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Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and the Anxiety of Queer Influence in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Abstract:

This essay reopens the question of Walter Pater's influence on 1870s Oxford in general and Oscar Wilde in particular, in order to mark it more specifically as queer influence and to suggest that this question of Pater's queer influence on Oxford and the anxiety it gave rise to was the motivating idea and primary concern of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which restages the Oxford moment of the 1870s in the 1880s to explore the questions "can you really influence someone's sexual desire?" and "where does sexual desire come from?". Simultaneously, though less consciously, Wilde works out his own anxiety of queer influence with respect to Pater, symbolically killing off the queer father in a ritual Christian sacrifice that we might take to be the founding murder of modern queer theory.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, Queer Influence, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Walter Pater

After completing an undergraduate degree at Queen's College, Oxford, in 1862, Walter Pater stayed on at the university as a private tutor until he was elected as a fellow of Brasenose College in 1864, where he remained on the faculty for another thirty years until his death in 1894. In 1864, he wrote his first essay "Diaphaneité", the first of several essays written during the next decade, in which he undertook the nearly single-minded task of conceptualizing the idea of the "subject of same-sex desire", by which I mean not only the concept of a human subject of same-sex desire, a "character" with both physical and mental attributes ("a latent intelligence within it"), but also the subject of same-sex desire as a topic of inquiry and an area of study (Davis 2002). These efforts were carried out parallel to more social-scientific efforts in Germany in the 1860s, the former culminating in Pater's famous essay on the life and work of Leonardo da Vinci with its famous passage on the *Mona Lisa*, and the latter culminating in the coinage of the term "homosexual", both in the queer year of 1869. Just a few years later, Pater gathered many of

these essays into a volume, originally titled *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, published in February, 1873, a work that was organized around a number of queer subjectivities (Botticelli, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Winkelmann), often as such, as well as a number of associated queer ideas. The book bore a readily recognizable and palpable queer affect. Further, Pater affixed to the volume, a provocative “Preface” and an even more provocative “Conclusion”, both of which privileged the idea of “pleasure”, what we might even call “self-pleasure” insofar as they called for indulging the pleasures of the self. While the “Preface” was new, the “Conclusion” was the conclusion of an earlier essay, “Poems by William Morris”, published in 1868. There it had functioned as the formal conclusion of a Hegelian dialectical argument about the history of same-sex desire, an argument that took for its thesis the Greek body limited to the concrete and at one with itself, and for its antithesis the Medieval body estranged from itself and writhing under repression, from which dialectic it drew out a new synthesis, complete with sublations, now of the *modern* body, which Pater conceived of as a body coextensive with the natural world, circulating natural fluids, and (most remarkably) *organized* around its libidinal desire. In reaching this conclusion, Pater might well have been the first person in history, to conceptualize a subject (here a subjectivity) of (same-sex) desire (Davis 2018a).

When that conclusion reappeared as the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*, published by Macmillan, the premier academic publisher in England, it caused an uproar at Oxford and garnered considerable reactionary backlash both from the Oxford establishment in particular and the broad cultural establishment more broadly. Critics were concerned not only about the authorization of such an obviously queer theorem and manifesto – in both senses of the word “queer”, both specifically “gay” and more generally liberally libidinous – but also about the *influence* it might have on Oxford undergraduates and other young male readers. There was a concern, that is – we might say a piqued *anxiety* – that this queer book might make people queer, the very sort of anxiety that we see again now across western liberal and liberalizing democracies, some 150 years later. Just one year after the publication of *The Renaissance*, in February of 1874, Pater’s personal correspondence with such an undergraduate, Balliol College student William M. Hardinge, was exposed, Pater castigated by Balliol Master Benjamin Jowett – notorious for his translation of Plato, which bowdlerized all of its same-sex content – and Hardinge “sent down”. For his part, Pater was warned by the authorities and subsequently passed over for a number of academic appointments (Brake 1994).

It was into this heated environment of Pater’s queer influence on Oxford and the anxiety it raised that a precocious nineteen-year-old Oscar Wilde entered, only months later, in October of 1874, to matriculate at Magdalene College and begin a “Greats” degree. Wilde had already been steeped in the study of “the Greek” at Trinity College Dublin and in his own reading of John Addington Symonds’s *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873), which came out after Pater’s *Renaissance* and which was said to be “Pateresque” in both its content, especially its emphasis on the “aesthetic”, and its style. While Symonds did not broach the attendant topic of “Greek love”, he did not, however, follow scholarly custom and condemn it. Indeed, he would shortly go on to become an important figure in the positive investigation into same-sex desire, Greek and otherwise. In any event, a precocious Oscar Wilde in late adolescence who himself would later become one of the leading figures in that same field of inquiry cannot have missed and was no doubt keenly interested in the idea of “Greek love”, one of the several available, though inadequate, terms for designating and conceptualizing same-sex desire. When he arrived at Oxford in the fall of 1874, he immediately came under the considerable influence of Pater’s now notorious *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. According to Richard Ellmann, Wilde fell under the book’s “spell” in his first term (he would not meet Pater until a few years later)

and “never ceased to speak of it as ‘my golden book’”, perhaps most famously when he was in the docket on trial for “gross indecency” in 1895 (1988, 47). Even after the trial, while he was in prison and writing *De Profundis*, Wilde described Pater’s book as “the book which has had such a strange *influence* over my life” (*ibidem*; my emphasis). According to Ellmann, Wilde had much of the book “by heart”, especially the “Conclusion” that had caused such a scandal (*ibidem*).

