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Abstract
Recently, much attention has been devoted to the subject of lesbian and gay 'visibility' in the contemporary media and marketplace. Journalists, activists, and scholars alike have either bemoaned or celebrated the increasing appearance of gay and lesbian people in TV shows, films, and advertisements. For some, the visible presence of lesbians and gays in the media is a key factor in social awareness and gay rights advancement, while for others this 'visibility' reifies stereotypes of gay and lesbian identity and limits the public image of LGBT people to a resoundingly white, urban, upper-middle class (and typically male) segment of its population. Likewise, some have praised the development of gay and lesbian marketing niches, attributing the power of the purse to the solidification of social agency outside the market, while others have critiqued such developments as the potential downfall of subversive 'queer' identities. Naturally, I simplify this dialogue, reducing arguments and their proponents to two extremes. It would be more accurate to state that the gay and lesbian community finds itself at odds in a debate centered on the question of how gay and lesbian identity and rights discourses should situate themselves in relation to 'mainstream' culture and its modus operandi, consumer capitalism. For many, if not most, gay visibility is a double-edged sword: the 'consciousness raising' that such visibility affords us is accompanied by the marginalization of those who do not fit into the 'charmed circle' of marketability, along with the loss of a discrete subcultural identity.

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The Gay Man's Burden: Wilde, Dandyism, and the Labors of Gay Selfhood

Jordan L. Greenwald

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Jordan Greenwald, College '08

"…I think what the gay movement needs now is much more the art of life than a science or scientific knowledge (or pseudoscientific knowledge) of what sexuality is…[W]e have to create a gay life. To *become."*
-Michel Foucault, "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity," 163.

"…[W]hile I see that there is nothing wrong in what one does, I see that there is something wrong in what one becomes. It is well to have learned that."
-Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis,* 789.

Introduction: Towards a Theory of Gay Labor

Recently, much attention has been devoted to the subject of lesbian and gay 'visibility' in the contemporary media and marketplace. Journalists, activists, and scholars alike have either bemoaned or celebrated the increasing appearance of gay and lesbian people in TV shows, films, and advertisements. For some, the visible presence of lesbians and gays in the media is a key factor in social awareness and gay rights advancement, while for others this 'visibility' reifies stereotypes of gay and lesbian identity and limits the public image of LGBT people to a resoundingly white, urban, upper-middle class (and typically male) segment of its population. Likewise, some have praised the development of gay and lesbian marketing niches, attributing the power of the purse to the solidification of social agency outside the market, while others have critiqued such developments as the potential downfall of subversive 'queer' identities. Naturally, I simplify this dialogue, reducing arguments and their proponents to two extremes. It would be more accurate to state that the gay and lesbian community finds itself at odds in a debate centered on the question of how gay and lesbian identity and rights discourses should situate themselves in relation to

'mainstream' culture and its *modus operandi*, consumer capitalism. For many, if not most, gay visibility is a double-edged sword: the 'consciousness raising' that such visibility affords us is accompanied by the marginalization of those who do not fit into the 'charmed circle' of marketability, along with the loss of a discrete subcultural identity.

Many scholars have identified the recent trend in gay and lesbian visibility[1] as a process of commodification. In *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism,* Rosemary Hennessy launches a powerful critique of gay visibility, arguing that "for those of us caught up in the circuits of late capitalist consumption, the visibility of sexual identity is often a matter of commodification, a process that invariably depends on the lives and labor of invisible others" (111). Hennessey's critique addresses not only the growing appeal of a bourgeois gay "lifestyle" as expressed in the mainstream media; it also diagnoses academia's production of the "queer" as, in part, a glorification of marketable qualities (adaptability, mobility, flexibility, creativity) that characterize the ideal late capitalist worker. For Hennessey, 'visibility' ultimately works in service of capital rather than queer political agency. In being made 'visible,' queer subjects are encouraged to relate to an image of themselves

[1] For perhaps the most nuanced approach to the relationship between LGBT visibility and politics, see Katherine Sender, *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* (New York: Columbia UP, 2004). In one chapter, Sender examines the role that "professional homosexuals," LGBT marketers, journalists, and advertisers, play in the creation of a gay marketing niche. This element of her work resonates with my reading of Wilde and his contribution to the creation of a market for the New Woman, though her study is obviously from a more contemporary standpoint. Her book, which avoids the common trap of describing a marketable gay/lesbian identity entirely "interpellated" by advertising, subtly explores the question of queer agency in the advancement of visibility.

that, while occluding racial and class diversity, interpellates them as workers or consumers, as mere tools of the market. In her book *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market,* Alexandra Chasin laments the manner in which neoliberal politics have subsumed the gay rights movement. Tracing the manner in which capitalistic ideologies of privacy and liberty have shaped gay rights discourse into one of "identity politics," Chasin attributes this influence largely to the gay and lesbian community's willingness to be marketed and marketed to. For Chasin, this choice has not been a politically sound one: "I argue that identity based marketing and consumption are intimately related to identity politics, and that, working together, they are inimical to progressive political change" (24). Both Chasin and Hennessy posit that market visibility reduces gay and lesbian political and social agency to a system of commodity relations.

Others critique gay and lesbian visibility for its negative impact on gay culture. In a 1996 *New York* magazine cover story entitled "We're Here! We're Queer! Let's Get Coffee!", Daniel Mendelsohn declares the "decline of the gay sensibility" (27). According to Mendelsohn, who limits his analysis to gay men[2], gay culture has taken up an assimilationist attitude since its subversive 80s heyday, and gay men have become increasingly indistinguishable from straight ones. Along with gay visibility

[2] This paper, too, chooses to focus on the phenomenon of gay *male* commodification. As many of the scholars I survey point out, the gay male segment (almost always represented as thoroughly white and professional) is the most intensely pursued of the LGBT market. I will not attempt to explain the purely "economic" incentive for this focus, for my project pursues the cultural logic behind the commodification of gay identity *in particular*. My attention to Wilde is thus an obvious consequence of my paper's attention to the cultural linkage between gay male identity and commodity culture.

and the social tolerance it purportedly effectuates comes the deterioration of gay culture's "subversive edge." Mendelsohn delineates gay culture's contemporary "transition from being fabulous to being nice, from flamboyant style to hyperbourgeois consumerism, from the exoticized gay margin to the normalized straight center" (31). Just as secularism has taken its toll on Jewish (sub)culture, gay visibility has signaled the end of a subculture that positioned itself in radical opposition to normativity, homophobic oppression, and all things 'mainstream.' Harkening back to the subversive days of yore, Mendelsohn cites Oscar Wilde as the icon of this dying culture. Such longing for the days of Wilde is echoed by Daniel Harris, author of the controversial tract *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture.* Harris too argues that invisibility and marginalization are the driving forces behind the uniqueness of gay culture. Observing that "there is less and less need to assert our superiority as our society's tastemakers and aesthetic arbiters," Harris mourns " 'gay sensibility' in its classical form – that of decadent, hot-house aestheticism" (24). Wilde, as the poster boy for gay aestheticism, serves as the symbol of a lost age, one that consumerism and 'visibility' politics have practically erased. As such, Wilde is portrayed by Harris and Mendelsohn as a figure of purity, historically uncorrupted by the demands of the market and the program of gay normalization. In the face of ongoing gay assimilation and commodification, these two authors suggest that we can look back to Wilde as an example of resistance to consumerism and its 'liberatory' ideologies.

Unfortunately for Mendelsohn and Harris, they are guilty of two mischaracterizations. The first is the idea that there has been a *definitive* (rather than ambiguous and contested) cultural trend since the 1990s, a 'heterosexualization' of gay culture. The second mischaracterization is the canonization of Wilde as a saint-like personality who maintained a sense of gay selfhood completely divorced from the world of mass consumption. Though he certainly resisted normative Victorian codes of masculinity and sexuality, the idea of a Wilde somehow positioned outside the market, and even outside the realm of 'visibility,' is a naïvely nostalgic one. But before I begin my discussion of Wilde, the focus of this paper, I would like to address the question of whether gay culture has gone 'straight.' For could it not likewise be stated that straight culture has gone gay? This was the focus of Frank Rich's 1987 article in *Esquire,* entitled "The Gay Decades," an article that Mendelsohn, from the perspective of the 90s, attempts to contradict. Our current decade, I think constitutes a synthesis between these two opposing cultural hypotheses. For while gay men seem to be assimilating or 'integrating' into mainstream culture more than ever, this trend is accompanied by a growing heterosexual obsession with aspects of gay culture. Today, after all, is the Age of the Metrosexual. In his famous essay on David Beckham, Mark Simpson defines the metrosexual:

> The typical metrosexual is a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis -- because that's where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are. He might be officially gay, straight or

> bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference.[3]

Simpson traces the prevalent urban trend of metrosexuality to its older and more definitively gay incarnation, the dandy. Both practices rely upon a great degree of male narcissism, a quality that, until recently, was extended to only the few straight men not afraid of being labeled sissies or homos. Simpson goes so far as to say that (straight) metrosexuals aspire to be gay, a desire made evident by their alleged obsession with anal sex. For Simpson, metrosexuality is a way by which straight men can explore elements of the gay "lifestyle" and rebel against norms of masculinity that prohibit narcissistic self-attention, all the while embracing 'gay' preoccupations with shopping and fashion.

There is more to the metrosexual, however, than simple vanity. The metrosexual, Simpson claims, is a result of the extension of consumerism to straight men: "For some time now, old-fashioned (re)productive, repressed, unmoisturized heterosexuality has been given the pink slip by consumer capitalism" (1). The invention of the metrosexual has come into being in concert with the marketing of beauty products, high fashion clothing, and self-maintenance regimes to a growing number of men. The core of metrosexuality, after all, is self-presentation, the ability to attract the gaze of an admiring female *and* male public. The metrosexual thus constitutes "an advertiser's walking wet dream," and David Beckham, as the twenty-

[3] Mark Simpson, "Meet the Metrosexual." July 22, 2002. *Salon.com.* <http://dir.salon.com/story/ent/feature/2002/07/22/metrosexual/>: 1.

first century's quintessential metrosexual, represents "the future, but also a way of adapting other, less advanced specimens to that future" (1). Beckham has forged a modality of straight male existence, a modality that has come to be known as the prototype for successful, urban male subjectivity. Indeed, metrosexuality, originally conceived as a rebellion against masculine normativity, is now increasingly the norm: individuality, "self-creation," and a rigorous care of the self have become the criteria for a "sophisticated" brand of masculinity that is often considered to be the most desirable form of male being. The standard for urban, professional, *straight* masculinity, then, finds its origins in the narcissistic self-cultivation associated with dandyism and with gay culture in general.

The desire for a return to a Wildean aesthetic invoked by Harris and Mendelsohn is thus a paradoxical one, especially given our current situation. If metrosexuality represents the height of consumerism and male integration into the market, and if, as Simpson suggests, metrosexuality is a straight 'spin-off' of gay dandyism, how can it be that Wilde is regarded as a figure of resistance to gay visibility and assimilation? Some might protest that metrosexuality is somehow different, less campy or transgressive, perhaps, than contemporary forms of gay dandyism or narcissism. But what are we to make of TV shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*? Gay men, in the media as well as in 'reality,' have often functioned as style consultants, "fairy godmothers" to contemporary heterosexuals' aesthetic self-performance. While this assistance has typically been restricted to the realm of the feminine, shows like *Queer*

Eye attest to the fact that contemporary society places faith in the wisdom of gay men pertaining to aspects of *universal* aesthetic self-realization: cosmetics, grooming, fashion, interior design, cuisine, and good taste *tout court*. Moreover, that ubiquitous late capitalist buzz-word, "self-esteem," is frequently associated with the world of gay men, who apparently determine how the supply of "fierce-ness" and "flawlessness" is to be distributed through the general population. Consider, for instance, *To Wong Foo* (1995), a film in which drag queens descend on a small middle-American town and, after the requisite plot complications, confer fabulousness upon every last member of its population. This is what I like to refer to as the "gay man's burden," the faith that society and its significations places in the ability of gay men to "live the good life," along with the concomitant feelings of gay responsibility that come with that faith. In an age when images of gay stylists, cosmeticians and "life coaches" saturate the media, we have perhaps reached the apogee of the fetishization of gay men and, as Harris puts it, their "hot-house aestheticism."

Many would argue, however, that Wilde's dandified aestheticism is much different from its contemporary avatar, the metrosexual. They might suggest a historical break, a moment after which the dandy, like gay identity itself, lost its "subversive edge" and became a hot identificatory commodity. Certainly, the aesthetic elitism of *Queer Eye*'s "Fabulous Five" comes nowhere near the *raffiné* poses and the razor-sharp witticisms of Wilde. While Wilde promoted himself as the *arbiter elegantarium* of Victorian society, he openly berated its regimes of conformity and propriety – he

didn't gently proselytize Style and nurture "good taste" as, say, Tim Gunn does. Indeed, Wilde's subversion of Victorian norms was a very real and dangerous one, as the story of his downfall suggests. Likewise, the nineteenth century dandy's approach to mass consumption, as I hope to show, was much different from the unabashedly consumerist brand of gay identity marketed today. Nevertheless, dandies like Wilde engaged in a specific relationship with the emerging consumer market, staging a complex performance of elitism. As Wilde critic Regenia Gagnier suggests, "Social historians…have failed to emphasize the emerging service and consumerist economy that determined late-Victorian aestheticism" (*Idylls* 5). The legacy of that failure continues, it seems, in the nostalgia evident in the call for gay culture's return to a subversive Wildean past, a past that seemed to resist or even transcend the demands of the *fin-de-siècle* consumer market.

Similarly, critics like Chasin reinforce the notion that, at some vague point in the past, gay identity itself existed outside the influence of the market. Consider the following passage:

> Of course, people engaged in same-sex sexual behavior have consumed commodities for as long as there have been commodities; what is new is the constitution and consolidation of a social identity in the marketplace. Advertising is one of the central agents of that constitution and consolidation. Indeed, gay and lesbian identity and community were effectively consolidated through the market; in the 1990s, market mechanisms became perhaps the most accessible and the most effective means of individual identity formation and of entrance into identity-group affiliation for many gay people (24).

