OSCAR WILDE: READING THE LIFE AFTER THE LIFE

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The phrase "the life after the life" I have appropriated from a collection of essays on Walt Whitman edited by the scholar Robert K. Martin. In this book Martin and his contributors assess the extent to which Whitman's poetic and personal legacies have influenced subsequent generations of writers, readers, critics, and cultural impresarios. And beginning a paper on Wilde with Whitman is perhaps not such a bad idea, considering that he and Wilde are—albeit in very different ways—taken as two of the "founding fathers" of modern gay literature. Wilde actually met Whitman while on his triumphant lecture tour of North America in 1882. Gary Schmidgall, author of *The Stranger Wilde: Interpreting Oscar,* offers an extended account of this meeting in that book, as well as at the end of his more recent biographical rumination, *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life.* But I prefer the poetic portrait of the encounter rendered by the gay American poet and translator Richard Howard, whose "Wildflowers" constructs an imagined dialogue on art, identity, desire, and democracy between "the great good poet" of Camden and the aesthetic interloper from London. In Howard's reconstruction of the meeting, Wilde arrives very much the cocky aesthete, quoting Baudelaire and spouting the epigrams and paradoxes for which he would later become famous: *"Not until / you permit a poet a mask does he dare / tell the truth . . .*"; and "*. . . life / is so often nothing more than a quotation. / Most people are other people*" (21, 24–25, first ellipsis in the original). However, by the end of the poem, Wilde has become a convert to Whitman's "last confirming word," discovering "*how a desire becomes a destiny,*" and how he must write "an essential poem" and live "an essential life," as presumably Uncle Walt has (25, 26). "*Walt . . . You have scored a triumph for America,*" Wilde proclaims near the end of the poem:

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I came, I saw, I was conquered! Not by fame,
though anything is better than virtuous
obscurity—not fame conquered, but life,
your life, your immortality! (27)

To which Whitman replies:

Not
immortality,
Oscar, identity: call it that
and we are one. (27)

In other words, Whitman's gay identity politics trumps Wilde's queer camp posturing, Whitman's embodied adhesiveness Wilde's performative dandyism, Whitman's barbaric American yawp Wilde's bored British yawn.

It is a model of sexual and aesthetic politics decidedly at odds with the portrait of Wilde on offer in Jonathan Dollimore's *Sexual Dissidence,* which opens with another reconstructed encounter between two gay literary forefathers, this time Wilde and André Gide. Whereas Wilde's encounter with Whitman, in my reading of Howard's retelling of it, centers on Whitman's attempts to get Wilde to reconstitute himself as an essential and autonomous and authentic self—to acknowledge not only the destiny but also the naturalness of his desire—Wilde's encounter with Gide in Algiers in 1895, according to Dollimore, is all about Wilde's attempts to "decentre" Gide's subjectivity, to encourage him to transgress, and to realize that there is nothing natural, essential, or trans-historical about desire. Rather, desire is always embedded "within, and informed by, the very culture which it also transgresses" (11).

Dollimore seeks to understand "why in our own time the negation of homosexuality has been in direct proportion to its symbolic centrality; its cultural marginality in direct proportion to its cultural significance; why, also, homosexuality is so strangely integral to the selfsame heterosexual cultures which obsessively denounce it" (28). Not so coincidentally, he turns to the figure of Wilde to explicate a model of aesthetic and sexual transgression that takes place not outside of the bourgeois social order, but that "reacts against, disrupts, and displaces" this order from within (14). For Dollimore, what he sees as Wilde's nineteenth century proto-modern rejection of the "depth model" in life and art, and his concomitant embracing of surface style, also prefigures much of our late twentieth century postmodern embracing of irony, parody, and camp as modes of a) inverting or "transvaluing" the system of binary logic that orders our culture, whereby dominant social groups

can only know themselves in relation (and very "proximate" relation, at that) to what they disavow as unknowable, or not worth knowing; b) articulating a "decentred subjectivity" (sexual or otherwise) that transgresses mainstream culture while simultaneously operating within it; and c) exploding the "depth model" as a basis on which to found a model of humanism (64).

Oscar Wilde has, of course, repeatedly been subjected to posthumous conscription by scholars, critics, writers, and artists as the exemplary literary, sexual, and national outlaw. In this paper I propose to draw on Dollimore's discussion of depth versus surface models with respect to Wilde's "transgressive aesthetic" to trace both the Anglo and the American production and reception of these posthumous personae across two different performative contexts. First, I will examine the field of contemporary drama, where in the years leading up to the centenaries of Wilde's trials and death, several plays were staged which offered a mix of documentary and dramatic reassessment of his life, positioning Wilde, as biographical subject, in "proximate relation" to the surfaces and depths of the playwrights' own political concerns and ideological presuppositions as critical biographers. Next, I will briefly survey representations of Wilde in recent cinema, contrasting Brian Gilbert's very earnest biopic *Wilde* (1998; with Stephen Fry) with Todd Haynes's queerly revisionist *Velvet Goldmine* (1998; with Ewan McGregor and Jonathan Rhys-Meyers, about the origins of glam rock). In particular, I will use Haynes's own published commentary to discuss how the iconic and iconoclastic presence of Wilde in *Goldmine* serves as a departure point for his Wellesian disquisition on how Oscar's subversive artistic, social, and sexual aesthetic remains a powerful oppositional hermeneutic through which to read the world and the structures and codes that continue to order that world. Finally, my paper will conclude with a few observations, via Will Self's recent novel *Dorian: An Imitation,* on authorial—and queerly immemorial—deaths, and readerly births.

