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Strange Science

Investigating the Limits of Knowledge in the Victorian Age

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With a Foreword by Dame Gillian Beer

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CHAPTER 8

Immoral Science in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Suzanne Raitt

Near the beginning of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the painter Basil Hallward explains to Lord Henry Wotton exactly what it is about Dorian Gray that inspired him to paint such an exquisitely beautiful portrait. Basil explains, "[Dorian] defines for me the lines of a fresh school" of art, and his "personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style. I see things differently, I think of them differently. I can now recreate life in a way that was hidden from me before."[1] In the course of the narrative, Hallward's phrase "recreate life" turns out not to be simply a metaphor. After Dorian's wish that the picture might "grow old" while he himself remains "always young" (25), the picture literally "recreates" life, renewing Dorian's fading body and absorbing into itself the processes of biological and moral decay that would otherwise engulf the living man. The picture substitutes for Dorian's mortal body so that the biology of aging is expressed not in the man but in the image. The immortality of art—its arrest of time and change—is transferred to the flesh that in normal circumstances would droop and wither as the body made its inexorable way toward death.

This interchangeability between man and image, between the dynamic processes described by science and the eternal stasis so prized in portrait art, is the focus of this chapter. Nineteenth-century advances in

biological science—most significantly the development of cell theory in the 1840s, of which Oscar Wilde was aware[2]—had helped Victorian scientists understand the series of reparative mechanisms in the body that are designed to handle the toxicity and the waste products of the systems that sustain life: most importantly, cell metabolism and cell division.[3] Of course, the result of these processes was not immortality (although Freud fantasized that it might have been), but longevity.

Such advances informed a new interest in intervening in the rhythm of waste and repair, so that repair would outstrip or balance waste for as long as possible, for example by maintaining the body's health, and minimizing fatigue. As Tim Armstrong has noted, the same principles of thrift and efficiency—making use of every available material, even when it appeared inert or useless—that were used in the management of cities also applied to human biology,[4] and the "economy of the body," in Daniel Pick's words, became central to late Victorian social thought.[5] These biological models were enthusiastically taken up by writers on aesthetics as well as by scientists. Grant Allen, for example, novelist and aesthetician, used the concept in 1877 in *Physiological Aesthetics*, his inquiry into the nature of aesthetic pleasure: "The aesthetically beautiful is that which affords the Maximum of Stimulation with the Minimum of Fatigue or Waste."[6] Here art is aligned with the excess of stimulation over waste, or, as Allen put it earlier in *Physiological Aesthetics*, with "a state of high efficiency."[7] As Henry Adams put it, writing on the two laws of thermodynamics in 1910: "Matter indeed, is energy itself, and its economies first made organic life possible by thus correcting nature's tendency to waste."[8] Freud was fascinated by the idea of a world in which waste could be avoided and immortality guaranteed: "It may be . . . that [the] belief in the internal necessity of dying is only another of those illusions which we have created '*um die Schwere des Daseins zu ertragen*' [to bear the burden of existence]."[9]

Oscar Wilde also participated in this ongoing discussion about biological processes of renewal and their social implications. In his novel, however, he imagined a substitutive economy in which *art* might compensate for the limits of biology, entirely repairing the damages of life in all its ugliness. In effect, art "recreates" vitality, like a kind of magic medicine—or, as Wilde termed it, like an "immoral" science (17). By the end of the novel, this substitutive economy is exposed as a fantasy, and what might have seemed to be the stains of sin are revealed to be the inescapable marks of old age. Boldly, the conclusion posits biology as stronger than art; and art itself, when misapplied in this substitutive way, is exposed as merely a form of "immoral" science.