None can deny that the direct representation of gays and lesbians in advertising and the subsequent "consolidation" of their identity in the marketplace is a "new" phenomenon. To state, in passing, that (proto-) gays and lesbians have merely "consumed commodities for as long as there have been commodities," however, is far too reductive. In particular, the relationship between gay male identity and the marketplace is a historically complex one, and certainly predates the advertising campaigns of the 1990s. If we date the advent of modern gay identity, as Foucault does, in the latter half of the nineteenth century[4], we must recognize that the concept of the homosexual made its appearance in an age when the commodity reached new heights of importance and 'visibility' itself. At a time when competing definitions of homosexuality were circulating throughout medico-legal discourses, modern "commodity culture," with its accent on advertisement and the (re)presentation of the commodity image, came into being. To leave the relationship between that rising culture and the emergent gay subject unexamined would be a gross historical error. Although my project is not exactly one of "gay historiography,"[5] this paper will put an

[4] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990): 43.

[5] Since my paper focuses so heavily on the life and work of one individual, Oscar Wilde, I am reluctant to describe it as a work of "historical research." On the other hand, and as I hope to make clear, the historical impact of Wilde's life, given the public scandal it provoked, must certainly be accounted for in any history of the emergence of the homosexual as a publicly recognizable figure. From our current viewpoint, "Wilde" must be understood as a complex web of textual residues *not limited to* the essays, plays, poetry, and fiction that Wilde himself produced. As a precursor of modern celebrity, Wilde's public presence both before and after his trial can only be comprehended through a consideration of the myriad reviews, cartoons, satires, and advertisements that represented him on a huge scale in England and abroad. In the hope of furthering our understanding of this historical figure, this project engages with a growing body of cultural history centered around gender, sexuality, and *fin-de-siècle* commodity culture. My approach, I hope, conforms to the following prescription by Didier Eribon: "[R]ather than writing history in terms of a slow progress toward the right to freedom and to speech, it makes more sense to speak of the slow

accent on the relationship between *fin-de-siècle* commodity culture and, specifically, the creation of a gay 'modality of being.'

Wilde, unarguably the most 'visible' of nineteenth-century gay men, played a crucial role in the development and consolidation of a recognizable gay 'lifestyle'; indeed, as we shall see, his life and work informed the development of a concept of 'lifestyle' in itself. During the height of Wilde's career as an author, playwright, and public intellectual, a group of men called the Uranians[6], who collectively identified according to the homo-erotic desires they experienced, were attempting to forge a gay ethos and aesthetic in literary magazines. Wilde, of course, was representative of that movement, a testament to his involvement in the creation of a gay identity. At the same time, Wilde, well-known for his Paterian Aestheticist and later dandy persona, famously articulated a *habitus*[7] of modern male living, a lifestyle exemplified in his public persona as well in many characters of his texts. To a large extent, the controversy and ill-repute associated with him, which culminated in the scandal of his trial in 1895, solidified the public perception of a relationship between that

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construction of ways of living and thinking about homosexuality. For in effect, the notion of emancipation implies the idea of a preexisting identity that needs to be liberated" (152). Just as it examines the textual "construction" of Wilde, my work attempts to analyze his relationship with the textual construction of "ways of living and thinking about homosexuality". Didier Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004).

[6] See Michael Matthew Kaylor, *Secreted Desires: The Major Uranians: Hopkins, Pater and Wilde* (Brno, CZ: Masaryk University Press, 2006). See also "Love in Earnest: The Importance of Being Uranian," in Karl Beckson, *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History* (New York: Norton, 1992): 186-212.

[7] "To reconstruct the social conditions of production of the habitus as fully as possible, one also has to consider the social trajectory of the class or class fraction the agent belongs to, which, through the probability slope of the collective future, engenders progressive or regressive dispositions towards the future." Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984): 123.

lifestyle and homosexuality.[8] I argue that, regardless of his intentions, Wilde forged a subjectivity or mode of being that determined what the homosexual would "mean" for years to come. By manipulating and negotiating Victorian cultural practices and ideologies, he managed to articulate the idea of the homosexual as a discrete social identity with a set of specific tastes, sartorial styles, and 'life philosophies.' Before the age of gay 'visibility,' Wilde *made visible* an aestheticized lifestyle that would come to define, and to limit ("To define is to limit."[9]) popular conceptions of 'the homosexual.' The dandy lifestyle adopted a specific attitude toward and relationship with the commodity culture of late Victorian Britain, an attitude that anticipated modern 'consumerist' ideologies of the present. While the dandy lifestyle personified by Wilde subverted the ideals and values of Victorian society, it functioned, like Beckham's metrosexuality, as "the future, but also a way of adapting other, less advanced specimens to that future." Working in the historical period scholars associate with the shift from a 'productivist' to a 'consumerist' economy, Wilde forged a modality of being under capitalism that, in many ways, has become today's metrosexual norm.

"Forging a modality of being" is a phrase I applied to both Beckham and Wilde, which leads us to an important question: how might we characterize such a process?

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[8] For more on Wilde's impact on the public perception of male homosexuality, see Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side: Toward a Genealogy of a Discourse on Male Sexuality (* New York: Routledge, 1993). Also see Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994).
[9] *Dorian Gray* 162.

For one thing, the creation of a lifestyle involves a 'work on the self" of sorts, the subjection of the self to a series of regulating systems. In his later work, Michel Foucault theorized such a process. Foucault designates four types of technologies that characterize human life: technologies of production, of sign systems, of power, and of the self. In his own words,

> Technologies of the self…permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.[10]

To an extent, Wilde attained all of these things, and more, in the cultivation of an aestheticized self. His reputation as one of England's most famous writers, and as its most well-known gay man, have lent him an "immortality" equal to the likes of Shakespeare. Many commentators of Foucault argue that his late turn to technologies of the self represented the reclamation of agency and the development of a program of strategic resistance within the networks of power he so painstakingly analyzed. Indeed, if we apply Foucault's notion of ethico-aesthetical self-creation to the subversive selfhood of Wilde, we gain a more thorough understanding of the way that Wilde negotiated and manipulated Victorian norms, infused with power relations, to establish an ethos of queer resistance. Wilde artfully created a type of "gay life," a creation that Foucault calls for in the epigraph above. In today's culture, with its

[10]Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self." *Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth.* Ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New P, 1994.): 225.

metrosexual cynosure, we must, however, take note, as Foucault commentator Jeffrey Nealon does, that "neoliberalism is dedicated to the economization of artistic self-creation as a strategy for resisting normativity: that style of subjectivity has in fact become American-style neoliberalism's primary engine and product line" (13). Today's be-yourself, make-yourself-over culture, in other words, amounts to a giant marketing scheme. Wilde created an aestheticized self in an age that championed 'sincerity,' modesty; and conformity; in contrast, today's metrosexual asserts his individuality and narcissism in a culture that fetishizes non-conformity as the key to commodified self-realization. Being that he is the precursor to a consumerist paradigm of selfhood, it seems increasingly difficult to consider Wilde as a model for *contemporary* queer resistance against 'assimilation' or commodification.

In fact, the "forging of subjectivity" that I identify in dandyism is currently being theorized as a dominant form of labor in neoliberal capitalism. Italian neo-Marxist Maurizio Lazzarato has devoted his studies to "immaterial labor," which he defines as "the activity that produces the 'cultural content' of the commodity." Lazzarato relates,

> Immaterial labor involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as "work" – in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion.[11]

This cultural labor can be easily identified in the daily tasks of the professional-managerial class: marketing, public relations, advertising, etc. These, after all, are

[11] Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor." Trans. Paul Colilli and Ed Emery. *Generation Online*. 12 May 2008. < http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabour3.htm>.

remunerated and identifiable forms of labor. Paolo Virno, however, argues that in Post-Fordist capitalism, under which the general faculties of communication are heavily exploited for profit, "there is no longer anything which distinguishes labor from the rest of human activities…unemployment is non-remunerated labor and labor, in turn, is remunerated unemployment" (102-3). Following Virno's observations, dandyism, so often chastised as an idle and useless lifestyle, would fall under the rubric of unpaid labor. Being a dandy, as we shall see, certainly takes a lot of work. But dandyism (and by extension, metrosexuality) resonates with post-Fordist labor on an even more integral note. Among the "ideological products" that immaterial labor creates, Lazzarato argues, is subjectivity itself:

> If production today is directly the production of a social relation, then the 'raw material' of immaterial labour is subjectivity and the 'ideological' environment in which subjectivity lives and reproduces. The production of subjectivity ceases to be only an instrument of social control (for the production of mercantile relationships) and becomes directly productive, because the goal of our post-industrial society is to construct the consumer/communicator – and to construct it as 'active'. Immaterial workers (those who work in advertising, fashion, marketing, television, cybernetics, and so forth) satisfy a demand by the consumer and at the same time establish that demand.[12]

Late capitalism *strives* to create new subjectivities that can easily be marketed *and* marketed to, for identities can be sold as well as focus-grouped. David Beckham, then, is one of post-Fordism's most renowned "immaterial workers," for he has forged a metrosexual subjectivity for himself, and, by way of his celebrity, for others. In the

[12] Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labour," *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics.* M. Hardt and P. Virno (eds.) Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996: 132.

wings of every metrosexual's stage, however, we find the *quintessential* immaterial laborer of late capitalism: the gay male. For aren't the Fabulous Five of *Queer Eye*, along with the countless 'gay best friends' we see in cinema and television, the most culturally valorized creators of aestheticized and commodified subjectivities? And doesn't the metrosexual himself get his whole routine from the regime of masculine self-care formerly monopolized by gay men? I do not mean to suggest, of course, that every gay male in America is involved in the enterprise of subjectivity creation; if you take a quick peak at American media, however, that certainly *seems* to be the case. From *Bravo* to *TLC* (formerly *The Learning Channel)* to YouTube (see William Sledd's popular "Ask a Gay Man"), the gay male appears as the ultimate accessory to commodified selfhood.

Why is there such a strong tie between gay men and neo-liberal 'self-creation'? One answer is somewhat obvious: gay men constitute a 'bridge' of sorts between heterosexual men and women. Female subjectivity, after all, has *long* been subjected to the processes of commodification, and, since patriarchy assumes that the market for woman-as-commodity is male, commodified femininity has, until very recently, been ubiquitously figured as heterosexual. Given their ambivalent position between straight women (common desire) and straight men (common gender), gay men have signified the link between commodified femininity and yet-to-be-commodified masculinity, the 'last frontier' of commodification. I will explore Wilde's relationship to female commodification below, but I would like to now draw attention to another

hypothesis. David Evans, a sociologist who rigorously explores the relationship between sexualities and consumer markets, states the following: "The pursuit of the commodified self is the pursuit of the sexual self: individual, private, innermost, accomplished through the acquisition and conspicuous manifestations of style" (45). Since sexuality has become an axiomatic facet of one's 'individuality,' and gay sexuality is marked as the most obtrusive of sexualities, it makes sense that gay men would experience an undue burden *vis-à-vis* commodified selfhood. Furthermore, a large portion of Evans work explores the ghettoized aspects of gay labor, a cluster of occupations largely limited to the personal, the leisurely, and the private sphere in general; just as labor is classed, gendered, and racialized, it is quite often sexualized. Neoliberal capitalism's governments relegate sexual minorities to second-class "sexual citizenship," as homosexuality is still predominantly conceived as dangerous to the public weal.[13] Late capitalist society thus entrusts gay men with the stewardship of that most private of sectors, (commodified) self-stylization. Finally, we must consider the importance of 'coming out,' arguably the most radical of contemporary makeovers. Often praised by (straight) consumer culture as paragons of courage and 'self-esteem' for being out, gay men are indeed faced with the constant demand for self-affirmation. If, as Mendelsohn puts it " 'I am what I am' is increasingly becoming a matter of 'You are what you buy'" in gay male culture, gay men seem to be a step

[13] See "Sexual Rights and Commodities: The material construction of sexual citizenship" in David Evans, *Sexual Citizenship: The material construction of sexualities.* (London: Routledge, 1993): 36-64.

ahead of the rest in the process of self-affirmative consumption (31). In other words, if late capitalism's overarching mantra is "be yourself," the requisite emergence from the closet intensifies the public perception that gay men hold an advantage in the field of self-realization.

As we have seen, gay men occupy a specific locus in late capitalist society's signifying system. Gay men are figured as the most adept or savvy portion of the population in the activity of self-creation. This symbolic capital, although it certainly contributes to gay 'visibility' and 'acceptance' in mainstream culture, also reifies an essentially stereotypical and *exploitative* image of gay men. For if expertise in the immaterial labors of self-transformation or "subjectivity production" is attributed to gay men in contemporary culture, this places the gay man's burden on their shoulders. While forms of labor available to (openly) gay men have largely been restricted to the private sphere, this burden, in many ways, exacerbates that skewed allocation of labor. Since, in post-Fordism, we are able to draw little qualitative difference between labor and non-labor time, labors of selfhood extend to the most mundane, the most 'everyday' of activities. We are thus all working off the clock, but gay men in particular are saddled with the pronounced burden of producing themselves, and others, as ideal consumers. All of this speaks to a need to theorize and analyze gay labor and its legacy.

Speaking of legacy, among the reasons I list above why gay men are associated with the labor of the self, I should add one more: Oscar Wilde and his legendary

dandyism. Oscar Wilde produced an original subjectivity long before 'self-creation' was the norm. Working with the "raw material" of his "ideological environment," to use Lazzarato's language, Wilde produced a subjectivity, a modality of being, that refuted bourgeois Victorian values. His dandyism violated standards of class, propriety, productivity and masculinity. Wilde's practice of the self was indeed one of the most subversive in history. As I will argue, dandyism was a translation of sorts, the codification of gay sexuality into a specific lifestyle. We have seen that variations of this lifestyle continue to exist, in a highly commodified form, in gay culture today. But even at the inception of its *fin-de-siècle* incarnation, dandyism articulated itself in relation to the logics of the commodity. In many ways, dandyism was the "repressed unconscious of mass society," for, while Victorian society still clung to its stifling values at the *fin-de-siècle*, decadence and dandyism certainly had a strange appeal for many in Wilde's audience (Gagnier *Idylls* 98). Many critics have pointed to Wilde as a precursor to postmodernity for his accent on surface, performance, and irony. Few, however, have drawn attention to his stunning prescience of late capitalism, postmodernity's material context. The prevalence of metrosexuality today is just one testament to both his foresight and his influence.

