and hardest of facts. There were no transitions—only opposites, juxtaposed" (27). After what is to be Essex's final betrayal, when he leads a rebellion in the streets of London, Elizabeth can finally make a clear choice without confusion or delay. As Strachey takes the reader through Elizabeth's thought process concerning Essex's death, we see her come to a decision by untangling the strands of fiction and reality Essex had dangerously mixed: "She could not dwell indefinitely among imaginations; her sense of fact crept forward—insidious—paramount; with relentless fingers it picked to pieces the rosy palaces of unreality" (261). It now becomes clear that if there is a difference between the principles of life and death espoused in Strachey's book, they are merely poles of her ambiguity. Where life is defined through Elizabeth's action as "gaining time," death, in a slight tweak, becomes an act of repetition.

At this moment, Strachey installs his second psychoanalytically charged interpretation, which, I would argue, applies his supposition of Elizabeth's hysteria to a theory of history itself. Elizabeth concludes "that she could never trust him, that the

future would always repeat the past" (261). But here, rather than fall prey the passivity of postponement, Elizabeth erects her power on the inevitability of time's repetition. Time is no longer to be gained: "Once! But the past was over, and time was inexorable. Every moment widened the desperate abyss between them" (262). Time washes over her and she "recognised the truth—the whole truth—at last" (262). The truth Elizabeth recognizes flips the life she previously embodied into death and marks a sliver of agency in the inexorability of time. Essex "had mistaken the hesitations of her strength for the weaknesses of a subservient character" (263). He misread the ambiguity. In response, Elizabeth invokes her father's legacy: "Yes, indeed, she felt her father's spirit within her; and an extraordinary passion moved the obscure profundities of her being, as she condemned her lover to her mother's death" (263). Time is no longer seen as a sequence of events or actions but instead as a repetition that embraces an ambivalent active passivity.

At first, Elizabeth's repetition is a passive channeling of her familial heritage:

> In all that had happened there was a dark inevitability, a ghastly satisfaction; her father's destiny, by some intimate dispensation, was repeated in hers; it was supremely fitting that Robert Devereux should follow Anne Boleyn to the block. (263)

The "inevitability" that Strachey has played with all along as a plot tension stretches beyond Essex's life, beyond even Elizabeth's, to her father's notorious series of executed lovers. But then Elizabeth moves on to a second interpretation of her "repetition" and overthrows her father's legacy: "Her father! . . . but in a still remoter depth there were still stranger stirrings. There was a difference as well as a likeness; after all, she was no

man, but a woman; and was this, perhaps not a repetition but a revenge?" (263). There is a slight difference in the repeated moment—a dialectical progression from repetition to revenge. Again, the realization comes as an abolishment of the buildup of years: "After all the long years of her life-time, and in this appalling consummation, was it her murdered mother who had finally emerged? The wheel had come full circle" (263). Repetition curls time in on itself. No longer does Elizabeth postpone and "prevaricate": "And so it happened that this was the one occasion in her life on which Elizabeth hardly hesitated" (264). The moment—death—finally comes for Essex.

However, in her own death, Elizabeth still hovers between, in an ambiguous state of prevarication, and finally escapes the fixing of the moment. As her "anxious courtiers" try to take stock of her situation in her dying bed, it turns out they are already too late, "the inexplicable spirit had eluded them. But it was for the last time: a haggard husk was all that was left of Queen Elizabeth" (286). She evades even at the conclusion; only then, Strachey seems to imply, does the tension appear to be settled.

Writing His Story

Between the theory of history as repetition through death and Elizabeth's final evasion in dying is the fictional space where Strachey installs his practice of writing biography. Sánchez-Pardo has argued that underlying Strachey's biographical project—in particular, *Elizabeth and Essex*—is an attempt to compensate for real losses with imaginary projections. She writes, "If *Elizabeth and Essex*, as a text, mitigates a series of losses in the real world through rewriting, it also thematizes within the text how literary language finds itself at a loss, unable to bridge the gap between language and its object" (305). Accordingly, she claims that biography and historiography are doomed to fail

"since the recognition of their respective losses is a utopian project, paranoid-schizoid in its economy and essentially projective in its performance" (305).

The redemptive economy that Sánchez-Pardo finds at the root of Strachey's writing of real lives is based on a denial of death, an inability to mourn. Sánchez-Pardo is right to discover Strachey's desire for biography in a fantasy of projective identification with his subjects and to link this process to death; however, I would argue that Sánchez-Pardo misses the pleasure Strachey takes in facing death in history through its inevitable repetition, a punctuation of time, by diagnosing him with melancholia. Strachey follows in the legacy of Wilde's Aestheticism, spurred on by a narrative desire for death, to write himself into the famous death scenes he retells. For Strachey, the biography as a novelistic enterprise is a learning how to die.

Strachey's enterprise is nowhere more evident than in the final scene of *Elizabeth and Essex*, after Elizabeth's death, when he leaves us with the figure of Cecil writing history at his table. Holroyd juxtaposes the ends of *Queen Victoria* and *Elizabeth and Essex* to claim that the later text reverses the temporal direction of the first. On her deathbed, Victoria reviews her life, synchronizes it in a sentence, and then dies. But, the end of *Elizabeth and Essex*, the Queen is already dead. We are left instead with an image of Elizabeth's Secretary of State, Robert Cecil, writing:

> But meanwhile, in an inner chamber, at his table, alone, the Secretary sat writing. All eventualities had been foreseen, everything was arranged, only the last soft touches remained to be given. The momentous transition would come now with exquisite facility. As the hand moved, the mind moved too, ranging sadly over the vicissitudes of mortal beings, reflecting

> upon the revolutions of kingdoms, and dreaming, with quiet clarity of what the hours, even then, were bringing—the union of two nations—the triumph of the new rulers—success, power, and riches—a name in after-ages—a noble lineage—a great House. (286).

In the movement of the writing hand effecting the "momentous transition," Holroyd sees this paragraph pointing towards the future, rather than summarizing the past, as Victoria's death scene does. The boundary of the book is broken, as we get a glimpse beyond Elizabeth's (and Essex's) death. Yet, I would suggest that the temporality of this final paragraph is more complicated—and it speaks directly to Strachey's biographical process.

The image of Cecil, I would argue, accomplishes a similar synchronization to Victoria's death scene, affecting the hallmark trope of aestheticism, the summary that Strachey calls a "beautiful economy" of fiction over fact. The scene begins "meanwhile," simultaneous with Elizabeth's final exit. The moment of survival accompanying her death is the present of Cecil's writing, the planning out of history, which looks at the future as if it is already past. Cecil is the exemplary writer, whose action directs the world: organizing, editing, selecting—but dictating the future ("what the hours . . . were bringing") instead of describing the past. This is a mirror image of Strachey, the biographer and historian, orchestrating for us once again the tragic history of Elizabeth and Essex. He projects himself into history through the fantasy of a writer who directs the movement of time and the actions of men. As with Victoria's end, there is a simultaneity created of the past: the pieces fall into place. The present is the necessary outcome of the planned past, what "had been forseen" and what "was arranged."

Throughout the book, Strachey continually returns to the image of Cecil, "at his table writing" (109). Strachey catalogues the mysterious features of the little hunchback who was so powerful. Yet, as with Elizabeth, the way things happen is a process with little pomp and hardly any details for the writer to describe. Strachey gives us a picture of how history works through Cecil's eyes:

> Yet, perhaps, in some quite different manner, something, sometimes—very rarely—almost never—might be done. At a moment of crisis, a faint, a hardly perceptible impulsion might be given. It would be nothing but a touch, unbetrayed by the flutter of an eyelid, as one sat at table, not from one's hand, which would continue writing, but from one's foot. One might hardly be aware of its existence oneself, and yet was it not, after all, by such minute, invisible movements that the world was governed for its good, and great men came into their own? (110-111).

