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Different Desires: Subjectivity and Transgression in Wilde and Gide

JONATHAN DOLLIMORE

*Jonathan Dollimore, who serves as Reader in English and American Studies at the University of Sussex, is a literary and cultural critic. In this essay he compares two homosexual authors who were contemporaries about a century ago—André Gide and Oscar Wilde. Dollimore argues that there were crucial and, for us today, instructive differences between them. As Gide understood his own life-story, his transgressive breakthrough into homosexual behavior was a liberation of his authentic, inner self. But in Wilde's view all desire was socially produced, and there was no such thing as an inner self waiting to be freed. If Gide was a humanist, Wilde was a socialist, committed not to individual self-discovery but rather to struggle for the transformation of those social conditions which produce misery. Wilde thought that his transgressive homosexual behavior could be a part of that struggle. As an inversion of the normal, homosexuality was in many ways potentially a subversion as well. What Dollimore ultimately suggests is that for us Wilde should be more exemplary than Gide. Jonathan Dollimore is the author of *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Power, and Ideology in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (1984), and of *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (1991).*

In Blidah, Algeria, in January 1895 André Gide is in the hall of a hotel, about to leave. His glance falls on the slate which announces the names of new guests: "suddenly my heart gave a leap; the two last names . . . were those of Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas."¹ Acting on his first impulse, Gide "erases" his own name from the slate and leaves for the station. Twice thereafter Gide writes about the incident, unsure why he left so abruptly; first in his *Oscar Wilde* (1901), then in *Si le grain ne meurt* (*If It Die*, 1920, 1926). It may, he reflects, have been a feeling of *mauvaise honte* or of embarrassment: Wilde was becoming notorious and his company compromising. But also he was severely depressed, and at such times "I feel ashamed of myself, disown, repudiate myself."² Whatever the case, on his way to the station he decides that his leaving was cowardly and so returns. The consequent meeting with Wilde was to precipitate a transformation in Gide's life and subsequent writing.

Gide's reluctance to meet Wilde certainly had something to do with previous meetings in Paris four years earlier in 1891; they had seen a great deal of each other across several occasions, and biographers agree that this was one of the most important events in Gide's life. But these meetings had left Gide feeling ambivalent toward the

older man, and it is Wilde's obvious and Delay, in the manuscript from November to December 1891.

Undoubtedly Gide's remarks in his letter to the younger man's self are full of moral rigor and represent a position notoriously opposed. Gide wanted to reenact in his life the purification—which his father had earlier. (Wilde's major work, *Deceit, Mad Love and Madness*, dates from 1889–90.)⁴ But first Wilde had to be transfixed within the life of the younger man in the sense of liberation precisely in the sense of the "Demoralize" was a condition for Gide, recalled Flaubert to Valéry at this time (the remains of my soul, but it is not: he wants me to mislead it. Each thing is made in a month: "Please forgive me, I have published notes for this purpose you a sanction for evil." It seems indeed to have done so: intention was partly to do me nothing but harm. I have varied emotions, but has said Delay, in accordance with the inseparable from an essential Lord keep me from evil. Wilde is to be counted on: time he found himself a transmutation of all with this judgment and Gide supplies much of the work containing a character.

It is against the background of the ambivalence to the further encounter in Algiers stronger; in a letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, a dangerous product of the "down to the marrow."¹⁰ A year later Wilde declares his intention was to change Gide's life and the entire narrative of *If It Die* a café. It is there that "I" youth. He stood there for

older man, and it is interesting that not only does Gide say nothing in *If It Die* about Wilde's obvious and deep influence upon him in Paris in 1891, but, according to Jean Delay, in the manuscript of Gide's journal the pages corresponding to that period—November to December 1891—are torn out.³

Undoubtedly Gide was deeply disturbed by Wilde, and not surprisingly, since Gide's remarks in his letters of that time suggest that Wilde was intent on undermining the younger man's self-identity, rooted as it was in a Protestant ethic and high bourgeois moral rigor and repression that generated a kind of conformity to which Wilde was, notoriously, opposed. Wilde wanted to encourage Gide to transgress. It may be that he wanted to reenact in Gide the creative liberation—which included strong criminal identification—which his own exploration of transgressive desire had produced nine years earlier. (Wilde's major writing, including that which constitutes his transgressive aesthetic, dates from 1886, when, according to Robert Ross, he first practiced homosexuality.)⁴ But first Wilde had to undermine that lawful sense of self which kept Gide transfixed within the law. So Wilde tried to decenter or demoralize Gide—"demoralize" in the sense of liberate from moral constraint rather than to dispirit; or, rather, to dispirit precisely in the sense of to liberate from a morality anchored in the very notion of spirit. ("Demoralize" was a term Gide remembers Wilde using in just this sense, one which, for Gide, recalled Flaubert.) Hence, perhaps, those most revealing of remarks by Gide to Valéry at this time (December 4, 1891): "Wilde is religiously contriving to kill what remains of my soul, because he says that in order to know an essence, one must eliminate it: he wants me to miss my soul. The measure of a thing is the effort made to destroy it. Each thing is made up only of its emptiness." And in another letter of the same month: "Please forgive my silence: since Wilde, I hardly exist anymore."⁵ And in unpublished notes for this time he declares that Wilde was "always trying to instil into you a sanction for evil."⁶ So, despite his intentions to the contrary, Wilde at that time seems indeed to have dispirited Gide in the conventional sense. Yet perhaps the contrary intention was partly successful; on January 1, 1892 Gide writes: "Wilde, I think, did me nothing but harm. In his company I had lost the habit of thinking. I had more varied emotions, but had forgotten how to bring order into them."⁷ In fact, Gide reacted, says Delay, in accordance with his Protestant instincts, reaffirming a moral conviction inseparable from an essentialist conception of self (cf. *Journal*, December 29, 1891: "O Lord keep me from evil. May my soul again be proud"). Even so, this meeting with Wilde is to be counted as one of the most important events in Gide's life: "for the first time he found himself confronted with a man who was able to bring about, within him, a transmutation of all values—in other words, a revolution."⁸ Richard Ellmann concurs with this judgment and suggests further that Wilde's attempt to "authorize evil" in Gide supplies much of the subject of *The Immoralist* and *The Counterfeiters*, the former work containing a character, Ménalque, who is based upon Wilde.⁹