Wilde and Science

In recent years, a number of critics have explored the extent of Oscar Wilde's interest in science and suggested that scientific language, concepts, and discoveries played a significant role in the evolution of his art. Because so much of his life and work was devoted to defending aesthetic values, it might at first seem counterintuitive to think of Wilde in a scientific context. As Rita Felski has noted, however, "Though disdaining the rationalist claim of science, aestheticism was nevertheless deeply suffused by its organicist and pathological metaphors and by Darwinian notions of evolutionary development."[10] Further, as Philip E. Smith II has pointed out, "Wilde's knowledge of nineteenth-century science has been underestimated or misunderstood" by the majority of critics.[11] Michael Wainwright has claimed that "contradictory but contemporary scientific hypotheses informed Wilde's artistic practice" and has shown that *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in particular, is built around competing theories of heredity.[12] Similarly, Carolyn Lesjak, examining the affinities between nineteenth-century atomic theory and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, suggests that "nineteenth-century scientific thinking (and not just evolutionary biology), both in its methodological procedures and in its actual content, animates Wilde's aesthetic" and that "science as a discourse is very much at the center of the novel."[13] Implicit in all these critical analyses is the idea that Wilde's writing is deeply informed and shaped by his knowledge of science. I shall suggest, however, that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* goes even further than participating in a scientific discourse—it actually suggests that art is in fact a kind of science—but not one on which we should depend.

Wilde's early intellectual life was full of scientific inquiry. As Wainwright has shown, education at Oxford in the mid to late nineteenth century was newly focused on emerging sciences such as physiology and biology.[14] Wilde's commonplace book from his early years in Oxford in the 1870s reveals an interest in both psychology and biology, and a belief that the two were intimately connected. As John Wilson Foster has observed, "Wilde's Oxford notebooks [reveal] a surprising pleasure in science."[15] In an early entry Wilde observes, "There can be no knowledge of human nature without knowledge of the Laws of Mind, (Psychology) nor of the Laws of Mind without knowledge of the Laws of Life (Biology). / The science of society then rests on the science of life: sociology on Biology."[16] The commonplace books cite the work of contemporary Victorian scientists, including that of the physicist John Tyndall

and biologist T. H. Huxley. At this time he also explored the writings of Victorian biologist Herbert Spencer, whose work Wilde addresses in his student essay "Historical Criticism," which celebrates the "scientific method" above all others.[17] In fact, many of the ideas he explores in this early essay anticipate the central concerns of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The idea of determinism, for example, emerges in his reflection that "the very first requisite for any scientific conception of history is the doctrine of uniform sequence: in other words . . . that the past is the key of the future."[18] Wilde also addresses the idea of decay: "All created things are fated to decay—a principle which, though expressed in the terms of a mere metaphysical abstraction, is yet perhaps in its essence scientific."[19] Clearly, Wilde was deeply interested in the implications of scientific writing and the philosophy of science from an early age, and, as will be shown, this attraction later emerges in the implicit analogy he draws between the scientist and the artist in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The overlap between science and art is also reflected in Wilde's early intellectual environment, particularly through his relationship with Walter Pater, which fostered his sense that science and art might share a common language. Wilde met Pater, a fellow of Brasenose College, when he was still a student at Oxford in the fall of 1877.[20] Wilde was already fascinated by Pater's 1873 *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (in *De Profundis* he called it "that book which has had such strange influence over my life"), and there are numerous echoes of it throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.[21] As Billie Inman has shown, Pater was heavily influenced by the language and concepts of Victorian physiology: he predicted in 1889 that "for many years to come" the "enterprise" of the English language "may well lie in the naturalisation of the vocabulary of science. . . . The literary artist, therefore, will be well aware of physical science; science also attaining, in its turn, its true literary ideal."[22] In the conclusion to *The Renaissance* (1868), Pater describes combinations of "natural elements to which science gives their names" as lying behind "birth and gesture and death and the springing of violets from the grave": "Our life is but the concurrence," Pater writes, "of forces parting sooner or later on their ways."[23] The language and concepts of science lay behind even Pater's aestheticism, and they informed Wilde's own exploration of the supreme art of self-realization in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891). Art for Wilde had a transcendent value, but he also theorized that science could lead the individual man to perfection: "Now and then, in the course of the century, a great man of science, like Darwin; a great poet, like Keats; a fine critical spirit, like M. Renan; a supreme artist,

like Flaubert, has been able to isolate himself . . . and so to realise the perfection of what was in him, to his own incomparable gain, and to the incomparable and lasting gain of the whole world."[24] Artist and scientist were, in Wilde's view, both engaged in the art of self-exploration, self-actualization, and experimentation.