In the next part of my essay, I will focus on the importance of dandyism in *Dorian Gray*. From the manuscript, to the *Lippincott's* edition, to its final book form (published in 1891), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was subjected to a painstaking process: the systematic erasure of its more-or-less explicit homoerotic language. By

studying these revisions, one also observes the manipulation and disruption of certain strategically placed silences. Although, as Wilde once stated, "[w]hat Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows," the reader nonetheless gains an epistemological foothold in the later edition of the text. I thus undertake two important tasks: analyzing the new knowledge provided in the 1891 edition, and tracing the contours of the silence that exists in its stead in the original. By doing so, we gain a glimpse into the way that gay sexuality is (dis)articulated in the context of *fin-de-siècle* consumerism, channeled through the 'lifestyle' of the dandy. In addition, I examine Wilde's editorship of *Women's World* in order to understand his pivotal role in the creation of New Woman subjectivity and, consequently, a feminist niche market. The political dynamic between the gay dandy and the New Woman is a fascinating one, and an exploration of that dynamic sheds light on the beautifully complex manner in which Wilde negotiated political and economic discourses to create new forms of being in the world.

In the last section of my essay, I will argue that reification, as described by Georg Lukács, is a driving force behind the tragic aspects of *Dorian Gray*. As we have already seen, the state of the "subversive" dandy is currently decidedly bleak. What formerly represented a form of resistance has become yet another form of commodified labor. In my reading of *Dorian Gray* as an allegory of reification, I examine a narrative progression in Wilde's representation of the labors of gay self-creation. That progression, I argue, parallels the story of Wilde's own gradual self-

commodification. As Wilde forged the subjectivity of dandyism as a subversive mode of gay existence, he began to feel the consumerist ideologies that constituted the building blocks of that subjectivity manipulate and dictate his own actions. *Dorian Gray*, I hope to show, is the autobiography of Wilde's split consciousness. As Elisa Glick argues in her essay on *Dorian Gray*, "gay identity is itself paradigmatic of a new form of consciousness that capital social relations engender, embodied most recognizably in the bourgeois subject: a radically split, contradictory subjectivity" (132). With that said, it is now necessary to turn to the question of how Wilde makes gay identity *appear* in an age when "capital social relations" were undergoing a period of turmoil.

Picturing Desire: The Logics of Consumption and the Sexual/Textual Revisions of *Dorian Gray*

In response to the famous criticisms launched against *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the Scot's Observer ("Mr. Wilde…can write for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph boys"), Oscar Wilde responded with the following in a letter to the editor: "Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray. What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them" (Gillespie 366-67). In Wilde's 1895 trial, Eric Carson would cite this exact rejoinder to inquire as to whether Wilde still held the same opinion about the interpretation of his novel. Indeed, the championing of ambiguity and freedom of interpretation lay at the heart of Wilde's defense, the strategic legal incarnation of his famous Aestheticist insouciance. If "no one knows" the exact nature of Dorian Gray's sins, one might argue that his sins are to be found *precisely* in the textual moments in which knowledge is foreclosed. In other words, Dorian's sins are definitively what "no one knows" in the novel; their presence, marked by the absence of their specification, is to be found in lacunae in the text. As Foucault notes, silence often speaks:

> Silence itself, the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies (Foucault *Introduction* 27).

To read a silence effectively, then, we must not simply fill in the blanks based on what is presumably *behind* the silence, but instead examine the manner in which that silence is textually constituted in relation to what *is* said. To do so is to consider the text as a photographic negative, to examine the way in which what is said shapes, deforms, or subtracts from the silence as a *positive* entity, as a concrete space of interpretive possibilities.

To read across the omissions, additions, and "refinements" that occur between the 1890 (*Lippincott's Monthly Magazine)* and 1891 bound (book form) version of Dorian Gray is to witness a process of both erasure and substitution – namely, the erasure of homoeroticism and its subsequent substitution with the details of a luxurious and "artistic" lifestyle . To examine the discrepancies between the holograph manuscript and the first published edition of the novel is more or less a similar experience. The textual alterations contour the silence that Dorian's secret "sins" occupy, lending that silence, paradoxically (what could be more fitting for Wilde?), both a greater and a lesser significance. That is to say, the presence of changes in the second version allows one to look back and more positively assess what is *absent* in the first version- one becomes attuned to the presence of an absence. To begin, we should examine the ways in which silence is bolstered by erasure. In both revisions, a silence is instantiated around the question of homoerotic contact. Moments of physical contact , both between Lord Henry and Basil and Dorian and Basil, are systematically erased from first the manuscript and later the 1890 edition: "taking hold of his hand" (MS, n.

188), "laying his hand upon his shoulder" (187), "shaking his hand off" (188), "we walk home together from the club arm in arm" (194). Likewise, the language of desire, expressed by Basil in relation to Dorian, is suppressed in the revisions of the manuscript. "Passion" becomes "feeling" (188), the "romance" found in Basil's painting becomes instead the "ideal" (277), and Basil's "worship" of Dorian disappears (192). Because of these revisions, the version of *Dorian Gray* lanced against Wilde in his trial was in fact the 1890 version; the changes, also mentioned in court, were an incriminating omission, for they pointed to a sin that apparently needed to be masked.[14]

The question of expressing homoerotic desire, of course, is at the heart of the conversation between Lord Henry and Basil in the first chapter. The portrait of Dorian functions as the very picture of Basil's desire for the young man. As such, the painting is charged with inciting the narcissism that leads to Dorian's self-destruction – Basil's desire leads him to produce an idealized image of Dorian, which Dorian himself internalizes. Thus the desire present in the painting constitutes a corrupting, or at least a corruptible, force. In the manuscript, one finds the following self-damning admission regarding Basil's reluctance to display the painting in public:

[14] For an analysis of a more contemporary double-bind such as this one, see Eve Sedgwick's analysis of the court case of an eighth grade science teacher in Maryland who, after being transferred to a nonteaching position by the Board of Education, was completely refused a contract for his disclosure of this information to "60 Minutes." Acanfora sued, but the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals rejected his case on the grounds that he had failed to document on his application for employment that he has served as an officer in a homophile organization in college. As Sedgwick relates, "the space for simply existing as a gay person… is bayoneted through and through, from both sides, by the vectors of a disclosure that at once compulsory and forbidden." Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, U of California P, 1990): 69-70.

"Where there is merely love, they would see something evil. Where there is spiritual passion, they would suggest something vile" (194). The "something vile" that is suggested in the painting, a dysphemism for homoerotic desire, is to be read at the very surface of the image. It belies a secret that reveals itself against the will of the painter. Like the novel itself, one can bring certain along certain "sins" in one's interpretation of the painting, and that possibility proves to be thoroughly dangerous for its creator. Basil damns himself more fully in the manuscript, declaring "[I]t seems to me that to say a thing is to bring it to pass. Whatever has found expression becomes true, and what has not found expression can never happen" (195). Art, then, can bring about reality through merely expressing the unsaid, and, as we know, it bears an agency that is literally deadly for Basil. Though Basil adores secrecy as "the only thing that can make modern life wonderful or mysterious to us," the desire that he articulates in the painting of Dorian Gray had perhaps better been left completely unsaid (187). As has been pointed out many times before, the painting comes back to torment its creator just as Wilde's novel worked against him in the trial. These works of art serve as testaments to the "love that dare not speak its name," a love that, once spoken, can bring about disaster for the speaker.

While elements of homoeroticism had been erased from the 1890 version as well as the manuscript, so had a certain narrative gap that constitutes a textual possibility of homosexual corruption. The space of "one month" between chapters two and three of the 1890 version function as a possible site for the homosexual initiation of Dorian

Gray by Lord Henry. At the end of chapter two, Dorian leaves Basil's studio with Lord Henry, who is to drop him off at his own residence. In chapter three, Dorian awaits the arrival of Lord Henry in the latter's luxurious salon; given several textual clues, including Dorian's parroting of Wotton's many aphorisms, we learn that the two men have been seeing each other regularly over the course of the month. Lady Henry even jokes that her husband possesses twenty-seven photos of Dorian. When Lady Henry asks Dorian whether he talked during the performance of Lohengrin that he and Lord Henry reportedly attended, he retorts "I never talk during music, - at least during good music. If one hears bad music, it is one's duty to drown it by conversation," to which she responds, "Ah! That is one of Harry's views, isn't it, Mr. Gray?" (210). It is thus quite clear that Dorian has gained a large degree of familiarity with "Harry" – enough to have learned his style of wit *and* his manners. Nevertheless, we are deprived of a month of details surrounding the relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian; we can only guess what has occurred since their first carriage ride together. If certain readers bring their "own sins" to a reading of the novel, the familiarity between Dorian and Lord Henry might be interpreted as the result of a deeper, *physical* intimacy.

An even more striking lacuna is the one that appears at the end of chapter three. Dorian announces that he has fallen in love with the actress Sibyl Vane (in all her stage diva glory), yet admits that it took a certain amount of badgering from "the old Jew" owner of the theatre to convince him to come backstage to meet her. "It was

curious, my not wanting to know her, wasn't it?", Dorian muses to Henry (215). The question is left hanging in the 1890 version: the text shifts rather awkwardly to the moment when Lord Henry returns home to find a telegraph declaring that Dorian is engaged to be married to the actress. Now, given that it was common practice for actresses in the nineteenth century, especially ones in lowly theatres such as that in which Sibyl performs, to offer sexual services to their backstage admirers for a certain fee (it was in fact a crucial part of the revenue of such theaters), it is quite possible that this "know" can be interpreted as a Biblical one. In any case, the cause of Dorian's reluctance to "know" Sibyl remains an important and unanswered question, one which is foregrounded by the radical jump in the narrative at the end of the chapter. In this chapter, silence presents itself as the possibility for erotic sins or unnatural dispositions, and it is precisely these silences that are erased in the 1891 edition with the addition of a new chapter between the original second and third, as well as the continuation of the abbreviated Sibyl Vane conversation.

The new chapter three in the 1891 edition provides us with an entirely novel scene of initiation, one that blunts the sexual scandal haunting the gap between chapters two and three in *Lippincott's*. As Lord Henry conducts a visit to his uncle, Lord Fermor, he is planted (rather safely) for the reader into his social *milieu*. Lord Fermor, who possesses "an inordinate passion for pleasure" and has undertaken "the serious study of the great aristocratic art of doing absolutely nothing," seems to be the perfect predecessor for Henry; his flare for indulgence is established as a family affair

(30). The question of lineage in general becomes central in this chapter, as Wotton has come to inquire about the aristocratic ancestry of Dorian Gray. Although we learn that Dorian's mother caused a shock by running off with a man of much lower status, the chapter serves in general to shore up our sense of Lord Henry's and Dorian's class and familial status. The effect is that the reader becomes more aware that Lord Henry's influence on Dorian is rooted in the *nonchalant* posturing of the aristocracy, and thus not necessarily in the pull of sexual attraction that one might assume. Lifestyle is central in this chapter: Lord Fermor inquires why Lord Henry has arrived so early, since "dandies never [get] up till two, and [are] not visible till five", while Henry himself declares that "Credit is the capital of a younger son, and one lives charmingly upon it" (30,31). The dandy, with his carefree attitude and unbridled spending habits, appears as a much more pronounced figure in the 1891 version of Dorian Gray, and the insertion of this chapter into a former space of shameful silence suggests that it is dandyism, not homosexuality, that is the sin of the new text.

The parade of aristocratic characters that follows, each participating in the show of wits that is inevitable in Henry's presence, highlights subversive aristocratic humor and detachment as a mode of living to which Dorian will aspire. We are indeed provided an initiation scene in which Lord Henry can indulge his passion for "the exercise of influence"; we see him indoctrinating Dorian into the aristocratic or dandiacal way of life. As Lord Henry delivers a witty Aestheticist-tinged lecture on

beauty (à la Wilde) to the lords and ladies of his aunt's salon, Dorian looks on, mesmerized:

> It was an extraordinary improvisation. He felt that the eyes of Dorian Gray were fixed on him, and the consciousness that amongst his audience there was one whose temperament he wished to fascinate, seemed to give his wit keenness, and lend colour to his imagination. He was brilliant, fantastic, irresponsible. He charmed his listeners out of themselves, and they followed his pipe laughing. Dorian Gray never took his gaze off him, but sat like one under a spell, smiles chasing each other over his lips, and wonder growing grave in his darkening eyes (39).

In this passage, the dynamics of desire are reversed: Lord Henry, at the apogee of his wit, becomes the object of wonderment for the hypnotized Dorian; Dorian is now the subject and not the object of desire, thus fully positioning him under the "spell" of Lord Henry. This desire is complicated by the question of identification, for the desire to embody what he sees serves as the driving force that will transform Dorian into an indulgent monster modeled after the decadent personality of Lord Henry. In a move that is fittingly "Greek", Wilde here blurs the lines between homoerotic desire and admiration for an accomplished mentor.[15] Ultimately, however, this passage, like the surrounding chapter, assures us that Henry is initiating Henry into the aristocratic world of luxury and *esprit*, *not* into the realm of the unsaid.

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[15] In many of his works, Walter Pater, Wilde's own mentor of sorts, praised the masculine Greek ideal, with its requisite system of initiation via pederasty – particularly in his treatment of Winkelmann in *The Renaissance*. Winkelmann, an archaeologist and the first modern art historian, is largely responsible for Germany's eighteenth century association of "Greek" with homosexual relations of any sort, regardless of the presence of a power dynamic. The figure of the lover/mentor implied in Lord Henry's relationship to Dorian thus calls to mind a lineage of the archaeology of homoerotics, as does the name "Dorian" itself. See James Eli Adams's commentary on Pater's efforts to integrate Greek ascetism (and thus homoerotics) into the "strategies of legitimation" of mid-Victorian masculinity. *Dandies and Desert Saints*: *Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1995): 151-154.