As we might expect, Pater’s work heavily influenced Wilde’s early work. We can see it clearly operating in Wilde’s lectures composed for his American tour in 1881–82. It is a little more surprising that we should see it suffusing a mature work like *The Picture of Dorian Gray* a decade later. Indeed, Pater is more present in that novel than he is anywhere else in Wilde’s work, and early readers and critics, who were more versed in Pater than readers are today, were quick to note it. That Pater influenced Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is one of the most foundational and long-lasting tenets of the criticism. Ellmann himself rehearses this truism highlighting many of the recognizable, distinctive Paterian phrases in Wilde’s novel. Today still, any careful reader of Pater who reads *Dorian Gray* instantly registers Wilde’s unmistakable habit of almost verbatim citation.

But there is an important difference between Pater’s influence on Wilde’s lectures and his influence on – and in – Wilde’s novel. The former is a kind of ordinary influence in which one author’s work *informs* another’s. It is likely that we can identify this sort of ordinary influence in almost any given work of literature, and this was, for a long time, a common professional practice of critics. Indeed, it remains a not uncommon practice to discern the echoes of earlier authors in later authors and to track the descent of ideas. Sean O’Toole’s recent study, *Dorian Unbound*, the express aim of which is to amass a range of non-Paterian sources for Wilde’s novel, falls into this mode of criticism. But Pater’s influence on and in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a different and more complex sort of influence altogether, in that it is not just one unconscious influence or effect among many others, like those others that O’Toole describes, but is, rather, the major and motivating influence on the novel and, moreover, the perhaps major, self-conscious *theme* of the novel. For this is not just a novel that *has been* influenced but a novel fundamentally *about* influence and it is a novel more particularly about *Pater’s* influence – both on Oxford and on Wilde himself.

I mean to suggest that the events at Oxford in 1873 (the publication of *The Renaissance*, with its queer “Conclusion”, its “influence” on Oxford undergraduates, and the “anxiety of influence” that it gave rise to) and in 1874 (Wilde’s coming under the influence of Pater) are the germ and *raison d’être* of Wilde’s novel. Those events must have provoked in Wilde, who had a deeply philosophical and theoretical mind, the big question “can you really influence someone’s sexual desire or someone’s desiring position?”, whether it is the desire of the young Oxford undergraduates in general, or the desire of the young Wilde in particular. Or to put it in more explicit, more contemporary terms, “can you really make someone queer?”. But these questions must have provoked, in turn, some even deeper questions, namely, “what is sexual desire?” and “where does it come from?”¹.

These are the very same issues that Sigmund Freud, born just two years after Wilde, would shortly take up himself. Just as Wilde took this early interest in the idea of influence, so did Freud take an early interest in Bernheim’s notion of hypnotic *suggestion* and *suggestibility*, translating the French doctor’s “De la Suggestion et de ses Applications à la Thérapeutique” in 1888, just at the time Wilde would begin to write up the idea that had been simmering for some fifteen

¹ John Paul Riquelme registered the significance that Pater’s work had on Wilde’s novel but in overlooking the queer specificity of both Pater and Wilde, he missed its full value (2000).

years, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which he began to write the next year in 1889. And just as Wilde would follow up with an exploration of the origins of sexual desire in his novel, so would Freud follow with his own exploration in his first major work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, completed in 1899 and the work of the next two decades. And just as Wilde would investigate the origin of same-sex desire, so indeed would Freud, culminating in his monograph *Leonardo da Vinci* in 1910, in which, notably, he cites Walter Pater's own essay on Leonardo in *The Renaissance*. What is striking is that Wilde should approximate so closely to some of the major ideas of Freud and psychoanalysis *avant la lettre*, though, of course, he uses the various devices of fiction available to him, including both philosophical fiction and gothic fiction, to carry out his inquiry into the origin of desire, and while he does arrive at some of the same general psychoanalytic concepts that Freud does – including a tripartite model of the psyche, a notion of the repression of desire, and a device to remove the censor and access the repressed – he also arrives at some specific concepts of his own, many of them better, especially those concerning the subject of same-sex desire, Freud notoriously having had one eye wide-open and one eye closed-shut on the subject of the homosexual².