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If Wilde's life and work have gained increasing critical currency among contemporary theorists of gender and sexuality, so too have they served to fire the imaginations of a host of contemporary dramatists. As the successive centenaries of Wilde's trials, release from jail, and death approached, a host of plays began to appear that took Wilde and the complexities of his life as their point of departure. The list is endless, and I could have chosen any number for analysis. In what follows, I have singled out five plays—Terry Eagleton's *Saint Oscar,* David Hare's *The Judas Kiss,* Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love,* Moisés Kaufman's *Gross Indecency: The Trials of Oscar Wilde,* and Neil

Bartlett's *In Extremis*—each of which offers a different, although no less compelling and revealing, portrait of Wilde's public persona and private torment. I will discuss each in turn in the relative chronological order of their representative dates of production and publication.

Eagleton's *Saint Oscar* premiered in Ireland in 1989, with Stephen Rea in the title role. Like Wilde, his Oxford predecessor, Eagleton is Irish. Noting that the impetus for the play came from the fact that few of his undergraduate students knew Wilde's national heritage, Eagleton claims, in his introduction to the published version of the play, that this provided him with a very personal motivation:

> Writing *Saint Oscar* was an attempt to rediscover something of my own suppressed voice in that respect, something bred in the bone, as though what I had been trying for some time to do in theory had finally to culminate logically in art. What at one level is a question of style is at another level a matter of identity. Examining the doubleness of Oscar Wilde, Oxford dandy and son of the dirtiest man in Dublin, then felt unavoidably like a stage of self-exploration. (4)

In Eagleton's construction of him, Oscar thus joins a long list of Irish writers, orators, and politicians brought down by a British cultural oligarchy that saw the seductiveness of their language and message as threatening and subversive. To this end, Wilde's fate is compared on more than one occasion in the play to that of Charles Stewart Parnell, the prominent Irish republican, who in 1889 was falsely accused (on the basis of forged letters) of inciting violence and condoning political assassination. Wilde and his brother, Willie, attended Parnell's trial out of solidarity with the accused, and Willie even wrote a few newspaper articles in Parnell's defense. Though eventually exonerated of the trumped-up charges, only a few months later Parnell was named as co-respondent in Captain William Henry O'Shea's divorce suit against his wife, Katherine. Parnell, crushed, chose not to defend himself, and was dead only two years later. According to Richard Ellmann, it "was an example of secular heroism and martyrdom that Wilde could cherish" (290). And according to Eagleton, this was primarily because of the two men's common national heritage. Listen to the following speech that Eagleton gives his Oscar just after he is first sent to prison:

> The Irish have always understood about failure. They need to: there's a lot of it over there. No nation was ever so much in love with losing; they can't get enough of it. But they know the meaning of sacrifice: to be immolated on the altar of oneself. The martyr will always worst the conqueror. Power the conqueror can understand; it's sheer helplessness which leaves him disarmed. Helplessness was always Ireland's secret weapon. (49)

But Eagleton's play, which centers primarily upon the collapse of Wilde's case against Queensberry and its immediate consequences, complicates any easy anti-British reading by seizing upon a central irony from that first trial: namely that Queensberry's defense team was headed by Edward Carson—fellow Irishman, former Trinity College schoolmate of Wilde's, and later to spearhead the Ulster Unionists' opposition to British Home Rule in Northern Ireland. In Act Two, the play essentially becomes a two-hander between these old adversaries, and their opposing views on art and politics culminate in a final pair of dueling monologues, in which Carson's moralistic and imperialistic rhetoric bests Wilde's metaphysics of fantasy, whereby, according to Wilde, "no Irishman can receive a fair hearing in an English court, because the Irish are a figment of the English imagination" (46–47). What's even more significant about Eagleton's depiction of the courtroom exchanges between Wilde and Carson is that he has made a key change to the biographical record: in Act 2, he has made Carson Wilde's prosecutor in a recreated amalgam of the second and third trials, rather than depicting him as Queensberry's defender in the first trial, as was actually the case. This points to the fact that what's really on trial in Eagleton's play is the future of Ireland, both in terms of the specter of Home Rule that retrospectively looms over the chronology of the play, and the 1994 Good Friday Accord that is necessarily influencing my reading of Eagleton's writing. This especially comes to the fore in the final scene of the play, when Carson, dressed in a paramilitary uniform, reappears to Oscar in the latter's prison-fed imagination. As Wilde comments to his old classmate, each man is "A stage Irishman. . . . I speak for Ireland in an English accent; you defend the Crown in a Dublin one. We're both topsy-turvy" (59). To which Carson replies that, as an artist, Wilde is ultimately faithless and feckless, unable to commit to any identitarian mythos (national or otherwise), and as such, represents a threat: "There's no call for mythology in the middle of Chelsea. But we must keep your wit out of Ireland. I saw a chance to shut your mouth for ever, so I moved fast" (61).