In the bound edition of *Dorian Gray*, the possibility of sexual initiation is replaced by a more thorough depiction of the attitude, philosophy, and lifestyle of Lord Henry *qua* aristocratic libertine. There is a direct relationship between the disappearance of homoerotic possibilities and the accent on the social, material, and ideological trappings of dandyism. One might interpret that relationship in a variety of ways: 1) the practice of dandyism represents *itself* a form of ascesis which limits or restricts sexual activity in the text; 2) dandyism in the text is essentially a euphemism, a way to signify homosexuality without directly mentioning it; or 3) dandyism represents the sublimation of homosexuality for Lord Henry and Dorian, a complexly indulgent way of life that effectively makes up for a singularly prohibited pleasure. None of these interpretations can fully account for this relationship, but each offers us a useful way for thinking about the figure of the dandy in *Dorian Gray*. Ultimately, the best interpretive strategy is to target the cultural associations that link together homosexuality and certain aspects of the dandiacal way of life. By doing so, we not only learn the ways in which Wilde patched over or converted the "questionable" parts of the original text; by examining this transformation, we are witness to a stereotype in the making. For, as critic Alan Sinfield relates, "The notoriety of Wilde…afforded a simple stereotype as a peg for behavior and feelings that were otherwise incoherent and unspeakable…Between 1900 and 1960, a dandified manner afforded by far the most plausible queer identity" (125). Our duty is to question *how* and *why* the dandy is so "plausible" a model of queer identity even at the height of

Wilde's career, that is to say, *before* 1895. An examination of how dandyism manages to signify or correspond to the idea of homosexuality within *Dorian Gray* is crucial to that interrogation, allowing us to see how Wilde navigates Victorian culture, particularly the ideology of late Victorian consumerism, to articulate a form of gay identity that persists in the contemporary imaginary.

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In many respects the dandy embodies precisely the absence of sexuality. Baudelaire, for instance, famously stated that dandies do not get erections. He describes the frigidity of the dandy as follows: "The distinguishing characteristic of the dandy's beauty consists above all in an air of coldness which comes from an unshakeable determination not to be moved; you might call it a latent fire which hints at itself, and which could, but chooses not to burst into flame" (800). This studied removal of the dandy from vulgar passions was also championed by Barbey D'Aurevilly in his biographical study of Beau Brummell, the world's first dandy (*Du Dandyisme et de George Brummell,* 1845). Barbey accentuates the popular opinion of Regency society that Brummell did not engage in the amorous (or even sexual) pursuit of women due to a combination of calculated restraint and pure disinterest fueled by narcissism. Ellen Moers, in her exhaustive study *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm*, relates,

> The dandy's achievement is simply to be himself. In his terms, however, this phrase does not mean to relax, to sprawl, or (in an expression quintessentially anti-dandy) to unbutton; It means to tighten, to control, to attain perfection in

> all the accessories of life, to resist whatever may be suitable for the vulgar but is improper for the dandy (18).

The accent on dandyism in the later text thus serves to put a damper on the "vulgar" moments in which sexual activity might be construed. The more that Henry and Dorian are seen to be dandies, the less likely they are to participate in sex of any kind, at least according to the cultural legacy of the dandy. In *Dandies and Desert Saints,* James Eli Adams argues that dandyism constituted "the incarnation of an ascetic regimen, an elaborately articulated program of self-discipline. As such, [it laid claim to] the capacity for self-discipline as a distinctly masculine attribute and…embod[ied] masculinity as a virtuoso asceticism" (2). Thus the dandy was able to skillfully rearticulate Victorian middle-class values surrounding masculinity that find their origin in a Protestant ethic of self-control. In the figure of the dandy, asceticism and aestheticism work hand-in-hand, creating a subject whose artistic way of life manages to shore him up against the dangers of base sexuality.

On the other hand, dandies came to represent the decadent ideology of indulgence prominent in *fin-de-siècle* subculture. Take, for instance, the famous prescription Lord Henry offers to Dorian: "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it" (199). The paradoxical mixture of self-restraint and limitless indulgence present in the figure of the dandy can be explained, in part, by the long history of permutations of dandyism that preceded Wilde and made possible the creation of Wilde's particular version of the dandy. Over the course of the nineteenth century, dandyism voyaged

across the Atlantic and became a phenomenon associated with the decadent artists of Paris, from Baudelaire to Huysmans, becoming, in Baudelaire's words, "une espace nouvelle d'aristocratie…basée sur les facultés les plus précieuses, les plus indestructibles, et sur les dons célestes que le travail et l'argent ne peuvent conférer" (Moers 273). In France, through the writings of Baudelaire and Barbey D'Aurevilly, as well as through the everyday practices of Parisian bohemians, dandyism became a subversive subcultural practice that appropriated aristocratic posturing and lifestyle as a means to stand in direct opposition to middle-class values of productivity, frugality, and conformity. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the aristocracy was increasingly associated with backwardness: they were characterized as the refuse of the development of capitalism. Thus Matthew Arnold desribes them in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) as "barbarians" who "willfully resisted civilization," "the wasteful, indulgent lords of feudalism."[16] Aristocracy was thus a *metaphor* for Baudelaire and the dandies to follow him, a stand-in for supercilious rebellion against prevailing bourgeois ideology. While Brummell was certainly famous for his abuse of the newly-developing system of credit and his eschewal of any form of labor aside from self-adornment, his dandyism was largely a social-climbing strategy, an attempt, through fashion, to establish himself within an upper-class and aristocratic socioeconomic *milieu*. The French-inflected "Decadents" of Victorian society – both

[16] Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: U of Chicago P: 2000): 94.

aesthetes and dandies[17] – allied themselves with the "degenerate" aristocracy as a signifying rather than as a material strategy[18]. By mimicking the leisured attitude and carefree spending habits of the aristocratic elite, as typified in Huysmans's *À Rebours* (the so-called "Bible of Decadence"), *fin-de-siècle* dandies did not seek to access social status, but rather to express their innate superiority and their highly refined tastes. In the case of Lord Henry Wotton, of course, actually having a title is an added convenience – he possesses both socially conferred *and* innate superiority.

The indulgent aspect of dandiacal identity is the perfect nexus in which illicit sex and the logic of commodity culture meet. The dandy, by way of his aristocratic status (be it in name or in spirit), employs the logic of exception in order to justify his own yielding to temptation. While restrictions on desire and its fulfillment may apply to the average bourgeois subject, the dandy is not subject to the same laws of self-

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[17] The distinction between dandies and aesthetes appears to us today a fine one. Aesthetes cultivated an extravagant appearance, with a focus on vibrant colors and exquisite ornamentation, a look in accord with their program of appreciating the artistic fineries of life. By contrast, the dandy's comportment is one of reserve and extreme attention to minor details, a classic example being the three or more hour morning toilette of Beau Brummell, who would never be seen without a starched collar, painstakingly shined boots, and in a state of god-like cleanliness. Wilde himself opted for the dandy later in his career, after years of appearing as the aesthete. As Alan Sinfield relates, "Wilde's self-fashioning took two phases. In his dress he stressed aestheticism until his return from the USA in 1882; then he took up the dandy manner. This shift, from aesthete to dandy, enacts a change in class identification. The aesthete…is almost a bohemian. He lives of the edge of society, and the dragoons are annoyed partly by his upstart status…For Wilde, [the dandy] was the dream ticket: a conjunction of art and the leisure class, in opposition to middle-class, philistine, masculine practicality." *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994): 98.

[18] In her exploration of the theme of convalescence in the work of decadent writers, Barbara Spackman describes the aristocracy, like convalescence, as "a space in-between." Decadent writers employ this intermediate or third term to articulate a different sort of modernity, rejecting both the bourgeois vision of technical and productive progress and the provincial tastes and brutish manners of the "vulgar" masses. Thus characters in decadent novels, such as des Esseintes in *A Rebours,*, are often of "a historically dislocated aristocracy, a marginal and waning class, which is itself a third term between bourgeoisie and proletariat." *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, ????): 42-3.

restraint – indeed, he has his own set of "ascetic" laws which place him under a whole different rubric, a topic I will soon discuss. The notion that the dandy, like the aristocrat, is among a "select few" who has access to otherwise proscribed pleasures is what allows Lord Henry, and later Dorian, to subscribe to the Pater-infused ideology of "a new hedonism…that is never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience (288). Jeff Nunokawa refers to Lord Henry's endorsement of *"any* mode" of desire and its fulfillment as a "strategy of euphemism": included in the "general rubric of desire" is a "specific strain," homosexual sex, for which any given temptation serves as a virtual equivalent, different only insofar as it is able to be *named*. Most important, this strategy, one that includes the fetishistic "appreciation" of luxury goods, is inextricably tied to a late-nineteenth century ideology of consumption: "The general proliferation of desire that [Lord Henry] encourages functions more broadly to support the increasingly specialized market for commodities that evolved in the second half of the nineteenth century," one which constantly sought to create new perceived needs.[19] The implicit endorsement of homosexual sex in *Dorian Gray* thus works in concert with the emerging consumer culture of Victorian Britain. It is through the language of consumption that Wilde is able to endorse and encourage gay sexuality. It should come as no surprise, then, that with the disappearance of homoerotic moments

[19] Jeff Nunokawa, *The Tame Passions of Wilde: The Styles of Manageable Desire* (Princeton: Princeton UP):81, 84.

between the 1890 and 1891 texts comes a corresponding emphasis on Lord Henry's dandiacal "lifestyle"; the quintessential advocate of *all* desires gains prominence, while the possibility for the elaboration of a *certain* desire is foreclosed. While *Dorian Gray* is forced further into the closet from one edition to the next, at least it is a more luxurious closet in 1891, stocked with the "patent leather boot[s]" and the "tasseled malacca cane" of Lord Henry, the spruced-up dandy, an ideologue of unrestrained consumption (192).

Unbridled and inexhaustible desire in the face of an expanding market is, however, not the best lens through which to examine the dandy's relationship to commodity culture – or at least not the only lens. After all, the indulgent side of the dandy is, as already mentioned, coupled paradoxically with a studied restraint. This restraint is, first of all, a repression of sexual and amorous stirrings that one might interpret as being sublimated into a form of consumerist *libertinage*. But it is also the restraint associated with the maintenance and development of highly selective, individualized taste, a taste which regulates decisions within the surplus of choices. In her study of the "man of taste," Reginia Gagnier makes clear that an "insatiable" capacity for pleasure was conceived as the mark of the civilized bourgeois subject in the latter part of the nineteenth century. At the same time, equally important was that the man of taste "cultivated a disciplined individualism consistent with modern notions of progress" (*Insatiability* 94). For the man of taste and also for the dandy, not just any form of consumption will do; distinction is everything in the establishment of a

"nouvelle aristocratie." The desire to develop a personalized flair in one's forms of consumption underlies the project of dandyism. The decadent dandies of the *fin-de-siècle* thus had to actually work *against* the rising phenomenon of mass consumption. They did so through elitism, separating themselves off from *haute bourgeoisie* status-seekers in favor of pursuing what is purportedly the use value[20] of beautiful *objets d'art,* as des Esseintes does in *À Rebours*. The effort to escape the market and transcend bourgeois fetishization, however, is always already a failed one, as the elitist, individualist consumer positions himself in contradistinction to the market – his exotic and eccentric tastes are for that reason ironically determined by it[21]. Moreover, as Benjamin notes, taste *itself* is a product of mass consumption:

> Taste develops when commodity production clearly surpasses any other kind of production. The manufacture of products as commodities for a market ensures that the conditions of their production – not only societal conditions, in the form of exploitation, but technological ones as well – will gradually vanish from the perceived world of the people. The consumer, who is more or less expert when he gives an order to an artisan..., is not usually knowledgeable when he acts as a buyer…As the expertness of a customer declines, the importance of his taste increases proportionately – both for him and for the manufacturer (129).

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[20] Marx's idea of use value is all too frequently conflated with the 'utilitarian.' Marx specifies that "[N]othing can have value, without being an object of utility. If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value" (308). "Useless," however, is not synonymous with 'frivolous' or 'excessive': it means that the object has no possible relationship with human life. For Marx also relates, "A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference" (303). Thus aesthetic objects, whose use value is solely the pleasure they bring, can have use value. When des Esseintes and Dorian collect objets d'art, it is purportedly for the pleasure they bring, *not* their value in relation to the market (exchange value), that drives their habits. Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. (New York: Norton, 1978).

[21] See "Dandies and Elitist Consumption" in Rosalind H. Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982): 107-153.

The dandy, as the quintessential *arbiter elegantarium* of nineteenth century culture, is central to the maintenance of a bourgeois consumerist fantasy: that there exists a person who transcends the fetishization of the market and who can appreciate luxurious goods for their inherent and not their status-granting value. In his lack of expertise, the dandy can only offer up personal taste, but that taste seems to be enough to afford him high status within a society built upon commodity fetishism.

The rejection of vulgar commodity fetishism in favor of an imagined transcendental taste has an important parallel in the dandy's striking ambivalence toward all things feminine. For Baudelaire, women are the opposite of dandies, for they are too mired in the realm of reproduction, too corporeally oriented. While dandies possess and employ a "feminine" sensuality that allows them to appreciate the fine things in life, they, as men, are able to do so critically and from a distance. Women, on the other hand, are unable to make "disinterested" evaluations of art – their sensuousness is limited to a vulgar form of pleasure, the visceral reactions that stem from their putative excess embodiment. Rita Felski examines the prevalent Victorian stereotype of women as "buying machines," mindless consumers in whom "economic and erotic excess" converge.[22] Women and their bodies, associated with reproduction and "base" sexuality among aesthetes and dandies (one need only to look at Wilde's private musing on his wife Constance to see this), are not to be trusted

[22] See "Imagined Pleasures: The Erotics and Aesthetics of Consumption" in *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995): 61-90.

when it comes to 'metaphysical' matters like aesthetics – they do not possess the faculty of judgment required for truly elitist consumption. Among dandies like Wilde, transcendental and 'disinterested' taste is thus accompanied by the aesthetisization of homosexuality, for women cannot access the "more exalted, transcendent, and non-purposeful love" of gay male sexuality.[23] Sexuality absent a woman, and thus absent the possibility of reproduction, is theorized as a more divine form of sexuality; sex for sex's sake is the counterpart of art for art's sake.[24] The 'elitest consumption' of dandies like Lord Henry, and later Dorian Gray, might thus be seen in a new light: the rejection of all things "base" works in concert with the rejection of heterosexual sex. The unspoken sin of Dorian Gray is converted into the lifestyle of the dandy, and it does so in relation to the logics of commodity consumption. While gay love dare not speak its name, it does manage to find its place in the market by way of the dandy.