In the opening chapter of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde is concerned to restage and redramatize that important Oxford moment of Paterian influence of 1873-1874 – with some major differences, however. He moves the scene from early 1870s Oxford to contemporary London, where both Pater and Wilde were settled in the 1880s, and he “updates” and otherwise reconfigures the scene. He turns the figure of Pater into the figure of the painter Basil Hallward, giving Pater's words, ideas, and personal characteristics to him. Basil speaks “Paterese” in Richard Ellmann's phrase; expresses Pater's major idea of one's “subjective” or “interested” investment in the work of art; and has Pater's famous reticence about his *particular* investment revealing too much about his *particular* desire. That Wilde should have turned Pater into a painter is perhaps overdetermined. First, there is a very close correspondence between the words “Pater” and “painter”; second, Pater's early work was largely about art, much of it painting, including the famous paintings of Botticelli, Leonardo, and Michelangelo; third, it created a bit of a “screen” for Pater, at once a fictional screen, that covered for Pater and allowed Wilde to depersonalize and appropriate Pater to Wilde's own imaginative ends, and a psychological screen that permitted Wilde to work out some unconscious “desires” toward Pater, whose name of course was identical to the Latin word for “father”, including the unconscious Oedipal desire to kill off the father. Further, in representing Pater as a painter, Wilde is likely conflating him with that other problematic father figure for Wilde, frenemy James MacNeil Whistler³. But it is clearly Pater and Pater's ideas, decidedly not Whistler's, underneath.

While Wilde re-presents Pater in the figure of Basil Hallward, he re-presents *both* Pater's own portrayal of an aesthetic “ideal of male beauty”, often called “a type of beauty” – phrases that function as early terms for not only the subject but also the object of same-sex desire, in which the subject often collapses into its object – *and* also the typical Oxford undergraduate, who might have been susceptible to or come under queer influence, in the figure of Dorian Gray. Just as Pater's “ideal” was a new, modern variation on the old “Greek ideal”, so, indeed, is Dorian a modern variation on that same ideal. While Pater's ideal was more often than not

² The image of the one eye recurs throughout *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

³ Whistler scholar Elizabeth Boone has gone so far as to suggest that Basil is based on Whistler (2003). While I suspect there is some Whistler mixed in, the Basil's ideas and personality are clearly Pater's and not Whistler's. In fact, while Pater was a queer theorist, Whistler displayed a homophobia in “The ‘Ten O'Clock’ Lecture” (1885) that Wilde registered immediately and answered in “The Birthday of the Infanta” (1891).

imagined in two-dimensional, pictorial terms, as Basil depicts Dorian on his canvas, Wilde's Dorian, however, is imagined in three-dimensional terms. Indeed, as the name "Dorian" might suggest, he is imagined in the three-dimensional terms of Greek *Doric* sculpture and as a sculpture come to life, in the three-dimensional terms of a living, breathing human figure. While Pater might have "painted" this figure, Wilde, like Pygmalion, gives him form and brings him to life.

But if Wilde re-presents the Paterian type and the Oxford type in Dorian, he also re-presents *himself* in Dorian. Wilde famously wrote that he was all three of the principal characters of the novel, and, while Wilde was himself no "type of male beauty" in the ordinary sense of that phrase, he was precisely that "type of male beauty" in the more specialized Paterian sense of the phrase, of a (perhaps still unrealized) type of *desiring subject*, and he was one of those very Oxford undergraduates who had come under the spell of Pater's queer influence. And if Wilde re-presents himself in Dorian, it is in large part in order to re-examine and analyze that significant moment in Wilde's own development fifteen years earlier, from the perspective now of a mature adult and through the medium of the novel. As Wilde's famous comment also helps us to see, though it is perhaps already clear enough, Wilde also represents himself in the figure of Lord Henry Wotton. We can instantly recognize Wilde in Lord Henry. If Basil speaks "Paterese", then Lord Henry speaks "Wildean". Although Lord Henry does appropriate some of Pater's phrases, he speaks primarily in the distinctive mature, wry and clever idiom so characteristic of the Oscar Wilde of the essays.

Let us parenthesize for now the third, seemingly improbable claim that Wilde is also Basil Hallward, step back, and re-assess the scene. Wilde restages the original Oxford scene of 1873-74, between Walter Pater and a composite figure who embodies both the Oxford general type and the particular instance of that type, the young Wilde himself, but he restages the scene in the London present and introduces into it a third figure, this one of the older Wilde. He essentially triangulates the scene much in the way that René Girard will conceptualize triangulation, but without any of Girard's problematic heteronormativity (1966). Here the Pater/Basil figure stands for a model of (same-sex) desire; the Oxford type/young Wilde/Dorian figure represents not only the object of such a desire, but also the imitating subject of that desire; and the older Wilde/Lord Henry Wotton figure represents the one-time imitator object/subject of desire who is now the fresh competitor or rival for the object of desire, challenging Pater/Basil for possession of the younger Wilde, which is to say, of course, possession of himself. According to Harold Blom, to whom I will turn later in the essay, it is from the (Freudian) family romance (here reimagined as queer family romance), that the anxiety of influence extends, and "the strong poet must 'rescue' the beloved Muse from his precursors" (1973, 63)⁴.