Strachey is fascinated with the "quiet minimum of action which led to such vast consequences" precisely because "we can only obscurely conjecture at what happened under the table" (111). This is the final image of Strachey's narrator, one of immense power and incredible weakness, ambiguity and paradox. We have the writing, but something about the past is totally unavailable—namely, that body under the desk, or Elizabeth's inscrutable person "below the robes" (11). Through this small opening, Strachey projects his life into the past and injects the past into the present. There is always room for interpretation, to repeat the past and discover that while lives are inevitably limited, they somehow come back.

After reading *Elizabeth and Essex*, Keynes perceived Strachey's fantasy of projecting himself into history. Keynes wrote to him, as if getting to the bottom of it all, "You seem, on the whole, to imagine yourself as Elizabeth, but I see from the pictures that it is Essex whom you have got up as yourself" (3 December 1928, in Holroyd 612). I would go further to claim that Strachey "gets himself up" as every character. Elizabeth and Essex, as we have seen, play out the central dynamic of writing for Strachey.[10] But most importantly, we see Strachey in the figure of the writer, like Cecil, presenting his reader with his fantastical mastery of the past, to take his place among the immortals of history. Johnstone warns against Strachey's experimental approach to life-writing, since, like Cecil, it might be seen to attempt to master the past:

> The clearly defined pattern which may be seen when a life is viewed in retrospect, which may be grasped by the intellect and presented from this point of view or from that, is probably an illusion, a pattern imposed on events by the intellect itself for its own convenience and satisfaction (128).

According to Johnstone, giving life the "pattern" or form of a plot is most likely a merely external "imposition." In other words, the plot or narrative form life seems to assume after death is only interpretation, not reality. However, rephrased in this manner, Johnstone's critique becomes instead a positive version of Strachey's aesthetic creed. There is no reality, only the creative interpretation of fiction.

It would not therefore be a stretch to see a kind of therapy in Strachey's writing. Most critics, especially since the publication of Holroyd's monumental biography, have

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[10] Holroyd describes Strachey's increased involvement in the writing of *Elizabeth and Essex* over against *Queen Victoria* as a result of the "love-story . . . prompting memories of his early love-affairs and mingling with the day-dreams of current infatuations" (566). He claims that Strachey had difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy, resulting in the comparative failure of the final book.

attempted to explain his work through his life in this manner. But even before Holroyd, Rebecca West critiqued *Elizabeth and Essex* precisely for what she perceived as its self-therapeutic aims. According to West, Strachey flouts "too flagrantly the rule that a work of art must never be an obvious compensation for the deficiencies of the author's existence":

> It was too plainly the revenge taken by the suppressed romantic elements in a character committed by a majority vote to a cool and classical way of living, and it had the turgid and disconcerting quality of adolescent dreams that have been dreamed too long. ("Lytton Strachey: Father of Modern Biography," *New York Herald Tribune* [7 February 1932], quoted in Holroyd 612)

West places Strachey's life alongside the book and bases her judgment on the book's apparent need to fill a lack in his life. Strachey, she claims, wants to escape his own persona through his writing. She relegates the book to the realm of dreams—an analogy Freud uses as well in his appraisal of the book—and thereby turns Strachey into the analysand. It seems unfair, however, to claim that a personal deficiency is mirrored in an aesthetic one.

T.R. Barnes makes a similar critique in relation to the whole of Strachey's work. He claims that due to his "appropriately Freudian and freethinking reason, [Strachey] appealed to that desire for fantasy satisfaction through 'character' or substitute lives, which is the basis of commercial fiction" (*Scrutiny* volume II, no. 3 [December 1933] quoted in Holroyd 612). Barnes picks up on the same escapist fantasy that West does, but critically shrugs off any theoretical importance it may have by relegating it to the

middlebrow. He sums up his criticism again by saying that since Strachey was "incapable of creation in life or in literature, his writings were a substitute for both" (612). This refrain of disappointment is still repeated in Strachey criticism. Merle's biography and critique of Strachey tends in the same direction, blaming Strachey's deficiencies in literary creation for his settling in biography.[11] Only Spurr gives this predicament a positive spin, claiming that Strachey improved on aestheticism by practicing "art for life's sake" and giving up an imitative aesthetic for a "redemptive" one (120-1).

Yet Meisel provides the most important response to the critical disappointment in Strachey's creative powers by removing him from the merely personal relation to his work that the other critics see and placing him in relation to the canon. Precisely because of Strachey's reworking of the past, Meisel classifies his books amongst the highest of the high modernists. Strachey disregards the call to "Make it New" in favor of what Meisel argues is a Paterian mode of interpretation that gains a different kind of mastery over the past. Meisel points us in the right direction. What the critics who disapprove of Strachey's relegation to mere biography overlook is that Strachey creates substitute lives in the manner of fiction by using verifiable facts. He writes himself into to history, not only in the form of the biographer who, as both Woolf and Johnstone note, takes the stage along with his subjects, but also in the guise of the characters he recreates in his writing.

Although Strachey worked with fact in the name of accuracy, the appeal of his biographical novels is the relief they give from the truth. Strachey vanquishes the univocal narrative which presents itself as eternal and thereby makes room for the pleasurable imaginative response to history that brings it into relation the present. That

[11] Merle also hints that Strachey's homosexuality is a part of his lack of creative abilities, an obviously dubious claim (48-9).

death is at the center of the project points to the danger Strachey courts in potentially sacrificing historical truth for fanciful fiction. But his critical eye does not undo the sympathy for the pained and tortured bodies that are strewn along the paths of historical time. There is always a frame in Strachey's work—a frame that works like quotation marks, indicating that the work within is a citation, an interpretation.

Strachey sought a formal literature that organized life in a way to play out the typical yet utterly unique drama of time and mortality. In the introduction Strachey wrote to George H.W. Rylands' *Words and Poetry*, published the same year as *Elizabeth and Essex*, Strachey gives an interesting example of a purely formal literature—and it is curiously similar to what he attempts in *Elizabeth and Essex*. In this essay, Strachey renames the dialectic of fact and fiction as "ideas" and "words." As Strachey pushes the tension between meaning and language to its end, he concludes "the ultimate solution escapes us; we are entranced by an inexplicable beauty—an intangible loveliness more enduring than ourselves" (285). Strachey leaves us with meaningless beauty that outlasts the limits of life. Our lives are limited, meaning escapes us, and for that reason our true appreciation of art seems timeless and endlessly deferrable. But that supplemental majesty, the last ambiguity that makes a particular life exemplary, is not a hint of immortality—it is the mark of an irreducible finitude, which, Strachey shows, is what gives unique pleasure to the narration of lives.

V. Death as Communication: Narrative Desire in *Mrs. Dalloway*

Virginia Woolf's novels are notoriously difficult, but *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) places a special burden on its readers: How do we understand the curious (non)-relationship between Clarissa Dalloway, the titular bourgeois housewife who is planning a party, and Septimus Smith, the shell shocked and suicidal World War II veteran? The two characters never meet, but their connection forms the climax of the novel, when Clarissa hears of Septimus's death at the party she has been planning throughout the day and relives his final moments. Recent critics have used a psychoanalytic model of mourning as a way to understand the role of death in Woolf's writing as a loss that fiction might console. However, I would argue that the relationship between Clarissa and Septimus gives us a different picture of the way death works in Woolf's fiction. Rather than thinking of death as a relation of loss, I claim, Woolf uses the relationship of these two characters to show that fiction is fueled by a desire for death.

Clarissa physically experiences Septimus's suicide after the fact and thinks of his death as "an attempt to communicate." To think of death as communication entails a desire that paradoxically yearns for connection and separation, a communication that Woolf envisions as the model of the novel. Between Clarissa and Septimus, I claim, lies Woolf's discovery of a new narrative technique for the novel that enables us to confront mortality. Woolf's experiments with the time of the novel simulate an experience of dying by overlaying linear time with simultaneity—in other words, summing it all up in a moment. I argue that Woolf's formal innovations, first implemented in *Mrs. Dalloway*, make explicit the desire for death that motivates our reading of the novel as a genre.

Woolf uses death as the ultimate mode of fiction to give us a sense of time and a feeling that life, though fleeting, might be meaningful.