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Completely skirting the issue of morality, Julian Hawthorne (son of Nathaniel) praised the "sensuous descriptions…of the decorations and environments of the artistic life" in Wilde's novel in the 1890 issue of *Lippincott's* (Gillespie 370). The second edition of *Dorian Gray* continues on this path – it is characterized by an even more belabored fetishization of luxury goods. Wilde dropped even more descriptions

[23] Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990):174.
[24] Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace,* 137-76

of beautiful objects and exotic commodities into the book version, complementing the already massive inventory of Dorian's *objets d'art* provided in chapter nine. Perhaps nowhere is this tendency more evident than in the additions to chapter five of the *Lippincott's* edition, which becomes chapter eight in 1891. After chastising and dumping Sybil Vane following her acting flop, Dorian strolls through Covent Garden in the early-morning air. He hails a hansom and is immediately transported home, where we learn that, "passing through the library towards the door of his bedroom ," he glimpses the changes that have occurred in his portrait (227). In the 1891 edition, Dorian waits a while at his doorstep, admiring his affluent neighborhood of Grosvenor Square, before continuing indoors. The reader's attention is suddenly drawn to the "huge gilt Venetian lantern, spoil of some Doge's barge, that hung from the ceiling of the great oak-paneled hall of entrance" (76). Dorian's discovery of the changes to his portrait is temporarily suspended, and we are now led by the hand through the lush interiors as if on a house tour: "He…passed through the library towards the door of his bedroom, a large octagonal chamber on the ground floor that, in his new-born feeling for luxury, he had just had decorated for himself, and hung with some curious Renaissance tapestries that had been discovered stored in a disused attic at Selby" (76). Such additions serve at the least a double function. First, they constitute certainly a voyeuristic glimpse at aristocratic luxury in keeping with the late nineteenth-century trend of the increased visibility of the spoils of wealth. Thus 1891 *Dorian Gray* provides a textual parallel to the exhibition, department store,

and catalogue culture that reaches its heyday in the Victorian age.[25] The middle-class reader is given a glimpse of the exotic commodities she could theoretically purchase, given the right spending power. Moreover, much like in an advertisement, these commodities are placed within their proper aristocratic "index", "an image of people, places, or occasions to be somehow associated with the product and its use" (Ohmann 182). Such fineries are thus properly fetishized as the keys that unlock access to superior social status, presented to the reader in the most pleasing of manners.

Secondly, these descriptions imply a relationship between Dorian's amoral treatment of Sybil Vane and his "new-born feeling of luxury": the gratuitous descriptions suspend the narration's judgment of the gravity of the act Dorian has just committed, one that leads, as we know, to Sybil's suicide. By dwelling on the details of Dorian's home, the descriptive hiatus constitutes a virtual advertisement break, delaying the ominous revelation of the change in Dorian's painting. The text implies that it is precisely the willingness to be distracted and entranced by luxury that allows Dorian to commit such crimes as driving Vane to her suicide. The unspeakable corruption that drives Dorian Gray to cruelty in the first edition of the novel thus

[25] Many commentators of material culture note a revolution in the visibility of luxury commodities that takes place in the latter half of the nineteenth century. With events such as the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the invention of the department store (Bon Marché in Paris, 1852) comes a new technology of making "priceless" commodities, formerly restricted to the closed aristocratic worlds of the court or the country manor, visible to an ever-wider number of bourgeois consumers. While few actually possessed the purchasing power to *own* these luxury goods, they became increasingly available as *images*. The result was a democratization and a diversification of consumerist fantasies. Thomas Richards describes it as "a utopian vision…not so much of a classless society as of a society in which everyone was equal in the sight of things." See Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990). Also see Rosalind H. Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982) and Andrew Miller, *Novels behind glass: Commodity culture and Victorian narrative (*Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

materializes as luxury in this version. The commitment to a lavishly cultivated lifestyle and environment, the text suggests, leads to aristocratic insouciance and the amoral indifference of radicalized "New Hedonism." Despite the possibly deadly results of this "lifestyle", it holds an appeal much stronger and more universal than the implied homosexuality in the first edition. Wilde's illustrations of luxurious decadence speak directly to the desires of *Dorian Gray*'s Victorian bourgeois readership.

Among that readership, it is perhaps toward Victorian women that *Dorian Gray* orients itself most. As Regenia Gagnier points out, "The outcry against Wildean decadence on the part of the gentlemen journalists [who denounced the novel] was in part an outcry against the male author who won the support of Society – an institution managed by women – by writing a book that would appeal to women" (*Idylls* 66). This is precisely the complaint of Thomas Wentworth Higgenson, a New England minister and advocate of women's suffrage, who in a review of Wilde's *Poems*, inveighs against Wilde's "offences against common decency" and their influence on "women of high social position."[26] Gagnier, who traces Wilde's ability to gain such support back to his days as editor of *Woman's World*, seems to suggest a sort of strategic alliance of Wilde's dandified, effeminate, and indeed homosexual persona with the political struggles and consumer tastes of middle- and upper-class

[26] Karl Beckson, ed., *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Hamlyn, 1973): 51. The review appeared in Boston's *Woman's Journal*, and is cited in Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994): 91.

Victorian women. By appealing to his female readership's desires – both for objects and for certain rights or privileges – Wilde manages to create a buffer against the onslaught of disapproval from the legions of Victorian gentlemen who would eventually bring about his downfall. Aside from his social success with many titled women of the time (he was, after all, in high demand for every salon in London), it is difficult to claim whether such a buffer ever actually succeeded in protecting Wilde from danger. From a certain point of view, it is rather the case that Wilde actually endangered the fate of the woman's movement by this very alliance: the 1895 trial spelled out the end of the New Woman in the eye of the Victorian public, as suggested in the pages of *Punch.*[27] Perhaps it is thus better to observe that, in some ways, the "woman's world" from which Wilde undoubtedly drew inspiration functioned as a space in which he could articulate something like gay sexuality or identity more freely.

Might then such new alterations as the one above, which functions as a voyeuristic glimpse into the secretive and luxurious world of Dorian Gray's domestic interior, be recourse to the "safe space" of upper-class women's taste for expensive decoration? Since the 1891 text points more conspicuously to luxury as one of Dorian's cardinal sins, it manages to relegate the "unspeakable" sin to a list of transgressions in which luxury is included. Thus Dorian's corruption is not limited to the sphere of

[27] Sally Ledger, "The New Woman and the crisis of Victorianism," in *Cultural Politics of the* Fin de Siècle, eds. Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995): 24.

"unhealthy" boys and men, but also implicates would-be participants in a decadent or aristocratic lifestyle, the trappings of which held particular appeal to *fin-de-siècle* women. In *Novels behind glass,* Andrew Miller argues that women's commodified status as "manikins, puppets, and statues" in the patriarchal culture of Victorian England rendered them particularly prone to identification with goods on "the other side of the glass" (220). Miller thus suggests that women were more adept than their male counterparts at maintaining the vicarious fantasy of possessing the often unattainable goods they encountered in the display windows of department stores and imperial exhibitions.[28] This dynamic of fascination of the world "behind the glass" is particularly germane to an understanding of *Dorian Gray*, and not just in relation to its depiction of luxurious decorative goods: the "open secret" of the novel, the sexuality that is visible but not quite accessible, operates within a similar dynamic.

The idea of the unattainable object of fantasy structures the novel on several levels. For one thing, we might think of Basil's painting of Dorian as both a tool for the perpetuation of his fantasy of communion with Dorian, as well as an analgesic substitute for the longing for his unattainable object. When Basil relates, "I see things differently, I think of them differently. I can now re-create life in a way that was

[28] Rita Felski argues that the dynamic evoked by such a relation to commodities in fact constituted "a legitimate..form of wanting" that served as a substitute for the more taboo desire associated with female sexuality. "Often depicted as an object in the domain of heterosexual relations, woman, it seemed, could only attain the status of an active subject in relation to other objects. The circuit of desire thus flowed from man to woman, from woman to the commodity" Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995): 65.

hidden from me before," he is perhaps speaking of a new management of his desire for the unattainable Dorian through the representational substitute in art (193). As readers, we encounter our own unattainable object: the unarticulated secret that draws one into the narrative of Dorian's corruption and whose suggestive presence repelled the gentlemanly readers of its time. If indeed Wilde "follows Pater's practice in calling secrecy not to demystify, but to fascinate," it is the very impossibility of demystification that renders the secrecy in *Dorian Gray* so fascinating (Eli Adams 204). For the Victorian reader of the novel, the specter of homoeroticism functions quite similarly to the Lacanian *objet a*, the cause of desire whose very unattainability is the prerequisite of fantasy, and of which any confrontation can be nothing but traumatic.

We might even apply the same dynamic to Wilde's public persona as Britain's most famous effeminate dandy. Wilde's unparalleled celebrity is a testament to his uncanny appeal within late Victorian culture; even the journals that lambasted and caricatured him contributed regularly to his publicity. Countless publications hinted laughingly at Wilde's putative sexual practices long before the 1895 trial, and, as we have seen above, Wilde successfully articulated a dandiacal identity that resonated as *queer* without explicitly mentioning gay sex (excepting his anonymous novel, *Teleny).* Wilde's sexual practices, along with their socio-cultural associations, were "behind glass" for all to marvel at, but the 1895 scandal shattered this protective glass, traumatizing the Victorian public with the raw truth of his sexuality. The secret of

Dorian Gray and of Wilde the celebrity thus mirrors the dynamic that women faced in the commodity culture of Victorian England: you can look, but don't touch. While the purchase of the object in the fetishizing display window may not traumatize, the attainment of that object of desire, along with its concomitant removal from the system of objects that determines its exchange value, disrupts the fantasy and forces the viewer to move on to the next passion. When Wilde's "secret," and thus the secret of *Dorian Gray* was revealed, the disgusted public promptly sloughed them off and moved on to the latest fashion. That being said, the more pronounced appearance of unattainable luxury is an important addition to the novel. In the face of rising controversy, Wilde repackaged the dynamic of the open secret into the more acceptable and marketable form of a feminized commodity fetishism.

While on the subject of interiors, one must recognize the importance of interior decoration in relation to its linkage with the recent developments in women's property rights at the end of the nineteenth century. Given that the patriarchal ideology famously exemplified in Coventry Patmore's image of "The Angel in the House" has rendered the Victorian woman indissociable from the domestic interior in the contemporary mind, it is perhaps surprising to discover that women's *control* over the details of their angelic habitat was quite a novel phenomenon at the time of the publication of *Dorian Gray*. Following the Property Act of 1882, in which all women were granted property rights, the field of interior decoration, formerly the near-

exclusive practice of men, became the site of a "militant domesticity."[29] The right to own and to *make* a home was a revolutionary idea, especially among middle-class women who were not afforded the separate property settlements that wealthier women enjoyed. Interior design, a profession earlier occupied by men, became one of the earliest professions taken up by women, precisely because of their established claim on the domestic sphere. Interior decoration was championed as the ideal activity through which a woman could express her individual "personality" as well as her newfound autonomy as a consumer. [30] Thus it should come as no surprise that the language of the home finds itself in the rhetoric of the New Woman: Mary Haweis, author of *The Art of Decoration* and *The Art of Housekeeping* declared at the 1894 Women Writers Dinner, "In woman's hands- in women writers' hands – lies the regeneration of the world. Let us go on with our tongues of fire, consecrated to an entirely holy work, cleaning, repairing, beautifying as we go, the page of the world's history which lies before us now."[31] If the lush interiors of *Dorian Gray* held particular appeal to women, this appeal must be seen in the light of women's

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[29] See Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2006): 89-121.

[30] The arena of the department store, already a site for leisurely activity for women seeking the latest fashions and the total authority they did not possess in the household (even the *female* customer was always right at Whiteley's and the like), capitalized quite well off this newfound passion. The interiors on display at department stores took on the spirit of fantasy that linked consumption masterfully with women's rights: "[It became] a total alternative environment, a vision of abundance, a succession of surprises, a place to go to be cosseted, flattered, and amused…A meeting place and promenade, a home away from home…[yet] it served less to rival the home than to complement it, providing ideas and opportunities for domestic embellishments." Donald J. Olsen, *The Growth of Victorian London* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1976). Cited in Yaffa Claire Draznin, *Victorian London's Middle-Class Housewife: What She Did All Day* (Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 2001).

[31] Cited in Karl Beckson, *London in the 1890's: A Cultural History* (New York: Norton, 1992): 142.

newfound passion for interior decoration *vis-à-vis* the material control of the household, a passion that resonates with Dorian's "new-born feeling of luxury."

The middle- and upper- class housewife of the 1890's was thus presented with the opportunity of a sort of vindication through commodities. This relationship, which facilitated the presentation of household commodities as signifiers of *rights,* resulted in a special kind of fetishism[32] that was certainly not lost on Oscar Wilde. Beginning in America in 1882, Wilde would begin to deliver what is often regarded to be his most successful lecture, "The House Beautiful." For a short summary of its content, one need only look at an incomplete report given of Wilde's lecture in New York: "Art Decoration: The Practical Application of the Principles of the Aesthetic Theory to Exterior and Interior House Decoration, with Observations Upon Dress and Personal Ornaments." Wilde professed that the "first necessity [is that] any system of art should bear the impress of a distinct individuality," and that decoration was one such "system of art". Women bear a special burden in the beautification of the home, since "women have natural art instincts" and the "decorative arts have flourished most when the position of women was highly honored, when women occupied that

[32] Marx relates, "[T]he existence of things *qua* commodities, and the value-relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connexion with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things." The fetishism at play here certainly takes on the form of a "relation between things," but in this case one of those things is an abstract idea, the notion of woman's right to own and decorate her own home. This consequently masks the surplus value that renders the object profitable as well as obscures the use value of the object in question. Karl Marx. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. (New York: Norton, 1978) 321.

space on the social scale which she ever ought to do."[33] Wilde's speech endowed the quest to beautify the home with the aspects of a civilizing mission, and he spread the spirit of this mission by delivering the speech repeatedly in Britain between 1883 and 1885. Wilde both capitalized on and encouraged the widespread fervor among women for home decoration that finds its beginnings at this very period in the 1880s. He promoted a spirit of individuality in personal style in dress and in decoration (and thus in consumption) as the cornerstone of the modern woman's "personality", producing an image of her that comes especially close to the position the dandy occupied in the social imaginary.