This image of Wilde—the literary fantasist, the artist with his head in the clouds, clinging to an outdated belief that the pen, in its culturally and politically relative instrumentality, really is mightier than the sword, unable to deal with the harsh and gritty realities of politics, where friends betray friends—is of course not supported by Wilde's own writing. One has only to read "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" to understand how more truly radical was Wilde's brand of socialist individualism than Carson's rather conservative republicanism, and one has only to see *An Ideal Husband* to realize that Wilde was fully cognizant of the *realpolitick* that formed the bulwark of British parliamentarianism. Still, the image of the artist defending the higher

ground of his art to the end—"If I have to go down, I'll go down writing" is a line of Oscar's that recurs throughout Eagleton's play (34, 61)—makes for a dramatic set piece. And so it should probably come as no surprise that we find a version of it repeated in David Hare's *The Judas Kiss,* which premiered in London in 1998 before transferring to Broadway with Liam Neeson in the starring role. Also on view in Hare's play is the hitherto unheralded Wildean trait of empathy. Act One, in particular, spends a great deal of time focusing on Wilde's relationships with the servants looking after him at the Cadogan Hotel, to which he has repaired following the collapse of his case against Queensberry, and where he will be arrested later that same day. Wilde and the domestic triumvirate of Mr. Moffat, Arthur, and Phoebe articulate a deep personal connection that somehow transcends class differences. This has less to do, I would argue, with the playwright's own politics than it does with the fact that the Wilde on view in Hare's play is the Wilde from *De Profundis,* an explicitly Christ-like figure betrayed by someone closest to him—hence the Biblical allusion in Hare's title. To this end, Hare focuses very specifically on what he imagines to be the core of the relationship between Oscar and Lord Alfred Douglas: Act One is called "Deciding to Stay," and concludes with Oscar's decision not to flee England for the Continent, based on his continuing love for Bosie; Act Two, set in Naples in 1897, is called "Deciding to Leave," and ends with Bosie's decision to betray his promise to Wilde and abandon him by returning to his mother in England. In a speech that could have been drawn directly from *De Profundis,* and that echoes both the refrain of "Each man kills the thing he loves" in "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" and the New Testament description of Peter thrice denying Christ, Hare concludes his play with Wilde translating for the audience his own transfiguration through suffering:

> All trials are trials for one's life, just as all sentences are sentences of death, and three times I have been tried. The first time I left the box to be arrested, the second time to be led back to the House of Detention, and the third time to pass into a prison for two years. Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole . . . (115; ellipsis in original)

The Judas Kiss is, in the end, about love, in particular Oscar's utterly abject love for Bosie. "You know full well," Wilde tells Robbie Ross in Act One, "I have done what I did out of love. . . . I have acted out of love. I have

defended this love which exists between us, the purest I have known in my life. More perfect, more vital, more telling, more various, richer, more vibrant, more sweet. The redeeming fact of my life. . . . It is what I have left. It is what remains to me" (49). And in a key speech in Act Two that gets reproduced on the cover of the Grove edition of the play, Oscar tells Bosie "The everyday world is shrouded. We see it dimly. Only when we love do we see the true person. The truth of a person is only visible through love. Love is not the illusion. Life is" (95). Note that Wilde is speaking in the abstract here: he does not identify the truth of a specific person. Which leads one to intuit that the truth he learns through love is the truth about himself, that he, the witty epigrammist, the dramatist of the surface, the materialist, the aesthete, is capable of sincere, profound, selflessly romantic love. Whereas, for Bosie, love is purely mercenary. At the end of the play, just as Bosie is about to leave, Wilde informs him "The governing principle of my life has been love. But of yours, it has been power" (112).

That Wilde puts himself on the cross for romantic love—"I cannot live without you," Wilde says to Bosie near the end of the play (108)—perhaps grates against our understanding of the writer who parodies such poses with such viciousness in his plays. Everywhere in Hare's play is the "fatalism" that Joseph Bristow, among others, has identified as such a hallmark of Wilde's writing. With his persecutors closing in on him and the possibility of prison ahead, it soon becomes clear in Act One that Wilde has no intention of escaping: "I have always had a low opinion of what is called action. Action is something my mother brought me up to distrust. Why make a decision which does not yet need to be made? What's more, think of this: I am where I wish to be" (30). Recognizing even at this point that he has in some senses already been betrayed by Bosie, Wilde also must recognize and admit to his own paralysis:

> I'm trapped in the narrative. The narrative has a life of its own. It travels inexorably towards my disgrace. Towards my final expulsion. And it bears me along on its crest. . . . Yes, in fact, for me, borne along by this story, there is even an odd kind of freedom. I may wear whatever mask I may choose. Tragic? Defiant? Tearful? Resigned? I may try all these attitudes. I may bring what so called "feelings" I like to the rile. But they will not have the slightest effect on the outcome. The story has only one possible end. (36)