The older Wilde/Lord Henry intervenes in the scene, wrests away from Pater/Basil the younger Wilde, and begins to unfold his own queer theory and his own deep inquiry into the nature of same-sex desire. And it is in that competition with, and wresting from the figure of Pater/Basil, whom we might designate as the figure of the queer father, a designation facilitated by Pater's own name, that we might understand that third claim of Wilde's, that he is not only Dorian and Lord Henry, but also Basil Hallward, Wilde identifying with the figure of the father and usurping

⁴ Notably Bloom identifies the young poet with the Greek figure of the ephebe (1973, 67). Here Dorian might be said to be both the young poet and the muse. We might alternatively use René Girard's terms and suggest that Wilde restages the Oxford scandal now as "skandalan", a term Girard takes from the gospel, where it indicates an obstruction, most notably Peter's getting in the way of Jesus, prompting Jesus's rebuke "Get behind me Satan" (Matthew 16:23), the word "Satan" meaning adversary (1996, 198).

and appropriating his paternal function – all so that he might sire himself, or, in another phrase of Harold Bloom’s, “re-beget [his] own self, to become [his] own Great Original” (64).

Thus, beginning from the questions raised at Oxford – “can you really influence someone’s desire?” and “can you really make someone queer” – Wilde sets out upon a course of inquiry that is finally a fictional account of his own experience, Wilde engaging, as Freud would, in a probing and complex self-analysis, as he tries to understand how he himself developed, immediately after Oxford, as a desiring subject⁵. As Wilde’s narrator puts it near the end of chapter four of the novel, “It often happened that when we thought we were experimenting on others, we were really experimenting on ourselves” (2003, 54). If Wilde had come under the powerful influence of Pater’s queer theories at Oxford, then why, when he left Oxford a few years later, did he embark on a course of seemingly heterosexual desire, falling in love with actresses and eventually marrying a woman? Wilde is concerned to investigate this very question, and the investigation is the whole point of the Sibyl Vane chapters, which make up nearly a quarter of the novel. If we ask ourselves, why does Wilde devote so much space to an ostensibly heterosexual romance in what is now generally understood to be a quintessentially queer novel, we might answer that he is trying to understand retrospectively how his desire took the strange turn that it did and, indeed, more generally, how desire operates and plays out in the world.

In the Sibyl Vane chapters, Wilde actually provides two very different answers to this question: one that anticipates late twentieth-century imitative (mimetic) theories of desire and one that anticipates early twentieth-century psychoanalytic theories of desire. And remarkably, I think, he provides these two answers even handedly, though he might provide the former more consciously and the latter more unconsciously. One of the more delightful moments in the novel is when Lord Henry expresses his amused surprise that Dorian, who had just come under the queer influence first of Basil and then of Lord Henry himself and who had been conceptualized as something of blank slate or blank sculpture come to life, a live animate experiment, announces his seemingly heterosexual desire for the actress Sibyl Vane. Lord Henry observes wryly “I thought you must have some curious romance on hand. You have; but it is not quite what I expected” (Wilde 2003, 51). The first explanation that Wilde provides in the novel is the one with which we have become familiar in the last three decades or so, namely that Dorian has *learned* to desire in this way and that he, not unlike the one he thinks he desires, Sibyl, is actually imitating a well-established cultural model: acting a role and performing a desire. If one sends a “blank sculpture” out into the world, especially the world of late-Victorian London, one discovers very quickly that he is not really blank and that there is a limited number of roles and a limited number of available plots of desire, limited, of course, to the primary role of heterosexual subject and the primary plot of heterosexual romance that leads to marriage, a role and a plot cemented by religion, the state, and cultural practice. Wilde had already identified and begun to critique this prevailing cultural plot in “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime”, first published in 1887, which explicitly ironizes the social *duty* to marry and the closely associated biological *duty* to reproduce, at least for the upper classes who maintained property and power through the structures of primogeniture and inheritance⁶. While Dorian’s role is essentially fixed and prescribed for him, Sibyl, the low-class actress, however, enjoys a wider variety of roles and romantic plots. While Sibyl does play the conventional female gender role of Juliet, she also, however, plays a number of less conventional female gender roles, like Rosalind, Portia, and Imogen, in which the female character claims more

⁵ Freud often engaged in self-analysis, most famously in his analysis of his own dream of Irma’s Injection in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

⁶ The woman Lord Arthur is engaged to is also called Sybil, though with this variant spelling.

agency and famously cross-dresses as a man. Thus, although Dorian's cultural gender/sex role might be culturally fixed and his real-life romance/sex plots circumscribed, Dorian does find in Sibyl and the world of the London *theater* at least, an alternative world in which his ostensible love object might play at being male and thus fulfil for him a legitimate (because Shakespearean and theatrical) alternative same-sex fantasy. This is one reason he depends upon her ability to act, to *create* and *sustain* an alternative *theater* of desire.