Perhaps nowhere is the linkage between consumer choice and women's autonomy in Wilde's work more evident than in *Woman's World,* a journal he edited from November 1887 to June 1889. Formerly titled *Ladies' World,* Wilde renamed the magazine in order to appeal to a wider audience of readers, as well as to invoke the more feminist connotations that the word "woman" bore at the time. Wilde took special care to review books and publish articles written by women. His goal was to make the magazine "the recognized organ through which women of culture and position will express their views" (*Letters* 303). The magazine would therefore contain such articles as "The Fallacy of the Equality of Women" by Miss Lucy M.J. Garnett and "The Fallacy of the Superiority of Men" by Mrs. Charles McLaron, as "women of culture and position" in Wilde's view seemed to be largely of the New

[33] Karl Beckson, *The Oscar Wilde Encyclopedia* (New York: AMS Press, 1998): 141.

Woman variety. At the same time, the previous fare of *Ladies' World* was preserved, though now held to a much more rigorous Wildean standard, with the publication of such articles as "The Uses of a Drawing Room" by Mrs. H.O. Bennett and "Culture vs. Cookery" by Mrs. Harnet Brooke Davies. Laurel Brake describes Wilde's editorial project as "not only the construction of the cultivated new woman but the introduction of a male homosexual discourse into female space"[34]. In the first issue, for instance, he replaced the monthly fashion slot, located at the front of the magazine, with illustrated images of "Orlando" and other male actors posing seductively in androgynous costumes. If Wilde's editorship brought about the publication of articles that espoused the ideologies of the "cultivated new woman", and if indeed he positioned himself as the male homosexual muse to the emergence of a new self-image of women as autonomous and individualist, we must also keep in mind that Wilde was pioneering what we might describe today as a marketing niche. In other words, while half of *Woman's World* was dedicated to what "cultivated" (read: upper-middle-class) women were thinking, the other half was dedicated to what she was (or should be) *buying* – be it the latest fashions in reform-minded clothing or the finest of French porcelain. On the pages of *Woman's World,* the New Woman found herself a lifestyle and Wilde functioned, quite fittingly, as the accessory to the creation of this particular *mode de vie*. As we have seen, the dandy

[34] Laurel Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges*: *Journalism, Gender and Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1994): 127.

(as well as the aesthete) bears a certain burden in late Victorian society: he is the *arbiter elegantarium*, and, as such, he is charged with pioneering the very notion of "lifestyle" within the context of *fin-de-siècle* mass consumption. In this case, the lifestyle he pioneers is not his own. For this reason must we be cautious of statements such as Rita Felski's that "[f]emininity is…appropriated by the [decadent] male artist as emblematic of the modern", i.e. of 'cosmetics', style, and artifice (94); as a discursive practice, "femininity" was constantly being re-articulated in the face of various politico-economic developments over the latter half of the nineteenth century, and the dandiacal male artist often took part in the efforts of its (re)construction. Rather than talk of a femininity that was "appropriated," perhaps we would be better served to speak of one that was *negotiated* – especially as regards the life of Wilde.

The significantly bolstered cast of female characters in the second edition of *Dorian Gray* speaks to a renewed attention to the relationship between the dandy, Lord Henry, and the mordantly witty women who populate the feminized space of the *salon* in which he thrives. Perhaps, after the condemnations that Wilde received for his *Lippincott's Dorian Gray*, the addition of Lady Agatha, Lady Vandeleur, and the Duchess of Harley constituted recourse to the female-gendered space that he had already charted in *Woman's World*. While women provided a space in which dandified gay identity might be more safely articulated, Wilde the dandy supplied his talent and wit to develop both a rhetoric and a lifestyle around which New Women

could rally. This would explain, for instance, Wilde's repeated mention of American women and of America as "a Paradise for women" in the second edition (33): Wilde champions American feminism as a strategy to pull in a broader audience of New Women. We might thus identify a symbiotic relationship between *fin-de-siècle* feminists and *fin-de-siècle* gay men. This relationship is played out within the context of emergent consumer capitalism: for both parties, the political task was, in part, to forge a new and subversive self in relation to commodity culture, with all the liberties that culture afforded them.

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As we have seen, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is structured around an empty center, the love that dare not speak its name, whose resistance to disclosure incites fascination for the reader. While foregoing the disclosure of its fundamental secret, the text nevertheless exploits the *topoi* of the dandy and the New Woman to signify homosexuality in the most strategically sound manner available: through the Victorian public's relationship with commodities. This strategy points to consumerism as the conditions of possibility in which gay identity might come into being, at times sheltered within the space of the increasingly influential niche market of the female consumer. John D'Emilio argues that the historical developments of capitalism, especially across the twentieth century, served as the basis for the organization of the gay community and the contemporary gay rights movement:

> In divesting the household of its economic independence and fostering the separation of sexuality from procreation, capitalism has created conditions that allow some men and women to organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex. It has made possible the formation of urban communities of lesbians and gay men and, more recently, of a politics based on a sexual identity (104).

This commentary undoubtedly rings true. Unfortunately, little work has been produced that critically evaluates the manner in which capitalism influenced the creation of "homosexuality" as a concept. Michel Foucault's project of tracing the idea of the homosexual to the medico-legal discourse of the nineteenth century is regarded as canonical in the field of gay historiography, yet it does not account for the influence of consumer capitalism. Moreover, it does not examine the manner in which historical figures such as Wilde, well-read in the literature of the Uranians (a network of homosexual-identified men who debated the role of homosexuality in society), put the homosexual as a *persona* on the cultural map. Across his life and career, Wilde manipulated the discourse of budding consumerism and the emergent definition of the homosexual in order to create a 'subjectivity' or 'lifestyle' that was identifiably gay. As he is known to have said, he put his genius into his life and his talent into his work. *Dorian Gray,* as one of the key products of his work, not only documents this process of self-creation, but also marked the gay dandy's entrance into popular discourse. Byy studying it in the light of developments in the consumer economy of Victorian England, we can develop a narrative of the ideological construction of homosexual identity in relation to a material framework.

A key aspect of this material framework is the way that mass production laid the ground work for consumerism. In *Consuming Desire,* Lawrence Birken makes a powerful historical argument that a "consumerist" mentality that arose from a perceived surplus in goods after the Industrial Revolution was a driving force for changes in the ideologies of sex and gender. The shift in economic discourse from production to consumption, and thus to *desire,* was mirrored by sexology, an enterprise that sought to map out the seemingly endless array of sexual practices and dispositions outside of the re*productive* genital mode. Out of this broader project of an epistemological accent on individual's desires arose the concept of the homosexual to which Foucault refers, providing the site for the "counter-discourse" that was the basis of the gay rights movement. Similarly, women's rights profited from the consumerist shift. Sexology began to posit women as subjects and not mere objects of sexual desire. As the "private" space of consumption became increasingly part of the "public" discourse of the contribution to national wealth, women, already interpellated as the quintessential consumers, gained a political foothold through their purchasing power. Over the course of the twentieth century, separate feminine spheres as the space of consumption became increasingly obsolete, contributing to a "genderless" world in which men too could be coddled and marketed to.[35] The culmination of that process is today's metrosexual. The consumerist paradigm is not

[35] Lawrence Birken, *Consuming Desire: Sexual Science and the Emergence of a Culture of Abundance, 1871-1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1988): 112-154. See also Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants.*

to be underestimated in the radical changes it effected in the conditions of both women and queers in the nineteenth century. The dandy, as an ideologue of elitist consumption, must thus be thoroughly considered if we are to deepen our understanding of how gay identity and gay rights discourse situate themselves in the material framework of consumerism.

In the following section, I will further explore the idea that Wilde undertook a project of aesthetic 'self-creation' in order to articulate something like gay identity. As we shall see, the manipulation of consumerist ideologies and the commodified labor of the self have their limitations, as well as their consequences. *Dorian Gray* is, in part, the narrative of a subject's creation of gay selfhood, and it beautifully expresses the alienation that results from the dandy's "cult of the self." As such, we might interpret it as a caveat to our contemporary situation of commodified gay identity, one that eagerly seeks to find its own face in the distorting mirror of the market.

Self-Love's Labors' Cost: *Dorian Gray* and Reified Gay Selfhood

"Most people become bankrupt through having invested too heavily in the prose of life. To have ruined one's self over poetry is an honour."
-Lord Henry, *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* 48.

At a peculiar point in the novel, Dorian Gray experiences what we might call "cold feet" about his relationship with Lord Henry and his newfound dandy identity. After Basil requests to see the painting for the first time since he has given it to Dorian, Dorian does not allow him to do so. He soon regrets rejecting Basil, since "Basil would have helped him to resist Lord Henry's influence, and the still more poisonous influences that came from his own temperament" (99). We are thus presented with the last moment in which Dorian might avert his apparent destiny and indeed the last moment when Dorian expresses anything but resignation or amusement regarding his decadent turn (barring, of course, the novel's end). Musing on Basil's love for him, Dorian arrives at the following:

> The love that he bore him – for it was really love – had nothing in it that was not noble and intellectual. It was not that mere physical admiration of beauty that is born of the senses, and that dies when the senses tire. It was such love as Michel Angelo had known, and Montaigne, and Winckelmann, and Shakespeare himself. Yes, Basil could have saved him. But it was too late now. The past could always be annihilated. Regret, denial, or forgetfulness could do that. But the future was inevitable. There were passions in him that would find their terrible outlet, dreams that would make the shadow of their evil real (99).

The citation of the homo past, the historical existence of the "love that dare not speak its name," is without doubt a familiar motif in Wilde: it occurred earlier in "The Portrait of W.H." as well as later in Wilde's second trial. In this passage, the old love that dares not be spoken is portrayed as a force of resistance against Dorian's "inevitable future," and is thus elevated to the status of the "noble," associated with Basil's innocence. There is something strikingly modern about this inevitability, accompanied by a "past [that] could always be annihilated." Indeed, Wilde will later employ an even stronger language of modernity to compare Dorian's dandiacal transformation to the creation of "a world that had been refashioned anew in the darkness for our pleasure….a world in which the past would have little or no place…" (109). The break with a past of secrecy, self-restraint, and nobly distant admiration is thus at the center of *Dorian Gray*.

As the above passage suggests, however, this break can be a violent and threatening one, as it turns out to be for Dorian himself. I propose that we read this passage as Heather Love does Pater's resistance to an "intolerable honor" in *The Renaissance*, namely, as hesitation regarding "the onset of late nineteenth-century modernity – and with it the birth of homosexuality as a newly public and newly recognizable social identity" (66). Since the dandy becomes the most recognizably gay male subject from the late nineteenth century onward, we might conclude that Dorian's last minute anxiety reflects ambivalence on Wilde's part regarding the advent of the dandy as the definitive 'type' of the homosexual, a stereotype Wilde

played a pivotal role in creating. As I have stressed, Wilde's work, along with his dandified public persona and the scandal associated with it, undeniably contributed to a radically new 'visibility' of male homosexuality as a discrete lifestyle. The passage above, much like the narrative thrust of *Dorian Gray* in general, highlights the hesitation, the regret, the alienation, and the sense of tragedy that haunts Wilde's on-going project of the creation of the gay dandy. All of these aspects, I argue, stem from the creation of an image of the homosexual male steeped in the ideologies of the *fin-de-siècle* marketplace, and indeed slated for consumption therein. For the gay dandy to be "sold" to the public entails a certain "selling out," and this is certainly not lost on Wilde. By tracing this process, one of self-commodification, we also gain insight into the cultural labor entailed in the birthing of this gay dandy subjectivity, along with the "birth pangs" that accompany it. I suggest that *Dorian Gray* be read as the allegory of an alienated labor of self-creation: the very story of the translation of gay sexuality into a marketable and market-friendly identity. This allegory highlights the process by which the project of self-creation is subsumed by the project of self-commodification.

To begin with, Dorian Gray's task of self-creation is wholly initiated within the context of homosexual desire that surrounds him in the company of Basil and Lord Henry. As I have already established, the inspiration behind Basil's painting of Dorian is motivated largely by Basil's own homoerotic desire for Dorian. Basil's stated alibi that "Dorian Gray is for me simply a motive in art" is only half true: while

Dorian is the motive behind Basil's art, he is only a motive insofar as he stands in as the representative of Basil's desire *in general* for the male body (14). It is homoerotic desire in general, paired with Dorian Gray as ideal object, which causes Basil to paint a picture brimming with such an eroticized aesthetic. Dorian, trapped between the competing forces of Basil's and Lord Henry's desire for him, comes to know himself as *desirable* within the context of the scene in which his desirability is foregrounded - the viewing of the painting by Dorian, Basil, and Lord Henry together. In a moment of self-recognition fueled by the competing desires of the two older men, Dorian internalizes an image of himself *qua* object of homoerotic desire:

> When he saw it he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time. He stood there motionless and in wonder, dimly conscious that Hallward was speaking to him, but not catching the meaning of his words. The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation (27).

This is the moment in which Dorian begins to see himself through the desiring gaze of others, which seems to trigger an unprecedented sense of selfhood. This internalization of the image of the self as seen by others effectuates a split in Dorian's being that persists throughout the novel, metaphorized by the doubling of Dorian's living body and the painting that reflects the vicissitudes of his soul. Dorian's newfound selfhood is mediated by the circuit of desire that surrounds him; he begins to identify with an externalized image of himself thoroughly integrated in a system,[36]

[36] This trope of the internalization of an external image of the "self," is, of course, the same one that structures Lacan's theory of identity construction in the Imaginary register. In *Dorian Gray,* there are

a libidinal economy that extends far beyond him, and which we might refer to as 'homosexual desire in general.'

Significantly, however, Dorian's recognition of his desirability, and thus his identity in general, becomes one of singularity and individuality. In what is perhaps in part a strategic move by Wilde to mask homosexual desire as a general phenomenon, Dorian is figured as *exceptionally* beautiful. Despite Basil's comparison of Dorian to a number of male bodies in the history of artistic representation, all of whom are known in one way or other to have had male lovers, a sense that Dorian is simply "the one" (read: the *only* male to be desired by men) persists in the novel, especially in relation to Lord Henry. Building on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's claim that *Dorian Gray*'s "plot devolves…from a worldly one of complex intersubjective rivalries to a hermetic one of the Double *tout court*" (*Epistemology* 164), critic Jaime Hovey suggests that "Dorian collapses [the admiration of Lord Henry and Basil] into a quality particular to his own individual person, seeing the desire he sees in the painting as a representation of his own attractive fabulousness, and – later – using it to justify his morbid self-obsession and self-loathing."[37] It is this movement from homosexual desire "in general" to the singularity of Dorian as object that pushes the novel from a

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indeed a number of mirror phases, of misrecognitions that function, nevertheless, to shore up or even instantiate Dorian's identity. As we shall see, the structure of the mirror resonates throughout the novel. See "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience*", Écrits* (New York: Norton, 2006): 75-82. See also Ed Cohen, "Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire and the Closet of Representation," *Critical Essays on Oscar Wilde*, ed. Regenia Gagnier (New York: GK and Hall, 1991):76.