Science in Dorian Gray

The Picture of Dorian Gray introduces the reader to two scientist/artist figures: Dorian and Lord Henry. The latter, like the former, is neither an artist nor a scientist, but it is through him that the novel's discourse about influence as an artistic and scientific process is introduced and explicitly developed. In terms of his artistic prowess, Lord Henry thinks of himself as a kind of sculptor of the emotions:

> There was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence. To project one's soul into some gracious form, and let it tarry there for a moment . . . [Dorian] was a marvelous type, too . . . or could be fashioned into a marvelous type, at any rate. Grace was his, and the white purity of boyhood, and beauty such as old Greek marbles kept for us. There was nothing that one could not do with him. He could be made a Titan or a toy. (35–36)

Lord Henry imagines himself transforming Dorian as if he were a piece of marble, fusing with him in the process of re-creating him. But influence does not only flow one way. Musing on his relationship with Dorian, Lord Henry thinks: "There was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence. No other activity was like it. To project one's soul into some gracious form, and let it tarry there for a moment" (35); "To influence a person is to give him one's own soul" (17). His plan is "to dominate [Dorian]—[he] had already, indeed, half done so. He would make that wonderful spirit his own" (36). The ambiguity in the last phrase—making Dorian's spirit "his own" figures the young man both as a possession and as a quality (Dorian's spirit is also Lord Henry's spirit), and also signals the extent to which artistic creation, attraction, and mutual absorption are aligned in this novel. To be an artist is to create the thing you love, and in creating it, to change both it and oneself.

In addition to being an artist, however, Lord Henry occupies the role of what the novel terms an "immoral" scientist (17)—that is, a scientist

whose experiments change not only the subject, but also the experimenter. Lord Henry thinks of his influence over Dorian as an art (he sculpts his spirit and in the process makes it his own), but he also describes it as a scientific experiment: "It was clear to him that the experimental method was the only method by which one could arrive at any scientific analysis of the passions; and certainly Dorian Gray was a subject made to his hand, and seemed to promise rich and fruitful results" (58). In this scientific context, however, his relationship with Dorian is figured as distinctly immoral. Lord Henry later explains that influencing and merging with another person, as he does Dorian, is ethically suspect: "All influence is immoral—immoral from the scientific point of view. . . . The aim of life is self-development" (17). Lord Henry's experiment on Dorian falls short of his scientific ideals, then, precisely because "the lad was his own creation" (57), not only an experiment but also the artistic product of a relationship. The artist fuses with his art in the process of transforming it, but the "moral" scientist scrupulously avoids such contaminating influence. In immoral science, transforming the nature of the object of the experiment cannot be distinguished from the transformation of the scientist himself. In the relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian, art is the instrument of immoral science, and Lord Henry is its inaugural practitioner.

Dorian, like Lord Henry, also conflates art with science. Enamored of his own image, he turns himself into a portrait by wishing that the painting, rather than his body, might undergo the indignities of aging. When he first gazes at his own picture, he fears not the effects of sin but the effects of time on his beauty: "There would be a day when his face would be wrinkled and wizen, his eyes dim and colourless, the grace of his figure broken and deformed. The scarlet would pass away from his lips and the gold steal from his hair" (25). In response, he becomes the unchanging image he so loves, while the portrait suffers the ravages of decay: "Hour by hour, and week by week, the thing upon the canvas was growing old. It might escape the hideousness of sin, but the hideousness of age was in store for it" (122). The painting, then, both expresses and contains the biological wasting processes of the body, while Dorian embarks on a life undertaken as art.

However, like Lord Henry, Dorian also sees himself as a scientist who must manage the effects of an experiment gone horribly awry. He views himself as having unwittingly unleashed a complex scientific process, toying with the notion that his relationship with the picture is owing to some strange quirk of biochemistry. He wonders at one point whether

