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PHILOSOPHICAL CONSISTENCY IN THE WORKS OF
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PHILOSOPHICAL CONSISTENCY IN THE
WORKS OF OSCAR WILDE

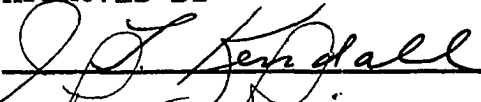
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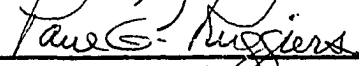
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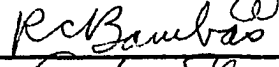
1967


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WORKS OF OSCAR WILDE


APPROVED BY











DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Any study of the works of Oscar Wilde seems peculiarly doomed to consider not only the art of the man but the man as well. His reported remark to André Gide that the drama of his life was that he had put his genius into his life and only his talents into his works¹ is at once definitive and prophetic. His life and his works were guided by two dominant concepts: Art for Art, and self-fulfillment through experience. The question must arise in consideration of the works whether or not Wilde combined these two concepts into a successful and consistent aesthetic. Rather than dealing with this question, previous criticism has tended to consider the works individually, giving but little attention to their relationship to one another or to Wilde's basic aesthetic or moral theories.

Wilde's erratic behavior, his striking of attitudes,

¹André Gide, Oscar Wilde, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), p. 16.

his mixture of compassion with contempt, his worship of beauty, mingled with base sensuality, make him very human and, I fear, very much more the subject for psychiatric study than for literary-critical examination. But Wilde is one of those artists whose personalities cannot be separated from their works. His lack of discipline in his life is reflected in the shortcomings of his art, and his great tragedy as an artist is his loss of control of both. Frank Harris suggests that Wilde would have been more accurate had he said that he had put his genius not into his life but into his talk.¹ But if one will accept Wilde at even approximately his evaluation of himself in "De Profundis,"² he can only regret a life shortened and made sordid through profligacy and an art often made shallow and uneven through indiscipline.

Wilde played brilliantly with art and society and with his ideas of them. Seldom has a philosophy of art been presented so lucidly or so amusingly as in his "Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist." The successful expression of any philosophy depends ordinarily upon clarity and cogency; style as such is secondary. In Wilde the success seems to lie rather more in the style than in the content-- though this is not to denigrate that content. In "The Soul

¹Frank Harris, Oscar Wilde (2 vols.; New York: Printed and Published by the author, 1916), II, 411.

²Oscar Wilde, The Letters of Oscar Wilde, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Rupert Hart-Davis Ltd., 1962), p. 466. Hereafter referred to as Letters.

of Man under Socialism," the philosophy of self-realization is weakened by Wilde's refusal to contend with the realities of life. Unless one can envision a world of total automation, Wilde's dismissal of the necessity of labor to sustain life with the pronouncement that machinery must "do anything that is tedious or distressing"¹ seems naïvely optimistic. But again, the idea of the work and its style make it as unique a work of sociology as the others are works of aesthetics.

"Played with" is a phrase which must be used in relation to the life as to the art of Wilde. It has been remarked that Wilde's great error was that he took himself too seriously as a Dorian Gray.² In other words, Wilde's life must be regarded--as Wilde himself must have regarded it--as one informed by art³ and itself a work of art. In the third act of The Importance of Being Earnest, Gwendolen remarks: "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing."⁴ Though superficially silly, the observation is, in small, a statement of Wilde's view not only of art but of life as well. It is not to accuse Wilde of in-

¹Oscar Wilde, The Works of Oscar Wilde, ed. G. F. Maine (New York: Dutton and Co., Inc., 1954), p. 1028. Hereafter referred to as Works.

²Morse Peckham, Beyond The Tragic Vision (New York: George Braziller, 1962), p. 319.

³Works, p. 922.

⁴Ibid., p. 359.

sincerity or lack of feeling to agree with Max Beerbohm's evaluation of the humility expressed in "De Profundis":

I think no discerning reader can but regard the book as the essentially artistic essay of an artist. Nothing seemed more likely than that Oscar Wilde, smitten down from his rosy-clouded pinnacle, and dragged through the mire, and cast among the flints, would be "diablement changé en route." Yet lo! he was unchanged. He was still precisely himself. He was still playing with ideas, playing with emotions. "There is only one thing left to me now," he writes, "absolute humility." And about humility he writes many beautiful and true things. And, doubtless, while he wrote them, he had the sensation of humility. Humble he was not. . . . [His humility] was the luxurious complement of pride.¹

Humility, genuine or not, is praised in "De Profundis," and the view of life as fulfilled only in tragedy and suffering appears elsewhere in Wilde's works and conversation: "Not happiness! Above all, not happiness. Pleasure! We must always want the most tragic" ² And in "De Profundis," as in conversation, he was fond of quoting the prisoner of Wandsworth who whispered, "I am sorry for you: it is harder for you than it is for the likes of us." ³ It is probably true, as Richard Le Gallienne suggested, that Wilde "rather enjoyed" his suffering. ⁴

The valuing of tragic suffering and the finding of pleasure in pain are hardly peculiar to Oscar Wilde, but

¹David Cecil, Max (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1965), pp. 124-125.

²Gide, p. 16.

³Letters, p. 495.

⁴Richard Le Gallienne, The Romantic Nineties (Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1925), p. 266.

they must be discussed here in relation to his life as to his works. His blunder into a hopeless libel suit and his failure to take advantage of the possibly deliberate lapse of police attention between the Queensberry trial and his own arrest to flee the country has puzzled his biographers. That a man convinced of the moral defensibility of his behavior or of the impotence of his opponent might misjudge a legal situation is not difficult to imagine; but that a man still convinced of his rightness while forcibly disabused of his misjudgment should merely await his execution is bewildering. Edmund Bergler theorizes that the basis of homosexuality is psychic masochism, that the homosexual is a homosexual because he seeks to gain punishment in some form, and that homosexuality's unacceptability to the community renders its practice a quite appropriate means not only to gain punishment and self-defeat but to deepen the sense of guilt as well.¹ Such a theory may well oversimplify the genesis of the disorder--it ignores those cultures, for example, in which inversion has existed without opprobrium--but it does fit and perhaps explains somewhat Wilde's insistence upon being apprehended when escape was possible. Further, it is noteworthy that at the very period in his life when he was most successful as an artist, he was also becoming increasingly careless and blatant in his degeneracy.

¹Edmund Bergler, Homosexuality: Disease or Way of Life? (New York: Hill and Wang, 1956).

This would suggest that, if Bergler's view is at all valid, Wilde could not accept the success he was so much enjoying.

Whatever Wilde's unconscious motives in his behavior, in "De Profundis" he praises suffering and the experiencing not only of humility but of humiliation as that which completes and deepens man, throwing the external world into healthier perspective and teaching him to value that which has genuine value:

I would not mind a bit sleeping in the cool grass in summer, and when winter came on sheltering myself by the warm close-thatched rick, or under the penthouse of a great barn. . . . The external things of life seem to me now of no importance at all.¹

That Wilde felt at least the "sensation of humility" is likely and is pertinent to his own view of his life. That he was within two years complaining to Robert Ross of the vin ordinaire furnished by his host in a Swiss villa² suggests some shallowness in his conversion. He says also of the fulfillment of the self through suffering:

To propose to be a better man is a piece of unscientific cant, to have become a deeper man is the privilege of those who have suffered. And such I think I have become.³

But neither his life nor his art following imprisonment demonstrates appreciably greater maturity or depth; in fact, there is little but decay, brightened only by brief flashes of his

¹Letters, p. 467.

²Ibid., pp. 788-789.

³Ibid., p. 489.

old brilliant flippancy in conversation or correspondence. Aside from the production of the "Ballad of Reading Gaol," Wilde as an artist was dead, and Wilde the man continued in degeneracy, bathed in self pity, and besieging all he knew for money. However, that Wilde could not successfully live the artistic life--that life informed by art and deepened by experience--cannot be taken as invalidating the concepts he presented. The sordidness of Wilde's last years has causes at best only slightly related to his aesthetic or moral views.

The facts of Wilde's last days and the apparent sham of his philosophizing are of little importance here and serve only to point up a distinction to be made. To pour one's genius into his life is, for the artist, to make life into art--to live a life informed by art. To take oneself too seriously as Dorian Gray is to strive to bring to life, like Galatea, a work of art. What does not fit the shape or is superfluous to the form--irrelevant fact--is like the scraps of marble abandoned by Pygmalion. To apply such words as "insincerity" or "hypocrisy" to Wilde--to whom style, not sincerity, matters--is to intrude standards into a situation where they will not apply. Art for the sake of Art is its own ethic; the concept of a soul broadened by experience and deepened by suffering--suffering being merely another form of experience--need appeal to no external law. These two ideals or concepts dominate the aesthetic as well as the personality

of Wilde. There are to be found in the works instances of apparent consent to conventional standards: no one ever questions the troublesome social rules operating in Lady Windermere's Fan; they are accepted, if grudgingly.¹ But the more genuine Wilde is to be found in the theoretical writings, The Picture of Dorian Gray, and in "De Profundis," where the need to please a general audience was less pressing. The question, again, must be whether or not Wilde operated with consistency in developing and presenting his philosophy. A consideration of certain of the works, principally "The Decay of Lying," "The Critic as Artist," "The Soul of Man under Socialism," The Picture of Dorian Gray, and "De Profundis" will provide some answer to the question. The three essays can be dealt with quite briefly for our purposes; the remaining two works require much fuller treatment.

"The Decay of Lying" appeared in the January, 1889, issue of Nineteenth Century. Cast as a dialogue between "Vivian and Cyril," the essay presents a kind of defense of art, arguing that nature's imperfection makes art necessary and that the human desire for expression is the very energy of life. Whereas Naturalism insists upon an art which presents life "as it is" and is thus in theory no art at all, but realism conquering art,² to Wilde it is art which creates

¹See Morse Peckham's article, "What Did Lady Windermere Learn?" College English, XVIII (October, 1956), 11-14.

²Works, p. 917.

reality, rather than being created by reality, and which in fact informs life: "Life is Art's best, Art's only pupil."¹

If life is artistically a failure, as asserted later in "The Critic as Artist,"² and art has no obligation save to itself,³ then not only is art's only obligation not to physical reality⁴ or to truth (which is really a "matter of style"⁵), but it is not required to concern itself with morality.⁶ Art's perfection is within; and that it expresses nothing but itself Vivian-Oscar identifies as the "principle of my new aesthetics."⁷ If art in such an aesthetic is, as Ojala suggests, a matter of placing form above content,⁸ and if, in matters of great importance, it is style, not sincerity, that matters, then nature's or life's imitation of art is successful if it emulates the form of art; and to make of life a work of art one needs operate only by those canons which regulate art itself, troubling not at all about morality but about a perfection unrelated to it. This sepa-

¹Ibid., p. 922.

²Ibid., p. 974.

³Aatos Ojala, Aestheticism and Oscar Wilde (2 vols.; Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuren Kirjapainon Oy., 1954), I, 19.

⁴Works, pp. 913, 915.

⁵Ibid., p. 920.

⁶Ibid., p. 913.

⁷Ibid., p. 926.

⁸Ojala, I, 18.

ration of art from ethics or morality marks a departure from the aesthetic socialism of Ruskin and the "Objectivists."¹

In "The Critic as Artist," another dialogue, published in Lippincott's Magazine in July and August of 1890, "Gilbert and Ernest" discuss literature as that which can bring beauty and emotion to one in ways that experience cannot, and the critic as he who extends and enriches the scope of art. All this is academic enough, but another note of what convention must call moral irresponsibility is sounded--one which harmonizes with the suggested art-for-art's-sake ethic of "The Decay of Lying." At one point Gilbert remarks:

What is termed sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colorless. By its curiosity Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism it saves us from monotony of type.²

It is noteworthy that "The Critic as Artist" appeared in the same year as Dorian Gray with its gospel of amoral self-fulfillment. But this amorality is not merely a philosophy of sensation or of unbridled lust; it cannot be separated from Wilde's developed moral-aesthetic view: a life of self-fulfillment is a life informed by art, a work of art itself; and, ". . . the real artist is he who proceeds not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion. . . . Form is the beginning of things."³

¹Ibid., I, 90.

²Works, p. 962.

³Ibid., p. 991.

The vision of a utopia in which individualistic self-realization is possible is presented in "The Soul of Man under Socialism," published in the Fortnightly Review of February, 1890. Here all the problems and duties of life are subordinated to the seeking of self-development and fulfillment. As I have suggested, the economics and sociology of the piece cannot be called sophisticated, but the view of Utopia is no more inane than most such views and its concept of human fulfillment is probably nobler. The means advocated is that of liberation from all those forces and things which restrict the individual and prevent his becoming all that he might be. Altruism, labor for survival, property, and external authority are the major burdens upon the soul that would be free.

Altruism would be unnecessary because one would not be distracted by the suffering of others. General prosperity will make the impulse to charity obsolete:

The chief advantage that would result from the establishment of socialism is, undoubtedly, the fact that socialism would relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others, which, in the present condition of things, presses so hardly upon almost everybody.¹

The poor's burden of laboring just to survive keeps them from their potential Individualism, and, ". . . amongst them there is no grace of manner, or charm of speech, or civilization or culture, or refinement in pleasures, or joy

¹Ibid., p. 1018.

of life."¹ Relieved of their burden, the poor, in pursuing that which gives pleasure or satisfaction, could practice true individualism and self-fulfillment.

Even as the poor man is burdened by his poverty, so is the rich man burdened by his property or his power. To Wilde an important part of the gospel of Jesus concerns liberation from this burden, and this, to him, is the message conveyed by the account of the rich young Jew who is told to sell all that he has by way of opportunity to substitute true riches for false ones.² The greatness of such as Julius Caesar and Marcus Aurelius was limited by the cares and insecurities of power which limited their development.³

External authority, be it that of state, church, or public opinion, or the pressures of family responsibility, would be removed, and thus,

it will be a marvelous thing--the true personality of man--when we see it. It will grow naturally and simply, flowerlike, or as a tree grows. It will not be at discord. It will never argue or dispute. It will not prove things. It will know everything. And yet it will not busy itself about knowledge. It will have wisdom. Its value will not be measured by material things. It will have nothing. And yet it will have everything, and whatever one takes from it, it will still have, so rich will it be. It will not be always meddling with others, or asking them to be like itself. It will love them because they will be different. And yet while it will not meddle with others, it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is. The personality of

¹Ibid., p. 1019.

²Ibid., pp. 1024-1025.

³Ibid., p. 1021.

man will be very wonderful. It will be as wonderful as the personality of a child.¹

Art's share in this freedom is obvious: with the elimination of the authority of government, church, and public opinion--with its voice, journalism--the artist can develop and progress, perfecting both his art and himself. Such perfecting is the artist's duty. The public's duty is to "make itself artistic."²

In the essay Wilde again pursues both the philosophy of self-fulfillment and that of amorality in behavior: "Man may be bad without ever doing anything bad. He may commit a sin against society, and yet realize through that sin his true perfection."³ However, the theme of tragic suffering as necessary to fulfillment is not only absent, it is attacked. Individualism expressing itself through joy is the objective, and "pain is not the ultimate mode of perfection. It is merely provisional and a protest."⁴ That part of the Christian message which preaches perfection through suffering is dismissed as medieval and made passé by the Renaissance and what has succeeded it.⁵

These essays, as well as the novel, are the work of a

¹Ibid., p. 1023.

²Ibid., p. 1029.

³Ibid., p. 1025.

⁴Ibid., p. 1042.