[37] Jaime Hovey, *A Thousand Words: Portraiture, Style, and Queer Modernism* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2006): 23.

story about homosexuality to one largely about narcissism and, accordingly, dandyism. Individual exceptionalism applied to the object of desire serves to mask over homosexuality as a social phenomenon: the object is *so* beautiful that *anyone, even men* could desire it, with the presumption that men are not prone to such desires. Individual exceptionalism on the part of the *subject* of desire, however, is the foundation of the modern identity discourse of homosexuality. The concept of the homosexual as an exceptional type of individual who desires members of his own sex is one that regulates contemporary notions of sexuality, as well as one that allows 'Uranians' such as Wilde to posit themselves as the exception to the rule: "I am one of those who are made for exceptions, not for laws" (*De Profundis* 789). The focus on Dorian as a singularly attractive 'personality' that draws out the desire of Basil puts a damper on the notion of a general homoeroticism that circulates among the three men of the novel (especially in the 1891 version, in which hints of pre-existent eroticism between Basil and Lord Henry are removed). At the same time, the internalization by Dorian of his image as a homoerotic ideal and his subsequent Lord Henry-inspired quest for radical individuation correspond tellingly to the emergent model of the homosexual as a distinct type of individual. The rhetoric of singularity thus performs a double duty in *Dorian Gray*.

Indeed, Dorian's pursuit of an increasingly conspicuous individualism finds its roots in this formative scene. After Dorian looks upon his beautiful picture, there is still a sense that there is more to be done: "'Appreciate it? I am in love with it, Basil. It

is part of myself. I feel that.' 'Well, as soon as you are dry, you shall be varnished, and framed, and sent home. Then you can do what you like with yourself.'"(27). Aside from the masturbatory *double entendre* of this exchange, what strikes me is that there is still work to be performed on the image, by Basil as well as possibly by Dorian. This is also the moment in which responsibility for the image, now practically 'the real Dorian', is transferred to Dorian himself. He is free to do as he pleases with it. In other words, he is now free *to work on himself*. The notion that Dorian has a *duty* to perform self-transformative work is imparted by Lord Henry, a necessary accomplice in the crystallization of homoerotic desire in the narcissistic relationship of Dorian to his own image. He advises Dorian that "the aim of life is self-development. To realize one's nature perfectly – that is what each of us is here for. People are afraid of themselves , nowadays. They have forgotten the highest of duties, the duty that one owes to one's self"(19). As Dorian internalizes his own beauty under the influence of Basil, he simultaneously internalizes the notion that ultimate self-realization should be his lifelong goal. In a sense, he is charged with intensifying the beauty that he already has, distributing that beauty to all aspects of his life in a totalizing activity of "self-development." The irony, accentuated by the fact that Lord Henry prefaces his speech with the caveat that "all influence is immoral," is that that Dorian's quest for selfhood is entirely motivated by external forces: the desire of Basil materialized as an image, and the ideology of self-creation propounded by Lord Henry.[38] When Dorian

[38]This idea is seconded by Ed Cohen: " Dorian Gray is to some extent born of the conjunction between

takes on the challenge to 'realize his nature' and embraces the distinctive methodology of dandyism to do so, it is within the context of this primal scene, one in which the question of representation of homoerotic desire is central.

The quest for an aesthetisized and aesthetically distinguishing individuality, of course, lay at the heart of Aestheticism since Pater, and Wilde consistently pointed to the quest towards radical individuality as his most noble cause. Individuality, in the sense of a distinct personality, is the self-proclaimed secret behind Wilde's work: in *De Profundis,* his 1896 letter to Alfred Douglas, Wilde describes "such an artist as I am, that is to say, the quality of whose work depends on the intensification of personality" (756). The notion of the "intensification of personality" occurs repeatedly in Wilde's essays. In "The Critic as Artist" (1890) he states "it is only by intensifying his [sic] own personality that the critic can interpret the personality and work of others" (Gillespie 330). Later in *De Profundis* Wilde speaks of the "intensity of individualism," and while implicitly comparing himself to Christ, declares that "Christ is the most supreme of individualists" (798). But it is in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," Wilde's February 1891 submission to the *Fortnightly Review,* that individualism figures most prominently, for Wilde puts forward that universal individualism is the telos of modern society, the very grounds for instituting socialism. The contemporary reader, for whom individualism probably equates with

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Basil's visual embodiment of his erotic desire for Dorian and Lord Henry's verbal sublimation of such desire. From this nexus of competing representational modes, Dorian Gray constitutes his own representations of identity." ("Writing Gone Wilde" 76).

social atomism and alienation in hypercapitalist society, this may indeed seem like a bizarre proposition. But one must remember that in the Victorian society in which Wilde wrote, one that fetishized conformity as a bulwark of productivity and order[39], individualism stands as a form of rebellion against the materialistic bourgeois status quo. For Wilde, "Art is Individualism, and Individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. Therein lies its immense value. For what it seeks to disturb is a monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit and the reduction of man to the level of a machine" (925). Wilde condemns individualism tied to material acquisition, as materialism "has led Individualism astray. It has made gain, not growth, its aim" (918). It is thus only with the abolition of private property that true individualism can prosper: the rich would not be yoked to their own alienating possessions, and the poor, rather than constantly working to stay alive, would be free to cultivate their own personalities. Wilde posits that "Under the new conditions [of socialism] Individualism will be far freer, far finer, and more intensified than it is now" (918). Just as intensified individualism/personality is the crux of Wilde's artistic work, it is the bulwark of his socialist politics. Individualism and its "intensification

[39] Denouncements of "Decadent" writers like Wilde focused on their deviation from the gentleman norm, which Geoffrey Best described as one of "conventional morality, *selflessness*, self-control, independence, and responsibility" (Gagnier *Idylls* 91, my emphasis). That Wilde and his contemporaries violated Protestant standards of self-renunciation through the promotion of individualism was scandalous for those who imagined themselves to be the watchdogs of Victorian morality and eugenics. Max Nordau, author of *Degeneration,* condemned the "ego-mania" inherent in the Aestheticist movement: "It never occurs to us to permit the criminal by organic disposition to expand his individuality in crime and just as little can it be expected of us to permit the degenerate artist to expand his individuality in immoral works of art" (Beckson *London* 66). For a majority of those situated in the middle-class bureaucracy, individuality represented a threat to the social order. By comparing the artistic expansion of individuality to criminality, Nordau strayed not far from the Victorian consensus; the selfless gentleman, after all, was the center of a cult of personality.

of personality" are theorized as disruptive or even revolutionary forces that can transform Victorian society into one in which they can thrive uninhibited. Wilde's artistic and political projects thus coincide, as they are committed to the promotion of a greater sense of self, the development of a heightened selfhood.

Other elements of Wilde's work, however, suggest that the development of a discrete self, the "intensification of personality," is more than just the freedom to do as one pleases. While Wilde believes that mankind must be freed from "dull" and "unintellectual" labor by the advancements of technology, labor itself does not disappear from his scope. After all, he argues in "The Soul of Man", "Every man must be left quite free to choose his own work…And by work I simply mean activity of any kind" (918). If "activity of any kind" can fall into the category of work, we might interpret the work implicit in the "intensification of personality" as a labor of self-development or self-creation. This type of "work on the self" is extensively theorized in the later work of Michel Foucault. In *The Care of the Self*, Foucault explores ancient Greek practices of ascesis (Stoicism, Spartanism) as the predecessors of a certain "cultivation of the self" that he advocates repeatedly in the final years of his career and life. According to these theories, self-cultivation is conceived, precisely, as a form of labor:

> It is important to understand that this application to oneself does not require simply a general attitude, an unfocused attention. The term *epimeleia* designates not just a preoccupation but a whole set of occupations; it is *epimeleia* that is employed in speaking of the activities of the master of a household, the tasks of the ruler who looks after his subjects, the care that

> must be given to a sick or wounded patient, or the honors that must be paid to the gods or to the dead. With regard to oneself as well, *epimeleia* implies a labor (50).

For Foucault, "the work of oneself on oneself" is a crucial aspect of "the art of existence." The self-disciplinary regimes of *epimeleia*, not to be confused with the disciplinary force of the classical age explored in Foucault's mid-career work, are linked to a liberty of choice, an aspect that is fundamental to Foucault's theories of selfhood. At the same time, self-cultivation is characterized as a type of labor. Whether this labor can be distinctly separated from productive labor *tout court* is called into question when Foucault states, "I am studying the problem of techniques of the self in Greek and Roman antiquity; how man, human life, and the self were all objects of a certain number of tekhnai that, with their exacting rationality, *could well be compared to any technique of production*."[40] Keeping in mind that the labor of selfhood is one that is not inherently distinct from any other form of labor, one might trace the "intensification of personality" throughout the works of Wilde, analyzing it *as* labor and, moreover, as a labor that can be alienated and alienating. *Dorian Gray*, along with particular moments in *De Profundis*, is a testament to the manner in which self-cultivation goes awry and the idea of 'the work of oneself on oneself' is twisted or inverted: Dorian's self as *object* begins to work on himself as *subject,* while this "work" is attributed to an agency that extends beyond Dorian as an individual.

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[40] Michel Foucault, "Structuralism and Poststructuralism," *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984.* Ed. James Faubion, vol. 2, 1998: 88. Also cited, with added emphasis, in Jeffrey Nealon, *Foucault Beyond Foucault: Power and Its Intensifications Since 1984*. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008), 22.

Before delving directly back into the world of *Dorian Gray*, it is worth noting that Foucault touches upon the topic of dandyism in "What is Enlightenment?" In this exploration of modernity as an attitude, Foucault posits Baudelaire and his spirit of dandyism as exemplary of such an attitude. While taking notice of what he calls "a discipline more despotic than the most terrible religions" inherent in Baudelaire's *dandysme,* he champions "the asceticism of the dandy who makes of his body, his behavior, his feelings and his passions, his very existence, a work of art"(41-2). The making of the person into a work of art, of course, occurs twice in *Dorian Gray*: once in the form of Dorian's conversion to dandyism, and again in his incarnation as a portrait of Basil's. As I have noted, neither transformation stems fully from Dorian's own actions. Lord Henry is the driving force behind his apotheosis into a dandy, and Basil is responsible for his translation into an image. In both cases, an outside imperative for transformation is present, and without it neither change would occur. These outside forces parallel the modernity that drives Baudelaire's dandyism as described by Foucault: "Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not "liberate man in his own being"; *it compels him to face the task of producing himself." (*"Enlightenment" 42, my emphasis). Foucault's commentary on Baudelaire's dandyism sheds light on the passage above, in which Dorian experiences hesitancy in the face of inevitability. If, as I argue, this inevitability represents the onset of homosexuality as a discrete and recognizable

identity within the modern regime of sexualities, then Dorian (and Wilde) is compelled "to face the task of producing himself" that modernity makes obligatory. In other words, if the late 1800s is the prime historical moment in which homosexual identity is to appear, it must be *made to appear;* homosexuals, in effect, are charged with producing themselves, with making themselves into discrete and identifiable entities, the living embodiment of a discursive concept. Thus the literary expression of homosexuality via dandyism in *Dorian Gray* points to "real life" experiences of nineteenth-century gay dandies such as Wilde who, operating within the limits of cultural, medico-legal, and economic discourses of their time, produce a distinct lifestyle, solidifying their status as "a type of life" or even a "species" (Foucault *Introduction* 43). The "intensification of personality" that Wilde speaks of for an individual might readily be allegorized as the labored creation of the homosexual as a type and as a lifestyle.

That being said, let us turn to *Dorian Gray* as the key nineteenth-century text that allegorizes this labor of the homosexual self. As I have stressed, Dorian's own narrative of self-development is one initiated and driven by the competing desires of Basil and Lord Henry. Dorian's agency in the creation of his own selfhood is thus called into question. After Lord Henry criticizes Basil in Dorian's presence for putting all his work into his art and not himself, he muses:

> To a large extent the lad was his own creation. He had made him premature. That was something. Ordinary people waited till life disclosed to them its secrets, but to the few, to the elect, the mysteries of life were revealed before

> the veil was drawn away. Sometimes this was the effect of art, and chiefly of the art of literature, which dealt immediately with the passions and the intellect. But now and then a complex personality took the place and assumed the office of art, was indeed, in its way, a real work of art, Life having its elaborate masterpieces, just as poetry has, or sculpture, or paintings (51).

Lord Henry the dandy, then, represents one work of art working on another, who in turn will learn to work on himself. It his own aestheticized existence which constitutes the inspiration of Dorian's self-transformation. In the last section, I explored the dynamics of dandiacal mentorship between Lord Henry and Dorian. At this point, I would like to draw attention to two distinct parallels of mentorship in Oscar Wilde's life: John Gray and Alfred Douglas. Biographer Neil McKenna thoroughly explores the relationship between Wilde and Gray, who served as the inspiration for Dorian.[41] Gray, born into a working class family, miraculously acquired a position in the Civil Service, and was able to transcend his class so extensively that he was taken by even the wealthiest and most educated to be a monied and cultivated 'man about town.' As McKenna observes, however, this self-transformation was not as independent as it seemed: the intellectual, symbolic, and economic capital behind his apotheosis almost certainly came from older male lovers like Wilde who were more than happy to fund Gray's integration into the upper-crust Uranian *milieu.*

[41] Neil McKenna, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (London: Arrow Books, 2004): 159-181.