there may not be "some curious scientific reason" for what he calls the "horrible sympathy between him and the picture" (106). Wondering whether or not to pray that the "horrible sympathy . . . might cease," Dorian muses: "Was it really under his control? Had it indeed been prayer that had produced the substitution? Might there not be some curious scientific reason for it all? If thought could exercise its influence upon a living organism, might not thought exercise an influence upon dead and organic things?" (106). Dorian wonders if his effect on the picture was the result of a scientific experiment in which he, unwittingly, had exercised "influence" upon something inorganic. Lord Henry's self-styled "experiment" in influencing Dorian transforms flesh into art, body into marble, but Dorian's "scientific" undertaking works the other way: he exerts an influence on art that turns it into flesh, the painting into his own body. Lord Henry complains that to influence someone is to "give him one's own soul" (17), as he fears doing in the experiment and artistic creation that is his relationship with Dorian. If Lord Henry fears that the intensity of his influence over Dorian will somehow fuse the two of them, the danger for Dorian is even more menacing. In influencing the painting into its "horrible sympathy" (106) with himself, he literally "give[s] [his] own soul!" (17) As another immoral scientist, who, like Lord Henry, works primarily through influence, Dorian discovers soon enough that "when we thought we were experimenting on others we were really experimenting on ourselves" (59). When Dorian views the altered painting after the death of Sybil Vane, he feels that "his own soul was looking out at him from the canvas and calling him to judgement" (119). Dorian is simultaneously artist, scientist and experiment, instigator and victim of his desire for self-substitution.

The parallels Wilde draws in the novel between scientist and artist depend largely on the assumption that art and science share a conceptual framework. It is no coincidence, then, that the paradigm through which *Dorian Gray* explores the overlapping economies of "immoral" science and art originates in nineteenth-century understandings of the biology of human life. The rhythm of "waste and repair" that shapes Dorian's fantasy, with the picture repairing the waste of Dorian's aging body, was one of the key concepts in the new Victorian science of cell biology. Nineteenth-century scientists routinely refer to the rhythm of "waste and repair," or "waste and assimilation," which sustains life. Even as cells "waste," or wear out, new cells take over to repair the damage to the tissue, and the resulting equilibrium is essentially the biology of life. Herbert Spencer—one of the scientists whose work Wilde read at

Oxford—was one of the first to identify this rhythm, writing in 1864, "Repair is everywhere and always making up for waste."[25] Physician James Deane echoed him in 1869: "We have constantly in every human body a continual system of waste on the one hand, and on the other hand we have a perfect system of supply, going hand in hand together through all the stages of human life."[26] In 1900 E. B. Rosa wrote that the body "builds itself up and repairs waste."[27] Death was believed to result when the processes of assimilation or of repair could no longer keep up with the production of biological waste, a failure that was seen as inevitable in every living organism. As psychologist Henry Maudsley put it: "The common law of life is slow acquisition, equilibrium for a time, then a gentle decline that soon becomes a rapid decay, and finally death."[28] Pater also invokes the paradigm, writing in the conclusion to *The Renaissance*, a book that, as we have seen, Wilde loved, of the "perpetual motion" of the human body: "The passage of the blood, the waste and repairing of the lenses of the eye."[29] Here the body becomes an image for unceasing and self-sustaining movement, what Pater calls "that strange, perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves."[30] Just like the world, the body constantly makes and unmakes itself such that it becomes an image for both ephemerality and longevity, both transient and resilient.

As Norton Wise and Crosbie Smith have explained, "the discourse of work and waste" was central to late Victorian culture and its anxieties about decay and degeneration.[31] Most of *Dorian Gray*'s early reviewers also participated in this discourse, curiously extending the reparative metaphor beyond the fictional narrative, even while they remained skeptical of the novel's fantasy of reparation. Over and over again critics used terms such as "filth," "muck," and "decay" in their condemnation of the novel. Samuel Henry Jeyes, for example, wrote in *St James's Gazette*: "Not being curious in ordure, and not wishing to offend the nostrils of decent persons, we do not propose to analyse *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," adding that the text "draws its life from malodorous putrefaction" and "delights in dirtiness."[32] An unsigned review in the *Daily Chronicle* called it "a poisonous book . . . heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction," and another notice in the *Scots Observer* asks: "Why go grubbing in muck-heaps?"[33] Such language was informed by the pervasive anxiety about entropy and degeneration at the end of the century, which encouraged many social commentators to think of certain social groups—homosexuals among them—as themselves a form of waste or ordure. Cultural critic Max Nordau, for example, saw criminals, the insane, homosexuals, artists and city dwellers as the "refuse of civi-