⁵Ibid., p. 1041.

successful man, one whom life has not touched too deeply or roughly. One can assume that until his friendship with Alfred Douglas and his subsequent downfall Wilde never suffered in any real sense. By his talent and his charm he won the admiration and liking of most he encountered. His early views of life and art are intelligent and brilliantly expressed without being profound. Such a man may sense tragedy without understanding or really feeling it. He may sentimentalize human suffering as he may sentimentalize love or guilt without feeling them. The Picture of Dorian Gray is an attempt to translate theory into action, to make the philosophy of the artistic life incarnate, and to relate tragic suffering to the development of that life. It is here that the great flaw of the novel may lie. Nothing in Wilde's known experience previous to his fall would have enlightened him as to tragedy, and his genius was not of the sort that perceived the deeper experiences of others. It would be an oversimplification to suggest that had Wilde written his novel after his own tragedy it might have been a better piece in every respect, but aside from the plays he is often best remembered for the "Ballad of Reading Gaol" and "De Profundis," both composed after deep suffering. And of the plays, it is noteworthy that the best of them, The Importance of Being Earnest (1895), was written quickly and with uncharacteristic discipline, in the consciousness of pressing catastrophe at the hands of Queensberry and the threat of bank-

ruptcy. Wilde came to experience tragedy; that he lacked the strength to perfect his art, or himself, after the experience is hardly a sign of singular weakness or degeneracy. Only a man and artist of heroic strength could have translated such bitter suffering into perfect art or perfect life. But in the "Ballad" and "De Profundis" Wilde came to express tragedy as he had never known or expressed it before. If, then, we divide Wilde's works into two unequal parts--those preceding disaster and those following it--we have first the body of his poetry, often imitative and mawkish; the essays, which are brilliant intellectual exercises; the plays, whose comedic or stylistic genius is often marred by failure to deal with the problems presented in them; and the novel. The works following imprisonment strike the reader as projections of genuinely felt tragic experience and perception as the earlier works do not. Whereas Dorian Gray with its basically tragic structure is the work of an emotionally shallow and undisciplined artist, "De Profundis," whatever its lack of relevance to later biographical fact, and the "Ballad" are the works of an artist who has suffered and has understood his suffering.

CHAPTER II

THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

The Picture of Dorian Gray first appeared in the July, 1890, issue of Lippincott's Monthly Magazine. Reaction to the novel was varied. The St. James Gazette of June 24 advised its readers to "chuck Dorian Gray into the fire," while The Scots Observer accused its author of "grubbing in muck heaps" and of being able to write "for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph boys." Walter Pater, though qualifying his praise, held the work to be a "beautiful creation."¹ St. John Ervine has more recently tempered praise even further by observing that Dorian Gray "contains some good writing, but more that is terrible."² Criticism of the day centered not upon the author's style but upon those questions of morality posed or suggested by the book. Late Victorian England did not react positively to the disturbing story punctuated by outrageous aphorisms.

¹Frances Winwar, Oscar Wilde and the Yellow Nineties (New York and London: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1940), p. 169.

²St. John Ervine, Oscar Wilde: A Present Time Appraisal (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1951), p. 125.

As often happens with condemned literature, however, such unkindness as was expressed by critics was softened by the financial success of the work. The personal malice of critics, noted by Wilde in his epistolary defense of the book,¹ has disappeared and been replaced by more dispassionate evaluations. Public indignation, as well as wide public interest, has likewise given way, and The Picture of Dorian Gray has found a very minor but continuing popularity.

Aside from Wilde's glittering language and paradox there is little in the book that is unique. It is in fact a potpourri of elements borrowed from other authors. Balzac's Peau de Chagrin provided the concept of an object exterior to the soul receiving the effects of the soul's corruption. A Rebours, Huysmann's account of the perverse Des Esseintes, suggested much of Dorian's experimentation with the senses: Chapter XI is, in effect, borrowed from A Rebours. Oscar Maurer suggests that the picture motif was prompted by an article, "The Philosophy of Yourself" by George Augustus Sala, which urges the contemplation of one's image in the looking-glass and in periodically taken photographs as a means of taking stock "of the divinity remaining" in his features.² The almost-living portrait probably de-

¹Letters, p. 260.

²Oscar Maurer, "A Philistine Source for Dorian Gray," PQ, XXVI (January, 1947), 84.

rives directly from C. R. Maturin's Melmoth the Wanderer. Whatever the immediate sources of the novel, its Gothic elements recall Poe and its suggestions of corrupt sensuality echo Baudelaire. It is a truism that Wilde was not original either in style or matter.

Despite his habitual denial of any place for morality or moral judgments in art, Wilde insisted that Dorian Gray is a story with a moral:

And the moral is this: all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment. . . . Dorian Gray, having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure, tried to kill conscience, and at that moment kills himself. . . . Yes: there is a moral which the prurient will not be able to find in it, but which will be revealed to all those whose minds are healthy.¹

But is it conscience that Dorian Gray kills? Dorian refers to his portrait not only as his conscience but as his "soul-life,"² a soul made hideous by the sins of the body. Dorian is not, in fact, so concerned with conscience or soul as such, but with the discovery of sin and the ugliness manifested by his portrait. Wilde's own lack of consistency makes it possible to insist that Dorian's conscience--still in its usual place--is one thing, while his soul, now present in the portrait, is another.

Conscience, though dulled, begins to affect Dorian's behavior in Chapter XIX when he abandons Hetty Merton rather than bring her a corrupt soul. He later denies the action

¹Letters, p. 260.

²Works, p. 167.

as good and regards vanity as its only motive. To question or endorse Dorian's intellections on the matter is to engage in debate as to whether any generous action is ever genuinely altruistic or is merely done for the gratification of the doer. However, Dorian's view that the fullness of experience includes the denial of self¹ is in keeping with that gospel of self-fulfillment learned from Lord Henry. Whatever the motive, there is an urge to good followed by Dorian's destruction of his soul-life as a loathesome thing which haunts him.

The subsequent restoration of the portrait to its original beauty makes little sense if it has functioned as his conscience: the desire to destroy conscience--the sense of sin--is hardly a desire to purify it. If, on the other hand, the portrait is the soul, and fearful hatred of the soul which is stained causes its destruction, its restoration suggests its purification and therefore salvation for Dorian. The restored portrait presents a puzzling ending to the novel, and it is generally ignored except as a statement that Dorian is no longer beyond human limitation.²

¹Ibid., p. 166.

²A cogent interpretation of the role of the portrait as active "hero" of the novel is presented in Epiphanyo San Juan's recent book, The Art of Oscar Wilde (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 49-73. But concerning its restoration he can only quote Morse Peckham's suggestion that "the end results of Dorian's life are a ruined body which is continuous with his personality and his society, and a work of art which will symbolize forever his power to explore the hell of reality." Tragic Vision, pp. 318-319.

There are good reasons for ignoring it: if the novel is of a piece, if the movement and view are consistent throughout, the suggestion of orthodox redemption is an embarrassment. Lord Henry tells Dorian in Chapter II, "Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us. . . . The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the thing it has forbidden to itself" ¹ Dorian strangles no impulses and resists no temptations, but his soul is poisoned and grows sick. It is only in an attempt to destroy the corrupted soul, stained by the sins which he has committed, that purity is regained. Dorian, who cannot bear the idea of his soul's being hideous, ² restores its beauty through loathing and fear of his sins, not through the commission of them. Whatever Lord Henry's statement that the soul is cured by the senses ³ might mean, it has no application to Dorian, whose career of soul-curing makes him morose, nervous, and confused.

Even as the plays, for all their brilliance, will seldom stand analysis in regard to psychological realism, which is sacrificed for the sake of melodrama or epigram, the novel suffers from a lack of philosophical and artistic integrity. If Dorian is damned or eternally dead at the

¹Works, p. 29.

²Ibid., p. 82.

³Ibid., p. 31.

end, why does his portrait, which revealed to him "his own soul,"¹ not reveal damnation or death? If the soul is purified, why is its purification not the result of Dorian's diverse experience rather than his hatred of its record? If it is perfected, why does it not have greater beauty than before? The end results of Dorian's life of experience, including his recognition and hatred of his sins, is the death of his body and the transformation of his soul-picture not to some perfected, and therefore more beautiful, state but to its original state, "a portrait . . . in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty."² It is as if Adam's sons, following the Fall and the whole process of redemption, had been simply returned to man's original state, neither ennobled nor transfigured. A constant element of traditional tragedy is the raising up or improvement of the hero in some sense: Oedipus ends a better man than he begins; Dorian appears to end exactly as he begins, at least in any usual sense of perfection or redemption.³ As Professor Spivey observes, "[Wilde's] ideal of salvation in the book is at best only shadowy."⁴ Certainly Wilde's own re-

¹Ibid., p. 88.

²Ibid., p. 167.

³For further discussion see Arthur Nethercot's "Oscar Wilde and the Devil's Advocate," PMLA, LIX (September, 1944), 833-850.

⁴Ted Spivey, "Damnation and Salvation in The Picture of Dorian Gray," Boston University Studies in English, IV, No. 3 (Autumn, 1960), 162.

marks upon his own works are seldom illuminating, as they are commonly flippant or mystifying--possibly because of his imperfect understanding of his own creations.

Regardless of the precise nature of the salvation involved, the important fact for our purpose is that the novel does present a pattern of temptation, fall, and redemption. Very much to the point too are Wilde's characteristic lack of discipline and incompleteness of conception which so often mar his works. The parallels in The Picture of Dorian Gray to structure and character in other literature of redemption make evident its author's intention to present a tale of fall and salvation. To assume otherwise is to attribute such parallels to chance.

Obviously one cannot classify Dorian Gray with such works as Paradise Lost, The Divine Comedy, or with that briefer but superior novel, Billy Budd; and one of the principal obstacles to such classification is its flawed and inadequate conception. In examining any of the greater tragedies,¹ one finds a wholeness, a unity of both character and structure in which the Aristotelian criteria of necessity and probability are met. Each element is complete in itself

¹I will use "tragedy" in a somewhat restricted sense to mean that structure wherein a hero is tempted, falls because of a flaw, gains in misery what Aristotle calls "recognition," and in the process gains salvation or nobility surpassing his original state. The terms of Dante's privileged tour of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven throw him outside this definition, but his movements and much of his experience parallel those of the tragic hero.

and part of a greater completeness. In Dorian Gray, as in Wilde's plays, incidents and motivations often have a floating--or at least disconnected--quality which damages or even ruins his works. Were this disunity not characteristic, the friendly critic might insist that Wilde was not the first writer to be compromised by the pressures of commissioned publication in a monthly magazine. It is more realistic, if unkind, to insist that in the creation of Dorian Gray Wilde lost control of his concept, if it was ever clearly defined, and therefore of those elements intended to constitute a tale of redemption, producing instead a flawed work.

There is in Dorian Gray a God, an Adam and a Satan, an Eve and even a Beatrice, a Fall, a repentance, and a redemption; but none of these characters or elements is adequately conceived or controlled, and the resulting work is, if not a total fiasco, at least a partial one. Leaving aside such excellences as the novel possesses, I propose to examine it as a flawed novel of redemption, comparing and contrasting those elements which parallel or seem to imitate various works more artfully executed, and pointing out wherein the novel fails to parallel their success. Obviously a consistent pattern of absolute parallels among the discussed works cannot be demonstrated, because not all the works contain all the considered elements; for example, there is no Eve or Beatrice in Billy Budd (except perhaps in some veiled psychological sense) and no central, func-

tioning arch-tempter in The Divine Comedy. What matters for us is the success or failure in the use of such elements in The Picture of Dorian Gray.

Adam, in Paradise Lost, appears before the Fall to be not only a figure of almost divine beauty--"to heav'nly spirits bright/Little inferior,"¹ with "fair large front . . . and hyacinthine locks"²--but one whose "harmless innocence" causes even Satan to melt.³ He is Man in his noblest and happiest state. The earth is his and all contained therein. He is without sin or mortality and is in fact ignorant of their existence. He knows that he ought not do the one thing displeasing to God, the one thing which will bring death, "whate'er death is,/Some dreadful thing no doubt";⁴ but beyond grasping this "one easy prohibition"⁵ and the duty of tending the trees of Eden, Adam lacks real moral sense. He is Man as Man would wish to be, possessing untroubled innocence. He is the embodiment of the goodness of which Man has always dreamt and towards which Man has occasionally struggled.

The mythic Adam, by other names, has appeared fre-

¹John Milton, Paradise Lost, Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. Merrit Y. Hughes (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1957), Bk. I, ll. 361-362.

²Ibid., IV, 300-301.

³Ibid., IV, 388-389.

⁴Ibid., IV, 425-426.

⁵Ibid., IV, 432.

quently. In Melville's Billy Budd we encounter Adam as the "handsome sailor." Like Adam, Billy possesses great physical beauty. Besides being "Welkin eyed"¹ and having an "as yet smooth face all but feminine in purity of natural complexion," he is

cast in the mould peculiar to the finest physical example of those Englishmen in whom the Saxon strain would seem not at all to partake of any Norman or other admixture, he showed in face that humane look of reposeful good nature which the Greek sculptor in some instances gave to his heroic strong man Hercules. But this again was subtly modified by another and pervasive quality. The ear, small and shapely . . . the curve in mouth and nostril . . . above all something in the mobile expression, and every chance attitude and movement . . . indicated a lineage in direct contradiction to his lot.²

Of Billy's purity Melville provides a full measure of information. Allowing certain possible departures from respectability on Billy's part (and that of seamen in general), he insists that such proceed not from viciousness, but from

exuberance of vitality after long constraint; frank manifestations in accordance with natural law. . . . Billy in many respects was little more than a sort of upright barbarian, much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been ere the urbane serpent wriggled himself in his company.³

This purity Melville attributes to Billy's isolation from the corrupting forces inherent in civilization: the pres-

¹Herman Melville, Billy Budd and Other Prose Works, The Works of Herman Melville (16 vols.; London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1924), XIII, 14.

²Ibid., p. 15.

³Ibid., pp. 16-17.

ence of "certain virtues pristine and unadulterate" in any contemporary man seem "exceptionally transmitted from a period prior to Cain's city and citified man."¹ Furthermore we are told by the captain of the Rights of Man that Billy joins with this natural goodness the capacity to make peace,² a capacity bound up with his very beauty and purity of soul.

Besides approaching Adam in virtue and beauty, Billy almost matches him in what can only be called naïveté. He is undisturbed by impressment and its attendant unpleasant-ries, and more important, he cannot believe that Claggart is his enemy--despite the Raphael-like admonitions of the Dansker--and to the very last fails to grasp that Claggart has set out deliberately to destroy him. If Adam's major flaw is uxoriousness, Billy's is an excessive goodness--goodness and purity of such apparent limitlessness that they make him incapable of conceiving of evil. He is in this respect even more obtuse than Adam, who can at least grasp angelic warnings.

Dorian Gray resembles both Adam and Billy Budd in that he is introduced as the embodiment of both beauty and purity of soul. He is a "young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose leaves," with his "finely curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold

¹Ibid., p. 17.

²Ibid., p. 10.

hair."¹ As for his character,

there was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth's passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world.²

His only faults, we gather, are traces of petulance and absent-mindedness.³ Despite considerable intelligence and an obviously good education, he has lived a totally unexamined life and is oblivious to his own nature until Basil paints his soul and Lord Henry explains it to him. Although young--he is not yet of age--he is in most ways sophisticated and has obviously spent a considerable time in that citified society of which Melville speaks and which Wilde represents as brilliantly cynical. Yet the reader is asked to accept him as not only pure but naïve.

Given the frame, or world, of Milton's Adam, most readers can accept primal innocence and excuse apparent obtuseness as unavoidable: where would Adam have learned the difference between good and evil? His world and his nature are so constructed as to exclude any necessity for distinguishing one from the other, or even of the existence of evil. He is not obliged to confront or deal with evil until the urbane serpent wriggles himself into his company. Such difficulty as readers have in accepting Adam arises

¹Works, p. 19.