But if Wilde has Dorian choose Sibyl as his love-object, it is not merely to make the one superficial point about the cultural construction of (heterosexual) desire, but also to make another deeper point, less consciously, to be sure, if not unconsciously, about the psychoanalytic origins of (same-sex) desire. Indeed, if Wilde is asking the question, "why, after queer Oxford, did I desire female actresses?", and the correlative question "where does my desire come from?", he seems to be answering here, with Freud, "from childhood" and "from within the family romance", though not early childhood as in Freud but later childhood – puberty and adolescence⁷. For the young Wilde/Dorian is not only acting a role but also *acting out* what I would call a "primal fantasy" and an associated "primal scene" from Wilde's early adolescence, both centered on the figure of the younger sister Isola. There is considerable biographical evidence to suggest that Wilde had a special attachment to his sister Isola and, even, what I would call a major psychological investment in her, as the site of the primal fantasy of the female phallus⁸. There is also considerable biographical evidence to suggest that her early death, when she was nine years old and Wilde twelve, constituted a major event and primal scene in Wilde's psycho-sexual development – the scene that is of the castration (death=castration writ large) of the female phallus. This seems to have been a formative moment for Wilde, shaping not only his psychological make-up, but also his sexuality, and his identification as artist. On the occasion of his sister's death, Wilde wrote "all my life's buried there" and composed his first poem, his very first aesthetic act. The life and death of the sister, his psycho-sexuality, and his vocation as artist were all bound up together, and he had very recently revisited and explored this major moment in his formation in "The Birthday of the Infanta", first published in 1889, in which he appears to identify with, and locate his subjectivity in, the figure of the castrated female phallus (Davis 2018b).

It seems to me that Wilde returns to that same scene again in the Sibyl Vane chapters here in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* through which he continues to explore its significance not only in his own development but also for a more general etiology of same-sex desire. The name "Sibyl" itself, which is mentioned a total of eighty-five times in the novel, seems to be pointing to that scene. As a word, it suggests very strongly the word "sibling", a word that, though it had had the more general sense of "relative" for centuries, was just acquiring within the new genetic discourse of the late-nineteenth century the modern sense of "brother or sister". And it is notable that the term "sibling" is ungendered and can thus indicate both brothers and sisters and so pivot between the biological sexes. Of course, Sibyl is additionally marked as the sibling/sister of the James Vane character, whose character and plot Wilde developed significantly in his revisions of the novel, further interrogating the sibling relation and further playing out a kind of revenge for the dead sister and the loss of the female phallus. Further, the Greek sibyls were prophetesses, and so we might suggest that it was the figure of the sibling/sister (Isola) who

⁷ Prior to Freud in general, who was the first to locate the origin of desire in infancy and early childhood, it was common (and common sense) to locate it in puberty/adolescence. Pater and Wilde both privilege what Pater calls "early manhood".

⁸ See Ellmann's (1988) biography of Wilde for an account of Wilde's relation to Isola and his experience of her death.

functioned as a prophetess – a predictor and augur of Wilde’s own sexual desire. Meanwhile Sibyl’s surname “Vane” is a double-entendre that means both a directional indicator and, via the homonym “vain” and the cognate “vanity”, perhaps the indicator of a certain ego-formation.

I mean to suggest that it was this investment in the fantasy of the female phallus that very likely led both Wilde and Wilde’s Dorian to resurrect and desire female *actresses*, women with agency who could actually perform and exercise their agency, and who could reanimate the female phallus, which was not only a fantasy in which Wilde was invested but also a fantasy that was, psychoanalytically, closely associated with and contingent to (and very possibly *mistaken for* or *confused with*) the formation and constitution of the male subject of same-sex desire. When Sibyl acts well, she maintains the fantasy of the female phallus, and when she acts “like a man”, even more so. Indeed, when she acts like a man she comes very close to the figuration of the primal fantasy of the female phallus, or the female *as* phallus⁹. But that figuration is merely the theatrical illusion of the female phallus, and when Sibyl stops acting, the illusion collapses¹⁰. The illusion failed, Dorian promptly loses interest and even scorns her. Both Wilde and Dorian must then re-experience her death, her final castration, in order to know again the unconscious origin of desire, in order to individuate now as a queer desiring subject, and in order to set out upon the alternative path of the so-called “aesthetic”, where the word “aesthetic” suggests both a sexual and a professional demeanor. Notably, after Sibyl dies, Lord Henry takes Dorian to the opera where they sit in Henry’s “sister’s box”, a phrase twice repeated and a vivid image and metaphor of the sister’s female genitalia after passing through castration, a passing Wilde had dramatized vividly in “The Birthday of the Infanta” (Davis 2018b).