Reading Woolf's fiction in the mode of mourning tends to liken her prose to poetic forms like elegy. For example, Kelly Walsh explores Woolf's fiction as a "poetics of insufficiency" that "endlessly" tries "to express inexpressible grief" (8). Similarly, Karen Smythe reads Woolf's novels as "fiction-elegies" that fuse fragments to overcome the shock of death and provide consolation to the reader, who takes a distanced and vicarious relation to the characters of the novel. I would argue that we must emphasize Woolf's interest in redefining the novel, which is grounded in the paradox of indirect communication. She takes this to the extreme in a model of self-cancelling form, the novel that comments on its own narration and simultaneously produces and destroys convention.

In line with the poetic reading of Woolf's fiction, critics often pose Septimus as a Romantic figure of the suicidal poet, who achieves his goal in death and is remembered by the emblematic reader, Clarissa, for whom Woolf sacrifices him. Even Garrett Stewart, who proposes a convincing allegory of the displaced death of the artist through Woolf's fiction in the pairing of male and female figures, condenses the real artistic energy in Septimus alone, while Clarissa is merely "the authentic reader" (*Death Sentences* 279). I would argue that to seriously evaluate Woolf's achievement in *Mrs. Dalloway* in terms of the novel form and to thereby understand the role of death in her narrative process, we must read Septimus not as visionary but as failure.[1] Septimus is an

[1] In her biography of Woolf, Hermione Lee compares Septimus's horrified reaction to the maid finding his writings and laughing at him to Woolf's own anxiety about being read. I would suggest that Septimus is a cathartic figure for Woolf through which she can almost cruelly poke fun at her anxiety of failure as a writer.

ironized poetic figure, who seeks ultimate meaning in the world, whereas Clarissa is a model of the impersonal narrator, who only looks for temporary connection and allows the dispersal in art that Septimus only finds in death.

To emphasize Septimus at the expense of Clarissa is to overlook Woolf's attempt to reinvent the novel through a new narrative voice. Clarissa is the better model for this voice: she is a hostess who gathers then lets go, accepting death, rather than a tragic poet who wants to establish meaning and truth in death. The success of *Mrs. Dalloway*'s effect ironically resides in a failure: the connection between Clarissa and Septimus has the form of a paradox, a communication that is only an attempt and is merely imaginary or fictional. The indirect attempt at communication is the narrative model of impersonality that Woolf sought in order to escape the Romantic lyrical "I."

Though Woolf herself situates her work as an innovation in fiction, her experiments with the novel form have a history that draws from 19th-century Aestheticism and its formalization of art.[2] J. Hillis Miller has shown how Woolf draws out consequences innate to the traditional 19th-century realist modes of novelistic narration, specifically through a rethinking of death as the source of narration.[3] But where Miller emphasizes the novel's attempt at remembrance or repetition of the past in the present, I point to a more future-oriented understanding of the role of fiction that Woolf exploits in her mature novels, beginning with *Mrs. Dalloway*: not only a remembering but an anticipation of memory. Here we find the influence of Aestheticism on Woolf, specifically in its insights into the relation between art and life. Woolf combines Pater's

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[2] Here, I follow Perry Meisel's reading of Woolf as an inheritor of Walter Pater in *The Absent Father*. Meisel focuses on Woolf as an essayist, but dedicates a chapter to the sense of life's textuality that Woolf shares with Pater.

[3] See *Fiction and Repetition*, where Miller devotes a chapter to *Mrs. Dalloway* that finds the source of the narrative voice in death.

stress on the fleetingness of the artistic impression as a "quickened sense of life" that comes from impending death (*Renaissance* 61) with Oscar Wilde's famous claim that "Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life" ("The Decay of Lying" 982). In Woolf's hands, these insights turn into a process of narration that bridges the gap from death to life. Life takes its narrative potential—its ability to be made into a story or a novel—from interruptive and irrecuperable death, which epitomizes the fleetingness of the present moment. Woolf's Modernism accelerates the formalization Pater and Wilde began so that the time of the novel now explicitly replicates a desire for death. The desire for death is the corresponding content of formalism in literature, but both form and content are ultimately self-canceling. Woolf follows Pater and Wilde by highlighting the experience of art over tangible meaning that would outlast it. With *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf masterfully produces the finite temporal experience of art as an anticipation of death.

What Woolf takes from Pater and Wilde is the paradoxical idea of death, whose aesthetic promise is a summary and reprise of life in the moment of passing, but which in the end is really nothing. The paradox of fleetingness and the promise of succession becomes the new narrative form Woolf develops with *Mrs. Dalloway* and then dramatizes in the temporary connection of Clarissa and Septimus. Septimus's death is simultaneously separation and connection, providing the model for novelistic narration. In narrative, we seek to give life form but can only do this by imagining a life complete—dead. The desire for death, which a desire that seeks its own end, motivates our relation to fiction as we try to sustain life in the moment as a life already lived. Ultimately, both life and death are fictional constructs that we use to understand time as it passes. Woolf

installs this desire as a narrative device in order to make the reader of *Mrs. Dalloway* experience living and dying as an effect of literature.

For Woolf, fiction has its source in the search for narrative contours of life. As she claims in "The New Biography," "the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life." (100). Fictitious life is complete; its form is a result of "the novelist's art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect" (100). Clarissa's reception of Septimus's suicide as communication epitomizes this vicarious experience of life that Woolf calls fictitious. I would suggest that the indirect communication through death adds another twist to this reversal of the priority of reality over fiction by demonstrating that at the root of our relation to fiction is not just an attempt to understand life, but more importantly a desire for death. In other words, fictitious life is an experience of dying. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, these novelistic forms come to the fore, to highlight our desire and the feeling of meaning that the structure of the novel produces.

Woolf first perfects her innovative narrative technique in *Mrs. Dalloway*. To connect Woolf's theories of writing that inform this technique with her actual literary practice, I will analyze her essays alongside the novel. Within *Mrs. Dalloway*, I argue, Clarissa's theories of life and death reflect Woolf's theories about fiction. In other words, when Clarissa reflects on life and death in the novel, she is implicitly announcing Woolf's theory of fiction. By tracing the implicit connection Woolf draws through this double process of theorization between textuality and life, we can better evaluate the importance of Woolf's narrative innovations. Woolf's experiments with voice and time in the novel are not merely attempts to better represent reality in writing but a more explicit demonstration of how writing forms our lives. Woolf exposes the novel's framework as

an attempt to momentarily gain a retrospective view of death in the present, like Clarissa's experience of Septimus's suicide, and thereby imbue our otherwise indefinite lives with a feeling of meaning akin to the feeling of reading a novel.

The Fictitious Life

Virginia Woolf always writes about life. Yet what the word "life" means in its many appearances in her essays and fictions, eludes easy grasp. It is this elusiveness, however, that for Woolf defines life. Preparing to write *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf notes: "Suppose the idea of the book is *the contrast between life & death*" (*"The Hours"* 414). "Life" is a relation, only momentarily grasped in conjunction with death. E.M. Forster highlights the transience Woolf is after in his appraisal of *Mrs. Dalloway*: "it is far more difficult to catch [Woolf] than it is for her to catch what she calls life—'life; London; this moment in June'" (108). Following Woolf's own cue, Forster shows that life, this moment, is completely intangible, even though it is the subject of the book. Woolf claims this elusiveness is true for all literature. In her famous meditation on modern fiction, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1923), she announces the task of fiction: not to let Mrs. Brown escape. Mrs. Brown is "the spirit we live by, life itself" ("Character in Fiction" [1924] 54). She is what Woolf wants for fiction, "the life of Monday or Tuesday" ("Modern Fiction" 9), felt in the moment, rather than the minute material description of reality.