²Ibid., p. 27.

³Ibid., pp. 27-28.

from the limitations of human nature and human experience-- both of the reader and of the author. Neither Milton nor his audience have ever encountered such complete nobility and purity as are attributed to Adam. But again, given the kind of universe and the kind of recent creation the myth presents, we accept Adam and Eden, not with such interest as we feel in Satan perhaps, but with as much suspended disbelief as we can muster. Even in the more recognizable world of Billy Budd we can more or less accept the picture of happy innocence maintained by ignorance and separation from a complex and corrupting society. Like Adam, Billy does not quite come to life; but as in Paradise Lost the problem is not so much with the concept or the artistry as with the foreignness of the concept to human experience. Although Adam and Billy are not altogether real to us, their characters are largely consistent with the donnés. It is neither Milton's nor Melville's fault that human beings can understand Hell better than they can understand Heaven.

In Dorian Gray the problem is rather different. Dorian's just-born air cannot be explained by unique nature, ignorance, or isolation. If Wilde had in mind a primal innocence, he ought logically to have placed his hero, like Miranda, on a desert island. Instead, Wilde's Adam is a cultivated young man whose wealth, rank, and charm have allowed him to move among privileged dilettantes in one of the world's more cosmopolitan capitals. London society in

the last decades of the nineteenth century was neither so cynical nor so witty as Wilde pictures it; however, Dorian lives not in a real London but in an artfully created one brimming with lightly regarded adulteries and casually uttered bon mots. Further, despite his great physical beauty, he has apparently never put it to use for selfish gratification. If Dorian were a carefully chaperoned maiden, his character might be rather more consonant with human experience; but in a young man of broad education and considerable social experience, this character is incredible--unless one is to judge him an idiot, which he obviously is not.

The problem of verisimilitude shadows not only the figure of Dorian but the plot and its motivations. Dorian's relationships with Basil, Lord Henry, Sybil Vane, and Hetty are all inadequately or carelessly developed. St. John Ervine's remark that Dorian, Henry, and Basil are all plainly pederasts¹ is probably valid, but it is not widely illuminating and does little to humanize or vivify the characters. The lack of reality in the novel lies not so much with the nature of the conception or of the mise en scène, as may be argued in regard to the incredibility of Dorian's innocence; it lies rather in the nature of the artist--one whose talents were too often spent upon the creation of melodrama, both in his life and in his works. The shattered Wilde who could write in "De Profundis," "A man's very highest moment is, I

¹Ervine, p. 127.

have no doubt at all, when he kneels in the dust, and beats his heart, and tells all the sins of his life,"¹ then return to that life to the extent that health and finances allowed, is the same Wilde to whom the emotional surface drama mattered far more than any human reality underlying it. This is what melodrama is; and what makes melodrama bad art is its unacceptability in the light of human experience.

The most artfully drawn character in Dorian Gray is that of Lord Henry Wotton. Although it can be urged that all the major characters of the novel are aspects of the author, Lord Henry is immediately recognizable as the charmingly cynical Oscar Wilde. The success of this characterization is not due so much to artistic discipline or insight into the appropriate psychology of a fictional character as it is to the fact that in Lord Henry he is dealing with perhaps the only real human being to appear in his works--himself. The result of this projection into Dorian's tempter is a figure which can be compared to Milton's Satan and Melville's Claggart. This is something of an accomplishment in one whose characterizations are generally flat when they are not merely silly.

The creation of a heroic tempter demands a high degree of verisimilitude to human psychology; but more than this, it demands a capacity for combining evil with beauty and criminality with grandeur. The Satan of Paradise Lost

¹Letters, p. 502.

is at no time the repulsive devil of popular imagination. He suffers loss of stature and beauty, but there are few fictional heroes who are so appealing as the Satan of the first four books. His attractiveness, his remorse, and his struggles have given some the impression that he may after all be the true hero of the piece. Surely the pallid Adam is never so close to the human heart as is Satan when, having been forever exiled from God's presence by his hopeless rebellion, he defies God still:

All is not lost; the unconquerable Will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield,¹

and expresses the experientially valid determination to spite God and frustrate his will:

To do aught good never will be our task,
But ever to do ill our sole delight,
As being the contrary to his high will
Whom we resist. If then his Providence
Out of our evil seek to bring forth good,
Our labor must be to pervert that end,
And out of good still to find means of evil.²

In the first two books, Satan is a fallen king but still very much a king, with "monarchal pride"³ and majestic language. We can recognize human deviousness in his machinations during the demonic council of Book II and human remorse, joined with masochistic persistence, in the great address to the sun.

¹Milton, I, 106-108.

²Ibid., I, 159-165.

³Ibid., II, 428.

As Satan pursues his plan there is a progressive diminution from grandeur to bestial smallness. His first announced loss of stature and beauty, aside from the dulling of brightness by exile, occurs in his assuming the guise of a "stripling cherub"¹ in order to pass unrecognized by Uriel. Upon entering Eden itself, he takes the shape of a cormorant--the voracious and ugly "crow of the sea."² Then in order to move unnoticed, he counterfeits the shapes of various of ". . . the sportful herd/Of those fourfooted kinds" ³ In order to poison Eve's dreams, he becomes "squat like a toad."⁴ Upon discovery by Ithuriel and Zephon, he starts up "in his own shape,"⁵ but his former subordinates fail to recognize him except as "one of those rebel spirits adjudged to Hell"⁶ and despite his arrogance tell him:

Think not, revolted spirit, thy shape the same,
Or undiminish'd brightness, to be known
As when thou stood'st in Heaven upright and pure;
That Glory then, when thou no more wast good,
Departed from thee, and thou resemblest now,
Thy sin and place of doom obscure and foul.⁷

For the actual seduction of Eve Satan enters the serpent,⁸

¹Ibid., III, 636.

²Ibid., IV, 196.

³Ibid., IV, 396-397.

⁴Ibid., IV, 800.

⁵Ibid., IV, 819.

⁶Ibid., IV, 823.

⁷Ibid., IV, 835-840.

⁸Ibid., IX, 179-190.

thus completing his diminution from angelic majesty to bestiality. The process is symbolic of the goal he pursues: his appearance and stature become outward and visible signs of inward character. At the moment of success he assumes the serpent shape; this he has freely chosen, even as he has freely chosen the pursuit of his goal. The purpose once achieved, however, he again becomes a serpent--not quite by direct free will but by election of the same sort by which Dante's inhabitants of Hell or Heaven have found their place: they are where they are because that is where they want to be. In other words, Satan's serpent shape is at once a punishment of God and a functioning symbol of what he is and wants to be.

Even as Satan is more engaging to the reader than Adam, John Claggart is more so than the not-quite-real Billy Budd. "Baby" Budd is, like Adam, beyond our comprehension because of his almost perfect goodness; Claggart is not only conceivable but familiar to us because of his very human evilness. The analogous roles of Satan and Claggart are quickly evident and have been discussed.¹ Claggart, like Satan, is by no means an ugly or even ordinary figure. His features are,

all except the chin, cleanly cut as those on a Greek medallion. . . . His brow was of the sort phrenologically associated with more than average intellect; silken jet curls partly clustering over it, making a

¹See Henry R. Pommer's Milton and Melville (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1950), pp. 89-90.

foil to the pallor below¹

Further,

. . . his general aspect and manner were so suggestive of an education and career incongruous with his naval function, that when not actively engaged in it he looked like a man of high quality, social and moral²

He is, "one person excepted, the only man on the ship intellectually capable of adequately appreciating the moral phenomenon presented by Billy Budd."³ But again like Satan, who says of himself, "Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell,"⁴ Claggart is one "in whom was the mania of an evil nature, not engendered by vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living, but born with him, and innate, in short, 'a depravity according to nature.'⁵

Melville also employs animal imagery to describe Claggart. He is ". . . like the scorpion for which the creator alone is responsible."⁶ After his death, to lift him is "like handling a dead snake."⁷ Success in their endeavors results in the reduction of both Satan and Claggart from beauty and dignity to reptilian ugliness.

¹Melville, pp. 31-32.

²Ibid., p. 32.

³Ibid., p. 49.

⁴Milton, IV, 75.

⁵Melville, p. 46.

⁶Ibid., p. 49.

⁷Ibid., p. 74.

Henry Wotton undergoes a less dramatic but nonetheless real diminution. We are told at the beginning of the novel that he is a "tall, graceful young man . . . with romantic olive-coloured face and worn expression,"¹ which is heightened by "dreamy, languorous eyes."² His engaging and poisonous words, delivered in a "low, musical voice,"³ fill out the characterization of one whose beauty of form and manner makes him an apt colleague of Satan and Claggart. Like them he is an aristocrat, and like them he is motivated by a kind of twisted love. In the course of the novel Lord Henry's role is decreased and his influence upon Dorian as well. Having prompted Dorian's movement to damnation, he remains to comment, and not too profoundly, upon the movement. In fact, he seems unaware of the inner effects of Dorian's life, seeing only the surface. His last real comment in the novel is, "I wish I could change places with you."⁴ This is, in a sense, what he has wished from the beginning, and he fails to see that Dorian, in following the course he has suggested, has changed places with him. But Lord Henry--or Oscar Wilde--fails to appreciate, or at least to announce, the motive or the success of the temptation. The brilliance and penetration Lord Henry displays

¹Works, p. 31.

²Ibid., p. 30.

³Ibid., p. 29.

⁴Ibid., p. 163.

early in the novel fail to carry through to the end.

To attribute to Milton's Satan, to Melville's Claggart, or to Wilde's Henry Wotton a merely destructive motivation in seducing their victims--to credit that seduction to spiteful hatred of the good--is to oversimplify a complex and paradoxical psychology. Satan, cast from Heaven through rebellion, realizes both his depravity and the danger of pursuing it:

Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;
And in the lowest depth a lower deep
Still threat'ning to devour me opens wide.¹

The apparent illogic of Satan's persistence in his course, his conscious final rejection of the comparative good for pain-bringing evil seems to us insane. Milton presents Hell as a kind of bedlam; it is, among other things, mad disorder. Satan, who has, in prideful desire for the glory and beauty and power of God's throne, brought punishment upon himself, will yet do battle again with God through God's image, Man. Whom he might love he will not and cannot arise to; rather, he will by the destruction of innocence gain union with him and thereby both spite God and goad Him to further punishment:

League with you I seek,
And mutual amity so strait so close,
That I with you must dwell, or you with me
Henceforth²

¹Milton, IV, 75-77.

²Ibid., IV, 375-378.

This is followed very shortly by Satan's admission that he melts at their innocence and is just preceded by his praise of Adam and Eve's beauty. There is then a species of perverse love whose only consummation lies in lowering its object to the level of guilt and corruption of the lover. One of the torments visited upon demons is that of unfulfillable desire:

Sight hateful, sight tormenting! thus these two
 Imparadis't in one another's arms
 The happier Eden, shall enjoy thir fill
 Of bliss on bliss, while I to Hell am thrust
 Where neither joy nor love, but fierce desire,
 Among our other torments not the least,
 Still unfulfill'd with pain of longing pines.¹

In order to conquer God's image and further aggravate God's anger, Satan seeks to prompt Man to the same sin of which he is guilty: disobedience through pride. He will thereby--according to his own logic--at once defeat God's purpose, gain union with Man by reducing him to his own misery, and increase God's wrath toward himself--goals not easily disentangled from, and in fact all parts of, Satan's masochistic psychology.

Claggart must quickly call to mind parallels with Satan. Rage of the evil toward the good--so easily defined as jealousy--motivates both to destruction of that good. But as with Satan the rage is entangled with a species of love:

That glance would follow the cheerful sea-Hyperion with

¹Ibid., IV, 505-511.

a settled meditative and melancholy expression, his eyes strangely suffused with incipient feverish tears. Then would Claggart look like the man of sorrows. Yes, and sometimes the melancholy expression would have in it a touch of soft yearning, as if Claggart could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban.¹

This is hardly hatred in its usual form. Like Satan's motives, Claggart's cannot be explained merely as "elemental evil" or by likening Claggart to the scorpion which "must act out to the end its allotted part." Like Wilde, Melville avoids making explicit the homosexual motive attributed to Lord Henry by Ervine and to Claggart by W. H. Auden:

In Billy Budd, the opposition is . . . innocence/guilt-consciousness, i.e., Claggart wishes to annihilate the difference either by becoming innocent himself or by acquiring an accomplice in guilt. If this is expressed sexually, the magic act must necessarily be homosexual, for the wish is for identity in innocence or in guilt, and identity demands the same sex.²

Hence the attempted seduction--not directly a sexual one but still a seduction--of Billy into taking part in a mutiny, not of course for the sake of the mutiny itself but in order to gain identity with him in corruption.

In his The Christian Renaissance, G. Wilson Knight discusses Dorian Gray in relation to his concept of the "Seraphic Intuition."³ Knight suggests that the figure of Dorian was for Wilde a projection of his ideal self, of

¹Melville, p. 60.

²W. H. Auden, The Enchafèd Flood (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 149.

³G. Wilson Knight, The Christian Renaissance (London: Methuen and Company Ltd., 1933), pp. 269-338.

that beauty and purity he would possess or gain union with. At this point a passing comment must be made upon the figure of Basil Hallward. Were one to press analogies with the other works of redemption, Basil would apparently play the role of God. It is he who creates the soul and the image of Dorian (and ultimately his conscience; compare Paradise Lost, III, 144-145). Lord Henry meets Dorian after he has seen what Hallward has created, and his perception of Dorian is affected by the painting much as Vivian's Londoners, in "The Decay of Lying," are affected by the "wonderful brown fogs" which never existed until the Impressionists created them.¹ What Lord Henry sees is largely predetermined by what Basil has, in Wilde's words in "The Critic as Artist," expressed of himself: "The only portraits in which one believes are portraits where there is very little of the sitter and a very great deal of the artist,"² and Basil has put "too much of" himself into the portrait.³ The Gestalt is set, according to Peckham,⁴ and only the most creative artist-critic will see in the portrait aspects which the painter himself has failed to reveal⁵--and Lord Henry does. Having created a Dorian Gray--

¹Works, p. 925.

²Ibid., p. 928.

³Ibid., p. 19.

⁴Peckham, Tragic Vision, pp. 346-347.

⁵Works, p. 967.

or having projected his own ideal self--Basil will preserve his beauty and purity and dies in an attempt to salvage their incarnation. Even as Dorian is a tragic figure manqué, so perhaps Basil is a kind of God-Christ manqué executed by his own creation after that creation's surrender to the blandishments of his tempter.

Even as Lord Henry perceives Dorian according to that soul-image created by Basil Hallward, as well as to his own projection, so Dorian chooses a way of life first conceived in a work of art. The "book bound in yellow paper, the cover slightly torn and the edges soiled,"¹ is Huysmann's previously mentioned A Rebours. We are told:

For years, Dorian Gray could not free himself from the influence of this book. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he never sought to free himself from it. . . . The hero . . . became to him a kind of pre-figuring of himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain a story of his own life, written before he had lived it.²

Life is based upon art--as the perception of reality is derived from it--and becomes its incarnation in order that life may be a work of art. "Life has been your art," Dorian is told.³

Lord Henry's seduction of Dorian, like the rest of his role, is rather less dramatic than those of the other tempters. But his motives are similar. He is not so

¹Ibid., p. 100.

²Ibid., p. 102.