While Hare's play is undoubtedly a powerful work of art, something about it bothers me. And I think that something is that, unlike Eagleton, who in many scenes delights in depicting a ribald and loquacious Wilde rather glorying in his outcast state, Hare essentially portrays Wilde as a tragic figure. The "fatalistic" and "inevitable" take on Wilde and his "disgrace," it seems to me,

is somewhat too easy. It shifts the focus away from larger cultural, political, and social issues that conspired to make Wilde a convenient public scapegoat at a particular moment in time, and places the blame squarely on the shoulders of Wilde as an individual somehow at odds with the age in which he lived. That is, like Oedipus or Hamlet, both of whom Wilde has been compared to by previous critics, Wilde is adjudged to be in possession of a fatal moral weakness, a flaw in character—arrogance, self-importance, blind egotism are the ones most often mentioned, with sexual perversity (in the subtle but no less frequent linking of tragedy with homosexuality) being the one that needn't be named—that somehow made his trials, imprisonment, and untimely death inevitable. One can certainly understand the lure of such a reading. It lends any staging of Wilde's life a certain *gravitas,* the requisite degree of pathos. And yet, this is to ignore the fact that Wilde, who did on occasion show himself to be predisposed to melodrama, rarely wrote tragedies—at least not in the classical sense, and not with any of the grand success with which he wrote his social comedies—and that, judging by the published transcripts, he treated the particular predicament of his trials rather more like a farce.

Which is why I much prefer the dramatic takes on Wilde recorded in the plays by Stoppard, Kaufman, and Bartlett. In Stoppard's imaginary biography of A. E. Housman, *The Invention of Love,* which opened at the Royal National's Cottesloe Theatre in 1997 and, like Hare's *Judas Kiss,* subsequently moved to Broadway, Wilde is quite literally the *deus ex machina,* pausing in his crossing of the River Styx near the end of the play to scoff, in a bravura speech comparing their respective queer afterlives, at the scholarly, poetic, and sexual asceticism of AEH:

> Better a fallen rocket than never a burst of light. Dante reserved a place in his Inferno for those who willfully live in sadness—sullen in the sweet air, he says. Your 'honour' is all shame and timidity and compliance. Pure of stain! But the artist is the secret criminal in our midst. He is the agent of progress against authority. You are right to be a scholar. A scholar is all scruple, an artist is none. The artist must lie, cheat, deceive, be untrue to nature and contemptuous of history. I made my life into my art and it was an unqualified success. The blaze of my immolation threw its light into every corner of the land where uncounted young men sat each in his own darkness. . . . I awoke the imagination of the century. I banged Ruskin's and Pater's heads together, and from the moral severity of one and the aesthetic soul of the other I made art a philosophy that can look the twentieth century in the eye. I had genius, brilliancy, daring, I took charge of my own myth. I dipped my staff into the comb of wild honey. I tasted forbidden sweetness and drank the stolen waters. I lived at the turning point of the world where everything was waking up new—the New Drama, the New Novel, New Journalism, New Hedonism, New Paganism, even the New Woman. Where were you when all this was happening? (96–97)

In the introduction to the published version of his play *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde,* first staged off-Broadway in 1997, Moisés Kaufman elaborates on his ongoing dramaturgical concern, and that of his company, Tectonic Theater Project, with how theatre can reconstruct history, not as a seamless and unified record of events, but as an amalgam of diverse and conflicting accounts. As with his later play, *The Laramie Project,* about the murder of Matthew Shepard, Kaufman's solution in *Gross Indecency* is to eschew a fictionalized portrait of his own personal version of the "real" Oscar Wilde in favor of a documentary collage of the different perspectives on offer in the published testimony of Wilde and his fellow witnesses from the trials, as well as the published views of such intimates and contemporaries as Bosie, Frank Harris, Lady Speranza Wilde, and George Bernard Shaw. What results is a play as nuanced and complex as Wilde himself, in which the actors' Brechtian quotation of historical documents, and their structural foregrounding of their narration of the play's action, resist a totalizing portrait of their biographical subject, something which more conventional realist dramatic forms such as those employed by Hare more readily encourage.

Kaufman's method of documentary collage should not be mistaken, it seems to me, for an attempt to provide an objective, agenda-free presentation of the "facts" of Wilde's case—and at any rate, "Facts deal only with types," according to Stoppard's Wilde, "Truth is quite another thing and is the work of the imagination" (93). Rather, I think Kaufman's method is meant to move an Aristotelian subjective identification with the "character" of Wilde into the realm of Brechtian intersubjective analysis of the social conditions that both produced and eventually dismantled that character.[1] Hence the doubling up of roles in the all-male cast: the actors who serve as Wilde's jury, for example, also appear as the rent boys who give evidence against him. Hence the interview with academic and queer theorist Marvin Taylor that begins Act Two, wherein poststructuralist musings over the "ethics" of Wilde's performed lie (whether in print or in the dock) are revealed to be projections of contemporary anxieties about the identitarian "disruption which Wilde [re]presented" (77–78). And hence the inclusion of Wilde's prose poem "The House of Judgement" as a coda to the play. Read within the courtroom setting of the stage, and within what S. I. Salamensky has called the "'you-be-the-judge' structure" of the play (585), Kaufman is forcing the spectator to adjudicate, but framing the parameters of that judgment not with morally relativistic grounds but with imaginatively relativistic ones. That is, the "man" being judged in Wilde's poem, like the "character" being judged in Kaufman's play, cannot imagine heaven in the terms set out by his adjudicators because they cannot, concomitantly, imagine his hell.