lized peoples"; French physician Charles Féré referred in 1888 to the "impotent, the mad, criminals or decadents of every form" as "the waste-matter of adaptation"; and journalist F. A. McKenzie referred to "waste humanity," as if certain people were somehow themselves a kind of garbage, a sign of the inexorable wasting away of the world.[34] Henry Adams noted that humanity is the most wasteful of all the species: "Man does more to dissipate and waste nature's economies than all the rest of animal and vegetable life has ever done to save them."[35] The stigmatization of waste as a sort of universal pathology appears in turn-of-the-century psychoanalysis, especially Freud's theory of sexuality, where a vision of a productive, teleological sexuality is haunted, as Leo Bersani has argued, by the promise of a masochistic self-shattering.[36] In vilifying the book in these terms, then, reviewers were implicitly expressing their own revulsion not just at Wilde's art, but also at his body and its habits.[37]

Immoral Immortality

Unlike the critics, who associated the novel with waste and found it repulsive as such, the narrative of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* communicates a fascination with waste and extravagance, all the while balancing the illicit nature of this morbid fascination with the apparent "moral" of the book. Dorian's self-destructiveness intensifies as he becomes increasingly (and misguidedly) desperate in his pursuit of beauty after the portrait starts to change, and he begins to realize that the equilibrium between waste and repair that he had hoped to set up is ultimately unsustainable. His first action, after he makes his prayer to the portrait, is on the face of it entirely harmless: he falls in love with Sybil Vane. Lord Henry sees this as the beginning of Dorian's transformation: "Lord Henry watched him with a subtle sense of pleasure. How different he was now from the shy, frightened boy he had met in Basil Hallward's studio! His nature had developed like a flower, had borne blossoms of scarlet flame" (54–55). Dorian's search for sensation becomes perverse (and the picture starts to change) only after he abandons Sybil. The urban landscape through which he walks when he leaves her signifies his descent into a more sinister world, in which destructive (and possibly homosexual) forms of pleasure are conflated with working-class and slum life:

> Where he went to he hardly knew. He remembered wandering through dimly-lit streets, past gaunt black-shadowed archways and

> evil-looking houses. Women with hoarse voices and harsh laughter had called after him. Drunkards had reeled by cursing, and chattering to themselves like monstrous apes. He had seen grotesque children huddled upon doorsteps, and heard shrieks and oaths from gloomy courts. (88)

Here a classic 1890s depiction of nightmarish streets and degraded people is used to imply other, darker forms of pleasure than those that Dorian has hitherto explored. Although here and elsewhere Wilde's decadent prose aestheticizes the ugliness he embraces, the narrative also emphasizes that Dorian's gradual immersion in what he at first identifies as a new type of pleasure is in fact a regressive move into more primitive, even bestial modes of being. The "Hellenic ideal," advocated by Lord Henry at the opening of the novel (18), eventually becomes the "New Hedonism" (22), and Dorian's search for beauty becomes indistinguishable from a willed self-corruption.

The picture itself not only tracks this change but also starts to stimulate Dorian to seek his own decay. When he compares the wizened portrait to the beauty he sees in the mirror, the "very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his sense of pleasure. He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul" (128). The picture itself becomes a kind of addiction. In his fascination with the influence he can exert on this image of himself, Dorian starts deliberately to seek out sensations that will lead to self-transformation: "In his search for sensations that would be at once new and delightful, and possess that element of strangeness that is so essential to romance, he would often adopt certain modes of thought that he knew to be really alien to his nature, abandon himself to their subtle influences" (132). In changing himself, he also changes the portrait, experimenting endlessly and then returning to view the results of his sins: "He would sit in front of the picture, sometimes loathing it and himself, but filled, at other times, with that pride of individualism that is half the fascination of sin, and smiling with secret pleasure at the misshapen shadow that had to bear the burden that should have been his own" (140). Dorian's obsession with his influence over the picture to which, in some "curious scientific" manner (106), he has given his soul, exposes the immorality of his scientific endeavors, since influence, as Lord Henry explains, is incompatible with science (17).