³Ibid., p. 163.

majestic in his corrupting power as Milton's Satan, nor can he be called possessed by "elemental evil" in Melville's sense; but he is without those qualities which he finds so beguiling in Dorian: the freshness of youth and genuine innocence. Though still young, he is distinctly jaded and world-weary. Dorian's portrait shows him pure and youthful beauty, and he promptly sets out to seduce the portrait's subject. He has himself been affected by a "book he had read when he was sixteen,"¹ presumably one in a yellow paper cover, and works to bring its influence to bear upon Dorian. His own innocence--or ignorance--is, like Satan's, irretrievable. He cannot regain purity and cannot rise to union in any terms with the image or embodiment of innocent beauty; he must therefore, as Auden has suggested of Claggart, corrupt in order to gain union. If we follow Knight's view of the Seraphic image, we have both Basil and Lord Henry making use of the human Dorian to project the ideal self. The difference between Basil and Lord Henry's use is almost theological: Basil, like God, creates in his own image, and Lord Henry, like Satan, perverts that creation. His wish to "exchange places with" Dorian is an expression of his basic motive, the urge to identity and union with Dorian, which is later frustrated and complicated by Dorian's apparently having the best of both worlds: he has tasted of corrupting experience but retains the appearance

¹Ibid., p. 30.

of youth and purity--so much so that many who might believe the worst of him and condemn him are convinced of his innocence by "his frank debonaire manner, his charming boyish smile, and the infinite grace of that wonderful youth that never seemed to leave him."¹ As with Satan, sin has told upon the face and manner of Lord Henry, but his character is not developed in the novel to the extent that even conjecture is possible regarding his real reaction to success in corrupting purity which gives no visible sign of its corruption.

The motives of all three of the tempters considered might, on one hand, be reduced to the cliché, "Misery loves company." As with most clichés, a truth is expressed; here both Auden's "opposition" and the psychiatric concept of sado-masochism are articulated. But whereas the pattern of pathological behavior is completed in Milton and Melville--a persistence of self-defeat to destruction--in Wilde the Satanic figure merely ages. On the other hand, Knight's concept of the urge for union with the Seraphic ideal self can be applied convincingly in all three instances. It can obviously be objected that Milton would find either theory absurd when applied to his Satan; but the figure and his behavior are not merely a creation of Milton's: he is first a figure from Christian and extra-Christian mythology, and he was to appear under other names in Melville and Wilde.

¹Ibid., p. 112.

Paradoxically, if obviously, the tempter plays a role almost equal to that of the hero in accomplishing the positive good which issues from the tragic career, whether it be in the ennoblement of the hero or in the benefit to society. Even as the temptation is great to sympathize with the tempter, as previously discussed, so is it easy to see him as in a sense praiseworthy for his contribution to the hero's career and almost as a hero himself. He is the personification of the evil which the hero embraces and of the hell into which he descends. And even as the descent has a positive function, so has the tempter, for without him the hero must remain in a state of mere natural goodness, lacking the perception and ennoblement of the tragic experience. But to say this is to recapitulate the concept of the Paradoxical Fortunate Fall and thereby to open the answerless philosophical and theological question posed by the experience of Job, as by the actions of Pilate and Judas, whose reputation of iniquity has fixed them forever, if not in hell, at least as the principal combatants in a puppet show. To pursue the question is to enter the mire of speculation which led to the existence of Mazda and Ormazd, to the debates in the primitive Church regarding the appropriateness of canonizing Pilate, and to the redemption-through-sin gospel of Rasputin--as well as to the question of the validity of Wilde's major theme in "De Profundis" and of the concept of tragedy in general. From the

literary and dramatic standpoint the question of the virtue of the tempter is a simple one: he is the essential catalyst, and it is not upon him but upon the hero himself that the question of justice--either tragic justice as in the Poetics or moral justice--must center; however, these questions must be asked of the tempter as of the tempted.

In tragedy, in those instances where there exists such a personification of evil, he has commonly suffered just punishment for his role. Dante's Satan is encased in ice, Milton's is made ugly and bestial, Melville's is destroyed. Each ends according to the author's sense of symbolic appropriateness or of psychological verisimilitude. Further, each has experienced a counterpart of the hero's perception--earlier in fact than does the hero himself. Milton's Satan is aware of his own nature and to what it will bring him; Claggart must realize on some level the reaction which his accusation of Billy is likely to bring and be somewhat prepared for and desirous of it--again like the scorpion which stings itself--in keeping with his masochism.

But even as Lord Henry is not punished, so is he lacking in any perception of his own nature or any appreciation of the career of Dorian. I have suggested earlier that, as with the tempters in other cited works, his motive may be that of gaining union with the tempted. There is in Dorian Gray a union of sorts achieved in the shared corruption of

Lord Henry and Dorian, but its consummation is not achieved. Satan and Adam-Christ, like Claggart and Billy, suffer punishment and in this punishment a final oneness is achieved.

No such community of suffering is found in Dorian Gray, and this lack, while hardly obtrusive, may be of a piece with the overall failure in tragic form and tragic understanding. Again, without pursuing a related question--that of the tempter's possible role as an aspect of the hero's personality--I would suggest that his behavior and psychology are of great importance in the reality or lack of it in the work as a whole. We can at least infer certain traits of personality in Lord Henry as we can in Milton's Satan and in Claggart. If he is driven by the need to corrupt in order to be destroyed, he is unsuccessful; if he desires, as Wilde suggests, to create a work of art through nature's imitation of art, he is partly successful, but his creation is flawed and ultimately destroyed. In this, he parallels the experience of Basil Hallward, who in his own terms creates and sees his creation corrupted. But Basil does perceive and suffer; Lord Henry does neither. The interaction of tempter and tempted is left uncompleted. The necessary and probable outcome of one of his psychological make-up does not take place. And even as Dorian's tragic course is dramatically and psychologically crippled, so is that of Lord Henry. From the standpoint of psychological verisimilitude, he should pursue Dorian to destruc-

tion in order to suffer in communion with his victim. But again, Dorian himself does not suffer in any real sense; no more does he perceive.

It would be possible to find the source of evil in the art and love of Basil: Dorian would not have been enabled to fall had Basil not shown him his own soul. But again, the metaphysical questions of the functions and relationships of good and evil would be upon us and we would face the possibility of holding God responsible for Adam's fall--which can be argued convincingly.

Following the example of his great-uncle, Charles Robert Maturin, whose Melmoth the Wanderer fascinated him as a child, Wilde transports Eden into the modern world. But whereas Maturin's Eden is set in a lush island "in the Indian Sea, not many leagues from the mouth of the Hoogly,"¹ Wilde's is the more conventional London garden of Basil Hallward. It is here that Lord Henry presses corruption upon Dorian Gray, tempting him to a deliberate attempt to gain all experience in a "new hedonism."²

In the cases of Adam, Billy Budd, and Dorian, the fatal flaws are of course different; but their genesis in each case is that pride which flies in the face of God--or of the nature of things--and which must be punished. Adam's

¹Charles Robert Maturin, Melmoth the Wanderer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 208.

²Works, p. 32.

takes the form of uxoriousness; Billy's is his sense of justice which precipitates his striking of Claggart (or perhaps his very nature: a precise definition of his flaw must depend upon a particular interpretation of the novel); Dorian's is a vanity which encourages him to desire to remain forever young and presumptuously to alter nature and its ways in order to satisfy an "insatiable curiosity, a never-ending desire for knowledge."¹ Here Dorian is like Milton's Eve and Maturin's Immalee: the single word "curiosity" may well define the motives of all three. One aspect of Dorian's fall distinguishes it from those of Adam and Billy Budd. In neither of the latter is there a cool act of the will by way of striking a bargain. Dorian, in this regard, is more of a Faustus than an Adam. Faustus agrees to surrender to Mephistopheles "both body and soul" (Sc. v); Dorian prays, "If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! . . . I would give my soul for that!"² Despite dissimilarities in the mechanics of damnation, the means for it, it seems, are invariably at hand.

Although I have suggested that "curiosity" is the trigger which brings about the fall, there is the question: curiosity about what? In Eve it is curiosity about Good and Evil, knowledge of which is the province of God; Maturin's Immalee is tempted with knowledge of the world from which

¹Spivey, p. 163.

²Works, p. 34.

Melmoth comes; Dorian, like Faustus, wishes for universal knowledge and experience. For Faustus the means are provided by a visible infernal agent; Dorian, with unidentified assistance, will make life a work of art through experience and knowledge, thereby attaining individualistic self-fulfillment. Spivey observes that Dorian's announcement that the desire for sensations is what naturally follows from the desire for knowledge¹ and the relationship of the two in the novel are "puzzling."² Why puzzling? The fullness of knowledge must of necessity include that gained through the senses; the formation of the soul is largely accomplished through the experience of the body, and it is hardly novel to suggest that in fact the soul is nothing more than the sum of physical, emotional, and intellectual experience. A kind of reversal of the sacramental principle is involved: rather than the physical serving as vehicle for the spiritual or being transubstantiated or informed by it, the soul itself is that which is acted upon. As life, in Wilde's theory, is informed by Art, as Dorian's life is informed by that of Des Esseintes, so the soul is informed or "cured" by the senses. There are a number of puzzling elements in the novel, but the relationship between knowledge and sensation is surely not among them. Perpetual youth is required by the need for world enough

¹Ibid., p. 49.

²Spivey, p. 164.

and time in which to realize the ambition suggested by Lord Henry.

The tragic hero sins, and his sin, if it be genuinely tragic, must be of sufficient presumptuousness to rank as hubris. Adam willfully disobeys God, giving his greater loyalty to Eve and thereby displacing God as center and master of his world. Billy Budd presumes to administer justice personally, thereby abrogating to himself that which is the privilege of those above him. The sin is not so much the striking down of Claggart, which administers pure justice--Vere compares Billy to an "angel of God"¹--as it is the assuming of a function to which he has no right, again an instance of replacing a higher will with one's own will. Dorian will usurp the creative and redemptive powers of God: he will, in effect, create his own soul and thereby redeem that same soul.

Through Eve, Adam is tempted to eat of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Eve is told:

. . . [God] knows that in the day
 Ye eat thereof, your Eyes that seem so clear,
 Yet are but dim, shall perfectly be then
 Op'n'd and cleared, and ye shall be as Gods,
 Knowing both Good and Evil as they know.²

It is her ambition and curiosity which will bring Adam to sin. His devotion to her--to the feminine--is a weakening element in his character. She is a mixed blessing: through

¹Melville, p. 75.

²Milton, IX, 705-709.

her Adam is given the power of creation as well as that of self-damnation. Dorian is approached with flattery, and, as with Billy Budd and Eve, appeal is made to a sense of justice: the gods have given him a great gift, but they will shortly take it from him, and to that gift he owes its exploitation. The tempter's promise is one of honor as well as of universality of knowledge and sensation: "A new Hedonism--that is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol. With your personality there is nothing you could not do. The world belongs to you for a season."¹ The possibilities of Dorian's temptation are not fully given in the tempter's approach. Unlike the directly stated promise in Paradise Lost or the direct assault of Claggart, the complete sin must grow from a relatively innocuous seed planted by Lord Henry. Dorian, again like Faustus, has an inner devil as well as an outer one.

Adam's weakening element has been discussed as his love for Eve. It is difficult to find a corresponding element in Billy Budd. Like Adam, Billy wills the good, but there is within him that which prompts him to do evil or at least makes the good less desirable than the evil. It has been suggested that Billy's stutter is a "symbol of his irreducible imperfection as a man."² It is more: it is that

¹Works, p. 32.

²Newton Arvin, Herman Melville: A Critical Biography (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1950), p. 297.

which allows him at the moment of the second temptation--an accusation by Claggart--to be turned from obedience to disobedience. At that moment he brings destruction to himself and both victory and destruction to his tempter. For Claggart as for Satan, victory in his design is simultaneously his defeat.

Dorian's weakening element may be defined on one level, again, as vanity. In this regard he is like Billy Budd in that the weak spot is internal and psychologically contained rather than projected as in the Adam-Eve relationship. However, there is an Eve of sorts in the figure of Sybil Vane: it is through her that Dorian first actually sins; that is, the will to sin encounters in her the occasion to sin, and the occasion makes possible the commission of sin. In his rejection of Sybil--by which he condemns her, like Eve, to suffering and death--he commits himself to the course of the classical tragic hero, and the motive for the rejection, like the rejection itself, involves the peculiar form of hubris of which he is guilty: the substituting of art for nature, the preference for the artificial over the natural, insistence upon the creative rather than the creature, and therefore upon the sensation rather than the genuine emotion. So long as Sybil creates the sense or impression of love as a work of art, Dorian is enchanted; when reality or the natural interferes with the artificial, his enchantment dies:

You have killed my love. You used to stir my imagination, now you don't even stir my curiosity. You simply produce no effect. I loved you because you were marvelous, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art. You have thrown it all away. You are shallow and stupid. . . . You are nothing to me now.¹

In other words, so long as Sybil can give "substance to the shadows of art" she is nature imitating or informed by art and is thereby the incarnation of creative art, capable of stirring the imagination and producing an "effect." When the natural replaces the artificial or artistic, the result is, in Dorian's eyes, stupidity and shallowness. The act of rejection, along with Sybil's resulting death, produces the first stain upon Dorian's soul and establishes the character of the career he is to pursue: he will live a life of creativity--the creation of his own soul--in which the sensation or the effect will take precedence over the natural and in which human considerations and ethical values are to be ignored or trampled. The love and suicide of Sybil (although Dorian regrets his lack of real sorrow), the distress and death of Basil Hallward, the blackmailing of Alan Campbell, and Basil's catalogue of Dorian's sins are dismissed, apparently as the price to be paid for a work of art.

If Lord Henry's motive as tempter is identical to that attributed to Claggart by Auden, then it is only in Dorian's destruction--the destruction of the projected ideal

¹Works, p. 75.

or love object--that we can find that combination of victory and defeat which exists in Billy Budd and Paradise Lost. Again the pattern of masochism is suggested, but, as I have indicated earlier, Lord Henry is not struck dead, nor is he dramatically reduced in grandeur or power: he merely ages, and if he derives either great pleasure or great pain from his success, we are left ignorant of it. His nonchalance is puzzling, but the answer to the puzzle may be a simple one: having created Lord Henry, who is a very charming Satan, and having given him victory in his assault upon Dorian, Wilde apparently did not know what to do with him. The nature of the setting militates against turning him into a snake, and to destroy him would be to remove from the novel its only really engaging character; but whatever other authors might choose to do with their devils, Wilde preferred to preserve his undamaged. Further, as Lord Henry is so much a fictional projection of Wilde himself, it is understandable that Wilde chose to retain him.

In the tragic structure as I have defined it earlier, the fall of the hero is essential to his redemption, so that in the very act of sinning, of presuming to be god-like, he moves toward divinity. Like Adam and Billy Budd, like any true tragic hero, Dorian must make the necessary and paradoxical first step in the direction of both damnation and salvation. Regardless of failures in clarity of the motives of both tempter and tempted, and despite problems of veri-

similitude, Dorian Gray includes the classic structure of the hubris. The major structural problems will appear later.

An almost constant element of classical epic is the descent into hell or the underworld or the realm of the dead, generally in order to gain truth or overcome an enemy. Odysseus must consult the shade of Tiresias; he is advised by Athene in a cave; Aeneas enters Hades, where the spirit of his father shows him the future of Rome; Beowulf must do battle with Grendel's dame in an underwater chamber; Paradise Lost presents the fallen angels in their dark abode; in The Rape of the Lock Umbriel descends to the cave of Spleen to gain assistance in creating strife. But commonly, benefit or knowledge is gained by the descent. Without exploring the interrelationship of epic and tragedy, one can find the same necessary descent in tragedy, most often in different terms than those in the epic, although, for example, in Shakespeare there are instances of actual encounters with the hellish--the weird sisters in Macbeth--or, less obviously, with the dead in scenes of perception: Hamlet's experience with his father's ghost, his leap into Ophelia's grave, and indeed the graveyard scene itself, and Romeo and Juliet's descent into their tomb. More often in tragedy and sometimes additionally in epic, the perception-giving descent is not an actual physical descent. It may consist, rather, of a fall into wretchedness, the nadir of the hero's career in which misery

is shared with perception. Oedipus, suffering from the full effect of his sin, gains insight of truth he has not known before. Dante, lost in the midst of life, must descend into hell before he can approach heaven and the vision of God. Adam's exile from Eden after his disobedience is his falling into misery and is accompanied by a vision of man's future and the promise of his redemption.