That Wilde does not exist outside of the printed text, that his is a life that has always been and continues to be mediated through art, and that any writing by or about Wilde must always in some senses be a form of ghostwriting, is ably demonstrated by Neil Bartlett's *In Extremis,* his one-act play that was commissioned by Corin Redgrave as a companion piece to his dramatic recitation of *De Profundis* at the Royal National's Cottesloe Theatre in November 2000. Noting with deliberate disingenuousness in the introduction to the play that he has "invented very little," Bartlett tells us that the text, which openly "steals" from Wilde's published writings, especially "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime," is "spun from a single historical fact" (9, 7): that a week prior to the start of his libel trial against Queensberry, Wilde consulted the cheiromantist and fortune teller Mrs. Robinson, "the Sibyl of Mortimer Street," who apparently "prophesied complete triumph" (Wilde, *Letters* 594, 636). Like his earlier work, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde,* Bartlett's play is an exercise in biographical literary forensics, or what Alan Sinfield, in *The Wilde Century,* calls "reading [the] silences" in the "faultline stories" of queer history (4–5). As such, *In Extremis* returns us, very materially, to the dichotomy of surface and depth in Wilde via Mrs. Robinson's reading of his palm. Troping on both the science and the sophistry of the emerging behavioral and psychological sciences—including the nascent disciplines of sexuality studies and criminology as they were initially linked to phrenology, palmistry, and other "arts of [bodily] divination" (*In Extremis* 26)—Bartlett, who in *Who Was That Man?* adjudged Wilde to be "no heroic victim. . . . He lied, and he lied at a crucial moment in our history" (33), here asks us to consider how Wilde's theatrical imposturing, his particular brand of deep shallowness, interacts with Mrs. Robinson's professional charlatanism, her version of shallow depth. In the end, it matters not by whom or even how the lie is performed; it matters only, according to Bartlett, that the "truth" of the lie cannot "be separated from the circumstances of its telling":

> A hundred years after his death, we find other truths in Wilde's life and work than those found when he swore to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in the dock at the Old Bailey. We flatter ourselves that we read his story differently to the jury who found him guilty, or to the newspaper editors who boosted their circulation on the back of lurid, moralizing editorials, or to all those who approved of or reveled in his humiliation. We've put up a statue, given him a plaque in Westminster Abbey, adopted him as an icon, claimed him as a pioneer, studied him to death, republished him endlessly and made him one [of] the very few above-the-title box office guarantee names of our entertainment industry. But I do not think we have understood him yet, or what was done to him. I don't think we realize how much he is with us, rather than behind us. (*In Extremis* 9–10)

Afterlives (clockwise from top left): Michael Fitzgerald as Oscar Wilde, from the 1997 Royal National Theatre production of Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love* (photograph © copyright and reproduced by permission of the photographer, John Haynes); a scene from The Hippodrome State Theatre's February 1999 production of Moisés Kaufman's *Gross Indecency* (photograph reproduced courtesy of the Hippodrome State Theatre); Jonathan Rhys-Meyers as Brian Slade and Ewan McGregor as Curt Wild from Todd Haynes's film *Velvet Goldmine* (photograph reproduced courtesy of Miramax Films); and Stephen Rea as Oscar Wilde, from the September 1989 Field Day Theatre production of Terry Eagleton's *St. Oscar.*

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And this maxim is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the spate of recent films that have attempted to cash in on Wilde's name. While a discussion of Rupert Everett's career-reviving turns as Lord Goring and Algernon in Oliver Parker's truncated and anachronistic celluloid versions of *An Ideal Husband* (1999) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2002) is beyond the scope of this paper, I do want to focus on two films released in 1998 that each, in its idiosyncratic way, centers on the life of Wilde. Like Margaret Stetz, whose discussion of two Wilde biopics from 1960—Gregory Ratoff's *Oscar Wilde* and Ken Hughes's *The Green Carnation*—appeared in the pages of this journal, I want to assess very briefly the extent to which each film's "retelling of [Wilde's] story function[s] as a mask," "with their simultaneously conscious and selective refashioning of the past" performing certain arguments about the present (93).