It is against the background and the importance of that earlier meeting, together with the ambivalence toward Wilde which it generated in Gide, that we return to that further encounter in Algeria four years later. If anything, the ambivalence seems even stronger; in a letter to his mother Gide describes Wilde as a terrifying man, a "most dangerous product of modern civilization" who had already depraved Douglas "right down to the marrow."¹⁰ A few days later Gide meets them again in Algiers, a city which Wilde declares his intention to demoralize.¹¹ It is here that there occurs the event which was to change Gide's life and radically influence his subsequent work, an event for which the entire narrative of *If It Die* seems to have been preparing. He is taken by Wilde to a café. It is there that "in the half-open doorway, there suddenly appeared a marvelous youth. He stood there for a time, leaning with his raised elbow against the door-jamb,

and outlined on the dark background of the night." The youth joins them; his name is Mohammed; he is a musician; he plays the flute. Listening to that music, "you forgot the time and place, and who you were."¹² This is not the first time Gide has experienced this sensation of forgetting. Africa increasingly attracts him in this respect;¹³ there he feels liberated and the burden of an oppressive sense of self is dissolved: "I laid aside anxieties, constraints, solitudes, and as my will evaporated, I felt myself becoming porous as a beehive."¹⁴ Now, as they leave the café, Wilde turns to Gide and asks him if he desires the musician. Gide writes: "how dark the alley was! I thought my heart would fail me; and what a dreadful effort of courage it needed to answer: 'yes,' and with what a choking voice!" (Delay points out that the word "courage" is here transvalued by Gide; earlier he had felt courage was needed for self-discipline, whereas now it is the strength to transgress.)¹⁵

Wilde arranges something with their guide, rejoins Gide, and then begins laughing: "a resounding laugh, more of triumph than of pleasure, an interminable, uncontrollable, insolent laugh . . . it was the amusement of a child and a devil." Gide spends the night with Mohammed: "my joy was unbounded, and I cannot imagine it greater, even if love had been added." Though not his first homosexual experience, it confirmed his (homo)sexual "nature," what, he says, was "normal" for him. Even more defiantly Gide declares that, although he had achieved "the summit of pleasure five times" with Mohammed, "I revived my ecstasy many more times, and back in my hotel room I relived its echoes until morning"¹⁶ (this passage was one of those omitted from some English editions). At this suitably climactic moment we postpone further consideration of Gide and turn to the antiessentialist, transgressive aesthetic which Wilde was advocating and which played so important a part in Gide's liberation or corruption, depending on one's point of view. And I want to begin with an indispensable dimension of that aesthetic: one for which Wilde is yet hardly remembered, or, for some of his admirers, one which is actively forgotten; namely, his advocacy of socialism.

Wilde begins his *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891) by asserting that a socialism based on sympathy alone is useless; what is needed is to "try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible." It is precisely because Christ made no attempt to reconstruct society that he had to resort to pain and suffering as the exemplary mode of self-realization. The alternative is the socialist commitment to transforming the material conditions which create and perpetuate suffering. One might add that, if the notion of redemption through suffering has been a familiar theme within English studies, this only goes to remind us of the extent to which, in the twentieth century, criticism has worked in effect as a displaced theology or as a vehicle for an acquiescent quasi-religious humanism. So Wilde's terse assertion in 1891 that "pain is not the ultimate mode of perfection. It is merely provisional and a protest"¹⁷ may still be an appropriate response to those who fetishize suffering in the name, not of Christ, but of the tragic vision and the human condition (sainthood without God, as Camus once put it).

Wilde also dismisses the related pieties, that humankind learns wisdom through suffering, and that suffering humanizes. On the contrary, "misery and poverty are so absolutely degrading, and exercise such a paralyzing effect over the nature of men, that no class is ever really conscious of its suffering. They have to be told of it by other people, and they often entirely disbelieve them." Against those who were beginning to talk of the dignity of manual labor, Wilde insists that most of that too is absolutely degrading. Each of these repudiations suggests that Wilde was fully aware of how exploitation is crucially a question of ideological mystification as well as of outright coercion: "to the thinker, the most tragic fact in the whole of the French Revolution is not that Marie Antoinette was killed for being a queen, but that the starved peasant

of the Vendée voluntarily reaches into experience is also the ruling ideology, not sin that produces, escalates rather than it even more than the

There is much exemplifies a tough not least because for those ideologies of st A case in point would (Wilde made a point of *and Anarchy*: "Religious manner, places human inance of our human appropriate, given Wilde is not worth fighting how different is Wilde idealist culture generates the next section considers

Individualism

In Wilde's writing, is condition, than a dynamic freedom "latent and conceives it generates is man's original virtue disobedience and through close relationship between Already, then, Wilde' and a transgressive aesthetic and conventional morality

The public which against cultural difference it with being either prescribing for the true difference and diversity ideology disavow. Wilde and insists that selfishness as one wishes to live, but not only recognizes culture an affirmation of culture posed to that "immorality prevalent everywhere,

Uniformity of type only in individuals but is a crucial factor in the connection a piece of exploitation and repression

of the Vendée voluntarily went out to die for the hideous cause of feudalism." Ideology reaches into experience and identity, reemerging as "voluntary" self-oppression. But it is also the ruling ideology which prevents the rulers themselves from seeing that it is not sin that produces crime but starvation, and that the punishment of the criminal escalates rather than diminishes crime and also brutalizes the society which administers it even more than the criminal who receives it.¹⁸

There is much more in this essay, but I have summarized enough to show that it exemplifies a tough materialism; in modern parlance one might call it antihumanist, not least because for Wilde a radical socialist program is inseparable from a critique of those ideologies of subjectivity which seek redemption in and through the individual. A case in point would be Dickens's treatment of Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times* (Wilde made a point of disliking Dickens); another might be Arnold's assertion in *Culture and Anarchy*: "Religion says: *The Kingdom of God is within you*"; and culture, in like manner, places human perfection in an internal condition, in the growth and predominance of our humanity proper."¹⁹ But isn't a category like antihumanism entirely inappropriate, given Wilde's celebration of individualism? The term itself, antihumanism, is not worth fighting over; I have introduced it only as a preliminary indication of just how different is Wilde's concept of the individual from that which has prevailed in idealist culture generally and English studies in particular. It is this difference which the next section considers.

Individualism

In Wilde's writing, individualism is less to do with a human essence, Arnold's inner condition, than a dynamic social potential, one which implies a radical possibility of freedom "latent and potential in mankind generally." Thus individualism as Wilde conceives it generates a "disobedience [which] in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion."²⁰ Under certain conditions there comes to be a close relationship between crime and individualism, the one generating the other.²¹ Already, then, Wilde's notion of individualism is inseparable from transgressive desire and a transgressive aesthetic. Hence, of course, his attack on public opinion, mediocrity, and conventional morality, all of which forbid both the desire and the aesthetic.²²

The public which Wilde scorns is that which seeks to police culture; which is against cultural difference; which reacts to the aesthetically unconventional by charging it with being either grossly unintelligible or grossly immoral. Far from reflecting or prescribing for the true nature or essence of man, individualism will generate the cultural difference and diversity which conventional morality, orthodox opinion, and essentialist ideology disavow. Wilde affirms the principle of differentiation to which all life grows and insists that selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, but asking others to live as one wishes to live, trying to create "an absolute uniformity of type." And unselfishness not only recognizes cultural diversity and difference but enjoys them. Individualism as an affirmation of cultural as well as personal difference is therefore fundamentally opposed to that "immoral ideal of uniformity of type and conformity to rule which is so prevalent everywhere, and is perhaps most obnoxious in England."²³

Uniformity of type and conformity to rule: Wilde despises these imperatives not only in individuals but as attributes of class and ruling ideologies. Wilde's Irish identity is a crucial factor in his oppositional stances, and it is instructive to consider in this connection a piece written two years earlier, in 1889, where he addresses England's exploitation and repression of Ireland. "Mr Froude's Blue Book" is a review of J.A.