In Billy Budd, Billy's imprisonment after his trial reflects his fall in that he ceases to live in the sunshine and is chained inside a darkened bay. In contrast to the bright openness of his earlier surroundings, his world becomes similar to that of Claggart whose "official seclusion from the sunlight"¹ results in pallor as opposed to Billy's "rose tan."² Billy, in effect, symbolically enters the kingdom of his tempter. If we seek an account of illumination or even of suffering in the narration of Billy's imprisonment, we will be disappointed, and it is only by tenuous deduction that we can find a trace of such. And herein may lie a major flaw in the novel. We are told that Captain Vere visits Billy in his compartment but that, "beyond the communication of the sentence what took place at this interview was never known."³ But Nathalia Wright has suggested that it is "not unlike the episode in Gethsemane.

¹Melville, p. 32.

²Ibid., p. 96.

³Ibid., p. 91.

Afterward, the foretopman possesses a peace marvelous and ineffable."¹ The chaplain who later visits Billy finds his comforts or explanations pointless.² But at his death Billy's shout, "God bless Captain Vere!"³ suggests a recognition of justice or at least a resignation to injustice of which he was previously incapable.

Dorian Gray's descent into the underworld is provided by his visits to what Basil calls the "foulest dens in London."⁴ It is there in an opium den amidst "grotesque things that lay in such fantastic postures . . . the twisted limbs, the gaping mouths"⁵ that Dorian encounters the fruits of his sin: the brother of Sybil Vane, whom he has driven to suicide; Adrian Singleton and a woman, both of whom he has ruined; and a haunting vision of Basil Hallward, whom he has murdered. Later, vengeance-bent James Vane, having followed Dorian to the country, is slain, and in his appearance and death presents Dorian the truth of his corruption and knowledge of the extent of his guilt.

Wilde, like Melville, fails to develop the scene of perception, and the reader is informed only indirectly that the key encounter has an effect. Immediately following the

¹Nathalia Wright, Melville's Use of the Bible (Durham: Duke University Press, 1949), p. 132.

²Melville, p. 97.

³Ibid., p. 102.

⁴Works, p. 118.

⁵Ibid., p. 143.

death of Vane in Chapter XVIII, Dorian announces to Lord Henry that he is "not the same" and speaks of his intention to "be good."¹ Here the structure of the novel, which has hitherto largely adhered to the tragic formula, begins to lose its integrity as tragedy: Dorian is not immediately reduced to the state of aporia, nor is he ennobled; rather, he acts only to escape whole from the punishment which threatens him. To "be good" is not enough for the tragic hero. Only the sacrifice illuminated by perception will do. Dorian speaks of a sacrifice--his renunciation of Hetty for her own good and in order to leave her "as flowerlike as I found her";² but this is an act of generosity, not the death of the self as offering.

By introducing Hetty, Wilde gives us a fleeting glimpse of woman as a guide to salvation. For it is Dorian's experience with Hetty which gives him a "new ideal"³ and prompts him toward alteration of life. If Wilde at any time used Paradise Lost as any sort of model for tragedy, he surely did not use Paradise Regained as one. Taken separately, Milton's first epic is the embodiment of tragedy as I have defined it. But Milton's heterodox sequel, presenting the redemption of Adam-Man, plays havoc with any attempt to relate it to either Dante's use of the figure of Beatrice or

¹Ibid., pp. 162-163.

²Ibid., p. 158.

³Ibid.

the traditional Christian view of the Virgin Mary as participant in the redemption of man. It is characteristic of Milton that while he is generous in blaming woman for man's damnation, he refuses to grant her a role in his salvation beyond a biblical minimum. Of course, Milton the arch-Protestant could not, all else aside, ascribe to the Virgin any really active agency in the redemptive process. However, both the Divine Comedy and the Catholic tradition have ascribed to woman a major role not only in the damnation of man but in his redemption as well. The pre-Christian origins of the Mater Dei or Maria Mediatrix concepts are not our concern here, nor the medieval cultural or social evolution which may have given impetus to the elevation of woman. Suffice it to say that the mystical-romantic view of love of woman has played an important role in later western culture and that Dante found in woman a perfect figure of divine redemptive grace. If we can consider the Divine Comedy a tragedy in the same way that we have called the Adam-Man-Christ myth one, then Beatrice of the Comedy obviously functions more or less as the Virgin does in Catholic tradition. The biblical and traditional pattern is clear if Milton is perhaps not: Eve is a destructive agent, the Virgin Mary an agent of redemption. There is no functioning Eve in the Comedy; one finds Dante's Eve in the first sections of the Vita Nuova--she who brings him to wretchedness but then is transformed in his mind into the embodiment of divine love

and grace. In the Comedy it is she who brings about Virgil's guidance of the poet's redemptive journey and, in Dorothy Sayer's words in the introduction to her translation of the Inferno, "represents for every man that person--or, more generally, that experience of the not-self--which by arousing his adoring love, has become for him the God-bearing image, the revelation of the presence of God."¹

To Dorian, Hetty provides a "new ideal." She is hardly a revelation of the presence of God, but she does prompt Dorian to consideration of his career of self-fulfillment and to a sense of regret for the "unstained purity of his boyhood--his rose-white boyhood" ² However, rather than embracing the offer of love as that which redeems and guides, Dorian rejects it, wishing to avoid the pollution of another innocent person. Further, with a kind of justification-through-works attitude, he expects his renunciation to restore something of his soul's earlier purity to the portrait: "Yes, he would be good, and the hideous thing that he had hidden away would no longer be a terror to him. He felt as if the load had been lifted from him already."³ However, upon his examining the portrait,

a cry of pain and indignation broke from him. He could

¹Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (3 vols.; New York: Basic Books Inc. Publishers, 1962), I, 68.

²Works, p. 164.

³Ibid., pp. 165-166.

see no change save that in the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite. The thing was still loathsome--more loathsome, if possible, than before¹

Dorian's disappointment at this point suggests the distress of children who plant acorns and expect immediate oaks. But he remembers Lord Henry's suggestion that his renunciation is no more than a new sensation sought out of the same motivation as other sensations. Dorian thinks passingly of confession and atonement but realizes instantly that vanity, hypocrisy, and curiosity are the geniuses of his action: "Through vanity he had spared her. In hypocrisy he had worn the mark of goodness. For curiosity's sake he had tried the denial of self. He recognized that now."²

In any system of morality or ethics, as in the classical tragic structure, the recognition of the self and its principal flaw is the primary step toward redemption or atonement. It is Aristotle's "recognition"; it is the fruit of Socrates' gospel of the examined life and of the injunction "know thyself." Its illumination is the condition of the tragic hero's perception of himself and the prelude to the necessary sacrifice of himself. The Adam-Man-Christ perceives himself as the sinner whose only atonement and redemption lie in the sacrifice. Oedipus can no longer bear vision, for it is vision which has destroyed him. Milton

¹Ibid., p. 166.

²Ibid.

redeems his heterodox treatment of the redemption of man in Paradise Regained through the completeness--despite Dr. Johnson--of Samson Agonistes. It is not revolutionary to regard Samson as a kind of continuation or completion of Paradise Regained, and such a view would certainly relieve the reader of that sense of incompleteness Paradise Regained leaves. Regardless of Milton's insistence here, as in Paradise Regained, upon the withstanding of previously victorious temptation as the sine qua non, in fact the essence of redemption, Samson does carry through the necessary steps of tragedy as we have discussed it.

To suggest that the Divine Comedy does not contain these steps is to forget that implicit in the plan of the poem is the accomplished vicarious atonement: Dante's perceptions and redemption do not require a bloody sacrifice on his part--the sacrifice has been and is being offered. Dante partakes of the universal man in the Adam-Man-Christ process or figure. He is privileged to gain self-knowledge and elevation without personal sacrificial suffering. Billy Budd goes serenely to his death, somehow illuminated with an understanding of the justice of his death and somehow ennobled by his sacrifice. Further, Melville clearly has the concept of ascension in mind in describing Billy's execution. Besides the use of the words "ascended" and "ascending," as Nathalia Wright points out,

it is not accidental that the description contains a suggestion of the ascension and of the doctrine of the

atonement. For in the manuscript . . . the word 'shekinah' is crossed out in favor of 'rose' and at the beginning of the next chapter Melville first referred to Billy's 'ascension' but changed it to 'his execution.'¹

In *Dorian Gray*, perception does not come in any real sense beyond the realization that a recorded corrupt past is a danger to the future--even a future in which one "will be good." What is called "conviction of sin" is lacking, and Dorian's contrition is as imperfect as his perception. Theologically, perfect contrition is that which regrets the offending of God because He is God and accepts the justice of punishment; imperfect contrition, like Dorian's, is that which regrets the offense because of the fear of punishment and the wish to avoid it. The striking out at the portrait is not an attempt to destroy sin or to cleanse the soul: it is an attempt to destroy conscience--that which keeps the guilt before us--and to destroy the record of that guilt lest it be seen by others. Of the offering of the self to escape sin or to gain redemption in some terms, there is none. Dorian wishes to remove the danger of exposure and to kill the painter's work as he has killed the painter.² But the painter's work is not what Dorian attacks. Basil has created him, in a sense, in his own image. Dorian himself is the painter of the loathsome portrait. Basil, like God, has created a thing of beauty and innocence. Through Dorian's

¹Wright, p. 135.

²Works, p. 167.

vulnerability to the serpent, that creation has, by his own consent, been corrupted. Dorian does kill the painter--himself--though unintentionally. The same dark power which has preserved his youth and made his portrait grotesque acts to turn the knife upon its wielder and to restore the portrait to its original purity and beauty. It is here that the tragic structure of the novel is most flawed. One can insist that, like Samson, Dorian has made the bloody sacrifice necessary for his redemption and is restored to the nobility of his earlier innocence. In a very general sense this is true: Dorian has fallen through hubris into sin, has perceived the nature and seriousness of the sin, and has attempted to destroy the offending part--his own soul--thereby offering a sacrifice. But again the problems of motivation and recognition arise and cannot be dismissed. A desire to destroy the evidence and live by good resolutions is not the tragic offering.

Further, Dorian's fall is accomplished in human freedom and quite aside from the supernatural altering of his portrait. The changed portrait, however magical its operation, merely reflects the reality of Dorian's character or soul. No demonic or heavenly force associated with the picture causes Dorian to sin--the picture simply records the human reality. Such a parallel arrangement as this obeys the Aristotelian proscription of an actively interfering "irrational element" and allows the protagonist to pursue

his fate according to his character and at last to bring about his aporia and sacrifice. Dorian's death, on the other hand, is accomplished not by his own volition but by the operation of a kind of reversed deus ex machina which arrives to destroy the hero rather than to rescue him. Aristotle would condemn this apparently mechanical interference for the same reason that he condemns Medea's dragon-drawn chariot: there is nothing within the work or the character of the hero to make such an action "probable" or "necessary."

In traditional tragedy there ordinarily occurs, following the catastrophe or death of the hero, a "resurrection" or in Shakespearean terms a "glimpse of order restored." In Oedipus there is the double benefit of Oedipus' ennoblement and the lifting of the plague from Thebes. In Hamlet, the catastrophe purges the kingdom and allows for the accession of Fortinbras. In Samson Agonistes, the Israelites are freed and Samson is restored to God's favor. In Billy Budd, whether or not one accepts the idea of Billy's gaining perception, the sacrifice of the hero brings order to the world of the Indomitable, at least in so far as Captain Vere understands order, and the crew is given a hero-martyr--the spar from which Billy is hanged is kept track of and "to them a chip of it was a piece of the cross."¹ In each such instance there occurs an improvement over that state of the world or the hero (or both) which existed before

¹Melville, p. 113.

the hero's fall. Hence Addison's phrase, "Paradoxical Fortunate Fall." In *Dorian Gray*, however, there is no such improvement--unless the climb to the third floor can be considered an ascension. Indeed, Dorian's career has worsened the world and him considerably, and his involuntary self-sacrifice, besides coming apparently as a surprise, serves little purpose other than to restore his soul picture and therefore his soul to its original state--and this without Dorian's having recognized anything but danger to himself. Only in the vaguest sense can Dorian's death be said to precede a resurrection, ennoblement, or restoration of order. True, his soul is somehow restored to its prelapsarian purity; but, as I have suggested earlier, the final dignity of the tragic hero lies at least in part in his perception of himself and his courage in confronting the truth perceived, thereby elevating himself in some kind of ascension.

Further, the city or tribe must benefit in some way. Robert Nelson has suggested that Emma's death in Madame Bovary is followed by a glimpse of order restored in the form of Charles Bovary's momentary finding of peace and freedom from her life, which has been a kind of plague to him and of which he is now cured.¹ In *Dorian Gray* there is hardly this shadow of restored order. It is only by regarding Dorian's death as removing a threat to the morality

¹Robert Nelson, "Madame Bovary as Tragedy," MLQ, XVIII (December, 1957), 330.

of London that we can assume that such benefit occurs. Wilde gives us no hint in this direction. There is implied, however, a much larger restoration of order in the return of the portrait to its original state. The disorder in the novel is not so much in morality as in nature. The granting of Dorian's wish for a change in the usual order of things has not only apparently violated Wilde's dictum concerning life's imitation of art, it has thrown nature itself out of order by removing the mortal Dorian from the ordinary limitations of mortality and by suspending that mutability which is at once the sorrow and the sanity of man. The placing of the wages of sin upon Dorian's body and the purification of his soul-picture constitute, if nothing else, a statement of a principal theme of tragedy: that order will somehow ultimately reassert itself in the midst of disorder and, in its reassertion, demands a sacrifice.

If Dorian Gray is a tragedy, it should be approachable not only from the standpoint of character or role analogy but also from that of dramatic structure. The traditional tragic structure includes the following movements or elements: the exciting force, which sets the hero on his course; the rising action, in which the protagonist has the initiative; the climax or crisis, in which he loses the initiative; the tragic force, an action or incident which puts him at the mercy of his opponent; the falling action, in which he is driven toward destruction; the moment of final

suspense, in which a suggestion of hope appears; the catastrophe or death of the hero; and the previously discussed glimpse of order restored or "resurrection." In Dorian Gray the exciting force is Lord Henry's seductive conversation, principally in Chapter II. Dorian has hitherto had--believably or not--no opportunity or temptation to explore the forbidden, and Lord Henry suggests a course Dorian might never otherwise follow. The rising action lies in those chapters in which Dorian has control of his fate and includes even the murder of Basil and the blackmailing of Alan Campbell. The climax or crisis is to be found in the encounter with James Vane. At this point Dorian loses command of his direction, and, following the tragic action, his accidental slaying of Vane, whom he mistakes for a hare (compare Hamlet's "mistaking" of Polonius for a rat), he struggles to escape the results of his career. The announced love for and renunciation of Hetty Merton provide a moment of final suspense in that there appears momentarily to be a change of character and therefore a change of direction or fate for Dorian. The same function may be served as well by Dorian's determination to destroy the portrait. But, as is traditionally so in tragedy, the hope proves illusory--Lord Henry insists that renunciation is simply one more sensation--and Dorian must pursue his fate to its end. The catastrophe is achieved by Dorian's own hand, reminding us of Oedipus' striking at his offending eyes, of Juliet's stabbing of her

guilty heart, of Emma Bovary's symbolically appropriate consumption of poison. But again, the hero's sacrificial act in real tragedy is not only voluntary, it is done with perception. It is at this point, perhaps, that Dorian Gray is most flawed, and, as I have suggested, we are left with but a murky view of that resurrection or glimpse of order restored which is a constant element of tragedy.