In "Modern Fiction" (1925), Woolf gives a striking definition of life which outlines the impressionistic quality of consciousness that the writer must try to convey: "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (9). Though it looks like Woolf gives us a definition of life, it is precisely murky, allowing

life once again to escape. “A luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope” is barely an image: it is something that is on the verge of perception, but that escapes view. Woolf uses the word “envelope” in a similar and instructive way in her diary just before the publication of *Mrs. Dalloway* that presents us with the paradox of narrative desire to communicate at the same time as to divide: “people secrete an envelope which connects them and protects them from others, like myself, who am outside the envelope” (74). If life is an envelope working in the same way, as a semi-permeable membrane, then it would also be the simultaneous connection and separation each person or character feels in relation to everyone else they encounter. Maria DiBattista suggests that Woolf’s description of life also fits her “narrative persona,” which exists between subjectivity and otherness (*Virginia Woolf’s Major Novels* 14). More precisely, I would claim that Woolf uses the “semi-transparent envelope” as a model for a special type of non-directive communication between the narrator and the reader. In *Mrs. Dalloway* we become part of this structure as the narrative places us within hearing of various characters’ consciousnesses while they meditate on the difficulty of really knowing each other. Our reading of the novel doubles their reading of life, but we have privileged access to other consciousnesses through the movement of the free indirect discourse that is impossible when confined in our singular and personal perspective.

The major position of the characters throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* is retrospective: in the present moment, they look back at the past, trying out interpretations of their lives (in the face of what often feels like impending death). However, the plot of *Mrs. Dalloway* consists of the various characters’ daylong anticipation of the party of Clarissa Dalloway, the wife of a Tory MP. Therefore, *Mrs. Dalloway* is structured around a paradoxical

sense of time that synchronizes anticipation and retrospection. Clarissa's party collects the anticipation and recollection that dominate the narrative in the climax of a present moment at the end of the novel. The subplot that leads to the suicide of Septimus Smith, a WWI veteran who has returned to England "shell shocked," at times sidetracks the narrative of Clarissa and her circle. Yet Septimus's death structurally mirrors the climactic moment of Clarissa's party and brings the two strands of story together as she hears of his death at her party and undergoes a complex identification with him.

Woolf rethinks the relation of life to literature in the way her narrator treats the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway*. At some of the most crucial moments, the feelings the characters experience and ruminate about function also as narrative signposts, reflections on the act of writing. This enables a double reading of the moment as both narrative and narratology—what Meisel defines as "reflexive realism," in which the mimetic function of the text doubles as a reflection on writing and shows the textuality of the world being represented (*The Myth of the Modern* 35 and *passim*). There are always at least two ways of reading what is being narrated in Woolf's novel: first, as descriptive of the interiority of a character, and second, as descriptive of the exterior work of the narrator. When we take these two ways of reading together, the characters' thoughts become almost uncanny—as if they were able to narrate their own lives. This process, I claim, fulfils a wish of the reader who has no narrative control, however loose, over the form of his or her life.

The narrative signal for the activation of this double reading is the word "moment."[4] In "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf uses the idea of the moment to make sense

[4] Several critics trace Woolf's use of the word moment back to its philosophical sources. The dominant reading is Paul Ricoeur's analysis of the intersection of private and public time in *Mrs. Dalloway* (*Time*

of the connection between her life and her writing. These moments carry with them a distinct violence that recalls the horror Clarissa relives in Septimus's death (and Septimus's own violent shocks of war as well). In the midst of the "cotton wool" of the habitual life, which Woolf calls "non-being," she finds "a sudden violent shock; something happened so violently that I have remembered it all my life" (71). At first she notices that "many of these exceptional moments brought with them a peculiar horror and a physical collapse; they seemed dominant; myself passive" (72). Yet, recalling a satisfying moment, she gets the feeling that there is a reason behind it: "I was conscious—if only at a distance—that I should in time explain it" (72). The power of explanation, she supposes, "blunts the sledge-hammer of the blow" (72).

In the moment, the shock merges with the desire for explanation.[5] The ability to cushion the blow by "putting it into words" (72) allows Woolf temporarily to survive the moment, which is a herald of death in its violence, where someone like Septimus would succumb. Woolf's idea of the moment epitomizes the paradoxical structure we are examining in its simultaneity of fusion and disintegration. For Woolf, the moment is an impetus for fiction. Writing gives the moment "wholeness," unlocks a pattern "behind the cotton wool," so the moment loses "its power to hurt" (72). She is able then "to put the

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and Narrative). Recently, Ann Banfield has revised the traditional Bergsonian reading of time in Woolf's writings by placing Woolf's conception of time in her immediate artistic and philosophical milieu ("Time Passes"). I am more interested in the literary heritage behind the word "moment," such as the connection Meisel makes between Woolf's "moment" and Pater's "privileged moment," which is itself a reinterpretation of Wordsworth's "spots of time." I argue that the word flags for Woolf the literary potential of life. "Moments of being" are fictional moments that occur in real life and that give one the feeling of meaning.

[5] In "Virginia Woolf's 'Cotton Wool of Daily Life,'" Liesl M. Olson reads *Mrs. Dalloway* alongside "A Sketch of the Past" in light of the "moments of non-being" Woolf describes. Olson correctly remarks Woolf's ambivalence as she builds a novel out of ordinary events. This is what Olson labels the "elusiveness of the ordinary and the paradox of its representation" (53). Literary representation seems to confer meaningfulness on all details. But I would argue that what Woolf actually discovers in the writing of *Mrs. Dalloway* is a way to allow meaning to escape. The feeling of meaning is a function of time—a momentary cohesion necessarily followed by dispersal.

severed parts together" in order to get in touch with this feeling of "some real thing behind appearances" (72). As in *Mrs. Dalloway,* the shock of the moment is associated with meaning: "a whole avalanche of meaning [. . .] heaped itself up and discharged itself upon me, unprotected, with nothing to ward it off" (78). Woolf's discovery is that the moment has two beats; its time is layered. The moment occurs and suggests meaning. It has narrative potential in the explanation that discharges the violence of meaning. In this way, we see that meaning is merely hinted at but never reached; it is only a feeling that is attendant to the double time of the moment, an answer to its shock.

Woolf uses the dual structure of the moment to write the reader into the novel; she substitutes fiction for life. Each moment is already reflective and anticipates its communication. *Mrs. Dalloway*'s innovative narrative structure, which moves from character to character in their experiences of similar moments, facilitates the identification reading demands of one in order to be able to follow the narrative at all. While writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf made a "discovery," what she called a "tunneling process." In order to give "the past in installments, as I have need of it" (*AWD* 60), she "dig[s] out beautiful caves behind my characters. [. . .] The idea is that the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment" (59). Woolf's imagery of caves and tunnels maps time out spatially, but it sticks to the double time of the moment. The present, where the caves come to light, is the moment of reading, which forms a temporal link between the reader and the text. Woolf enacts the narrative through the reader in the same way that Clarissa receives Septimus's death, as "an attempt to communicate." This, I claim, is Woolf's true discovery about how literature works in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The reader's fragmentary process of identification is *Mrs. Dalloway*'s

model of novelistic communication grounded in Clarissa's vicarious experience of Septimus's death. Meaning is created and suspended, death avoided and embraced.

Inherent to the access the reader gains to the characters' thought processes, is a shock, a distinct violence. The most striking aspect for the reader is the narrative jump from one consciousness to the next, which is only amplified by the most violent jump of all: Septimus's jump to his death. His suicide demonstrates the fragility of the position in which the narrative places the reader—inside the characters' heads—as one of the tunnels we have followed comes abruptly to an end. For Woolf, life veers into death just as sanity veers into insanity. The violence Septimus experienced in the war repeats as the violence of his insane thoughts and finally as the thud of his body on the ground. Yet, the narrative typically maintains an undisturbed surface in its movement from one mind to another, which cushions the readers' shock at being torn suddenly out of context and thereby preserves his or her sanity. The reader's need constantly to find his or her bearings mimics the process of citation that occurs through the text in the characters' thoughts as well as through the narrator's work of bringing these characters together. Repeated words find themselves in new contexts, producing new meanings while simultaneously dredging up old feelings. While the reader works at understanding, the novel itself also works the reader into its texture. There is no escaping the violence of the narrative jumps while reading, since the novel communicates itself through such involuntary shocks of meaning.