Froude's novel, *The Two Chiefs of Dunboy*. In the eighteenth century, says Wilde, England tried to rule Ireland "with an insolence that was intensified by race-hatred and religious prejudice"; in the nineteenth, with "a stupidity . . . aggravated by good intentions." Froude's picture of Ireland belongs to the earlier period, and yet to read Wilde's review now makes one wonder what if anything has changed in Tory "thinking" except that possibly now the one vision holds for both Ireland and the mainland:

Resolute government, that shallow shibboleth of those who do not understand how complex a thing the art of government is, is [Froude's] posthumous panacea for past evils. His hero, Colonel Goring, has the words Law and Order ever on his lips, meaning by the one the enforcement of unjust legislation, and implying by the other the suppression of every fine natural aspiration. That the government should enforce iniquity, and the governed submit to it, seems to be to Mr Froude, as it certainly is to many others, the true ideal of political science. . . . Colonel Goring . . . Mr Froude's cure for Ireland . . . is a "Police at any price" man.²⁴

Individualism joins with socialism to abolish other kinds of conformity, including, says Wilde, family life and marriage, each being unacceptable because rooted in and perpetuating the ideology of property.²⁵ Individualism is both desire for a radical personal freedom and a desire for society itself to be radically different, the first being inseparable from the second. So Wilde's concept of the individual is crucially different from that sense of the concept which signifies the private, experientially self-sufficient, autonomous, bourgeois subject; indeed, for Wilde, "Personal experience is a most vicious and limited circle" and "to know anything about oneself one must know all about others."²⁶ Typically, within idealist culture, the experience of an essential subjectivity is inseparable from knowledge of that notorious transhistorical category, human nature. This is Wilde on human nature: "the only thing that one really knows about human nature is that it changes. Change is the one quality we can predicate of it."²⁷ To those who then say that socialism is incompatible with human nature and therefore impractical, Wilde replies by rejecting practicality itself as presupposing and endorsing both the existing social conditions and the concept of human nature as fixed, each of which suppositions socialism would contest: "it is exactly the existing conditions that one objects to . . . [they] will be done away with, and human nature will change."²⁸ Elsewhere Wilde accepts that there is *something* like human nature, but, far from being the source of our most profound being, it is actually ordinary and boring, the least interesting thing about us. It is where we differ from each other that is of definitive value.²⁹

Art versus Life

The key concepts in Wilde's aesthetic are protean and shifting, not least because they are paradoxically and facetiously deployed. When, for example, he speaks of life—"poor, probable, uninteresting human life"³⁰—or reality as that to which art is opposed, he means different things at different times. One of the most interesting and significant referents of concepts like life and reality, as Wilde uses them, is the prevailing social order. Even nature, conceived as the opposite of culture and art, retains a social dimension,³¹ especially when it signifies ideological mystification of the social. That is why Wilde calls being natural a "pose," and an objectionable one at that, precisely because it seeks to mystify the social as natural.³²

Nature and reality signify a prevailing order which art ignores and which the critic negates, subverts, and transgresses. Thus, for example, the person of culture is concerned to give "an accurate description of what has never occurred," while the critic sees "the object as in itself it really is not"³³ (Wilde is here inverting the proposition

which opens Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. Not surprisingly, the prevailing social order; basis of Wilde's aesthetic is a *disturbing and dis* disturb is monotony conscious and critical art, like individualism abnormal in life starts in normal relations to liar," is both an object contradicts not just to meet the liar, kiss of the great secret of a matter of style." subordinated to its both appropriated at the loss of truth, mu

Further, life is that art offers it. But In one sense Wilde's Creeds are believed, Form is everything. create the yearning virtually synonymous the priority of the so desire. So for Wilde, it does not exist as a p which it also transgr

Transgression

Returning now to Wilde's antiessentialism, a concept within the modernist ambivalence toward art to undermine his serious Gide's subsequent de literature. The submission desire and the way the rageous defense of his (*Journal*, October 19, quality but also insists heterosexuality prevail is associated with great indicative of decadence to observe that the fun as Gide's reasons for the equally controversial contained; for that time

which opens Arnold's famous essay, "The function of criticism at the present time"). Not surprisingly, then, criticism and art are aligned with individualism against a prevailing social order; a passage which indicates this is also important in indicating the basis of Wilde's aesthetic of transgressive desire: "Art is Individualism and Individualism is a *disturbing and disintegrating force*. There lies its immense value. For what it seeks to disturb is monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit."³⁴ Art is also self-conscious and critical; in fact, "self-consciousness and the critical spirit are one."³⁵ And art, like individualism, is oriented toward the realm of transgressive desire: "What is abnormal in Life stands in normal relations to Art. It is the only thing in Life that stands in normal relations to Art."³⁶ One who inhabits that realm, "the cultured and fascinating liar," is both an object and source of desire.³⁷ The liar is important because he or she contradicts not just conventional morality, but its sustaining origin, "truth." So art runs to meet the liar, kissing his "false beautiful lips, knowing that he alone is in possession of the great secret of all her manifestations, the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style." Truth, the epistemological legitimation of the real, is rhetorically subordinated to its antitheses—appearance, style, the lie—and thereby simultaneously both appropriated and devalued. Reality, also necessarily devalued and demystified by the loss of truth, must imitate art, while life must meekly follow the liar.³⁸

Further, life is at best an energy which can only find expression through the forms that art offers it. But form is another slippery and protean category in Wilde's aesthetic. In one sense Wilde is a proto-structuralist: "Form is the beginning of things. . . . The Creeds are believed, not because they are rational, but because they are repeated. . . . Form is everything. . . . Do you wish to love? Use Love's Litany, and the words will create the yearning from which the world fancies that they spring."³⁹ Here form is virtually synonymous with culture. Moreover, it is a passage in which Wilde recognizes the priority of the social and the cultural in determining meaning, even in determining desire. So for Wilde, although desire is deeply at odds with society in its existing forms, it does not exist as a presocial authenticity; it is within and in-formed by the very culture which it also transgresses.