CHAPTER III

THE "DE PROFUNDIS"

Composed in Reading Prison during the first three months of 1897, a manuscript of "De Profundis" was given to Robert Ross on the day after Wilde left prison, along with instructions that it be given to Alfred Douglas. In the years following Wilde's death, various versions of various parts of the letter were published, but it was not until 1962 that an accurate edition became generally available in the Rupert Hart-Davis collection of Wilde's letters. Ross's desire to avoid collision with Douglas, as well as that of presenting Wilde to the world in the best light, led to his censoring and revising the work in a number of ways for publication. Further, by his direction, the original manuscript was kept under lock and key by the British Museum until 1959.¹ But, whatever his motives or logic, Ross kept Wilde's last long work from both public and scholarly examination.

The letter must be considered in the context of Wilde's life. It is not enough to deal with it simply as

¹Letters, p. 423.

literature or as a calmly reasoned presentation of a moral or aesthetic philosophy. The very circumstances of its composition preclude its being evaluated in the same terms as, for example, the early critical essays. Despite the opinion that he remained basically unchanged by his sufferings, the rising Wilde of the "Decay of Lying" is obviously not the same man who lay in prison, destroyed by his own folly and full of recriminations and self-pity. On the other hand, imprisonment itself provided opportunity for a kind of reflection and ordering of thought which was not typical of Wilde. His career before and after imprisonment can be seen, as suggested earlier, as a drive toward defeat and death. The necessary arresting of the movement for two years allowed for an examination of experience and an attempt to find meaning in a shattered life and ruined career. Few writers are given such an opportunity to weigh and evaluate their lives and works. That Wilde failed to analyze his own personality in a fashion acceptable to modern psychology is relevant only as modern psychology can explain that personality. The literary judgments, too, are inaccurate and exaggerated. But Wilde characteristically overrated his own works as he did the careers of his parents.

The major themes of the "De Profundis" are two: the role of suffering in self-development and the villainy of Lord Alfred Douglas. Here one finds a vindictiveness uncharacteristic of Wilde, who, according to his acquaintances,

seldom if ever had unkind words for others, except for the sake of wit: Wilde was too much the artist to lose opportunity to exercise his greatest art--the molding of a penetrating or amusingly absurd phrase. But until the "De Profundis" one finds almost nothing of personal abuse or condemnation of another. That Wilde should place much of the blame for his fall upon Lord Alfred is understandable and to some extent justifiable. But, as Wilde himself observes, the major guilt is his own, and he must recognize it as such. At the time of their meeting, Douglas was a moderately gifted young poet whose talents and graceful beauty were far outweighed by a brutal temper, maniacal egoism, and an incapacity to direct himself as an artist or a human being. Whatever may be said of the validity of the tradition of the "fatal Douglas temper," "Bosie" was the embodiment of all the faults which characterized his clan and, as such, operated as the nemesis of Wilde's career and appears to have failed to mature in any way in his lifetime--and he survived Wilde by forty-five years. Wilde was, on the other hand, an adult intelligently aware of the nature of the society in which he lived, an artist of great gifts and rising success, a public figure, and the father of a family. There can be little doubt as to who must bear the greater guilt, and Wilde at least nominally admits the obvious.

Psychologically, the question of Lord Alfred's role in Wilde's fall must be treated very differently. Rather

than being an active participant in or contributor to that fall, he must be regarded as merely the instrument used by Wilde to destroy himself. Like the suicide's weapon, the nature of which is relevant only in regard to its effectiveness, Lord Alfred's nature was important only as it functioned effectively to execute Wilde's purpose. In examination of the suicide's psychology, the type or coloration or caliber of his weapon is incidental. It is not to oversimplify the interaction of personalities to suggest that had Wilde never met Douglas he would still have managed somehow to bring himself to disgrace and sorrow. It is the character of the tragic figure which brings his fall rather than the means he uses to accomplish it, and it is the desire for suffering which drives the masochist to pain rather than the instrument he finds to inflict it. In any such instance, any explanations or reflections the sufferer provides must be suspect as rationalizations. The judgments Wilde delivers upon Douglas are valid, as are those upon himself, from a moral or ethical standpoint. But the whole truth of an act or a group of acts cannot always be found by an examination of moral or ethical responsibilities; no more can it be found in the statement of conscious motivations or of the apparent results of actions resulting from those motivations. Thus, any approach to a work like the "De Profundis" must be made cautiously, and its place in Wilde's career as a man must be as scrupulously examined as its place in his works.

The trial, imprisonment, and disgrace are not properly viewed as the result merely of folly or accident. They represent rather the goals toward which Wilde worked unconsciously through much of his life. It is unnecessary here to play the psychologist to the extent of analyzing Wilde's infancy, but it is germane to refer to the theory that the criminal--in whatever sense or area--behaves criminally in order to bring punishment upon himself for imagined or real guilt and that the characteristically self-defeating personality is, in effect, working to atone for inadequacy or guilt suggested by parental disapproval of him in infancy and childhood. Lady Wilde's well-known preference for dressing the infant Oscar as a girl¹ may be significant not because of the feminine character of the dress but rather because it indicates maternal disappointment in Oscar for not being other than what he was. In other words, a sense of unworthiness and the need to suffer punishment for that unworthiness may well have been planted early in Wilde and have pursued him to final disaster. Anyone at all familiar with the careers of Wilde's parents could find a multitude of reasons for the unbalanced personalities of their children. But again, this is not our concern, beyond suggesting the possible roots of Wilde's tragedy.

Wilde addresses the "De Profundis" to Douglas, os-

¹Boris Brasol, Oscar Wilde (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), p. 19.

tensibly in order that Douglas may profit from Wilde's experience--one he has been spared. Following the announcement of purpose, there comes a painstaking catalogue of denunciation of Douglas, which in Wilde's mind apparently constituted the holding up of a mirror or portrait in order that Douglas might see his own soul and be improved by the seeing of it. Functionally, however, Wilde seems rather to be flogging one who has wronged him than seeking to instruct him, all the while attempting to realize that he himself is the primary villain. Having called their friendship intellectually degrading and "the absolute ruin of my art," Wilde immediately attributes its continuation to his own weakness.¹ Again and again in the letter this alternation in the placing of blame occurs; and, while the attacks upon Douglas provide a purgation of Wilde's obvious rage, he repeatedly and finally asserts his own sole guilt in the matter and absolves Douglas of any guilt, taking the "burden" of ruining him from Douglas and placing it upon "my own shoulders."² But this is what Wilde had to do: to do otherwise would remove from him the required guilt and the worthiness to be punished. The psychic masochist cannot seek for a scapegoat as the ordinary human tends to do. The wages of sin must be visited upon him and not upon another.

To the Christian, the figure of the crucified Christ

¹Letters, p. 427.

²Ibid., p. 465.

serves as scapegoat in much the same way as did the tragic hero in his oldest function--that of suffering punishment for the sins of the group of which he becomes the representative or embodiment. Wilde has hitherto failed to express the fullness of the tragic experience, which includes benefit gained through suffering; and only in the "De Profundis" does he indicate an appreciation of the role of pain meaningfully suffered. He cannot accept the orthodox Christian concept of vicarious atonement, again possibly not so much for intellectual reasons as for the need to bear his own cross.

But he is consistent with his own theory of development through experience, and he recognizes an error in his earlier attitude:

Sorrow, then, and all that it teaches one, is my new world. I used to live entirely for pleasure. I shunned sorrow and suffering of every kind. I hated both. I resolved to ignore them as far as possible, to treat them, that is to say, as modes of imperfection. They were not part of my scheme of life. They had no place in my philosophy. My mother, who knew life as a whole, used often to quote to me Goethe's lines--written by Carlyle in a book he had given her years ago--and translated, I fancy, by him also:

Who never ate his bread in sorrow,
 Who never spent the midnight hours
 Weeping and waiting for the morrow,
 He knows ye not, ye heavenly powers.¹

Sorrow, then, is the greatest experience in the developing of the soul and is raised to a sacrament-like role (such as was discussed on page 48) in the making of life into a work of art. This concept is a contradiction of the view

¹Ibid., p. 472.

of pain expressed earlier in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (see page 13) and in fact sees sorrow as being at once the source of all true creativity and the embodiment of truth in art.

Wilde's realization of the role of suffering is also a realization of his earlier, too-limited view of perfection. He sees his appreciation of sorrow as foreshadowed in phrases in earlier works--in "The Happy Prince," "The Young King," Salome, Dorian Gray, "The Critic as Artist," "The Soul of Man under Socialism"--but remarks that such phrases seemed "no more than" phrases.¹ One can assume that the very use of these phrases, though they were meaningless to the conscious intellect, were expressive of that same subconscious part of Wilde's personality which was urging him toward the fulfillment of a tragic role, an instance of saying more than one knows. Ojala's examination of Wilde's diction, discussed below, provides some convincing evidence for this assumption; and Wilde's observation that "at every moment of one's life one is what one is going to be no less than what one has been"² suggests not only a restatement of his view of self-fulfillment but also that he perhaps recognized something of his own psychological history.

In his discussion of his concept of humility, which has become for him the "ultimate realization of the artistic

¹Ibid., p. 475.

²Ibid., p. 476.

life," which is "simple self-development," Wilde insists that Wordsworth is wrong in regarding the artist as a mere spectator. In Christ he finds the true precursor of the Romantic Movement, for it is in Him that "imaginative sympathy which in the sphere of art is the sole secret of creation" is uniquely found.¹ This sympathy brings about in the character of Christ a unity of personality with perfection which by Wilde's definition constitutes in itself a work of art and marks the distinction between the classical and the romantic. In other words, the work or thing created becomes the ideal rather than merely representing it.

On a social as opposed to an artistic level, this unity takes the form of imaginative identification with all men--the realization that the suffering of one is the suffering of all. To Wilde, Christ's passion and death are the greatest tragic drama, but his definition of tragedy here seems to be one of tragic or dramatic effect as opposed to tragic purpose. The drama of the passion with its movement from warm companionship at "the little supper" through betrayal, loneliness, and submission² becomes hardly more than a pageant glorifying suffering for its own sake or a mode of self-expression. And yet by the terms of Wilde's philosophy, this view is consistent:

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., p. 478.

Christ as an individualist found a means of making His life a work of art by embodying an ideal. He became suffering and humility and expressed them in His life--the character is action in the Aristotelian sense.

Besides revising his view of suffering as a mode of perfection, Wilde further revises the view of altruism expressed in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" as one of the tyrants from which man must be freed. On one hand, the finding of the self remains the primary purpose of the individualist: "Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation."¹ On the other hand, a Christ-like living for others is a means of living for one's self: "When he says 'forgive your enemies,' it is not for the sake of the enemy but for one's own sake that he says so, and because love is more beautiful than hate."² What one suffers for others functions as one's own suffering does--as a means to incorporate experience into the self and to become its embodiment. Christ did not go about with the primary purpose of doing good or relieving suffering; rather, He aimed at making the suffering of others His own through identification with them. Their suffering became His suffering, and He became suffering incarnate, even as "every human being should

¹Ibid., p. 479.

²Ibid., p. 480.

be the realization of some ideal."¹

Christ becomes, in a sense, not so much artist as work of art: "To the artist expression is the only mode under which he can conceive life at all. . . . But to Christ it was not so."² Christ did not express Himself but rather became the expression or realization of suffering, "one in whom truth in art was set forth as it had never been before . . . that in which the outward is expressive of the inward; in which the soul is made flesh, and the body instinct with spirit: in which form reveals."³ To Him, as to the Wilde of "The Critic as Artist," sin was a mode of perfection; but whereas sin earlier was itself generative of individualism, it becomes now but a first step in that generation, for to fail to repent of sin is to fail to "realize" it.⁴ Again and again in the "De Profundis" Wilde repeats the formula, "the supreme vice is shallowness. Whatever is realized is right." This would appear to apply in both the area of art, in which truth "is the unity of a thing with itself, the outward rendered expressive of the inward," and in life, where the "outward is expressive of the inward."⁵ This is not exactly a direct contradiction of the relation of

¹Ibid., p. 481.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 482.

⁴Ibid., p. 487.

⁵Ibid., p. 473.

form to content as discussed in "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist" (see pages 9 through 10). But it does mark a shift in emphasis from form to content, for Wilde suggests here that feeling precedes form, at least in the building of the artistic life. And this shift constitutes somewhat an abandonment of what can be called a classical in favor of a romantic concept of artistic creation or artistic realization. To labor this apparent change, however, would be to distort or exaggerate its importance in the development of Wilde's views. Both elements are present throughout the works and operate without contradiction in their respective spheres: an ideal is presented in the form of art, and the embodiment of that ideal into life is achieved through feeling or experience. One does indeed start with form, but it is only through feeling that the form is given body. In order to measure up to his portrait, Dorian must make of his life as fully a work of art as the portrait. Christ is the perfection of the artistic life and furnishes the form by which to measure the degree of perfection, but it is only through experience or feeling that one realizes--makes real--the ideal provided.

Morality as such is dismissed as it is in the earlier works:

While to become a better man is a piece of unscientific cant, to have become a deeper man is the privilege of those who have suffered. And such I think I have become.¹

¹Ibid., p. 489.

Thus the tragic experience as Wilde has understood it does serve as it has not served before, to illuminate and in a sense exalt him who has undergone it. The process is not tragic in a Christian sense because neither the terms of the sin nor those of redemption are equatable with any orthodox Christian ethic. Such parallels as exist are simply those to be found in Christian and Greek tragedy. In both, "suffering is the secret of life."¹ But to Wilde the reformation is not accomplished in morality but in art. In life the suffering must be "meaningful,"² but in art: "If I can produce even one more beautiful work of art I shall be able to rob malice of its venom, and cowardice of its sneer"³ Further, something new "must come into my work" as a result of suffering. That which is meaningful in life is that Christ-like identification with the sorrows of others rather than with their joys; in art there may be added

a still deeper note, one of greater unity of passion and directness of impulse . . . of fuller harmony of words perhaps, of richer cadences, of more curious color effects, of simpler architectural order, of some aesthetic quality⁴

To suffering, then, is attributed three characteristics: it is a means of identification with others; it is

¹Ibid., p. 473.

²Ibid., p. 476.

³Ibid., p. 470.

⁴Ibid., pp. 488-489.

the supreme mode of expression; and it can produce greater depth in both art and life. It is in consideration of the last two that a basic problem in the art and psychology of Wilde arises. If suffering is the supreme mode of expression, then it is sufficient to itself and, like beauty, is its own excuse for being and exists for its own sake, in which case we are thrown back to that wish-for-pain discussed earlier and are faced with the probability suggested by Le Gallienne that Wilde "rather enjoyed" his suffering. In his subsequent career as a man this would seem to be the case: suffering did little to deepen character in any respect and in fact seems simply to have fed further suffering. A degree of resignation can be discerned in his attitudes, but the same tragic course was pursued. He can be compared in dramatic terms to the traditional tragic hero confronted with that aporia from which only death offers release. He recognizes his guilt and the justice of his suffering: "Nobody can be ruined except by his own hand."¹ But this recognition of guilt, justice, subsequent suffering, and the humility derived from them is personally a means of becoming a greater artist, whereas contradictorily that suffering and humility become in themselves the "ultimate realization of the artistic life." In one instance tragic exaltation--or ascension--is suggested; in another suffering is its own raison d'etre. It is difficult to reconcile the two ideas.

¹Ibid., p. 465.