If, as I have suggested, the economy of Dorian's experiment on himself is modeled on the biology of life, then Dorian's tragic end reflects

the gradual, but inevitable, decline of the body's ability to protect itself against its own waste. In Tim Armstrong's words, "'Waste,' like fatigue, signals the point at which the body and the machine cannot readily be reconciled."[38] Experiments on unicellular organisms in the 1890s had already confirmed the insight of doctors such as Henry Maudsley: "The products of organic decomposition are fatal to the organism, if not eliminated or counteracted, and the most virulent and fatal [are] those that are derived from the corruption of its own substance."[39] Similarly, the portrait, which was designed to absorb the decay of Dorian's depraved flesh, begins to remind him of what he had sought to repress. It becomes the embodiment of the waste his body has expelled but not destroyed, and thus becomes dangerous to the organism that paradoxically relies on its processes. The painting's "changing features showed him the real degradation of his life," and Dorian's successive fascinations with perfumes, music, jewels, embroidery, and ecclesiastical vestments are, as the novel tells us, merely "modes by which he could escape, for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times almost too great to be borne" (140). When the picture ceases to function as reparation and starts to become a reminder of guilt and mortality, Dorian quickly descends into paranoia, cycling rapidly through his series of obsessions as if he were trying to outrun his own inevitable decline: "He hated to be separated from the picture that was such a part of his life, and was also afraid that during his absence some one might gain access to the room, in spite of the elaborate bars that he had caused to be placed upon the door" (141). Far from being a protective mechanism, the portrait ultimately becomes the material trace of his inner and outer degradation, an image of what must be repudiated and expelled in order to sustain life. But Dorian, as artist and "immoral" scientist, cannot repudiate it, precisely because he is fused with the image he created, coextensive with his own experiment.

Tellingly, at this critical juncture a conventional scientist, in the shape of Alan Campbell, comes to the rescue. Campbell apparently performs a sort of miracle through science—to make Dorian's most glaring by-product of moral waste—Basil Hallward's murdered body—literally disappear, presumably through the application of vaporizing chemicals. Dorian, desperate to destroy Hallward's corpse, hails Campbell with relief: "Alan, you are scientific. You know about chemistry and things of that kind. You have made experiments. . . . All I ask of you is to perform a certain scientific experiment" (168). Dorian expects that Campbell will do the experiment without "turn[ing] a hair" (169), since for Campbell, the practice of science is not about the scientist

himself (as it is for Dorian), but about "increasing the sum of knowledge in the world, or gratifying intellectual curiosity, or something of that kind" (170)—or at least so Dorian would like to think. And although Campbell is "pale" when he finally returns from performing his ghastly work, he is "absolutely calm" (174). The horror he expresses in his subsequent suicide seems to derive as much from his discovery that Dorian could expose something dreadful in his past, and from his reluctance to have anything to do with Dorian, as from his experiences in the attic room with Basil Hallward's body (170–71). The strange science of Dorian's relationship to the portrait may have its uses, but conventional science—and the biology of mortality with which, in this novel, it is associated—win out in the end.

In *Dorian Gray*, then, we see the fantasy that art, when used as an "immoral" science, might prolong life. But that fantasy cannot last forever. The nineteenth-century scientists of waste and repair cited by Freud in his investigation of whether death is inevitable for all living things found that single-celled organisms could survive indefinitely only if they were protected from their own waste. Lorande Woodruff, professor of biology at Yale in the late 1800s, found that the "'slipper-animalcule,' which reproduces by fission into two individuals, persisted until at least the 3029th generation."[40] According to Freud, Woodruff was only able to obtain these startling results by continually providing fresh nutrients to each generation. Freud concluded that "if it is left to itself, [the animalcule] dies a natural death owing to its incomplete voidance of the products of its own metabolism."[41]

Similarly, in the novel, the portrait's mechanisms eventually prove inadequate to the task. Instead of being invigorated by looking at the portrait, by the end of the novel Dorian feels only fear when he thinks of it. Instead of protecting him, it seems to threaten him, to gather up all the detritus of his history and to mock him with it. Its very existence makes him vulnerable to exposure: "There was only one bit of evidence left against him. The picture itself—that was evidence. He would destroy it. Why had he kept it so long? Once it had given him pleasure to watch it changing and growing old. Of late he had felt no such pleasure. It had kept him awake at night. When he had been away, he had been filled with terror lest other eyes should look upon it" (222–23). Dorian is finally destroyed by what he can neither assimilate nor escape, the very by-products of his hateful and wasteful life.