The casting of Stephen Fry as the lead in Brian Gilbert's 1998 biopic, *Wilde,* seems to constitute the fulfillment of Vivian's third aesthetic doctrine in "The Decay of Lying," namely that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" (33). Not only does Fry greatly resemble Wilde, in bulk and stature if not exactly in facial looks, but he is also something of a match for him in terms of his wit, erudition, and charm. A Cambridge alumnus, a talented actor known to most audiences for his dry and acerbic portrayal of P. G. Wodehouse's butler Jeeves to Hugh Laurie's Wooster, as well as the author of several highly praised and very funny novels, Fry is also gay and Jewish, and he talks at length in his memoir, *Moab is My Washpot,* about his alienation from British public school culture while growing up—he cites Lindsay Anderson's *If…* as a favorite film—a sense of being somehow not a member of the club, as indeed that door was eventually shut against Wilde, the Irish homosexual, after his trials. But the similarities don't stop there. In *Moab is My Washpot,* published not so coincidentally the same year as the release of the film *Wilde,* we also learn that Fry, like Wilde, spent time in jail, in his case for teenaged credit card fraud.

Comparisons between the two thus became irresistible, and most reviews of the film dwell almost as much on the life of Fry as they do on that of Wilde. The effect of this is to encode Wilde—the character and the film—with a modern gay identity and a queer coalitionary politics that had not yet been invented, and that Wilde himself may well never have accepted. Hence the opening scene, with Wilde easily and jovially conversing with some Whitman-like manly comrades in a silver mine in Colorado; or flamboyantly dressed in a bright pink suit, parting a sea of barristers in London; or delivering with tragic nobility his defense of "the love that dare not speak its name"

in the dock. In positing among their viewers a more or less homogenous community as always already existing a priori of Wilde's own authorship of that community (whether via *Dorian,* or as Wayne Koestenbaum has argued, his post-imprisonment writings *De Profundis* and "The Ballad of Reading Gaol"), the filmmaking triumvirate of director Gilbert, screenwriter Julian Mitchell, and star Fry buys into the depth model of Wilde criticism. Here they take a page not from *De Profundis,* but rather from the similarly themed "Selfish Giant" in depicting Wilde—"posing sodomite" and doting father—as the inevitable Christ-like martyr for the rainbow coalition.

To be sure, some of the problems I see with the approach taken by Gilbert in *Wilde* stem from the cinematic genre in which he was working. Commenting on the *Citizen Kane* allusions that frame his film *Velvet Goldmine,* also released in 1998 and also containing a Wildean intertext (which I will get to shortly), Todd Haynes has stated that

> I also knew from the beginning that I was not interested in that kind of presumed intimacy of the traditional "bio-pic." The idea that you're behind closed doors and hearing the 'real' things that are being said kind of makes my skin crawl. That was never what I wanted "Velvet Goldmine" to be about—I wanted it to be about the relationship between the fan and his idol. And everything real or not real that happens because of that. (Interview)

Echoing Wilde's famous statement that "The only duty we owe to history is to rewrite it," Haynes has further remarked that "the only really truthful way to deal with history is as a fiction":

> It's the only way you can be honest about it and acknowledge the fact that history is partial, selective, usually in the hands of people in power who choose what gets written down for posterity and what falls through the cracks. With that attitude, you're liberated—allowed to embellish and make it as subjective as you like. ("Stardust")

Thus, as a fictionalized history of the glam rock era of music in the 1970s that produced such stars as David Bowie, Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, Marc Bolan, Brian Ferry, and Bryan Eno, Haynes's movie in part seeks to argue that this late twentieth-century pop cultural phenomenon, which made a cult of excessive style and artifice, and which stressed androgyny and sexual fluidity in the personae projected by the singers on stage (most iconically in Bowie's Ziggy Stardust), is part of a camp aesthetic continuum, in Britain at any rate, that stretches all the way back to Oscar Wilde. To this end, the film, which skips back and forth in time between 1984 and the 1970s, opens with an historical frame set in the 1850s and the 1950s. In it, the origins of Wilde and all of his decadent (aesthetically and sexually) followers to come are literally depicted

as otherworldly and extraterrestrial. With the voice-over narration announcing that "Histories, like ancient ruins, are fictions of empires, while everything forgotten hangs in the dark dreams of the past, ever threatening to return," the baby Oscar is delivered to his parents' Dublin door by spaceship, a mysterious emerald brooch affixed to the blanket in which he is swaddled. The camera then cuts away to Oscar, aged seven or eight, standing up in class and announcing, in response to a query about what he wants to be when he grows up, "I want to be a pop idol." We then cut away again to another scene of school children, this one a hundred years later. Little Jack Fairy is being roughhoused by the other boys. Pushed into the dirt, he unearths the emerald brooch, and its effect is galvanizing. He realizes his difference is not something to be ashamed of, but rather to celebrate, even flaunt.

Jack grows up to become one of the pioneers of glam rock, and the emerald brooch, like the green carnation worn by Wilde to the premiere of *Lady Windermere's Fan,* functions as a kind of camp talisman throughout the film, a symbol of artistic and sexual freedom, a sign to others wanting to experience this freedom that they are not alone, and according to Felicia Feaster, "as a token of their identification with Wilde's self-appointed—in Haynes' terms extraterrestrial—status as outsider." The brooch eventually passes from Fairy (Micko Westmoreland) to the Bowiesque pop and sexual chameleon Brian Slade (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers) to the Iggyesque showman Curt Wild (Ewan McGregor), and finally to Arthur Stuart (Christian Bale), a newspaper reporter and the moral center of the film.