Clarissa's Theory

The novel first sets up the possibility of an unintentional "communication" with Clarissa's theory, which is repeated in various versions throughout. Clarissa's theory, like

Woolf's figuration of life as a "semi-transparent envelope," aims to comprehend the connection and separation of people in the world. The potential connection between these floating voices within a concrete reality is a wish that motivates the narration of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Clarissa's old friend and former suitor Peter, who has just returned to London from India, gives the most fully articulated version of this wish-theory. One day, he remembers, Clarissa elaborated her theory to "explain the feeling they had of dissatisfaction; not knowing people; not being known" (152). Clarissa says, "sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not 'here, here, here'; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that" (152). Given universal perspective (outside time and from above), both Clarissa and the bus might be summarized, plotted out on a map of London, because "to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places" (152-3).

Clarissa's theory is really a theory of the novel, which orchestrates multiple consciousnesses in a paradoxical time structure of succession and simultaneity. Peter moves beyond the moment of this recollection, the quotation of Clarissa's words and the solid tapping of her seat, to his own summary of her idea:

> It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her scepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or

> that, or even haunting certain places after death . . . perhaps—perhaps. (153)

Peter's "perhaps" repeats as a slightly bemused reflection of the apparent silliness of the theory—its fictional status. But he demonstrates the theory as he recalls it. "Perhaps" may also be attributed to Clarissa: a sign of her hesitation or a hint of wishfulness betrayed behind this idea of life and death.

The question of whose "perhaps" it is exemplifies the fundamental ambiguity of free indirect discourse that Woolf exploits in the novel to make it something new. The word "perhaps" ultimately exists between the characters, Clarissa and Peter, somehow shared by them, though their consciousnesses are totally closed to one another. The reader—who takes the place of the semi-absent narrator in a privileged position that seems to promise complete vision—is the only one privy to such ironic ambiguity, able either to make a decision, such as "Clarissa said it," or to hold onto the two possibilities simultaneously. What this ultimately performs is the integration of the reader within the novel (not outside and above it). Just as Peter enacts Clarissa's theory as he recalls the event of its enunciation, we demonstrate it as we read it. We repeat Peter's act of memory. Clarissa's life ambiguously melds with ours. We identify with the various voices through the repetition of words and scenes, merging our private memories with the public space and time of the novel and denying us, as with the characters, any ultimate interpretation of life. After having read *Mrs. Dalloway*, we feel that Clarissa's or Peter's or Septimus's memories are somehow also ours. Her theory is not an attempt to escape death but rather an embrace of death as the fictional space of narration.

In his recollection of Clarissa, Peter makes a distinction between "the actual meeting" (a "sharp, acute, uncomfortable grain") and what happens "in absence, in the most unlikely places": the memory "would flower out, open, shed its scent, let you touch, taste, look about you, get the whole feel of it and understanding, after years of lying lost" (153). The double temporality of the meeting repeated in his memory corresponds to the two times of reading Woolf discusses in "How Should One Read a Book?" (1926). She outlines two processes, the "actual reading" and the "after reading" (71). The "actual reading" is equivalent to Peter's "actual meeting":

> During the actual reading, when we hold the book in our hands, there are incessant distractions and interruptions. New impressions are always completing or canceling the old. One's judgment is suspended, for one does not know what is coming next. Surprise, admiration, boredom, interest, succeed each other in such quick succession that when, at last, the end is reached, one is for the most part in a state of complete bewilderment. (71)

In its "succession" of moments, its forceful insistence of "impressions," Woolf's description of reading matches her description of life in "Modern Fiction." Only later, in the "after reading"—like the distance of time needed for Peter's recollection of a meeting to flower—"the whole book floats to the top of the mind complete" (71). In the gap of time, "some process seems to have been finished without one's being aware of it. The different details which have accumulated in reading assemble themselves in their proper places" (71). Despite the necessary delay between these two moments, there is, as between Peter's seed and flower, an intimate connection. In Woolf's delineation of the

two reading processes, she seeks the place and time from which a critical judgment of a book can be made. The actual reading may, she admits, give us "the greatest pleasure and excitement," but it "is not so profound or so lasting as the pleasure we get when the second process [. . .] is finished, and we hold the book clear, secure, and (to the best of our powers) complete in our minds" (71-2).

Woolf uses an image similar to holding the whole book complete in our minds to describe a sudden access Clarissa has to her "whole life" during her first meeting with Peter in the morning. Inevitably, their shared past comes up in Peter and Clarissa's discussion, only, however, to separate the two rather than to bring them closer together. Clarissa asks Peter "'Do you remember the lake?'" and then feels "an emotion which caught her heart, made the muscles of her throat stiff, and contracted her lips in a spasm" (*Mrs. D* 43). The word "lake" triggers a strange yet typical temporal experience for her:

> she was a child, throwing bread to the ducks, between her parents, and at the same time a grown woman coming to her parents who stood by the lake, holding her life in her arms which, as she neared them, grew larger and larger in her arms, until it became a whole life, a complete life, which she put down by them and said, 'This is what I have made of it! This!' And what had she made of it? (43)

Clarissa sees herself returning to a past moment, she—in the present—confronts herself and her parents in memory. This fantasy about her life follows the same temporal process of reading that Woolf delineates. Underlying our reading, Woolf shows, is a wish. Clarissa's theory of life expresses a desire to "make up" life, to have the same power over it as a writer—or a reader. In this strange model of communication, Peter is no longer

there; the interpersonal is motivated by a desire to escape the subjective position, to face death.

The relationship momentarily struck between past and present for Clarissa mirrors the relationship between the reader and Clarissa. For Woolf, this is exemplary of the way literature affects life: it is an imaginary temporal experience that makes disparate elements of life simultaneous. Clarissa reaches involuntarily for a sense of control in this memory/fantasy of holding her whole life in her arms—but the mastery is fleeting. One cannot escape one's past just as one cannot reenter it with complete knowledge. Woolf writes in "Street Haunting," "it is only when we look at the past and take from it the element of uncertainty that we can enjoy perfect peace" (186). However the perfect peace that comes with certainty, Woolf associates with death. In the essay, Woolf confronts a ghost of herself when she returns somewhere six months later to rediscover her lost feelings. Woolf finds she is separated from her old self because "the sights we see and the sounds we hear now have none of the quality of the past; nor have we any share in the serenity of the person who, six months ago, stood precisely where we stand now" (186). What comes between is death: "His is the happiness of death; ours the insecurity of life. He has no future; the future is even now invading our peace" (186).

Woolf shows that Clarissa's fantasy of a complete life can only gain this sense of fulfillment through an anticipation of death. The fantasy of a separation of selves confronting each other across time is the same model of the reading relation Woolf examines in her essays. Clarissa's attempt to map the past onto the present is specifically a fictional desire; it rephrases Woolf's own literary transformation of life. Yet like the envelope of life, Woolf's narrative is separation as well as connection.

The Madness of Narration

Woolf forces us within hearing of other characters' thoughts, not only Clarissa's—some of whom will never return. The most significant of these shifts occurs when the narrator introduces Septimus Smith. Suddenly, as if through his war induced paranoia, Septimus becomes the center of the text. Clarissa, who has been our constant in the narration, is thrown out of focus. Septimus's self-centeredness points out a quality in the narrative that should shock the reader, if it weren't beautifully smoothed over by the skill of Woolf's narration. Each character is the center of his or her own little universe, despite the momentary community created by narration. The reader's experience reproduces Septimus's madness; we hear voices, multiple voices, without immediate meaning attached, and we struggle to make sense of it.