At this point in the novel, Wilde introduces two new major conceits. The first is the device of the painting. While Wilde may well be drawing on the magic picture tradition, as Sean O’Toole has noted, I think Wilde’s particular use of the magic picture is perhaps best understood in relation to Pater and Freud. Pater had famously written about same-sex desire largely through his analysis of art, including the paintings of Botticelli, Leonardo, and Michelangelo, in large part because visual art (painting and sculpture) had, though the ages, preserved a place and a space for not only the representation of male beauty but also the exploration of the nature of desire. This is, I think, partly Wilde’s complaint about Pater and the reason for his own more radical experiment. If for Pater, real life had to be lived still under the threat of the censor and under both cultural and personal repression, and art was the alternative space for the expression of sexual desire, Wilde, in a signature contrarian move, imagines *reversing* that relation so that art/painting becomes now the space of the censor (the conscience) and the record of repression, and “real life”, the free space of sexual desire. Further, this device might be read as a forerunner of Freud’s couch, also an imaginative invention to remove the censor and allow for the fuller exploration of the unconscious and, of course, unconscious desires. The painting takes on both the function (moral judgment) and the effects (guilt) of conscience, permitting Dorian to form an ego based upon the principles of the Id. He can now pursue and enact a wide range of previously prohibited desires including, of course, same-sex desires.

At just about the same time that the painting is activated, Lord Henry also sends Dorian a book. Here Lord Henry, whom I have marked as the figure of the older Wilde, further displaces Pater/Basil as an influence on Dorian, a displacement nicely imaged at one point with Henry’s taking a cab with Dorian while forcing Basil to travel behind them alone in a separate

⁹ Wilde explores the relation between the female phallus, the male subject of same-sex desire, and castration once again in *Salomé*, which he wrote shortly afterwards, in 1892.

¹⁰ There is a comparable collapse into the real at the end of “The Birthday of the Infanta”.

cab. If Pater and Pater's strange book had been the major influence on the Oxford youth and the young Wilde, then here the older Wilde seems to be *replacing* that book with *another* one, as part of his ongoing effort to wrest himself out from Pater's influence and claim control over himself. Much as *The Renaissance* had influenced Wilde, so this new book now influences Dorian. It is precisely the point that this book is *not The Renaissance* but is generally identified with Huysmans' *A Rebours*, published a good ten years later in 1884. There Wilde discovered an entirely new post-Paterian queer terrain to traverse and so now does Dorian.

While the painting lifts the censor, this new book takes Dorian deeper into the far reaches of proscribed experience (something like Freud's unconscious) and together they lead inevitably to the killing of Basil Hallward. In his relatively free exploration of repressed desire, Wilde arrives, just as Freud will, at the deep, unconscious, so-called "Oedipal" desire to kill the father. Wilde, however, arrives there as part of his primary inquiry into the subject of same-sex desire, a subjectivity in which I suspect the fantasy of killing the father figures much more significantly given its investment in, its commitment to, and its identification with the female phallus. While this is no doubt deeply inspired by Wilde's own desire to kill off the problematic figure of his own father, William Wilde, it seems more limited, however, within the world of the fiction, to the desire to kill off Pater, the substitute, queer father, who is thematized in the novel and whose name, as we noted above, is Latin for "father", and Pater's overwhelming and indeed intolerable influence on such a strong individual as Wilde.

In 1973, Harold Bloom corrected the common ("idealizing") understanding of influence in literary criticism by noting that in many instances, especially those involving strong Romantic writers, influence was a burden to get out from under¹¹. For Bloom, strong poets, on the model of Milton's Lucifer, had to "swerve" away from their predecessors in order to individuate from them, while even stronger ones tried to "complete" their predecessors. For Bloom, as the reference to Milton's Lucifer suggests, this relation of the poet to his predecessor was rooted in the Freudian paradigm of the "family romance", and more specifically in the son's Oedipal desire to overthrow and even, as in the Greek Oedipus story, kill the father. Although Bloom does not follow this suggestion all the way to its extreme to suggest that strong poets want to kill their predecessors, I think that Wilde, who was a much stronger figure than Bloom – does, and if he does, it is for several overdetermined reasons. First, Wilde had an undeniable contrarian impulse to overturn nearly every thinker since Aristotle. That was partly a function of Wilde's extraordinary strength of mind and his equally extraordinary rebellious spirit. He was determined to throw over the accumulated tradition of thought, not only in order to individuate as an original thinker, however, but also to liberate himself as a subject of same-sex desire from an oppressive tradition of thought, especially moralizing thought, all the way from the moralizing of Aristotle all the way down through the moralizing of the Christian intellectual tradition. Second, insofar as the project here, inspired by Pater, is to freely explore unconscious desire, in Freud's spirit of unfettered inquiry, it must lead inevitably to this deepest of desires, registered throughout literature, and of course shortly to be identified and formulated by Freud

¹¹ It is notable that Bloom begins his study of poetry by observing that Oscar Wilde failed as a poet because he was not strong enough to overcome his anxiety of influence vis-a-vis Coleridge and Keats. He then later suggests, ever so slightly, that Wilde might have had an unacknowledged anxiety of influence with Pater, indicated by Wilde's observation in his review of Pater's "Appreciations" in 1890 that Pater had "no disciples", effectively denying his own discipleship. Of course, as I am arguing here, I think Wilde had a strong anxiety of influence with Pater and that it is played out in Wilde's masterpiece, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. As great a critic as Bloom was, he had no ear and no sense for Pater's *queer theorizing*, nor any sense I think for Wilde's, or, in turn, Wilde's struggle with Pater's.