Transgression and the Sense of Self

Returning now to Gide, we are in a position to contrast his essentialism with Wilde's antiessentialism, a contrast which epitomizes one of the most important differences within the modern history of transgression. In a way that perhaps corresponds to his ambivalence toward Wilde, Gide had both submitted to and resisted the latter's attempts to undermine his sense of self. Both the submission and the resistance are crucial for Gide's subsequent development as a writer and, through Gide's influence, for modern literature. The submission is apparent enough in the confirmation of his homosexual desire and the way this alters his life and work. In 1924 he published *Corydon*, a courageous defense of homosexuality which he later declared to be his most important book (*Journal*, October 19, 1942). In *Corydon* he did not just demand tolerance for homosexuality but also insisted that it was not contrary to nature but intrinsically natural; that heterosexuality prevails merely because of convention; that historically homosexuality is associated with great artistic and intellectual achievement, while heterosexuality is indicative of decadence. About these provocative and suspect claims I have only the space to observe that the fury they generated in the majority of commentators is as significant as Gide's reasons for making them in the first place. Two years later Gide published the equally controversial commercial edition of *If It Die*, which, as already indicated, contained, for that time, astonishingly explicit accounts of his homosexuality, and for

which, predictably, Gide was savagely castigated. Much later still, Gide was to write to Ramon Fernandez, confirming that "sexual non-conformity is the first key to my works"; the experience of his own deviant desire leads him first to attack sexual conformity and then "all other sphinxes of conformity," suspecting them to be "the brothers and cousins of the first."⁴⁰

But Gide—having with Wilde both allowed and encouraged the subversion of an identity which had hitherto successfully, albeit precariously, repressed desire—does not then substitute for it the decentered subjectivity which animates Wilde's aesthetic; on the contrary, he reconstitutes himself as an essentially new self. Michel in *The Immoralist* (1902) corresponds in some measure to Gide in *Algiers* (while, as earlier remarked, another character in that novel, Ménélaque, is probably based on Wilde). For Michel, as for Gide, transgression does not lead to a relinquishing of self but to a totally new sense of self. Michel throws off the culture and learning which up to that point had been his whole life in order to find himself: that "authentic creature that had lain hidden beneath . . . whom the Gospel had repudiated, whom everything about me—books, masters, parents, and I myself had begun by attempting to suppress. . . . Thenceforward I despised the secondary creature, the creature who was due to teaching, whom education had painted on the surface." He composes a new series of lectures in which he shows "culture, born of life, as the destroyer of life." The true value of life is bound up with individual uniqueness: "the part in each of us that we feel is different from other people is the part that is rare, the part that makes our special value."⁴¹

Whereas for Wilde transgressive desire leads to a relinquishing of the essential self, for Gide it leads to a discovery of the authentic self. As he writes in *If It Die*, it was at that time in *Algiers* that "I was beginning to discover myself—and in myself the tables of a new law."⁴² And he writes to his mother on February 2, 1895: "I'm unable to write a line or a sentence so long as I'm not in *complete possession* (that is, WITH FULL KNOWLEDGE) of myself. I should like very submissively to follow nature—the unconscious, which is within myself and must be *true*."⁴³ Here again there is the indirect yet passionate insistence on the naturalness, the authenticity of his deviant desire. With that willful integrity—itself a kind of perversity?—rooted in Protestantism, Gide not only appropriates dominant concepts (the normal, the natural) to legitimate his own deviation but goes so far as to claim a sanction for deviation in the teachings of Christ.⁴⁴ (In his journal for 1893 [detached pages] he wrote: "Christ's saying is just as true in art: 'Whoever will save his life [his personality] shall lose it.' " He later declared, after reading Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, that it was to this that Protestantism led, "to the greatest liberation.")⁴⁵ Delay contends, plausibly, that some of the great Gidean themes, especially those entailing transgression, can be found in the rebellious letters that he wrote to his mother in March 1895, letters inspired by his self-affirmation as a homosexual.⁴⁶

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance, in the recent history of Western culture, of transgression in the name of an essential self which is the origin and arbiter of the true, the real, and the moral; that is, the three main domains of knowledge in Western culture: the epistemological, the ontological, and the ethical. Its importance within the domain of sexuality and within discourses which intersect with sexuality is becoming increasingly apparent, but it has been central also in liberation movements which have not primarily been identified with either of these. This, finally, is Gide in 1921:

The borrowed truths are the ones to which one clings most tenaciously, and all the more so since they remain foreign to our intimate self. It takes much more precaution

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Paradox and

The contrast between subjectivity and desire transgression. Deviant than seeking to escap within and relentlessly rather than Gide's esc aesthetic. In Gide, tra natural, the sincere, a *insincerity*, *inauthentic* tered identity and des aesthetic, as can be see Young (1894):

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To be premature i
It is only the supe
To love oneself is

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to deliver one's own message, much more boldness and prudence, than to sign up with and add one's voice to an already existing party. . . . I believed that it is above all to oneself that it is important to remain faithful.⁴⁷

Paradox and Perversity

The contrast between Gide and Wilde is striking: not only are Wilde's conceptions of subjectivity and desire antiessentialist but so too—and consequently—is his advocacy of transgression. Deviant desire reacts against, disrupts, and displaces from within; rather than seeking to escape the repressive ordering of sexuality, Wilde reinscribes himself within and relentlessly inverts the binaries upon which that ordering depends. Inversion, rather than Gide's escape into a pre- or trans-social reality, defines Wilde's transgressive aesthetic. In Gide, transgression is in the name of a desire and identity rooted in the natural, the sincere, and the authentic; Wilde's transgressive aesthetic is the reverse: *insincerity*, *inauthenticity*, and *unnaturalness* become the liberating attributes of decentered identity and desire, and inversion becomes central to Wilde's expression of this aesthetic, as can be seen from a selection of his *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young* (1894):

If one tells the truth, one is sure, sooner or later, to be found out.
Only the shallow know themselves.
To be premature is to be perfect.
It is only the superficial qualities that last. Man's deeper nature is soon found out.
To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance.⁴⁸

In Wilde's writings a noncentered or dispersed desire is both the impetus for a subversive inversion *and* what is released by it. Perhaps the most general inversion operating in his work reverses that most dominating of binaries, nature/culture; more specifically, the attributes on the left are substituted for those on the right:

X for Y	
surface	depth
lying	truth
change	stasis
difference	essence
persona/role	essential self
abnormal	normal
insincerity	sincerity
style/artifice	authenticity
facetious	serious
narcissism	maturity

For Michel in *The Immoralist* and to an extent for Gide himself, desire may be proscribed, but this does not affect its authenticity; if anything, it confirms it. In a sense, then, deviant desire is legitimated in terms of culture's opposite, nature, or, in a different but related move, in terms of something which is precultural or *always more than* cultural. Gide shares with the dominant culture an investment in the Y column above; he appropriates its categories *from* the dominant *for* the subordinate. In contrast, for Wilde transgressive desire is both rooted in culture and the impetus for affirming different/alternative kinds of culture. So what in Gide's conception of transgression might seem a limitation or even a confusion—namely, that the desire which culture outlaws is itself thoroughly cultural—in fact facilitates one of the most disturbing of all forms of transgression: the outlaw turns up as inlaw; more specifically, that which society forbids

Wilde reinstates through and within some of its most cherished and central cultural categories—art, the aesthetic, art criticism, individualism. At the same time as he appropriates those categories he also transvalues them through inversion, thus making them now signify those binary exclusions (the X column) by which the dominant culture knows itself (thus abnormality is not just the opposite, but *the necessarily always present* antithesis of normality). It is an uncompromising inversion, this being the (perversely) appropriate strategy for a transgressive desire which is of its “nature,” according to this culture, an inversion.