Recontextualizing the novel in the discourse of nineteenth-century science suggests that it is about the inexorability of scientific truths

as much as about the self-destructive nature of pleasure. After all, the changes to the portrait reflect not just Dorian's malevolence, but also the transformations of age: "It had altered already, and would alter more. Its gold would wither into grey. Its red and white roses would die" (91–92). As Ellie Ragland-Sullivan notes, the portrait is not just "an allegorical depiction of an ethical state," but also "a caricatured picture of old age, seen from the slant of a skewed narcissism."[42] This picture of old age is not just disturbing for psychological reasons, it is also horrifying for existential reasons, serving as a metaphor for the inexorable nature of biological decay. Contemplating the picture, Dorian wonders "which were the most horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age" (128). Significantly, Dorian is not just a bad man, he is a bad *old* man, and his final attack on the painting is an expression of horror at his bodily decline as much as his moral failings: "It was his beauty that had ruined him, his beauty and the youth that he had prayed for" (220). Hidden in what is apparently a profoundly—if perversely—moral tale is an impotent rage against the inexorability of scientific reasoning and its results, and the impotence of art to protect against them. Waste and repair might be the rhythm of life; but eventually they become the signposts of death.

Notes

1. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 10. Subsequent references in the text are to this edition.

2. See Michael Wainwright, "Oscar Wilde, the Science of Heredity, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920* 54, no. 4 (2011): 495.

3. William Turner, writing in 1889 about the development of cell biology in the nineteenth century: "In 1839 Theodore Schwann published his famous researches into the structure of animals and plants, in which he announced the important generalization that the tissues of the animal body are composed of cells, or of materials derived from cells." Turner, "The Cell Theory, Past and Present," *Journal of Anatomy and Physiology* 24 (1890): 257.

4. Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 43.

5. Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848–c.1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 6.

6. Grant Allen, *Physiological Aesthetics* (London: Henry S. King, 1877), 39.

7. Ibid., 32.

8. Henry Adams, "A Letter to American Teachers of History," in *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* (1910; repr. New York: Macmillan, 1919), 215.

9. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (1920; New York: Norton, 1989), 53.

10. Rita Felski, "The Counterdiscourse of the Feminine in Three Texts by Wilde, Huysmans, and Sacher-Masoch," *PMLA* 106, no. 5 (1991): 1098.

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15. John Wilson Foster, "Against Nature? Science and Oscar Wilde," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (1993–94): 332.

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25. Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology*, 2 vols. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), 1:171.

26. James Deane, *An Essay on the Waste and Supply in the Human System* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1869), 56.

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28. Henry Maudsley, *Body and Will* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1883), 319.

29. Pater, conclusion to *The Renaissance*, 217.

30. Ibid., 219.

31. M. N. Wise, with the collaboration of Crosbie Smith, "Work and Waste: Political Economy and Natural Philosophy in Nineteenth Century Britain," pt. 2, *History of Science* 27 (1989): 421.

32. Samuel Henry Jeyes, "A Study in Puppydom," in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 68, 72, first published in *St James's Gazette* 20 (1890): 3–4.

33. Unsigned reviews of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Beckson, *Oscar Wilde*, first published in the *Daily Chronicle*, June 30, 1890; and *Scots Observer*, July 5, 1890: 72, 75.

34. Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: Heinemann, 1895), 337; Charles Féré, quoted in Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 32; F. A. McKenzie, *Waste Humanity: Being a Review of Part of the Social Operations of the Salvation Army in Great Britain* (London: Salvation Army, 1908–9), 20.

35. Adams, "A Letter," 216.

36. Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 29–50.

37. Many of the people who were identified as human refuse, however, fought back by reveling in their own liberation from the rigors of work and thrift. Wilde writes about this class in "The Soul of Man," describing them as "real men": "They are either under no necessity to work for their living, or are enabled to choose the sphere of activity that is really congenial to them, and gives them pleasure. These are the poets, the philosophers, the men of science, the men of culture—in a word, the real men" (3).

38. Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology*, 65.

39. Maudsley, *Body and Will*, 322.

40. See Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 56–57.

41. Ibid., 58.

42. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, "The Phenomenon of Aging in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: A Lacanian View," in *Memory and Desire: Aging in Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Kathleen Woodward and Murray M. Schwartz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 119, 124.