As such, we follow Arthur's efforts to solve the mystery surrounding the event that, in the film's fictionalized universe, brought the era of glam to a crashing end: the staged suicide/assassination of the Dorian Gray-like Slade's performative alter-ego, Maxwell Demon (a number of allusions to *Dorian,* and to other texts by Wilde, surface throughout the film). As part of his investigations, Arthur, like his counterpart in Welles's great film, seeks out Slade's former wife, Mandy (Toni Colette), who, channeling Wilde, reminds Arthur that "Every great century that produces art is, so far, an artificial century, and the work that seems the most natural and simple of its time is always the result of the most self-conscious effort." Indeed, in numerous published articles about the film, Haynes has been very frank in acknowledging his debt to Wilde's writings and aesthetic theories:

> In my research, I tried to retrace the steps that Bowie and Ferry and Bryan Eno took to arrive at what they created in that period—one of the most culturally jam-packed, highly referential, rock-and-roll moments that I can think of. I don't know if Oscar Wilde was as apparent to Ferry and Eno as he seems in the movie, but all the roads lead back to him. Wilde is the most articulate spokesperson for this

> moment—the last really mainstream explosion of these kinds of ideas that run very counter to the traditional notions of art and truth and direct emotional communication by the artists. Instead it elevates art as camp and irony and wit, evokes questions about sexual identity. Oscar Wilde was a very popular bourgeois hit in his time, and so was glam rock. (Interview)

Significantly, Arthur's quest for the truth about Slade's disappearance is set in a bleak, blighted, and bland New York in 1984. The blanket of corporate conservatism and the specter of surveillance (especially as it relates to sexuality) signaled by the dystopic, Orwellian frame setting is also, I think, Haynes's allusion to another *fin-de-siècle* that ushered in a similar sense of political, aesthetic, and sexual policing, namely that which descended in 1895 with Oscar Wilde's trials. In this regard, the defiantly oppositional pose of the Glam Rock movement—and, by extension, its aesthetic and performative antecedents in Wilde—gets coopted by having that movement's metaphorical use of masks and masquerade as a way to blur boundaries between artifice and reality turned into a literal adoption of the mask as a fake, mass-produced identity to hide behind in a pose of empty consumer conformity, as evidenced in Brian Slade's own facial reconstruction as a result of his metamorphosis into the shark-suited, shoulder-padded pop duke Tommy Stone (the dig at David Bowie is unmistakable, as I'll explain at more length shortly), and his handing out of that "new" face to all his fans. As Feaster has argued, the "70s glam fans who once integrated the musical androgyny into their daily lives give way to the cowed, identity-less Tommy Stone disciples who wear plastic masks bearing their idol's face."

In his comments to *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* creator John Cameron Mitchell, Haynes once again acknowledges the influence of Wilde in this representation of surface and depth in the film:

> There's a great emphasis on surface, on self-presentation, in style, in the pose, that's all very complex. As soon as you say those words in America, it seems to be an invasion of something underneath the surface. But I think, if you read Oscar Wilde, that notions of depth are just as constructed and prescribed. This refusal to look at the surface of things is a very American thing. Music has always been defined here by the R & B tradition. . . . But I think with Oscar Wilde, Roxy Music, Bowie and the more sophisticated strain of this dandy tradition, there's a great deal at stake. It's about questioning dominant ideas about masculinity, identity, art and the whole ability to communicate something from the gut with no meditation whatsoever. ("Flaming")

Ironically, this transnational opposition between American and British receptions of a queer camp aesthetic tradition inherited from Wilde is complicated

by the fact that Iggy Pop, on whom Ewan McGregor's Curt Wild was based, was much more accommodating towards the film than was David Bowie, who denied Haynes the rights to use any of his songs. Indeed, since the 1980s, and especially since his marriage to supermodel Iman, Bowie has repeatedly disavowed his sexually polymorphous past, sounding the death knell on whatever alien spaces of Wildean queerness might have influenced his Ziggy Stardust persona and, taking his cue from Tony Blair and the New Labour, resurrecting himself as the sharply dressed, straight-up *éminence grise* of post-Thatcher Brit pop.

* * * * *

"For he who lives more lives than one / More deaths than one must die." Those lines, from the last stanza of the third section of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (495), are a fitting epitaph for a man whom successive generations of readers, scholars, and family members (lest we forget the industry with which Oscar's grandson, Merlin Holland, has participated in the Wildean necrology) have buried and resuscitated, and buried and resuscitated again, over the past century. That there is yet more life in Oscar's life is evident in the fact that the dawn of the new millennium witnessed the publication of two new biographies of the writer, Joseph Pearce's *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde* and Barbara Belford's *Oscar Wilde: A Certain Genius,* as well as biographies of his lover (Douglas Murray's *Bosie: A Biography of Lord Alfred Douglas*), and his niece (Joan Schenkar's *Truly Wilde: The Unsettling Story of Dolly Wilde, Oscar's Unusual Niece*), who became a member of Natalie Barney's bohemian lesbian circle on the Left Bank of Paris in the 1920s before succumbing to alcohol and heroin addiction. There was even a biography of Wilde's most famous literary character, as Jerusha Hull McCormack argued in *The Man Who Was Dorian Gray* that the poet, dandy, and eventual priest John Gray served as the model for Wilde's Dorian.