But inversion has a specific as well as a general target: as can be seen from the *Phrases and Philosophies* just quoted, Wilde seeks to subvert those dominant categories which signify *subjective depth*. Such categories (the Y column) are precisely those which ideologically identify (interpellate?) the mature adult individual, which confer or ideologically coerce identity. And they too operate in terms of binary contrast: the individual knows what he—I choose the masculine pronoun deliberately⁴⁹—is in contrast to what he definitely is not or should not be. In Wilde’s inversions, the excluded inferior term returns as the *now superior* term of a related series of binaries. Some further examples of Wilde’s subversion of subjective depth are:

A little sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal is absolutely fatal.⁵⁰

All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling.⁵¹

In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the *vital* thing.⁵²

Only shallow people . . . do not judge by appearances.⁵³

Insincerity . . . is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities.

Such . . . was Dorian Gray’s opinion. He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceived the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex, multiform creature.⁵⁴

At work here is a transgressive desire which makes its opposition felt as a disruptive reaction upon, and inversion of, the categories of subjective depth which hold in place the dominant order which proscribes that desire.

The Decentered Subject and the Question of the Postmodern

Wilde’s transgressive aesthetic relates to at least three aspects of contemporary theoretical debates: first, the dispute about whether the inversion of binary opposites subverts or, on the contrary, reinforces the order which those binaries uphold; second, the political importance—or irrelevance—of decentering the subject; third, postmodernism and one of its more controversial criteria: the so-called disappearance of the depth model, especially the model of a deep human subjectivity. Since the three issues closely relate to each other, I shall take them together.

It might be said that Wildean inversion disturbed nothing; by merely reversing the terms of the binary, inversion remains within its limiting framework: the world turned upside down can only be righted, not changed. Moreover, the argument might continue, Wilde’s paradoxes are superficial in the pejorative sense of being inconsequential, of making no difference. But we should remember that in the first of the three trials involving Wilde in 1895 he was cross-examined on his *Phrases and Philosophies*, the implication of opposing counsel being that they, along with *Dorian Gray*, were “calculated to subvert morality and encourage unnatural vice.”⁵⁵ There is a sense in which evidence cannot get more material than this, and it remains so whatever our retrospective judgment about the crassness of the thinking behind such a view.

One of the most perceived connection. It is not only the time to define a specific now being indissociable being rather than, as regarded homosexual of an individual’s being insidious and subversive during and after his

After he had been imprisonment with him to a vicious and revealing: “wholesome, manly, were the natural outcome Wilde as the leader expressed here was, a symptomatic of a more important sense in which discursive and sexual perversity became to discursive and sexual at the same time, at Foucault calls a reversal in relation to Wilde—crossing over and being persuasively for binary displacement of the binary historical instances of already constitutes a dominant and political norms with

We begin to see he rarely advocated in those “wholesome, more conservative ideas of Victorian these that Wilde attacked anchor points for that criteria appear in the he did with Gide more tivity which keep desire which keep morality intact and indeed dismiss because life” and Wilde’s inventions, those ideals, to form the moral and to remain culturally central

I am thinking he phase of English studies alleged “national culture but more specifically a

One of the many reasons why people thought as they did was to do with the perceived connections between Wilde's aesthetic transgression and his sexual transgression. It is not only that at this time the word "inversion" was being used for the first time to define a specific kind of deviant sexuality and deviant person (the two things now being indissociable), but also that, in producing the homosexual as a species of being rather than, as before, seeing sodomy as an aberration of behavior,⁵⁶ society now regarded homosexuality as rooted in a person's identity; this sin might pervade all aspects of an individual's being, and its expression might become correspondingly the more insidious and subversive. Hence in part the animosity and hysteria directed at Wilde during and after his trial.

After he had been found guilty of homosexual offenses and sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labor, the editorial of the London *Evening News* subjected him to a vicious and revealing homophobic attack. He had, it claimed, tried to subvert the "wholesome, manly, simple ideals of English life"; moreover, his "abominable vices . . . were the natural outcome of his diseased intellectual condition." The editorial also saw Wilde as the leader of a likeminded but younger subculture in London.⁵⁷ The view expressed here was, and indeed remains, for some, a commonplace: sexual deviation is symptomatic of a much wider cultural deterioration and/or subversion. There is an important sense in which Wilde confirmed and exploited this connection between discursive and sexual perversion: "What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion."⁵⁸ This feared crossover between discursive and sexual perversion has sanctioned terrible brutalities against homosexuals; at the same time, at least in this period, it was also becoming the medium for what Foucault calls a reverse or counter-discourse,⁵⁹ giving rise to what is being explored here in relation to Wilde—what might be called the politics of inversion/perversion (again crossing over and between the different senses of these words). Derrida has argued persuasively for binary inversion as a politically indispensable stage toward the eventual displacement of the binary itself.⁶⁰ The case of Wilde indicates, I think, that in actual historical instances of inversion—that is, inversion as a strategy of cultural struggle—it already constitutes a displacement, if not of the binary itself, then certainly of the moral and political norms which cluster dependently around its dominant pole.

We begin to see, then, why Wilde was hated with such an intensity, even though he rarely advocated in his published writings any explicitly immoral practice. What held those "wholesome, manly, simple ideals of English life" in place were traditional and conservative ideas of what constituted human nature and human subjectivity, and it was *these* that Wilde attacked: not so much conventional morality itself as the ideological anchor points for that morality; namely, notions of identity as subjective depth whose criteria appear in the Y column above. And so it might be said that here, generally, as he did with Gide more specifically, Wilde subverts the dominant categories of subjectivity which keep desire in subjection and subverts the essentialist categories of identity which keep morality in place. Even though there may now be a temptation to patronize and indeed dismiss both the Victorians' "wholesome, manly, simple ideals of English life" and Wilde's inversion of them, the fact remains that, in successively reconstituted forms, those ideals, *together with* the subject positions which instantiate them, come to form the moral and ethical base of English studies in our own century and, indeed, remain culturally central today.

I am thinking here not just of the organicist ideology so characteristic of an earlier phase of English studies, one that led, for example, to the celebration of Shakespeare's alleged "national culture, rooted in the soil and appealing to a multi-class audience," but more specifically and importantly of what Chris Baldick in his excellent study goes

on to call its "subjective correlative"; namely, the "*maintenance of the doctrine of psychic wholeness in and through literature as an analogue for a projected harmony and order in society.*"⁶¹ For I.A. Richards, all human problems (continues Baldick) become problems of mental health, with art as the cure, and literary criticism becomes "a question of attaining the right state of mind to judge other minds, according to their degree of immaturity, inhibition, or perversion." As Richards himself puts it, sincerity "is the quality we most insistently require in poetry. It is also the quality we most need as critics."⁶² As a conception of both art and criticism, this is the reverse of Wilde's. Similarly with the Leavises, whose imperative concept was the related one of "maturity," one unhappy consequence of which was their promotion of the "fecund" D.H. Lawrence against the perverse W.H. Auden. As Baldick goes on to observe, "this line of critics is not only judicial in tone but positively inquisitorial, indulging in a kind of perversion-hunting" which is itself rooted in "a simple model of [pre- or anti-Freudian] normality and mental consistency."⁶³