himself. Third, as noted above, it is not unmixed with what I suspect is his desire to kill his own oppressive father. Fourth, as also noted above, the desire to kill the father seems more extreme in the subject of same-sex desire and perhaps even constitutive of that desire. While Freud maintained that [heterosexual] men “resolve” their Oedipal desires to possess the mother and kill the father, by, under the threat of castration, transferring their desires to substitute women, it seems very likely that many homosexual men do not, that they resist the prevailing Law of desire, accept their own castration and continue to possess the mother, transferring their desire to substitute men instead. Fifth and finally, Wilde had already written about the killing of the prophet in “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime”, in which he parodies Oedipus (Gr. “swollen foot”) in the chiromancer Podgers who is explicitly marked by his “fat fingers” (Wilde 2003, 164) and parodies as well the very notions of fate and prophecy, particularly fate/prophecy of desire. And he would presently write again about the killing of the prophet in *Salomé* in 1892, and the fate/prophecy of Christian asceticism, which is to say Christian *desire*, where desire is understood as *longing* for the lost object, which in Pater’s formulation is a Christian longing for the lost “Greek” object, where the body was “at one with itself”.

In Chapter 11, Wilde has Dorian dive into the book that Lord Henry had sent him following the death of Sibyl Vane and chart its extraordinary, alternative, queer terrain. The chapter interrupts the plot of the novel in order to take measure of this terrain and catalog everything in it. Cataloging is a constituent feature and generic convention of the epic, from Homer to Milton (and on to Melville in the 19th century) and if Wilde engages in such cataloging here, it is because he has conceptualized in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* nothing short of queer epic, a founding story for modern queer experience. While the chapter unfolds outside of the novel’s plot, roaming widely and freely across alternative space and time, within that plot eighteen years have elapsed, so that when the plot resumes it is now Dorian’s thirty-eighth birthday. This lapse of time might be read as a textual symptom or marker of the passage of time from the Oxford moment of 1873-1874 to the present moment now of 1890 or so, and it brings the plot back, for the first time in a long time, to the figure of Basil Hallward, who had been largely displaced by both Henry and Dorian, in order now to carry out the deep psychological work of killing him off, giving this founding story of modern queer experience its “founding murder”.

In Chapter 12, Wilde stages a preliminary scene between Dorian and Basil, that further reinscribes and further elaborates the association between Basil and Pater, just prior to Chapter 13 and the scene of the murder. Interestingly Wilde gives to Basil a line that echoes the charge levelled against Pater at Oxford in response to the publication of *The Renaissance* and particularly its “Conclusion”, which had urged readers in no uncertain terms to seek their pleasure. Now Wilde has Basil level the charge against Dorian: “You have filled them with a madness for pleasure” (2003, 112). First, this reminds us that Wilde’s whole project had its origin in that Oxford moment and is essentially a thought-experiment that explores the question, “can you really influence someone’s desire” and its close corollaries can you influence someone’s desiring position (and what is desire anyway?) and someone’s desiring practices. Notably, while Pater might have *inspired* this thought experiment, it was not Pater but Wilde who actually *pursued* it. Indeed, when the original charge was leveled against Pater, he was so shocked that he withdrew the “Conclusion”, suppressing it from subsequent editions of *The Renaissance*, and restoring it only much later. While the more reticent Pater proceeded cautiously and kept in line with the Victorian moral order that his work threatened, the bolder Wilde, however, threw caution to the wind, going where Pater would not dare to go. If Wilde gives this line to the Paterian Basil here, it is not only to mark Pater’s own retreat from the avant-garde to a more conservative moral position, but also Pater’s more moral function as a figure of the conscience for Wilde.

In Chapter 13, when Wilde has Dorian show the painting to Basil just before he murders him, Wilde reinscribes and develops the association between Pater and Basil once more, this time resurrecting the rhetoric of that new “ideal of beauty” that Pater had introduced in the 1860s and 70s, and that Wilde had ascribed to Basil in the opening of the novel. Here, Wilde is clearly concerned to have Dorian re-assign that ideal to the Pater/Basil figure and to make *him* responsible for it rather than Dorian, who did not originate the idea but rather pursued it to its (psycho)logical ends. Basil denies it is his picture, but Dorian reminds him of its origin in Pater/Basil’s radical new *idea* of a male *ideal* of beauty:

‘I don’t believe it is my picture.’
 ‘Can’t you see your ideal in it?’ said Dorian bitterly.
 ‘My ideal as you call it...’
 ‘As you called it’. (2003, 116)

That Wilde is intent to recall these original moments of Paterian influence, whether it was the original moment of influence at Oxford in 1873/4 or the fictionalized moment of influence at the beginning of the novel in London in 1890 or so, just before the murder, suggests that he is, indeed, playing out through Dorian his own anxiety of influence and that his having Dorian murder Basil is an imaginative effort to free himself from that influence and fully individuate. It is notable that Wilde has Dorian seize a knife that he had last used to “cut a cord” in order to kill Basil, introducing the metaphor of cutting the (umbilical) cord into the act of killing and suggesting that that killing completes a kind of birthing for Dorian here – a birthing on Dorian’s birthday – a cutting off/castration that marks the birthday just as a castration had in “The Birthday of the Infanta”, a double castration even insofar as it involves the cutting off of a *castrato*.