To which, of course, we must add *Dorian: An Imitation,* Will Self's recent homage to and mordant pastiche of Wilde's character/novel. In the third (after *Dorian* and "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.") and most powerful of his literary self-portraits, *De Profundis,* Wilde argued that "time and space, succession and extension, are merely accidental conditions of Thought," and that "what lies before me is my past" (162, 163). Self seizes upon this "crucial ambiguity" in constructing the time frame and spatial setting of his story, matching what Neil Bartlett (who, as I've already indicated, has written his own poisoned "gift" to Wilde) has felicitously termed the "fag ends" of history (see "Picture") to the expiry dates of two different *fins-de-siècle* and two different queer cultures:

> But such was the particular correspondence between the year our story begins, 1981, and the year of the [Wotton] house's construction, 1881, and such was the peculiarly similar character of the times—a Government at once regressive and progressive, a monarchy mired in its own immemorial succession crisis, an economic recession both sharp and bitter—that a disinterested viewer could have been forgiven for seeing more enduring significance in the fanlight and the dado, the striped wallpaper and the gilt-framed mirror, a reproduction bust of Antinous and a very watery Turner, than in the human figures that actually stood in the mote-heavy beam of light which fell to the runner. (3)

Compounding this sense of doubleness and déja-vu, Self also has his antihero, Dorian, die two deaths, once intra-diegetically when the HIV-positive but asymptomatic Dorian stabs the monitors of Baz's video installation *Cathode Narcissus,* on which are recorded and copied images of his inner decrepitude, and once extra-diegetically, as it were, when shortly after reading Henry's vengeful *roman-à-clef* detailing the excesses of his life, Dorian, like his famous friends Gianni Versace and Princess Diana (and like Wilde himself), meets an ignominious end at the hands of a succubine public that both created his celebrated/celebrity image, and has now determined, to paraphrase the novel's final line, that this image has remained fashionable far too long. In Dorian's case, this end comes in the form of the avenging author himself, a resurrected Henry imposing closure on his character by slashing his throat in a public lavatory.

Given that Wilde once famously quipped about his only novel that "'Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry is what the world thinks of me: Dorian is what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps'" (qtd. in Ellmann 319), one is tempted to read Oscar's reauthorized/reauthorizing hand at work in Self's novel, be it in the figure of Dorian or Henry. Yet, whereas in Wilde's novel Dorian accepts Henry's gift of Huysmans's recoded *À rebours,* finding that "the whole book seemed to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it" (*Picture* 111), in Self's novel Dorian rejects Henry's manuscript for both its lack of verisimilitude and its retrospective finitude: "even if it's some kind of allegory, this stuff—he thumped the typescript once more for emphasis—is a bit much, a bit bloody much" (260). As if anticipating such a response, earlier in the novel Henry says about himself, "Whatever my faults, I have at least lived my life at first hand, rather than filtering it through this paper as part of a literary experiment" (220).

It is hard not to read this statement as a ventriloquized and doubly self-referential comment on the queer afterlife of Oscar Wilde. In terms of the literary and cinematic experiments I have outlined in this article, we get the repetition of an Oscar Wilde who is quintessentially "other," both in terms

of how he is inevitably set apart from the age in which he lived (and yet curiously in tune with our own), and from the ways in which he has been depicted by previous critics, biographers, and writers. The proliferation of Oscar's posthumous personae thus continues unabated: Oscar the literary modernist, the sexual liberationist, the Irish nationalist, is joined by Oscar the anarchist, Oscar the socialist, Oscar the individualist, Oscar the feminist, Oscar the iconoclast, Oscar the pop star. The list expands exponentially until the frustrated scholar/reader wants to scream "Will the real Oscar Wilde please stand up?" To which the inevitable reply must necessarily be: "No, not that one, the other one." As the capricious Wilde puts it to the sage Whitman at one point in Richard Howard's "Wildflowers,"

> *Is it not incredible, then,*
> *that the prospect of having a biographer*
> *has tempted no one to renounce having*
> *a life?* (21)

That we still cannot agree on who Oscar Wilde was, nor on what precisely his written work represents artistically, culturally, or politically, is testament, in my mind, to a queer literary legacy as enduring and influential—if not exactly as adhesive (or *cohesive*)—as Whitman's. As Eagleton has stated, "everything about [Wilde] was doubled, ambiguous, unstable" (5). As such, one of the central contradictions about the process of "interpreting Oscar" (cf. Schmidgall) is that it always reveals more about us as readers than it does about him as writer. To paraphrase Henry in Self's novel, "'It's perfectly all right to stare into the abyss [that is Wilde] for days at a time . . . so long as you're wearing two pairs of Ray-Bans'" (7).

NOTE

1. On objectivity and intersubjectivity in Kaufman's play, see also Salamensky 584.

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