Septimus's madness is the madness of narration. He falls prey in his life to the idea that everything surrounding him can bear meaning. He explains to his wife, Rezia, that as he watches people in the street, he knows "all their thoughts [. . .] he knew everything. He knew the meaning of the world" (66). Septimus, like us, like the narrator, listens in on the thoughts of the people walking down the street. To classify his madness in generic terms, we see Septimus is afflicted with a narrator's omniscience. Shortly before jumping to his death, Septimus tries to escape his delusion, opening his eyes "very cautiously [. . .] to see whether a gramophone was really there" (142). Banfield reads Septimus's "testing" as "the philosopher's thought experiment" in which "the possible persistence of objects, an assumption of common sense, becomes itself extraordinary" (*The Phantom Table* 62). She claims, "Septimus goes mad precisely because 'all were real,' not unreal" (62). But Septimus's madness is not simply an example of the

philosopher's reality sickness; Septimus falls prey to the overwhelming meaning-making that is the effect of novelistic narration and that Woolf ultimately equates with death. He scans the room, taking in the objects one by one, so he will not be taken in by the potential meaningfulness of every object surrounding him.

If Septimus's madness is an example of the effect of narration, this is not because Septimus himself is attempting to narrate the world. Instead, I would suggest, his madness consists of his consciousness of being narrated. His madness replicates the mood of the anxious reader trying to understand—which is the equivalent of the anxious person trying to make sense of his or her life. But Septimus's predicament is ultimately paradoxical: he seeks meaning and escape from meaning at the same time. This desire, I would argue, is the fictional desire for death that Woolf both simulates and describes in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Death is a paradox that holds out the promise of fulfillment at the same time as nothingness. Therefore, the structure of the desire for meaning, as Septimus exemplifies it, is really a desire for death, an escape from meaning.

The process of narration uncovers the potential meaning of surrounding objects. Narrative's ability to overwhelm is linked throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* to death. Ricoeur explicitly links Septimus's madness to meaning: "Septimus is the bearer of a revelation that grasps in time the obstacle to a vision of cosmic unity and in death the way of reaching this salvific meaning" (*Time and Narrative* 109). However, I would claim that it is Clarissa, not Septimus, who "bears" whatever "revelation" there is in *Mrs. Dalloway*—though these terms overstate the momentary effect of the novel that Woolf exploits. Like Clarissa's theory, the meaning Septimus attempts to communicate in his death is a wish, and therefore takes on form as well as force only as fiction. Clarissa is able to survive

because she lets go where Septimus does not relent. Clarissa therefore provides us with a better model of narration than Septimus, since she becomes a momentary meeting place for meaning that dissolves rather than a permanent residence.

The possibility of meaning gets displaced onto Clarissa, but it is only fleetingly established in a temporary connection. Death makes any claims to permanence empty. Meaning is thus always in suspension, a ghostly presence. To stay sane Septimus must remark, "None of these things moved. All were still; all were real" (*Mrs. D* 142), leaving objects without interpretation, without connection, standing alone. Septimus cannot stand the meaning of the whole—he refuses hermeneutic certainty. As he looks at his wife, he "shade[s] his eyes so that he might see only a little of her face at a time" (142), confining himself to a fragmentary reading that will enable him to survive the moment. His madness gives him the same status as the reader in the "actual reading," who navigates a crush of impressions with the aim of interpretation. The reader, caught between actual and after reading, between the parts and the whole, can only hold so much in his or her head at one time. Septimus seeks death to escape the overwhelming meaning he sees in the world. All he wants is to escape this central position to which his madness confines him. The desire for meaning that Septimus's madness expresses becomes a desire for death.

The Host and the Sacrifice

The major difference between Clarissa and Septimus, which forms the novel's ambiguous stance on the relation of life, death, and writing, occurs in their different manifestations of artistry. Septimus presents the most explicit model of writing in the text. For a novel that reflects on narrative method and writing as much as *Mrs. Dalloway*

does, a figure of a writer would seemingly be rich in interpretive possibilities. But Septimus is the image of a failed writer.[6] And the narrator seems to have some fun in presenting Septimus as such.

The history of reading Septimus as a "visionary poet" fuses biographical detail of Woolf's psychological problems with the cliché of the mad artist.[7] But Septimus actually gets a self-consciously mock-heroic treatment. When he moves to London, he "leaves an absurd note behind him, such as great men have written, and the world has read later when the story of their struggles has become famous" (84). This future historical perspective makes light of Septimus's struggle by inflating his ambition and minimizing his effect. But it also anticipates his desire for death in its attempt to move past his life to his legacy. The most ridiculous image of writing in the book comes when Septimus submits love poems to his teacher Miss Isabel Pole: "He thought her beautiful, believed her impeccably wise; dreamed of her, wrote poems to her, which, ignoring the subject, she corrected in red ink" (85). Miss Pole only reads these poems as exercises in composition—and flawed ones at that.

The major turning point for Septimus is the war, which still contains literary potential for him. But his experience there causes his madness and warps his relation to language. He volunteers "to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays" (86). But after the war, Septimus returns to find that "[t]hat boy's business of the intoxication of language—*Antony and Cleopatra*—had shriveled utterly" (88). Instead, he decides that "the message hidden in the beauty of words," "[t]he secret

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[6] Peter too presents us with an image of a failed male writer: "In those days he was to write" (187).

[7] Ralph Freedman is one of the few to counter the visionary claim. In *The Lyrical Novel*, he calls Septimus "the romantic hero in reverse" (215): His failure is his attempt to bring the "huge symbolic recognitions" of the poet into the real world. I would argue that Septimus is crushed by the space of narration, whereas, by the end, Clarissa finds a way to survive it.

signal which one generation passes, under disguise, to the next is loathing, hatred, despair" (84). Shakespeare teaches Septimus that "[l]ove between a man and woman was repulsive" (89). At the same time, Septimus's desire and his relation to meaning are warped by his traumatic experiences, leading him to the paradoxical desire for destruction.

Septimus's madness begins as a feeling of guilt, that he has been condemned to death by humanity due to his inability to save his friend and officer, Evans. Septimus decides that "there is no death" (140) in order to absolve himself; but this ultimately reverses itself into a death sentence. The paradox is that the desire to transcend death is really a desire for death. Seeing himself as another mouthpiece for the truth and meaning of the world, he dictates to his wife Rezia, who "wrote it down just as he spoke it. Some things were very beautiful; others sheer nonsense" (140). Septimus himself is seemingly taking dictations. His position, despite its pathos, is also a parody of the Romantic writer: a genius taking dictation from nature, on the verge of death and madness.[8]

Clarissa is the obverse of Septimus since she actively seeks the dispersal of writing rather than the fixing of meaning. She is barred from war and thus from monumental writing (precisely the kind Woolf decries in her criticism of the previous generation of writers). Still she submits to—or even wholeheartedly embraces—what appears to most as mediocrity and anonymity. For Woolf, however, anonymity is not a bad thing. The female writer has over the male writer the ability to "pass a tombstone or a

[8] In *The Hours*, Michael Cunningham's novelistic reflection of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the Septimus figure is rewritten as a successful yet doomed writer named Richard (somehow the figure of Clarissa's husband becomes endowed with whatever Romanticism there may be in Septimus). One could say that Cunningham uses a precisely modern and masculine method, akin to Eliot's mythical method, but short-circuits it through the feminine, by rewriting *Mrs. Dalloway* rather than a myth. However, he reinstalls the patriarchy with the eminent figure of Richard, the tortured writer (who is also a double of the myth of Woolf herself). Cunningham's book stands on its own, but it is indeed a creative misreading of *Mrs. Dalloway*. He, like many others, misses Septimus' necessary failure.

signpost without feeling an irresistible desire to cut their names on it" (*A Room of One's Own* 52). Yet there is a critique of Clarissa's position as a bourgeois housewife in the narrative tone as well as in the minds of other characters like Peter and Richard Dalloway.

Just as Septimus' figuring of writing is ambiguous (and ironic), Clarissa's position must be read doubly and not too quickly cast aside. Clarissa elucidates her parties as an application of her theory of life and death:

> Here was So-and-so in South Kensington; some one up in Bayswater; and somebody else, say, in Mayfair. And she felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom? (122)

Clarissa exhibits more successfully than Septimus Woolf definition of the artist's skill: to combine and create. But Clarissa is not under the impression (as Septimus sometimes is) that in this there would be a way to escape death. The fleetingness of life Clarissa decides is "enough": "that one day should follow another; Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday; that one should wake up in the morning; see the sky; walk in the park; meet Hugh Whitbread; then suddenly in came Peter; then these roses" (122). "After that," she thinks, "how unbelievable death was!—that it must end; and no one in the whole world would know how she had loved it all; how, every instant . . ." (122). Though her thoughts about death and life here seem to be couched in protest, the typographical portrayal of her thoughts tells a different story. Death is the interruption, as Clarissa knows, with its exclamation point and dash. But it is also this sweeter dissolution (escape) which is

reproduced in the listing of semi-colons and a drifting off of her thoughts in an ellipse on the wave of w's, repeating softly as she daydreams.