To be made perfect through suffering is a recognizable concept; to be perfect at suffering forces a return to the view of Wilde and of much of his work as manifestations of masochism. On a lowest level Wilde is a melodramatist, and melodrama directly experienced in life or vicariously experienced in the theatre or from the printed page is, however shallow, a species of masochism.

Yet it must be said that in the "De Profundis" a new appreciation of both the breadth and depth of life is expressed:

My only mistake was that I confined myself so exclusively to the trees of what seemed to me the sungilt side of the garden, and shunned the other side for its shadow and its gloom. Failure, disgrace, poverty, sorrow, despair, suffering, tears even, the broken words that come from the lips of pain, remorse that makes one walk in thorns, conscience that condemns, self-abasement that punishes, the misery that puts ashes on its head, the anguish that chooses sackcloth for its raiment and into its own drink puts gall--all these were things of which I was afraid. And as I had determined to know nothing of them, I was forced to taste each one of them in turn, to feed on them, to have for a season, indeed, no other food at all. I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure. I did it to the full, as one should do everything that one does to the full. . . . But to have continued the same life would have been wrong because it would have been limiting. I had to pass on. The other half of the garden had its secrets for me also.¹

Further, a note of the community of men is struck:

"Whatever happens to another happens to one's self."²

Throughout his life Wilde was characterized by kindness and

¹Ibid., p. 475.

²Ibid., p. 477.

an almost studied avoidance of inflicting pain upon another. He himself mentions this quality in the "De Profundis" in reference to his ignoring of his own chagrin and, indeed, of his own best interests in dealing with Douglas and his family at the death of Douglas' eldest brother.¹ Reported instances of sharp rebuke or of wounding remarks are notably rare for a man gifted with a genius for brilliant retort and penetrating observation--especially one who did not suffer either fools or boors gladly. But in the "De Profundis," and joined with a thunderous denunciation of another, is an expression of a sense of universal identification with man--a realization, for the time at least, of what St. Paul (Epistle to the Ephesians, 4:25) and John Donne (Devotions XVII) express in their highest ethical formulations. What is merely social theorizing in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" becomes in the "De Profundis" and later in the "Ballad of Reading Gaol" a genuine consciousness of shared humanity. That Wilde could not translate his perceptions and his announced greater depth as a man and artist into life and art is an inestimable loss to literature. But like Dorian Gray Wilde is a flawed tragic hero. There was to be death, but little by way of ascension. And there was to be no fulfillment of Wilde's remark to Frank Harris: "Out of sorrow have the worlds been built, and at the birth of a

¹Ibid., p. 439.

child or a star there is pain."¹

¹Harris, II, 362.

CHAPTER IV

TRAGEDY AND ART

After release from prison a more subdued and far sleeker Wilde emerged than had entered. Frank Harris writes that Wilde's health was improved by the "regular hours and scant plain food of prison."¹ Although Harris' remark appears to concur with reports of others,² Renier insists that friends meeting Wilde soon after his release found Wilde "exhausted, coarsened; his complexion and his hands had turned purple, and his teeth were abominably decayed."³ The same kind of disagreement exists in regard to Wilde's emotional state, but whatever the truth be in these areas Wilde was evidently full of projected works: the completion of A Florentine Tragedy, begun in 1895, a play to be titled Pharaoh,⁴ a study of Christ "as the precursor of the romantic movement in life," a life of Moses, and various other works.⁵

¹Ibid., II, 368.

²Letters, p. 563.

³G. J. Renier, Oscar Wilde (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company Incorporated, 1933), p. 150.

⁴Letters, p. 649.

⁵Renier, p. 148.

However, from the beginning of his imprisonment to the end of his life Wilde produced only two completed works: the "De Profundis" and the "Ballad of Reading Gaol." Both works are in a sense works of pity: the ballad expresses pity for the executed guardsman, pity for the body of prisoners, and, it must be said, pity for the author. The injustice of the judicial system, the cruel treatment of prisoners, the vindictiveness of society in general toward those who have transgressed its laws, all are compressed into a work which it seems almost impossible to attribute to the writer of Lady Windermere's Fan or Dorian Gray. Although the work is sometimes little more than sentimental, even mawkish, and lacks the brilliance of style which marks Wilde at his best, it does possess that which his work had largely lacked hitherto: genuineness of feeling, a valid emotional involvement with the matter at hand.

There is much that is lovely in the earlier poetry, but, imitativeness aside, its major fault lies not in any technical problem but in its emotional shallowness or immaturity. The reader may, according to his taste, find the poetry pleasing or dull; but he will, I think, agree that it often gives the impression of an exercise written to meet a particular need rather than a coming to grips with the expression of real emotion or experience. There is the recording of impression as in "Les Silhouettes," "In the Gold Room," or more excellently in "The Harlot's House" and

"Ravenna," and the recording of sensation--"Quia Multum Amavi" and "Hélas" which please but are abstract rather than concrete. "Queen Henrietta Maria" contains lines which may illustrate the problems of both style and depth:

Bravely she tarrieth for her lord the king,
Her soul aflame with passionate ecstasy.
O hair of gold! O crimson lips! O face,
Made for the luring and the love of man!¹

It is too great a generalization to assert that Wilde never rose above mere sensation or sentimentality until after his trial and imprisonment, and it is obviously true that intellectually and artistically he decayed. And yet there is a great perceptiveness--the perceptiveness of felt experience--in the last two works which is lacking in the earlier. The experience itself may indeed be little higher than that of pity, but it is at least genuine and concrete pity rather than a superficial attempt to create the sensation of pity. It is perhaps illuminating to note that "Requiescat," the one early poem (1881) expressive of personal grief--over the death of his sister Isola--was at once Yeats's single choice among Wilde's works for inclusion in his compilation A Book of Irish Verse, published in 1894, and a poem which Wilde himself describes as untypical of his work.²

The ballad, published in February of 1898, contains

¹Works, p. 766.

²Letters, p. 365.

much of the stuff of tragedy as well as the theme of guilt and punishment, and Wilde's problems of both art and morality can be found in small in the work. Its principal matter is the narration of the anticipation of execution by hanging and the reaction of both the condemned guardsman and his fellow prisoners to that anticipation. The victim, who is likened to Christ,¹ not only accepts his fate, he looks forward to it² and has almost a joyful manner.³ His crime--the murder of his wife--represents to Wilde a universal one: the killing of the thing one loves. It could be argued that in a very general way this expresses a kind of tragic consciousness. But to do so is to identify tragedy with mere destructiveness and with the urge to die; and while one can translate the career of the tragic hero into little more than such, as Knight does in his presentation of Hamlet as an ambassador of death,⁴ to take this approach is to psychoanalyze tragedy out of existence. While such an approach is defensible in contemporary terms and can be applied possibly to every tragedy in literary history, it is only by hindsight that we can do so. A modern simplistic definition of tragedy might be formulated as a flying in the face of the nature of things and

¹Works, pp. 824, 835.

²Ibid., p. 827.

³Ibid., p. 824.

⁴G. Wilson Knight, The Wheel of Fire (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), pp. 34-50.

a bringing of destruction upon oneself thereby. But this is not quite what Sophocles, Shakespeare, or Oscar Wilde had in mind either in speaking of tragedy or of the human condition. Wilde has things to say about suffering and its function, but what he says in his essays--including the "De Profundis"--does not harmonize with the view of human experience as being little more than the effecting of a sadomasochistic death wish. On the other hand, in the ballad it seems that such a view is expressed: the guardsman destroys that which he loves and looks forward to his own death.

By intruding a Christlike figure into the poem Wilde presents something of the same problems we face in Dorian Gray and in "De Profundis." In traditional Christianity the cruel and apparently unjust crucifixion is followed by a resurrection and release for a human race held captive by death. In other words, as in tragedy, the suffering is purposeful and beneficial. It is above all neither accidental nor merely pitiful, nor is it merely an instance of universal injustice. Wilde's guardsman commits a sin, is crushed for that sin, and the reader is left with little more than a suggestion that divine justice is of a higher and more merciful nature than its human counterpart and that Christ will raise up murderers with others.¹ The suggestion itself is gratuitous in relation to the work as a whole. Wilde has made the guardsman into a hero and, like Dorian,

¹Works, p. 839.

surrounded him with the accoutrements of tragedy and the epic: the hero sins, enters into the hell of Reading Gaol, goes willingly to an atoning sacrifice--which includes an obvious ascension to the gallows; the night preceding the execution is haunted by the suggestion of supernatural beings who dance and leer:

And crooked shapes of terror crouched,
 In the corners where we lay:
 And each evil sprite that walks by night
 Before us seemed to play.

 About, about, in ghostly rout
 They caught a saraband:
 And the damned grotesques made arabesques
 Like the wind upon the sand.¹

Also present is personification of abstractions: horror and terror² and despair.³ The sacrifice is followed by release of the prisoners, "each from his separate hell."⁴ Thus far the structure of tragedy holds; but rather than experiencing a catharsis in any sense, i.e., a feeling of relief or release or reordering, the other prisoners appear to feel a deepening of guilt:

But there were those amongst us all
 Who walked with downcast head,
 And knew that, had each got his due,
 They should have died instead:
 He had but killed a thing that lived,
 Whilst they had killed the dead.⁵

¹Ibid., pp. 829-830.

²Ibid., p. 833.

³Ibid., p. 837.

⁴Ibid., p. 832.

⁵Ibid., p. 833.

Far from providing a universal hero or acceptable scapegoat who can lighten guilt, the guardsman in his death seems rather to spread and intensify it, increasing the curse of guilt rather than removing it. His suffering, despite its attributed similarity to Christ's, does nothing to save or relieve: it is merely one more horror of hell. The prisoners, released from their separate hells, emerge merely into a common one.

But is this not consistent with the purposeless and unredeeming sacrifice of Dorian Gray? And is it not also consistent with the experience of Oscar Wilde? We find in Dorian's story a career the purpose of which is the creation of a work of art through experience, including that of suffering (through renunciation). But Dorian's experience brings no one but possibly Lord Henry any sense of gratification or perfection. He brings himself and others to destruction through the discovery and development of his own soul. Again, if this is all that tragedy consists of, it is inaccurate to charge Wilde with inadequacy in his treatment of it. But it is Wilde himself who attributes value to suffering both in Dorian Gray and in "De Profundis"--a value which will contribute to the development of the soul.

Wilde the man provides a figure of the kind of tragic hero presented in both the novel and the ballad. Like the guardsman, Wilde destroyed that which he had loved--his

marriage and his relationship to his sons. It is perhaps noteworthy that Lady Wilde's death, in his mind, was associated with his guilt.¹ Having brought ruin upon himself and his family and having, as mentioned earlier, refused to flee personal punishment, Wilde suffered through two years of prison, a suffering he considers deserved in "De Profundis." His career following his release was a taking up of the worst of his earlier life, with hardly any of its redeeming productiveness. In lieu of that productiveness, we find little beyond self-pity and begging, excess and decay. Having exhausted the possibilities of broader destructiveness, Wilde took at last to alcohol and absinthe,² a symbolically appropriate poison, once said to destroy the brain, the seat of genius.

There is about both the works and the life of Wilde the tragic and the absurd. Perhaps the destruction-and-pain-seeking artist is represented as well as anywhere in two of his short tales: the poem in prose titled "The Master" (1894) and in "The Remarkable Rocket" (1888). In "The Master" a young man, weeping, naked, and wounded with thorns, is mistaken for a grieving disciple of the just-crucified Christ. His grief, however, is not over the dead Lord but over the incompleteness of his own career:

And the young man answered, 'It is not for him that I am

¹Letters, pp. 464, 496.

²Winwar, p. 357.

weeping, but for myself. I too have changed water into wine, and I have healed the leper and given sight to the blind. I have walked upon the waters, and from the dwellers in the tombs I have cast out devils. I have fed the hungry in the desert where there was no food, and I have raised the dead from the narrow houses, and at my bidding, and before a great multitude of people, a barren fig tree withered away. All things that this man has done I have done also. And yet they have not crucified me.¹

Without relating the tale to the earlier discussion of union with the loved object in death, one can find here that concept of self-destruction as the goal and end of action, of defeat and death rather than triumph and exaltation as the rewards of life.

Perhaps Wilde's most engaging tragic hero--and his most nearly perfect one--is the remarkable rocket whose purpose is, quite properly, well timed self-destruction but whose fatal flaw, sentimentality, born of pride in his sensitive nature, defeats that purpose through dampening by tears. Only after a descent into hell (the gutter) and execution (being thrown as a stick into a fire) can the rocket at last ascend and do that for which it is designed--explode. But even in this tale the hero is flawed: he learns nothing from his descent into hell, and he carries the fulness of his unenlightened pride (that hubris which has dampened his powder) to the moment of his ascension and destruction, a destruction which in pyrotechnical as well as tragic terms is valueless, as it occurs in full daylight

¹Works, p. 845.

and thus accomplishes nothing but destruction.

Wilde's remark to Gide that the tragic is that which is to be sought in life (see p. 4) is a mystifying one. If Wilde meant the tragic experience as it is traditionally viewed, one is faced with art which the artist himself either misunderstood or could not perfect, or with inconsistency. If Wilde meant tragedy as no more than a career culminating in self-destruction, then there is a consistency in all except the last long work, the "De Profundis," in which pain is not merely its own excuse for being but is, rather, generative of some benefit. In Vera there is sacrifice which brings order, but in different terms than the traditional tragic ones. One finds in the earlier works pain as the price of joy: again the "Quia Multum Amavi" and "Hélas," as well as of sin: Lady Windermere's Fan (1892) and An Ideal Husband (1895). But these examples may demonstrate little beyond a sense of the inevitability of suffering in life and could as easily be taken as a more or less realistic appreciation of the human condition in no way peculiar to Oscar Wilde.

The Duchess of Padua, first produced in 1891, can be described as a tragedy of blood but again is a tragedy without benefit, although the Duchess herself does experience a perception of guilt and is prepared to sacrifice herself for her lover. However, the play and its end are so pompously executed that any genuineness of the tragic sense is lost in pseudo-Shakespearean blank verse and genuine nine-

teenth-century melodrama. The structure and theme of the play are those of the seventeenth-century revenge play in five acts. Its setting is Padua in the latter half of the sixteenth century, and the problem laid upon the young Guido Ferranti is that of revenging the death of his father. The sinister Count Moranzone informs Guido of his true identity and of the betrayal of his father by the tyrannical Simone Cesso, Duke of Padua, and presents a far-too-complex plan of just revenge, including a variation of friendship betrayed. Guido is to gain the Duke's love and trust, then slay him in his bedchamber with his father's own dagger, which will be sent to him as signal and as weapon.

Guido's infatuation with the Duchess, his enemy's wife, brings a fatal weakness to him, and while on one hand Moranzone haunts him like the ghost of Hamlet's father--and to the same purpose--a flying in the face of fate reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet is accomplished by the love which will bring destruction both to Guido and the Duchess. The fatefulness of their love is foretold in a scene in which Moranzone has just appeared momentarily in the doorway to haunt the first protestations of love between the two and in which the dagger--the symbol of vengeance--is transformed into a dart of love, but a dart which must destroy them both:

Duchess: Ay! is it not strange
I should love mine enemy?

Guido: Who is he?

Duchess: Why, you: that with your shaft didst pierce
my heart!

Poor heart, that lived its little lonely life
Until it met your arrow.

Guido: Ah, dear love, I am so wounded by that bolt
myself

That with untended wounds I lie a-dying
Unless you cure me, dear physician.