This tradition has, of course, been subjected to devastating critiques in recent years; in particular, its notions of subjective integration and psychic wholeness have been attacked by virtually all the major movements within contemporary critical theory, including Marxism, structuralism, poststructuralism, and psychoanalysis. Yet Wilde's subversion of these notions is still excluded from consideration, even though we now think we have passed beyond that heady and in many ways justified moment when it seemed that only Continental theory had the necessary force to displace the complacencies of our own tradition. The irony, of course, is that while looking to the Continent we failed to notice that Wilde has been and remains a very significant figure there. (And not only there: while the *Spectator* [February 1891] thought *The Soul of Man under Socialism* was a joke in bad taste, the essay soon became extremely successful in Russia, appearing in many successive editions across the next twenty years.) Perhaps, then, there exists or has existed a kind of "muscular theory," which shares with the critical movements it has displaced a significant blindness with regard to Wilde and what he represented. This almost certainly has something to do with the persistence of an earlier attempt to rid English studies of a perceived "feminized" identity.⁶⁴

Recent critics of postmodernism, including Fredric Jameson, Ihab Hassan, Dan Latimer, and Terry Eagleton,⁶⁵ have written intriguingly on one of its defining criteria: the disappearance of the depth model. In a recent essay, Eagleton offers an important and provocative critique of postmodernism: "confidently post-metaphysical [it] has outlived all that fantasy of interiority, that pathological itch to scratch surfaces for concealed depths." With the postmodern there is no longer any subject to be alienated and nothing to be alienated from, "authenticity having been less rejected than merely forgotten." The subject of postmodernist culture is "a dispersed, decentered network of libidinal attachments, emptied of ethical substance and psychical interiority, the ephemeral function of this or that act of consumption, media experience, sexual relationship, trend, or fashion." Modernism, by contrast, is (or was) still preoccupied with the experience of alienation, with metaphysical depth and/or the psychic fragmentation and social wretchedness consequent upon the realization that there is no metaphysical depth or (this being its spiritual instantiation) authentic unified subject. As such, modernism is "embarrassingly enmortgaged to the very bourgeois humanism it otherwise seeks to subvert"; it is "a deviation still enthralled to a norm, parasitic on what it sets out to deconstruct." But, concludes Eagleton, the subject of late capitalism is actually neither the "self-regulating synthetic agent posited by classical humanist ideology, nor merely a decentered network of desire [as posited by postmodernism], but a contradictory amalgam of the two." If in one respect the decentered, dispersed subject of postmodernism

is suspiciously conventional, poststructuralist theory is integral to contemporary thought to decenter and

Eagleton's argument even though the unconscious bourgeois ideology, that it was never even to the extent that Gi affirmation of his or rethink their own assumptions philosophy. In Gide which was and remained bourgeois and other of sexual liberation in contradictory subject essentialism with regard radical antiessentialist oppression.

This is important to make our theories to be more historical complexities of social very centrality of an appropriation by a subordination; roughly speaking here. The kind of challenge has been more or less not, of course, guarantee ordinate cultures and much as to sabotage

Whether the deconstructionism is subversive or no doubt that Wilde's culture in the 1890s to rethink the antecedents in the current debate while remaining implicit his transgressive aesthetic culture of the surface hostile to but intently integration. Yet Wilde modern in that it inc political commitment in that it is accompanied reminiscent of Barthelme's glee . . . the fun

An antiessentialist effect, radical or otherwise such a guarantee. But

is suspiciously convenient to our own phase of late capitalism, it follows that those poststructuralist theorists who stake all on the assumption that the unified subject is still integral to contemporary bourgeois ideology, and that it is always a politically radical act to decenter and deconstruct that subject, need to think again.⁶⁶

Eagleton's argument can be endorsed with yet further important distinctions. First, even though the unified subject was indeed an integral part of an earlier phase of bourgeois ideology, the instance of Gide and the tradition he represents must indicate that it was never even then exclusively in the service of dominant ideologies. Indeed, to the extent that Gide's essentialist legitimation of homosexual desire was primarily an affirmation of his own nature as pederast or paedophile, some critics might usefully rethink their own assumption that essentialism is fundamentally and always a conservative philosophy. In Gide we find essentialism in the service of a radical sexual nonconformity which was and remains incompatible with conventional and dominant sexual ideologies, bourgeois and otherwise. Even a glance at the complex and often contradictory histories of sexual liberation movements in our own time shows that they have, as does Eagleton's contradictory subject of late capitalism, sometimes and necessarily embraced a radical essentialism with regard to their own identity, while simultaneously offering an equally radical antiessentialist critique of the essentializing sexual ideologies responsible for their oppression.

This is important: the implication of Eagleton's argument is not just that we need to make our theories of subjectivity a little more sophisticated, but rather that we need to be more historical in our practice of theory. Only then can we see the dialectical complexities of social process and social struggle. We may see, for example, how the very centrality of an essentialist concept to the dominant ideology has made its appropriation by a subordinate culture seem indispensable in that culture's struggle for legitimacy; roughly speaking, this corresponds to Gide's position as I am representing it here. The kind of challenge represented by Gide—liberation in the name of authenticity—has been more or less central to many progressive cultural struggles since, though it has not, of course, guaranteed their success.⁶⁷ Conversely, we may also see how other subordinate cultures and voices seek not to appropriate dominant concepts and values so much as to sabotage and displace them. This is something we can observe in Wilde.

Whether the decentered subject of contemporary poststructuralism and postmodernism is subversive of, alternative to, or actually produced by late capitalism, there is no doubt that Wilde's exploration of decentered desire and identity scandalized bourgeois culture in the 1890s and in a sense cost him his life. The case of Wilde might lead us to rethink the antecedents of postmodernism and, indeed, of modernism as they figure in the current debate which Eagleton addresses. Wilde prefigures elements of each, while remaining importantly different from—and not just obviously prior to—both. If his transgressive aesthetic anticipates postmodernism to the extent that it suggests a culture of the surface and of difference, it also anticipates modernism in being not just hostile to but intently concerned with its opposite, the culture of depth and exclusive integration. Yet Wilde's transgressive aesthetic differs from some versions of the postmodern in that it includes an acute political awareness and often an uncompromising political commitment; and his critique of the depth model differs from the modernist in that it is accompanied not by *Angst* but by something utterly different, something reminiscent of Barthes's *jouissance*, or what Borges has perceptively called Wilde's "negligent glee . . . the fundamental spirit of his work [being] joy."⁶⁸

An antiessentialist theory of subjectivity can in no way guarantee, *a priori*, any effect, radical or otherwise; nor, more generally, can any transgressive practice carry such a guarantee. But there is much to be learned retrospectively both from the effects

of antiessentialism and the practice of transgression, especially in the light of the currently felt need to develop new strategies and conceptions of resistance. Orthodox accounts of resistance have proved wanting, not least essentialist ideas of resistance in the name of the authentic self, and—in some ways the opposite—resistance in terms of and on behalf of mass movements working from outside and against the dominant powers. And so we have become acutely aware of the unavoidability of working from within the institutions that exist, adopting different strategies depending on where and who we are, or, in the case of the same individual, which subject positions he or she is occupying. But is this the new radicalism, or incorporation by another name?