Clarissa's artistry is survival in dispersion—collected only for a moment—that needs the interruption of death, needs the moment to end, for it to have any meaning at all. She does not seek to sustain meaning constantly in everything like Septimus, but allows it the rhythmical repetition of the waves. The real figure of the artist in *Mrs. Dalloway* is the hostess, who does not seek meaning but only a momentary gathering that is also an offering. Clarissa muses that the party is an "offering for the sake of offering, perhaps" (122), espousing the formula of aestheticism that refuses utilitarian meanness.[9] This offering is the quality Peter admires: Clarissa's ability "to be; to exist; to sum it all up in the moment as she passed" (174).

As a hostess, Clarissa is not merely a figure of bourgeois conformity, a slave to convention, although part of the irony in the novel is to show the artistry in this apparently mediocre position. Instead, Clarissa is a model of the impersonal novelistic narrator—who is, importantly, a feminine figure. As Woolf defines it in "Character in Fiction," convention is a "means of communication between writer and reader" (51). Woolf likens literary convention to manners: "Both in life and in literature it is necessary to have some means of bridging the gulf between the hostess and her unknown guest on the one hand, the writer and his unknown reader on the other" (48). Clarissa's position as hostess in fact allows her to receive Septimus's death as an attempt at communication, to transform it from nothingness into narrative potential. The hostess is Woolf's model for her own narrative technique in *Mrs. Dalloway*, where Woolf creates a situation in which

[9] One might also read this from a feminist slant. In her recent book, *Gifts, Markets and Economies of Desire in Viriginia Woolf*, Kathryn Simpson reads Clarissa's gift as a feminine interruption of the male market economy.

all of these minds (the characters as well as the reader) are jumbled together, while the narrator effaces herself.[10] Miller tells us that the place of this narrative communion is death; but where he emphasizes death as an impetus to collective remembering, I place the emphasis on dispersal. Clarissa becomes a momentary place of connection as she accedes to the narrative position of death.

Clarissa's personal success is precisely her welcoming of disintegration—always the hostess—offering a modern alternative to the Romantic strivings of Septimus, the writer. She is also hostess to the reader: lending her married name to the title, she is simultaneously the reason for the gathering of characters that the narrative produces and somehow absent from their midst. The reader can only hold on to Clarissa in memory—like Peter—never getting at her essence nor achieving a coherent vision of her. The novel finally presents Clarissa to Peter's, and the reader's view, only to end there: "For there she was." Since Clarissa embodies the narrative procedure of momentary gathering and dispersal, and not Septimus with his presumptive knowledge of truth and beauty, she alone can endow Septimus with meaning.

Quoting Death

Even before the communication that Clarissa sees in Septimus's death, the novel makes an indirect connection between the two characters through their shared citation of the death dirge of Imogen from Act IV, scene ii of *Cymbeline*: "*Fear no more the heat o' the sun/ Nor the furious winter's rages*" (9). This is the most obvious reflexive literary moment, as both characters ruminate on the first two lines of Shakespeare's funeral

[10] Rachel Bowlby elaborates a link between the hostess and clocks, which toll throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* marking the passage of time, to show the "instability of the hostess's identity which extends beyond Clarissa Dalloway to other characters" (81). Clarissa's central position is only fleeting, gathering the other characters in dispersal.

song.[11] Though it is entirely possible that two people unknown to each other may at the same time cite the same line of Shakespeare in their heads, this transmission has the kind of seemingly impossible contingency that marks it as fiction. However, for Woolf, it is precisely this conjunction of literature with life that makes our lives seem real and meaningful—even if it is only a momentary impression. Woolf shows us that our character is determined externally by literature.

Just as Clarissa's theory seems to evolve in response to a fear of death, which gets written into the novel in the substitutive sacrifice of Septimus, Shakespeare's lines seem to work apotropaically, to ward off death. But, I would argue that, by thinking of these lines, Clarissa instead accepts the necessity of death and abolishes the fear that precedes it. The communication of this line across time and between characters promises the possibility of survival. But it is a strange and impersonal survival, since it necessarily includes death.

The most striking aspect of the repetition of the Shakespeare line between Septimus and Clarissa is not the citation, but the fact that they both alter it in the same way. The line comes back to Clarissa often throughout the day. However, on one occasion, immediately before Peter's arrival in the morning, Clarissa appropriates the line and weaves it into her own life:

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[11] Abel reads this doubling as a reversal of the trope of the sacrificial female. By substituting Septimus's death for Clarissa's, Abel claims that Woolf saves her from the fate of many other titular female characters, like Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary, and of course, her namesake, Clarissa Harlowe. Imogen in *Cymbeline* escapes death as a punishment for unfaithfulness. She only appears dead—and thus evades sacrifice through a simulacrum of it, just as Woolf allows Clarissa to do in relation to Septimus. Woolf's substitution of Septimus for Clarissa moves the figure of writing from a visionary masculine position to an impersonal and disappearing feminine position. The textual connection between Clarissa and Septimus demonstrates—precisely as a substitute for traditional narrative conventions of romance—Woolf's insistence on the literary potential of life as it is activated through death.

> So on a summer's day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying "that is all" more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, That is all. Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall. And the body alone listens to the passing bee; the wave breaking; the dog barking, far away barking and barking. (39-40)

In Clarissa's thoughts, death, represented by the citation of Shakespeare, confronts an image of renewal and repetition, on the shore of the sea, in the waves. Clarissa's citation moves the line inwards, from "heat" to "heart." She shifts from the sun radiating heat onto all of the inhabitants of earth (a force of connection), to the heart pumping blood through the system of one body (a force of separation). The heart speaks the beginning of Shakespeare's line—interrupted—giving in to death. However, the waves offer another sense of repetition (doubling the repetition of citation): a repetition that also alters like the heart what it takes up again, beginning and collecting. The heart leaves the body alone to be the place where the sounds impress themselves. It is another ambivalent image of centralization, apparently unifying as the narrative splinters.

Septimus repeats the line in bed as he recovers from his fraught consultation with the doctor, Sir William Bradshaw:

> Outside the trees dragged their leaves like nets through the depths of the air; the sound of water was in the room and through the waves came the voices of birds singing. Every power poured its treasures on his head, and

> his hand lay there on the back of the sofa, as he had seen his hand lie when he was bathing, floating, on the top of the waves, while far away on the shore he heard dogs barking and barking far away. Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more. (139)

The images from Clarissa's daydream return in a different order in Septimus's thoughts. His body is no longer on the shore, but floating atop the waves, fragmented. There is a distinct separation from the sounds which remain safely on land. Septimus too attributes the line from Shakespeare to the heart (now the heart in the body), leaving out the heat. Here, the heart repeats itself and the paragraph ends by summing up the constellation of images.

In both cases, Clarissa and Septimus seem only to pass through Shakespeare's line—or else it leaves them behind, like the waves in their daydreams. The major difference is that Septimus's imagery struggles against separation and fragmentation, trying to sum it up in natural meaning: he ends his first reverie with the quotation, rather than going off on a train of association as Clarissa does. The two characters provide us with distinct reading models. Septimus attempts to collect the images and summarize them, while Clarissa lets them drift out to sea. Septimus in the end gives up: throws his body out the window and lets his life escape. He cannot bear the infinite task of meaning-making that never arrives at a final meaning. This line from Shakespeare signifies simultaneously the two fictional modes of death, as a summary (Septimus) and as a dispersal (Clarissa).