Also notable, however, is that the murder should be rendered in the vivid imagery of Christian sacrifice. First, Basil, not unlike that other prophet, John Baptist, whom Wilde would shortly go on to depict and dramatize in *Salomé*, appears sexually pure and innocent, maintaining a posture of chaste desire¹². Second, when Basil urges Dorian to pray, he gives the scene a clear religious context, which Dorian further adds to when he notes, in response, that he had already worshipped Basil too much. After suggesting they pray, Basil further develops the religious context, now explicitly invoking the image of Christian sacrifice, citing the biblical verse “Though your sins be as scarlet I will make them as white as snow” (Wilde 2003, 116). While that verse originates in the Old Testament in Isaiah 1:18, it was echoed in the New Testament in Mark 9:3, where it became associated directly with Christ’s purifying sacrifice that “which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Third, Dorian’s stabbing of Basil in “the great vein that is behind the ear” (Wilde 2003, 117), the site of both the vertebral and carotid arteries, appears to be an act of animal sacrifice that would lead to a quick death, though, to be sure, the subsequent stabs suggest some added rage, the filial rage perhaps of Oedipus as he repeatedly beats his father Laius to death¹³. This imagery of Christian sacrifice resembles and anticipates the imagery in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, in the opening lines of which Wilde again uses the word “scarlet” before giving a clear allusion to the sacrifice of Christ: “He did not wear

¹² Later in Chapter 16, when Dorian is in the hansom on his way to the docks, he recalls a line of Pater’s – “To cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul!” – before thinking “[h]ow the words rang in his ears! His soul, certainly, was sick to death. Was it true that the senses could cure it? Innocent blood had been spilled. What could atone for that?” (Wilde 2003, 134).

¹³ Dorian’s rage may also suggest the brutality of the scapegoat rite. It is possible that Wilde is in some ways reenacting the scapegoating of Pater at Oxford.

his scarlet coat, / For blood and wine are red" (883). Interestingly, once Basil is dead, Dorian thinks of him repeatedly as a "thing", a word that later acquires special value in the famous refrain of Wilde's ballad, "Each man kills the thing he loves" (884), and I think we might read that refrain as a deferred, retrospective gloss of this scene in *Dorian Gray*. If, after being killed, Dorian thinks about Basil as a "thing", it is because Dorian has "killed the thing he loves".

This complicates the scene of the anxiety of influence, Wilde completing not only Pater but also Bloom, in advance of Bloom. Here I would like to turn from Bloom's theory of influence to René Girard's theory of mimetic desire in order to account for what is happening in Wilde's text. Bloom's and Girard's theories are quite similar, each one concerned with the problem of the predecessor and of the imitation the predecessor, though Bloom's extends from Freud's primal scene while Girard's intervenes in that scene (Bloom-style) and reads it a little differently. For Girard, a subject learns to desire by imitating the desires of others (like the desire of the father), and this results in a competition for the shared object of desire. Indeed, I have read the Henry-Basil-Dorian triangle in this way above. More than this, the competition for the object of desire can very well lead to violence. In this particular case, adjusted to the queer scene, we might say that Wilde deploys Dorian to commit violence against Pater/Basil to gain sole possession of the object of desire, which, however, is also *himself*—a kind of self-possession and "self-realization", to use a term important for Pater and Wilde both.

The fact that the violence is rendered as a kind of sacred violence suggestive of the sacrifice of Christ, points us further down the Girardian path, for, for Girard, it was the act of (both animal and human) sacrifice in general and that of Christ in particular that functioned to diffuse the threat of mimetic violence in society and to thereby lay the foundations of a cultural order. Dorian's (overdetermined) murder of Basil might be read, then, not only as Wilde's carrying out the symbolic murder of the queer critical father, the fulfillment of the Oedipal drive, and as the violent climax of mimetic desire, but also *paradoxically*—in a paradox suitable for the prince of paradox—Wilde's execution of a "founding murder" that resolves and diffuses that very mimetic desire and thereby reestablishes a kind of cultural order. We might think of this murder as the founding murder of modern queer theory, through which Wilde plays out and works through his Oedipal struggle and mimetic desires and establishes a new law of the (queer) father(s)¹⁴.

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¹⁴ There is of course a close connection between mimetic desire and mimetic representation (mimesis) that is important for Wilde (cf. "The Decay of Lying", Wilde 2003, 1071-1092) but that I do not have the space to explore here.

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