It is in just these respects, and in relation to such pressing questions, that, far from finding them irrelevant—the one a *passé* wit and the other a *passé* moralist/essentialist—I remain intrigued with Wilde and Gide. In different ways their work explores what we are now beginning to attend to again: the complexities, the potential, and the dangers of what it is to transgress, invert, and displace *from within*,⁶⁹ the paradox of a marginality which is always interior to, or at least intimate with, the center.

I began with their encounter in Algiers in 1895. Gide, dispirited in the sense of being depressed and unsure of himself, sees the names of Wilde and Douglas and erases his own name as a result, preempting perhaps the threat to his own identity, social and psychic, posed by Wilde's determination to demystify the normative ideologies regulating subjectivity, desire, and the aesthetic. Nevertheless the meeting does occur, and Gide does indeed suffer an erasure of self, a decentering which is also the precondition for admitting transgressive desire, a depersonalization which is therefore also a liberation. Yet, for Gide, transgression is embraced with that same stubborn integrity which was to become the basis of his transgressive aesthetic, an aesthetic obviously indebted, yet also formed in reaction to, Wilde's own. Thus liberation from the self into desire is also to realize a new and deeper self, belief in which supports an oppositional stand not just on the question of deviant sexual desire, but on a whole range of other issues as well, cultural and political. Integrity here becomes an ethical sense inextricably bound up with and also binding up the (integral) unified self.⁷⁰ So the very categories of identity which, through transgression, Wilde subjects to inversion and displacement are reconstituted by Gide for a different transgressive aesthetic, or, as it might now more suitably be called in contradistinction to Wilde, a transgressive ethic: one which becomes central to the unorthodoxy which characterizes his life's work. In 1952, the year after his death, his entire works were entered in the Roman Catholic Index of Forbidden Books; six years earlier he had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Wilde's fate was very different. Within weeks of returning from Algiers to London he was embroiled in the litigation against Queensberry which was to lead to his own imprisonment. He died in Paris in 1900, three years after his release. So, whereas Gide lived for fifty-seven years after that 1895 encounter, Wilde survived for only six. And yet it was also Wilde's fate to become a legend. Like many legendary figures, he needs to be rescued from most of his admirers and radically rethought by some, at least, of his critics.

NOTES

Thanks to Joseph Bristow for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

1. André Gide, *If It Die* (1920; private edition 1926), trans. Dorothy Bussy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 271.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 271, 273.

3. Jean Delay, *The Youth of André Gide*, abridged and trans. J. Guicharnaud (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1956–57), p. 290.

4. Richard Ellman (W.H. Allen, 1970), p. 1891. My exploration concentrating on what Wilde merely re-present certain "impartial" ver criticism and literary t does not as yet figure ago is still true today: h the same terms, and w Mann compared Wilde 1987 we could add sev result of Ellmann's majc that there is of course n about other works not which intersect with ar

5. J. Guicharnaud here from the abridged versity of Chicago Pres

6. Delay, *Youth*, p

7. André Gide, *Jo*

8. Delay, *Youth*, p

9. Richard Ellman Prentice-Hall, 1969), p.

10. Quoted from

11. André Gide, (1949).

12. Gide, *If It Die*

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 236.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 264.

15. Delay, *Youth*,

16. Gide, *If It Die*

17. Oscar Wilde, *Artist as Critic*, pp. 256 (

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 259,

19. Matthew Arnc

20. Wilde, *The So*

21. Wilde reiterat Ellmann, ed., *The Artist* Ellmann's formulation o individual, the artist mus

22. See also Wilde pp. 271–74.

23. Wilde, *The So*

24. Oscar Wilde, ' pp. 136–37.

25. Wilde, *The So*

26. Oscar Wilde, ' 310, and "The Critic as

27. Wilde, *The So*

28. *Ibid.*, p. 284.

29. Wilde, "The I

30. *Ibid.*, p. 305.

31. For example, V

4. Richard Ellmann, ed., *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde* (1968; London: W.H. Allen, 1970), p. xviii. Those aspects of Wilde's transgressive aesthetic which concern me derive mainly from work published across a relatively short period of time, the years 1889 to 1891. My exploration of this aesthetic rests on a reading of Wilde which is avowedly partial, concentrating on what has hitherto been excluded. Too often supposedly impartial readings of Wilde merely re-present a certain consensus—hence presumably his continued exclusion from certain "impartial" versions of "English" studies. More important is his exclusion from cultural criticism and literary theory: Wilde has considerable significance for contemporary debates yet does not as yet figure within them. What Richard Ellmann said of Wilde nearly twenty years ago is still true today: he "laid the basis for many critical positions which are still debated in much the same terms, and which we like to attribute to more ponderous names" (ibid., p. x). Thomas Mann compared Wilde with Nietzsche; Ellmann in 1968 adds the name of Roland Barthes. In 1987 we could add several more, especially in relation to the renewed interest in Wilde as the result of Ellmann's major biography. And it is in relation to that interest that I want to acknowledge that there is of course more—much more—to be said: about those of Wilde's works discussed here; about other works not discussed; about Wilde himself; and especially about other ideas of his which intersect with and contradict the transgressive aesthetic explored here.

5. J. Guicharnaud, trans., *Correspondence 1890–1942, André Gide—Paul Valéry* (1955), cited here from the abridged version, *Self-Portraits: The Gide/Valéry Letters* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 90, 92.

6. Delay, *Youth*, p. 291.

7. André Gide, *Journals*, 4 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947–51).

8. Delay, *Youth*, pp. 289, 290, 291, 295.

9. Richard Ellmann, ed., *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 4.

10. Quoted from Delay, *Youth*, p. 391 (my italics).

11. André Gide, *Oscar Wilde*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949).

12. Gide, *If It Die*, pp. 280, 281.

13. Ibid., pp. 236–37, 247–49, 251, 252, 255, 258–59.

14. Ibid., p. 264.

15. Delay, *Youth*, p. 394.

16. Gide, *If It Die*, pp. 282, 284–85.

17. Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891), reprinted in Ellmann, ed., *The Artist as Critic*, pp. 256 (his italics), 286–88, 288.

18. Ibid., pp. 259, 268, 260, 267.

19. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869; London: Smith Elder, 1891), p. 8.

20. Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, pp. 261, 258.

21. Wilde reiterates this elsewhere: see Oscar Wilde, "Pen, Pencil and Poison" (1889), in Ellmann, ed., *The Artist as Critic*, p. 338; "The Critic as Artist" (1890), in ibid., p. 360. Cf. Ellmann's formulation of Wilde's position: "since the established social structure confines the individual, the artist must of necessity ally himself with the criminal classes" (ibid., p. 3).

22. See also Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," p. 341; Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, pp. 271–74.

23. Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, pp. 273, 284–85, 286.

24. Oscar Wilde, "Mr Froude's Blue Book" (1889), in Ellmann, ed., *The Artist as Critic*, pp. 136–37.

25. Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, p. 265.

26. Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying" (1889), in Ellmann, ed., *The Artist as Critic*, p. 310, and "The Critic as Artist," p. 382.

27. Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, p. 284.

28. Ibid., p. 284.

29. Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," p. 297.