Woolf uses Shakespeare as the epitome of literariness to bring together desire and death in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Earlier in the book, a line from *Othello* creeps into Clarissa's

mind and recalls for her the sexual excitement she felt for her old friend Sally Seton. The moment that comes with the Shakespeare line anticipates Clarissa's reception of Septimus's death; it is another model of communication. However, here the emphasis is on desire for connection rather than for separation in death. Clarissa remembers Othello's exclamation on seeing Desdemona in Act 2, Scene i: "if it were now to die/ 'twere now to be most happy" (ll.189-90). The moment of pleasure skips quickly on to death. When Clarissa thinks of Sally, the "overpowering" "charm" she is trying to recapture in this memory does not return: "the words meant absolutely nothing to her now. She could not even get an echo of her old emotion" (34). What does bring back her feelings—"going cold with excitement, and doing her hair in a kind of ecstasy"—is the Shakespeare line. Clarissa's memory is attached to a citation, the memory of "going downstairs, and feeling as she crossed the hall 'if it were now to die 'twere now to be most happy'" (34-5):

> That was her feeling—Othello's feeling, and she felt it, she was convinced, as strongly as Shakespeare meant Othello to feel it, all because she was coming down to dinner in a white frock to meet Sally Seton! (34-5)

Borrowed words communicate across time the feeling more strongly than her own personal memory; Clarissa identifies with Othello as she will soon identify with Septimus in his death. Desire for death provides the means for connection. The sentiment of the citation is the epitome of fleetingness of the moment, the desire that paradoxically anticipates death by invoking memory.

Death as Communication

Clarissa's reception of Septimus's suicide repeats the feeling she has in her memory of Sally and Othello. But now Clarissa is in the literary position that coordinates the paradoxical desire for death as an attempt to communicate. The textual connection between Clarissa and Septimus in this second reflexive moment most effectively puts Clarissa's theory into practice. Clarissa's party fits within her theory as a welcoming of disintegration. After Septimus's suicide, Clarissa gathers his pieces in herself, but only for a moment in the most beautiful demonstration of her theories of life and death. The paradoxical time structure of the novel culminates in this momentary, fictional meeting of Clarissa and Septimus that Clarissa sees as an attempt at communication. That Clarissa sees Septimus's act as an attempt marks the desire that motivates it. But since Septimus is already dead, we are really presented with Clarissa's desire—her desire for death that mirrors Septimus's fulfillment of that wish.

The epitome of interruptions, death surprises Clarissa and shocks her into a narrative position: "Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death, she thought" (183). The doubling of Septimus and Clarissa occurs in the chiasm of narrative attribution, from "thought Clarissa" to "she thought." After overhearing Sir William Bradshaw mention Septimus's suicide, Clarissa draws aside to another room to be alone and think:

> A young man had killed himself. And they talked of it at her party—the Bradshaws, talked of death. He had killed himself—but how? Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window.

> Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. (184)

Clarissa identifies in "her body" with the death of this unknown young man. She sees what he saw, narrates his death from his perspective. She gains access to the space of free indirect discourse, allowing for an interpretation of the demise of another.

Clarissa's connection to Septimus models the reader's connection to the characters of *Mrs. Dalloway*. The moment of death lived vicariously repeats the layering of time in reading Woolf describes. Clarissa, like the reader, is brought into the past, the present, and the future through the absence that comes at the moment of death. Here is the "cap and culmination of thought," as Woolf writes, the proleptic finishing of our sentences—or the analeptic narration of our pasts. After reading, Woolf writes, the book bubbles up complete, just like the life Clarissa wishes to hand over to her (dead) parents. In the simultaneous reception and dispersal of a momentary connection, we are able to get a hint of meaning, to feel it in its potential before it disappears, like life passing into death.

Clarissa's feelings culminate in her reception and interpretation of Septimus's death:

> A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre

> which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (184)

Death is simultaneously preservation, communication, embrace and dissolution, silence, separation. Septimus escapes the doctors and their cures; he escapes his failure, the identification and solidification of life as himself because death, Clarissa thinks, is an act of preservation, as in her theory. Death ensures that no one will ever know truly how one felt, but also lets one loose (as Septimus wishes) from the confinement of oneself into the associations, the citations and misreadings that survive one's life. "Death was an attempt to communicate": this paradox is the model of communication and transmission from which this novel is written. Death makes life the force of connection and separation that it is; the preserving envelope that contains an ambiguous message, always ready to escape. Death as communication is a failed desire, a desire whose fulfillment is its own cancellation.

The structure of the narrative as it guides the reader through the hours of the day towards the present moment of the party produces the expectation of a climactic moment, a resolution of the various narrative threads. The climax of Septimus's narrative arc gives us a more traditional understanding of the momentous ending of a story: he flings himself to his death. But the story goes on; this is not a dénouement. Alan Warren Friedman calls Septimus's suicide "anticlimactic, merely the disposal of a body" since his survival of the war makes him "experience the remainder of [his life] posthumously, as if [he] *had* died" (*Fictional Death* 212). Septimus is thus robbed of romantic figuration—except for the consecration of his posthumous survival in Clarissa's reception of his death. I would argue that what Friedman calls "posthumous" is really the narrative potential Woolf

exploits in death to give life a sense of form. After Septimus's death the novel returns us to Peter, rehearsing Clarissa's theory and thinking of "a moment, in which things came together [. . .] life and death" (*Mrs. D* 152). Septimus's story is over, but it is merely an interruption in another narrative. The climax echoes, a repetition of Septimus's death, the repercussion of his body's "thud, thud, thud"—like Clarissa's "here, here, here"—as it falls.

The real climax of the text is not an action. In fact, we only get a feeling of a climax through Clarissa's indirect representation of Septimus's death. Like the reader, Clarissa gains an imaginative connection—the kind only possible through fictional narrative. Clarissa's fantastic knowledge of Septimus's death reformats Septimus's aesthetic experience, which tried to linked beauty with meaning: Clarissa becomes a narrative space of temporary connection, where there is "an inner meaning almost expressed" (32), in the model of Woolf's writing. As the novel produces in the reader this feeling of climax, it also produces a feeling of meaning based merely in the connection of the two characters (their juxtaposition must mean something), like the reflexively meaningful citation of a text.

Since Septimus has no say in this communication, it could objected that Clarissa is merely appropriating another's experience to make her own more meaningful (like an author churning out a story from an item in a *fait divers* column). This is true to a certain extent: by taking on someone else's death, Clarissa exploits the duality of the moment, gaining the retrospective view of life that death affords without dying. But Clarissa's identification with Septimus does no violence to him; it is rather the violence of his death that makes the moment come alive momentarily for her. It shocks her into connection.

This shock is a heightened sense of the incessant shock of living—it is "dangerous to live even one day" (8)—and a descriptive version of our shock each time the narration transfers us into another character's head. Clarissa feels the shock of his thud on the ground, a reverberation of his death. In fact, Clarissa's theory of life, enacting Woolf's theory of fiction, makes concrete a moment of expropriation rather than appropriation, typifying the powerful desire that propelled Woolf in writing: to escape the "I." In the end, Septimus is only literary after his death, through Clarissa's impersonal recovery of him as a hostess.

Just before the end, the narrator allows us to listen in on Peter and Sally as they wait for Clarissa and discuss the possibility of really knowing anyone. Yet the text expertly leaves the question of knowing others unresolved. It is the question of the text itself, the question of the reader's judgment after moving through many characters' minds for the duration of the novel. Sally and Peter's discussion ends on "the power of feeling" (193): as with Clarissa's theory, knowledge is only linked to desire—to wishful thinking. The book sends the reader off with a final glimpse of Mrs. Dalloway from Peter's perspective: "For there she was" (194). We end looking directly at the already absent figure that has gathered and organized our reading, an object of identification as well as of judgment. If we cannot see her, it is only because she has facilitated our movement while remaining in the background most of the time. This final confrontation sends the reader off into his or her own trail of associations. Mrs. Dalloway floats to the top of her stairs to be reintegrated in our lives, a labeled moment with its attendant meaning, repeatable but elusive and always fleeting.

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