If Wilde remained more-or-less happy about his part in John Gray's transformation[42], such was not the case with Alfred Douglas, the catalyst behind Wilde's own downfall. Judging from the language in *De Profundis*, Wilde's 'creation' of Douglas as a gay dandy resulted in Wilde's self-destruction: Bosie was the monster to Wilde's Frankenstein. Wilde figures Bosie as a devastating and unstoppable force of decadence *in extremis*: his life is one of "reckless profusion," one that "outstripped all taste and temperance," forcing Wilde, his sponsor, into bankruptcy (758). Moreover, Wilde's financial assets are not all that Bosie corrupts: ""Having made your most of my genius, my will power and my fortune, you required, in the blindness of an inexhaustible greed, my entire existence" (759). I am struck here by the blunt appearance of the language of capitalist exploitation. Bosie has not only taken advantage of Wilde's financial capital; he is also charged with the greedy misuse of Wilde's genius, i.e. his *labor power.* As I have already mentioned, Wilde stated that he put all his "genius" into his life; Bosie has taken advantage of the very resource which allowed Wilde to self-create. What Wilde arrives at in *De Profundis* is the story of the product of labor (Douglas) that ends up co-opting its creator, destroying him in a process of seemingly endless exploitation. Now, any reader familiar with Wilde's own lifestyle and spending habits cannot help but take note of the irony of Wilde's hypocritical castigation. He created Douglas, after all, in his own image.

[42] "When I compare my friendship with you to my friendship with such still younger men as John Gray and Pierre Louys I feel ashamed. My real life, my higher life was with them and such as them" (*De Profundis* 757).

What I think is glaringly evident is that Wilde, writing in the most quintessential of solipsistic environments, solitary confinement, is largely, if not wholly in dialogue with himself. Implicit in dialogue, of course, is duplicity, and Wilde, through his projective blame of Bosie, is caught within the dueling forces of a *split self*. *De Profundis*, like *Dorian Gray*, is a microcosm of this split. Wilde, who originally forged a dandiacal modality of being *for himself,* conferred that lifestyle upon Douglas. In his prison letter, Douglas figures as the personification of Wilde's own lifestyle, one whose totalizing magnitude exceeds Wilde 'authorial intent.' I am consistently awed by the prescience of Wilde's only novel, which reads so powerfully as an allegorical test-run for the epistolary sorrows of *De Profundis*. In a sense, these texts are each other's doubles: Dorian's internal struggle against the self-image he has created bears an uncanny resemblance to *De Profundis*'s reproach of an externalized 'self' in the form of Alfred Douglas. In both texts, the self as 'object' winds up dictating the self as 'subject,' effectuating that subject's downfall or erasure. In *Dorian Gray* this dynamic is cloaked in the grotesque and fantastic trappings of the Gothic double, but its similarity to the conflict haunting *De Profundis* points to a commonality that is far from supernatural.

The split that terrorizes Dorian and Wilde is best expressed by Georg Lukács[43]as reification, "[t]he split between the worker's labour-power and his personality, its

[43] For my turn to Lukács I am deeply indebted to Elisa Glick and her enlightening work, "The Dialectics of Dandyism." Indeed, no one has informed my reading of *Dorian Gray* and dandyism than she has, and my

metamorphosis into a thing, an object that he sells on the market" (99). This definition is an especially rich one in the case of the dandy, for whom labor power is not just something extracted or removed from the personality; the labor power that breaks away from the personality to be sold on the market is transformed into a form of labor that *intensifies* that personality as a split one. Consider the following: "The specialized 'virtuoso,' the vendor of his objectified and reified faculties does not just become the [passive] observer of society; he also lapses into a contemplative attitude *vis-à-vis* the workings of his own objectified and reified faculties" (100). Does not the relationship between Dorian and his portrait adopt the feel of such a "contemplative attitude"? Dorian's portrait, as the picture of his conscience and the physical embodiment of his self-corruption, is what allows him to 'look on' at the effects of alienation that his labor of selfhood brings about. The portrait as physical manifestation of an artful self is the symbol of Dorian's split, a reflection of his fragmentation into a solipsistic subject (self-fashioner) and a labor-intensified object (self-fashioned). Wilde's usage of a magical literary device in the portrait is an

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project must be considered in part as a response to her essay. That being said, while we share a certain theoretical framework, our readings have important differences. Her argument consists of three main points: 1) the presence of the commodity form (a form that problematizes appearance vs. essence) so evident in the novel parallels the notion of the open secret that pervades it 2)the development of gay identity must be contextualized within the context of late/high capitalist commodity fetishism, and 3) Dorian's self-split can be read as a narrative of bourgeois reification. Although I find her arguments convincing, my reading offers an attention to labor that I think is lacking in Glick's analysis. While Glick links commodification and gay men via the appearance/essence split of gay experience, my study offers the idea of a commodified labor of selfhood that is distinctly gay. My reading of reification in the novel consequently focuses less on the notion of bourgeois alienation *in general* (as Glick's does) than it does on the idea of a reified *gay* subject, "the homosexual" as social type in the making. Elisa Glick, "The Dialectics of Dandyism." Cultural Critique 48 (Spring 2001): 129-163.

ingenious one, since the portrait makes apparent the product of a labor whose effects, though invisible and intangible, are very real ones.

Moreover, we might certainly call Dorian the dandy a 'virtuoso,' as his work relates to a type of labor without traditional product: his personality is an artful performance rather than a material good to be sold on the market. Italian Marxist Paolo Virno defines what he has called 'virtuosic labor' by the following:

> First of all, [virtuosic labor] is *an activity which finds its own fulfillment (that is, its own purpose) in itself*, without objectifying itself into an end product, without settling into a "finished product," or into an object which would survive the performance. Secondly, it is *an activity which requires the presence of others*, which exists only in the presence of an audience" (52).

This definition of a type of labor linked to the *performative* is particularly helpful in our understanding of the labor of selfhood, and, in Dorian's case, the labors of dandyism. While the product of the practice of dandyism is indisputably the self, that self never takes the form of an "end product." The self is never finished, but rather is continually worked on in a process of sustained performance. The portrait, as the double of Dorian's intensified personality, is the closest we have to a "finished product," but even it is subject to changes. What is more, the presence of an audience is integral to dandyism: one is inevitably a dandy *for* and *in relation to* others. Despite the dandy's best intentions to escape the logics of the market, he commodifies himself and his labor for a consuming public that figures him as its most distinguished member. This process closely resembles the process of self-commodification that the

man of letters undergoes in Benjamin's "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire":

> On the boulevard he spent his hours of idleness, which he displayed before people as part of his working hours. He behaved as if he had learned from Marx that the value of a commodity is determined by the worktime needed from society to produce it. In view of the protracted periods of idleness which in the eyes of the public were necessary for the realization of his own labor power, its value became almost fantastic (61).

Like the man of letters, the dandy spends hours of idleness on a commodity that, given all the time spent on its creation, is made all the more valuable. For both men, that commodity is ultimately the *self*, though while the man of letters is ultimately able to sell that self in book form, the dandy can only advertise his value (whether he is up for sale is irrelevant) in fleeting public appearances. Wilde and Baudelaire, as dandies *and* writers, mastered both forms of self-commodification, arriving at the perfect synthesis. The public performance of discrete selves is what distinguished them from the crowd and made them and their writings such hot commodities.

The labors of the dandy, which we have characterized as the intensification of personality, as virtuosic performance and as self-commodification, can lead, in the end, to boredom and dissatisfaction. Long after Dorian has slain Basil, the accomplice in his self-splitting, Dorian makes the following admission: "'I wish I could love,' cried Dorian Gray with a deep note of pathos in his voice. 'But I seem to have lost the passion, and forgotten the desire. I am too much concentrated on myself. My own personality has become a burden to me" (169). Dorian's mere reference to his

personality as an entity wholly apart from the self is already quite telling. Now striking a 'contemplative attitude' towards his own personality, Dorian falls directly into the description of the aestheticist condition that Lord Henry outlined earlier: "Suddenly we find that we are no longer the actors, but the spectators of the play. Or rather we are both. We watch ourselves, and the mere wonder of the spectacle enthralls us" (85). Indeed, if dandyism is akin to acting, Dorian's role as actor in the creation of his dandified persona is by this point very much in question. Furthermore, the acknowledgement of his personality as a "burden" reinforces the notion that Dorian's self-creation has deteriorated from a labor of self-love to mere *work*. Formerly a source of amusement and pride, Dorian's 'personality' becomes more than he can bear.

The tragedy, of course, is that Dorian cannot simply shake off that personality. It makes certain demands of him, and, in a sense, now exceeds his control. Given that the self that the dandy creates is always in relation to a public, Dorian's dandified image endures for that public even when the demands it presents are especially taxing: "He remembered how pleased he used to be when he was pointed out, or stared at, or talked about. He was tired of hearing his own name now" (180). More than this, however, the stubborn existence of the portrait is the best testament to the personality's persistence long after its novelty has worn off for its 'possessor.' Regenia Gagnier puts it best:

> The consequence of Dorian's insatiability, escalation of wants, and formal equivalencing of all desires in the cultivation of his personality is, or course, his portrait, where the shame of his consumption – his accumulated personality – is permanently, absolutely, recorded. At this price, he is given a beauty without limit, the scarcest commodity in a mortal world, that is his sole source of value to others, who commodify and consume him in turn" (Gagnier 111).

Dorian's portrait, the incontrovertible evidence of the commodification of his faculties of self-cultivation, is also the sign pointing to the reification of those faculties, their integration into a system (the market) that is beyond his control. As Lukács relates, the consequence of reification is that "the personality can do no more than look on helplessly while its own existence is reduced to an isolated particle and fed into an alien system" (Lukács 90).). Dorian's image as object of gay desire, as well as his discrete 'personality,' first comes into being in the locus of Basil and Lord Henry's desires. The transference of that image to Dorian's possession, and his subsequent work on the self at first seem to give him control over that image. In the end, however, it is clear that Dorian's split sense of self causes an inversion: the image begins to work back on him, now the representative of a system or agency that extends beyond his own control. Just as Dorian's painting was created within the demands of a libidinal economy, his image as dandy conforms to the ideologies of the *consumer* economy of *fin-de-siècle* England.

Dorian's conflict with his own representation, then, is indeed quite a perfect allegory for reification. Dorian's image, like the labor associated with it, "becomes something objective and independent of him, something that controls him by virtue

of an autonomy alien to man…" (Lukács 96). It is thus fitting that Dorian's portrait, the accumulation of his alienating self-labors, should lead to his downfall. It is, after all, the painting which seems to suggest to Dorian that he kill Basil: "Dorian Gray glanced at the picture, and suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over him, as though it had been suggested to him by the image on the canvas, whispered into his ear by those grinning lips" (132). A fascinating aspect of *Dorian Gray*'s narration is that a cause/effect relationship between Dorian's actions and their registration on the surface of the painting is problematized toward the end of the novel. For Dorian, it seems obvious that the painting constitutes a reflection of his conscience, visualizing the effects of his heinous actions on his soul. But at a certain point in the narration, the text implicitly raises the question of whether the painting is reacting to Dorian's actions or whether Dorian is reacting to his own image. The hints that point toward this ambiguity, I should add, were part of the 1891 additions. *Dorian Gray,* as I argue, can be read as an allegory for the creation of a commodified gay self, an allegory heightened by the replacement of erotic language surrounding its characters with more detailed descriptions of the dandy's lifestyle. If the second text thus ties gay subjectivity even more tightly to consumerism and the commodity, these additions are particularly telling. Wilde was interrogating the repercussions of his self-representation as the prototype for gay dandyism, and the *negative* repercussions of that self-representation were more clearly articulated in 1891 as the painting gains its malevolent autonomy. The painting reaches the height

of this autonomy in the final pages of the novel. Dorian, who has recently undertaken an attempt at atonement, looks into the "unjust mirror" for signs of a change:

> Vanity? Curiousity? Hypocrisy? Had there been nothing more in his renunciation that that? There had been something more. At least he thought so. But who could tell?...No. There had been nothing more. Through vanity he had spared her. In hypocrisy he had worn the mask of goodness. For curiousity's sake he had tried the denial of self. He recognized that now. (183, added lines beginning "No…." in 1891.)

Dorian's final interaction with the painting, the one that drives him to stab it and, in doing so, kill himself, is inspired by the repudiation of his good deeds by the apparent truth of the painting. Dorian "recognizes" his sins on the surface of the painting: but is it not possible that this is a misrecognition, the product of his his own guilty projections? Moreover, there is the possibility that the picture, a malevolent force, *lies*, registering only the immoral fluctuations in Dorian's personality in order to foment his fall from grace. Earlier, Dorian asks himself,

> Was there some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms, that shaped themselves into form and colour on the canvas, and the soul that was within him? Could it be that what that soul thought, they realized?-that what it dreamed, they made true? Or was there some other, more terrible reason (81).

The "more terrible reason" would indeed be that the painting does not change in relation to his soul, but that his soul changes in relation to the painting. This confusion of cause and effect, of subject and object, of self and image, is what drives the novel as an allegory of reification. It is also the confusion that colored Wilde's relationship to his public image and, by extension, to Alfred Douglas. Dorian's and Wilde's own self-creations and –representations, the products of a

labor which, it turns out, was *not* entirely their own, came back to haunt them, to *destroy* them. The commodification of Dorian's labor, like Wilde's, rendered him the reified witness to his own downfall.

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In is on such a tragic note that I would like to end. I framed this essay, after all, as a rebuttal of nostalgia aimed at Wilde and his cultural setting. Wilde, I hope to have shown, cultivated a subversive existence that anticipated the mass commodification of late capitalism, and, in the process, forged a gay subjectivity that stood in direct opposition to the prevailing power structures of his age. At the same time, it is absolutely necessary that we contextualize and historicize that subversion as a localized practice of the self. For today, after all, the narcissistic legacy of dandyism remains anything but subversive. The tragic elements of Wilde's later texts demonstrate a remarkable prescience. Although Wilde could never accurately predict the extent of his influence on the Western world's perception of 'the homosexual', his depiction of the dark and dangerous aspects of dandiacal self-creation resonate today in a world where gay identity is increasingly subsumed by a voracious consumer market. Wilde innovatively performed a distinct form of cultural work that, to a great extent, allowed gay identity to come into being as a *visible* mode of existence. Today, since all that is visible is commodified, that form of work defines the most predominantly exploited labor of the overdeveloped world. While we have something to learn from Wilde, it is not that we should simply emulate his actions.

Instead, we need to understand and appreciate the way that Wilde created such a powerfully original technology of the self, one that exploited and manipulated the fields of power, profit, discourse, and pleasure that surrounded him. At the same time, we should, like Wilde, be constantly aware of the *cost* of the decisions we make, the implications that each practice of selfhood brings with it. By doing so, perhaps we can resist a pervasive cultural trend that fetishizes commodified and sexualized 'individuality' as the telos of human existence.

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