30. Ibid., p. 305.

31. For example, Wilde, "The Critic As Artist," pp. 394, 399.

32. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890–91; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949), p. 10.
33. Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," pp. 343, 368.
34. Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, p. 272 (my italics).
35. Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," p. 356.
36. Oscar Wilde, "A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Overeducated," *The Complete Works*, with introduction by Vyvyan Holland (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1948), p. 1203.
37. Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," pp. 292, 305.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 305.
39. Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," p. 399.
40. Delay, *Youth*, p. 438.
41. André Gide, *The Immoralist* (1902; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), pp. 51, 90, 100.
42. Gide, *If It Die*, p. 298.
43. Delay, *Youth*, p. 396.
44. Gide, *If It Die*, p. 299.
45. Delay, *Youth*, p. 467.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 407.
47. Gide, *Journals*, p. 338. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 371–76.
48. Oscar Wilde, *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young* (1894), in Ellmann, ed., *The Artist as Critic*, pp. 433–34.
49. The attacks on Wilde after his trial frequently reveal that it is masculinity which felt most under threat from him and which demanded revenge.
50. Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," p. 393.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 398.
52. Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1894–99), ed. R. Jackson (London: Ernest Benn, 1980), p. 83 (my italics).
53. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 29.
54. *Ibid.*, pp. 158–59.
55. H.M. Hyde, *Oscar Wilde: A Biography* (1976; London: Methuen, 1982), p. 271.
56. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction* (1978; New York: Vintage Books, 1980), p. 43.
57. H.M. Hyde, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (London: William Hodge, 1948), p. 12.
58. Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (1897), in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962); cited from the abridged edition, *Selected Letters* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 194. In certain important respects, *De Profundis* is a conscious renunciation by Wilde of his transgressive aesthetic. This is a work which registers many things, not least Wilde's courage and his despair during imprisonment. It also shows how he endured the intolerable by investing suffering with meaning, and this within a confessional narrative whose aim is a deepened self-awareness: "I could not bear [my sufferings] to be without meaning. Now I find hidden somewhere away in my nature something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is meaningless . . . that something . . . is Humility." Such knowledge and such humility, for Wilde (and still, for us now), is bought at the cost of fundamentally—deeply—renouncing difference and transgression and the challenge they present. In effect, Wilde repositions himself as the authentic, sincere subject which before he had subverted: "The supreme vice is shallowness," he says in his work, and he says it more than once. And later: "The moment of repentance is the moment of initiation" (*ibid.*, pp. 195, 154, 215). This may be seen as that suffering into truth, that redemptive knowledge which points beyond the social to the transcendent realization of self, so cherished within idealist culture; those who see *De Profundis* as Wilde's most mature work often interpret it thus. I see it differently—as tragic, certainly, but tragic in the materialist sense of the word: a kind of defeat of the marginal and the oppositional which only ideological domination can effect; a renunciation which is experienced as voluntary and self-confirming but which is in truth a self-defeat and a self-denial massively coerced through the imposition, by the dominant, of incarceration and suffering and their "natural" medium, confession. What Wilde says here of the law is true also of the dominant ideologies he transgressed: "I . . . found myself constrained to appeal to the very things against which I had always protested" (*ibid.*, p. 221).
59. Foucault, *Hi*
60. Jacques Deri
61. C. Baldick, 7
- pp. 213–18 (my italics)
62. I.A. Richard
63. *Ibid.*, p. 217
64. B. Doyle, "Reading English (London: Blackwell, 1983); Bald
- Wilde, *The Picture of I*
65. Fredric Jame
- Aesthetic: Essays on Pos*
- "Postmodernism, or th
- Hassan, "Pluralism in
- Latimer, "Jameson and
- "Capitalism, Modernis
- 131–47.
66. Eagleton, "C
67. M. Berman,
- Society* (London: Allen
68. Ellmann, ed.
69. See Jacques
- and London: The John
- 41–42; R. Terdiman, *I*
- teenth-Century France* (I
- the most informative v
- in mind especially rece
- Turned Upside-Down:
- ed., *The Reversible Worl*
- University Press, 1978)
- English Revolution* (Har
- Poetics of Transgression* (
- of Witchcraft," *Past an*
- world turned upside-de
- of inversion and is, qu
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- transgression in Wilde
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- Penguin, 1986). But see
- esp. pp. 52, 98–99, 13
70. It is instructi
- existential and humani
- with its facile counterp
- which it is sometimes r
- Journals*: December 21
- November 25, 1927; F
- 1931; June 27, 1937.

59. Foucault, *History*, p. 101.
60. Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (London: 1981), pp. 41–42.
61. C. Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848–1932* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), pp. 213–18 (my italics).
62. I.A. Richards, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 215.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
64. B. Doyle, "The Hidden History of English Studies," in Peter Widdowson, ed., *Re-Reading English* (London: Methuen, 1982); Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Baldick, *Social Mission*. On Wilde in Germany, see Manfred Pfister, ed., *Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1986).
65. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in H. Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Bay Press, 1983); Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984); Ihab Hassan, "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 3 (1986): 503–20; Dan Latimer, "Jameson and Postmodernism," *New Left Review* 148 (1984): 116–28; Terry Eagleton, "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism," in *Against the Grain* (London: Verso, 1986), pp. 131–47.
66. Eagleton, "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism," pp. 143, 132, 145, 143–45.
67. M. Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971).
68. Ellmann, ed., *Oscar Wilde*, p. 174.
69. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (1967), trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore, Md., and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. lxxvi–lxxviii; Derrida, *Positions*, pp. 41–42; R. Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter Discourse: Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), esp. Introduction. Some of the most informative work addressing inversion and transgression is historically grounded; I have in mind especially recent work on early modern England. See, for example, D. Kunzle, "World Turned Upside-Down: The Iconography of a European Broadsheet Type," in Barbara Babcock, ed., *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1978); Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975); P. Stallybrass and A. White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986); S. Clark, "Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft," *Past and Present* 87 (1980): 98–127. Kunzle, discussing the iconography of the world turned upside-down broadsheets, offers a conclusion which registers the complex potential of inversion and is, quite incidentally, nicely suggestive for understanding Wilde: "Revolution appears disarmed by playfulness, the playful bears the seed of revolution. 'Pure' formal fantasy and subversive desire, far from being mutually exclusive, are two sides of the same coin" ("World Turned Upside-Down," p. 89). This is the appropriate point at which to note that the fuller study to which this article is a contribution necessarily addresses other considerations in relation to transgression in Wilde and Gide, most especially those of class, race, and colonialism. A crucial text for the latter is Gide's *Travels in the Congo* (1927–28), trans. D. Bussy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986). But see also Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?* (1948; London: Methuen, 1967), esp. pp. 52, 98–99, 133.
70. It is instructive to see in Gide's writing how complex, vital, and unconventional the existential and humanist commitment to sincerity of self could be, especially when contrasted with its facile counterpart in English studies, or indeed (a counter-image) the reductive ways in which it is sometimes represented in literary theory. See especially the following entries in Gide's *Journals*: December 21 and detached/recovered pages for 1923; January 1925; October 7 and November 25, 1927; February 10 (especially) and December 8, 1929; August 5 and September 1931; June 27, 1937.