Duchess: I would not have you cured; for I am sick
With the same malady.¹

And immediately the dagger is delivered to Guido, reminding him of his mission and bringing with it the realization that his love is impossible. He renounces his vows of love to Beatrice, speaking of a "barrier" between them,² and leaves her in despair both over her abandonment and the misery of her life with the heartless Duke. She determines to drive her dagger into her own heart: "The stars have fought against me, that is all, and thus tonight when my lord lieth asleep, will I fall upon my dagger, and so cease."³ At which point Moranzone appears once more as the personification of that vengeance which makes her new found love impossible:

Moranzone: He does not love you, madam.

Duchess: May the plague
Wither the tongue that says so! Give him
back.

Moranzone: Madam, I tell you you will never see him.
Neither tonight, nor any other night.

Duchess: What is your name?

Moranzone: My name? Revenge!⁴

¹Ibid., pp. 584-585.

²Ibid., p. 586.

³Ibid., p. 589.

⁴Ibid., p. 590.

But Guido, softened by love and weakened in his resolve, abandons revenge in the person of Moranzone only to find that Beatrice, maddened by disappointment in love and determined to remove what she takes to be the barrier between them, has stabbed her husband and is prepared to flee with Guido. Horrified, not by the death of Padua but by the sin of Beatrice, Guido repulses her even as he has dismissed revenge, for she is guilty of the sin of her husband and the bloodthirst of Moranzone and is no longer worthy of love:

Duchess (wringing her hands): For you! For you!
I did it all for you: have you forgotten?
You said there was a barrier between us;
That barrier lies now i' the upper chamber
Upset, overthrown, beaten, and battered down,
And will not part us ever.

Guido: No, you mistook:
Sin was the barrier, you have raised it up;
Crime was the barrier, you have sent it there.
The barrier was murder, and your hand
Has builded it so high it shuts out our heaven,
It shuts out God.¹

Like a poison, bloodshed has corrupted love as it corrupted the Duke, Moranzone, and nearly Guido himself. Only he is free of the contamination begun by the betrayal of his father. But the Duchess is infected by more than blood, and, in a scene in which Guido holds before her the bloodied dagger with which she has slain her husband, she threatens to further the spread of blood:

Duchess: Murder did you say?
Murder is hungry, and still cries for more,
And death, his brother, is not satisfied,

¹Ibid., p. 599.

But walks the house, and will not go away,
 Unless he has a comrade! Tarry, death,
 For I will give thee a most faithful lackey
 To travel with thee! Murder, call no more,
 For thou shalt eat thy fill. . . .
 Do you not hear,
 There is artillery in the Heaven tonight.
 Vengeance is wakened up, and has unloosed
 His dogs upon the world, and in this matter
 Which lies between us two, let him who draws
 The thunder on his head beware the ruin
 Which the forked flame brings after.¹

At this moment Guido repents of his too-stern condemnation and attempts to regain their lost love, but Beatrice rushes out to accuse him publicly of the murder of the Duke.

Guido is tried in a court dominated by the vengeance-maddened Beatrice, and rather than betray her Guido acknowledges his guilt in the death of Padua, rightly seeing himself as the cause of her crime:

Guido: Art thou that Beatrice, Duchess of Padua?
Duchess: I am what thou hast made me; look at me well,
 I am thy handiwork.²

Recognizing the strength of Guido's love and his comparative innocence, Beatrice attempts to give pardon as ruler of Padua but is prevented by the Lord Justice. She appears disguised in Guido's cell, planning to free him by an exchange of clothing, and, haunted by guilt, drinks the poison prepared for his execution and made the symbol of the figurative poison which has destroyed her. Guido, discovering her love, again resolves to die with her but is frustrated by Beatrice's having exhausted the poison. So

¹Ibid., p. 603.

²Ibid., p. 612.

in the final scene of what Epifanio San Juan calls "a historical melodrama soaked in romantic gush,"¹ the Duchess, maddened with guilt and the workings of poison, hallucinates in a dungeon to the accompaniment of chanting monks, while her unjustly condemned lover attempts to comfort her:

Duchess: Oh I have been
 Guilty beyond all women, and indeed
 Beyond all women punished. Do you think--
 No, that could not be--Oh, do you think that
 love
 Can wipe the bloody stain from off my hands,
 Pour balm into my wounds, heal up my hurts,
 And wash my scarlet sins as white as snow?--
 For I have sinned.

Guido: They do not sin at all
 Who sin for love.

Duchess: No, I have sinned, and yet
 Perchance my sin will be forgiven me. I have
 loved much.

They kiss each other now for the first time in this act, when suddenly the Duchess leaps up in the dreadful spasm of death, tears in agony at her dress, and finally, with face twisted and distorted with pain, falls back dead in a chair. Guido, seizing her dagger from her belt, kills himself; and as he falls across her knees, clutches at the cloak which is on the back of the chair²

Such tragic integrity as the play might have is sacrificed to operatic bombast. Mary Anderson, perhaps too kindly, refused to portray the Duchess on the grounds that "the play . . . would no more please the public today than would Venice Preserved or Lucretia Borgia."³ However, the play was produced in America in 1891, and its run of two weeks

¹San Juan, p. 106.

²Works, pp. 630-631.

³Letters, p. 142.

constituted in Wilde's mind "an immense success."¹

Like most of the plays, The Duchess of Padua suffers from an oversupply of purely conventional elements and devices. Shakespeare gauged his audience's tastes accurately in including action and motif that were popular in his day--the theme of blood getting blood, of revenge and madness, of spectres actual or suggested, of poison thematically harmonized with action, of love turning to destroy. But he could at his best transmute these devices into a catholic meaningfulness in which they rise above mere effect and become contributing parts of a whole, a kind of symphonic fusing of symbol to meaning. Wilde, writing three hundred years later, miscalculated the appeal of Renaissance devices to contemporary audiences. He also failed to raise symbol--the dagger, poison--above the level of mere cleverness. The treatment of love is in one respect valid in that sudden infatuation can turn to hatred and vengefulness. Also, a love which flies in the face of the nature of things can bring destruction. It is difficult, however, to credit Guido's alternation between love and disgust and Beatrice's between love and vengefulness. Guido can perhaps be accepted more nearly than can Beatrice. We learn early that he is impulsive: he will forget the bargain with Moranzone and reaches for his dagger at the first sight of his enemy. But Beatrice, who first appears as the embodiment of purity, charity, and

¹Ibid., p. 283.

long suffering, is hard to believe as she develops from this to impulsive love, to thoughts of suicide, to murder, to vengefulness and cruelty, then back to love and again to suicide. Her behavior in the trial scene of Act IV is the weakest element of the play. Given a character subject to sudden shifts, her sustaining of hard cruelty and disregard for the laws and feelings of her subjects strains credibility. We can accept her as a symbol of the contamination wrought by revenge and perhaps as a symbol of love finally triumphant, but she is merely a symbol and fails to convince as a character of flesh and blood.

Aside from Wilde's common weakness for melodramatic effect, the problem of psychological validity may rise from a total lack in Wilde's mind of an understanding either of the ordinary operations of love or those of vengefulness. Neither figured in his personality. Love, when it is not handled superficially in the modern plays, is the means of self-destruction and is in fact the love of death or suffering. It is true that in The Duchess of Padua love becomes the means of self-destruction, but there is nothing within the personalities of the characters to force love to function in this way. We are, rather, presented with characters and their actions for which there is little justification save that of staging the necessary steps in a play about revenge. The form is present, but it is not "instinct with feeling," at least not with feeling above the level of the sensational.

What might function as the skeleton of a Verdi opera will seldom stand on its own feet as drama.

That a total lack of normal credibility will not necessarily destroy a play is demonstrated in The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) in which the ordinary world and ordinary logic are turned upside down and the action and characters of the play assume a reality of their own within the frame of reference. Here there is no pretense of realism or depth of character, and the play moves from beginning to end with an integrity, if only in its own terms, which makes it perhaps Wilde's finest work. That the characters should move and talk like actors playing parts is of a piece with the content and tone of the play. In The Duchess of Padua, however, Wilde mistakes largeness of movement and form with largeness of effect and is tripped up by his own philosophy of form-over-content. To fit content to form is artistically defensible, and to allow form to be the beginning of things is possible in the work of a great artist and is the case, for example, in Lycidas. But to lean totally upon the devices of a genre and to depend completely upon the strength of melodramatic effect is to produce what is at best unbelievable and at worst shallow.

Vera, Or The Nihilists (1880), while enjoying even less success than The Duchess of Padua, is in many respects a better play. Although it is given a foreign setting--

Russia--it is contemporary in action and is redeemed to an extent by the same talent which saves Lady Windermere's Fan and the other modern plays from their own plots. While its plot is contrived and at the mercy of coincidence, its dialogue, for the most part free of pretended grandeur of diction, often has the same brilliance of wit which is Wilde's forte. But the cloak-and-dagger melodrama of the piece necessarily limits its use.

Here Wilde attempts a drama of social injustice, posing the Czarist regime as heartless oppressor and exploiter of the people of Russia. The Czar appears as a kind of witty Nero who delights in cruelty for its own sake but is a coward, distrustful not only of his people and ministers but of his own son:

Czar (nervous and frightened): Don't come too near me, boy! Don't come too near me, I say! There is always something about an heir to a crown unwholesome to his father. Who is that man over there? I don't know him. What is he doing? Is he a conspirator? Have you searched him? Give him till tomorrow to confess, then hang him!--Hang him!¹

The Czarevitch himself is a paragon of heroism and love for his people, risking his life in order to learn the sympathies of the conspirators and, hopefully in his own person, to right the wrongs which they suffer.

Again in a kind of Romeo and Juliet fashion, a love made impossible by the situation in which it takes place

¹Works, p. 651.

works to destroy the lovers. Vera, a commoner, is sworn to avenge her exiled brother and to free Russia from imperial rule. She has become a part of a conspiracy whose purpose is to destroy both Czar and Czarevitch. Alexis, the Czarevitch, is himself a member of the conspiring group, posing as a medical student and regarded by the group's president as "the bravest heart amongst us."¹ Both are bound by the nihilist oath:

To strangle whatever nature is in us; neither to love nor to be loved, neither to pity nor to be pitied, neither to marry nor to be given in marriage, till the end is come; to step secretly by night; to drop poison in the glass; to set father against son, and husband against wife; without fear, without hope, without future, to suffer, to annihilate, to revenge.²

But Vera mingles love with admiration for Alexis' devotion to Russia and liberty: "Liberty is blessed in having such a lover." However, she speaks ominously of her approaching dilemma:

Had I not strangled nature, sworn neither to love nor to be loved, methinks I might have loved him. Oh, I am a fool, a traitor myself, a traitor myself! But why did he come amongst us with his bright young face, his heart of flame for liberty, his pure white soul? Why does he make me feel at times as if I would have him as my king, republican though I be? Oh, fool, fool, fool! False to your oath! Weak as water! Have done! Remember what you are--a nihilist, a nihilist!³

Alexis demonstrates his loyalty to the revolutionary group by exposing himself to danger from the Czar's police

¹Ibid., p. 640.

²Ibid., p. 638.

³Ibid., p. 643.

and from the group itself by revealing his identity. Further, he pleads for the cause of the people in the face of his father's anger and the cynicism of the prime minister, Prince Paul--a figure who joins the wit of Lord Henry to the cruelty of the Czar--and exposes his own involvement in the revolution:

Czar: Insolent boy! Have you forgotten who is emperor of Russia?

Czarevitch: No! The people reign now, by the grace of God. You should have been their shepherd; you have fled away like the hireling, and let the wolves in upon them.

Czar: Take him away! Take him away, Prince Paul!

Czarevitch: God hath given his people tongues to speak with; you would cut them out that they may be dumb in their agony, silent in their torture! But, he hath given them hands to smite with, and they shall smite! Ay! From the sick and laboring womb of this unhappy land some revolution, like a bloody child, may rise up and slay you!

Czar: Devil! Assassin! Why do you beard me thus to my face?

Czarevitch: Because I am a nihilist!¹

The Czar's rage and determination to punish his son are cut short in the same scene by a fatal shot through the balcony window which leaves Alexis the crown but accomplishes only half of the nihilist plot--the other half being the death of Alexis himself in order to eradicate the rule of the Czars. Alexis fails to appear to renounce his title as he has sworn to do, and, despite the pleas of Vera, the conspirators determine to assassinate him, for "'tis but a sorry hunter who leaves the wolf cub alive to avenge his father."² In the

¹Ibid., p. 656.

²Ibid., p. 661.

presence of Prince Paul, who compounds his villainy by joining the conspiracy after his new master has dismissed and banished him, Vera, remembering her oath, at last consents to the drawing of lots for the choice of the assassin:

Ay, it is right that he should die. He hath broken his oath. There should be no crowned man in Europe. Have I not sworn it? To be strong, our new republic should be drunk with the blood of kings. He hath broken his oath. As the father died so let the son die too. Yet not tonight, not tonight. Russia, that hath borne her centuries of wrong, can wait a week for liberty. Give him a week.¹

She is inevitably the drawer of the fatal sign and in the grand finale to the third act utters the only really noisome melodramatic speech of the play, comparing herself to Charlotte Corday, liberty and Russia to the crucified Christ, and Alexis to Judas, and ending:

Here on thy altar, O liberty, do I dedicate myself to thy service; do with me as thou wilt! (brandishing the dagger.) The end has come now, and by thy sacred wounds, O crucified mother, O liberty, I swear that Russia shall be saved!²

In the last act of the play, Alexis, despite his broken oath to the nihilists, works to cleanse Russia of the evil ministers who have surrounded his father and dreams of reunion with Vera. She appears armed and is turned aside from her purpose by Alexis' announced plan for freeing Russia from tyranny and oppression, his reiterated love for her, and her own heart:

¹Ibid., p. 664.

²Ibid., p. 666.

Vera (clutching dagger): To strangle whatever nature is in me, neither to love nor to be loved, neither to pity nor--O, I am a woman! God help me, I am a woman! O Alexis! I too have broken my oath; I am a traitor. I love. O, do not speak, do not speak--(kisses his lips)--the first, the last time.¹

But realizing that failure to signal the death of the Czar-- by throwing the bloodied dagger into the courtyard below-- will bring her fellow nihilists rushing in to accomplish their design, Vera stabs herself and throws the dagger through the window. She has thus satisfied the wishes of the conspirators, at least momentarily, and has saved the life of her lover. To Alexis' query, "What have you done?" she responds, "I have saved Russia."²

In Vera, with its more moderate use of melodrama and stage effect, and despite its spy-thriller atmosphere, Wilde created a play with at least as much integrity as any of his plays so far as credibility and discipline of structure are concerned. Whereas in The Duchess of Padua the motivations and actions of the characters seem lacking in psychological realism, alternating as they do between love and disgust or between love and vengefulness, in the character of Vera the alternation is between kinds of love or between duty and love. The duty of revenging her brother is enlarged into the greater duty imposed by the love of the liberty her brother represents and the love of Russia. This

¹Ibid., p. 672.

²Ibid., p. 673.

love is weakened momentarily by romantic love for Alexis but is overriding until the final scene of the play in which the different loves merge and manifest themselves in the figure of the new and enlightened Czar who is also the man she loves. The revelation is inseparable from the realization that only by sacrifice of herself can she express her love and save its object. The dagger--that standard symbol of vengeance--becomes the knife of sacrifice and an instrument of love's consummation.

The play cannot be considered either a tragedy in a classical sense or a tragedy of blood. There is no flaw as such in either of the characters, unless it is the capacity for love which destroys Vera but saves Alexis. Vera's blood is shed, but not as any direct consequence of blood getting blood or of contamination. Her death is sacrificial and motivated by love, and its result is the saving of Russia from both oppression and chaos. Here is the only instance in the dramatic works of Wilde in which suffering or death brings benefit. Indeed, its culmination amounts to the Shakespearean glimpse of order restored. But this does not provide the whole of tragedy. Vera has not sinned, nor is her death atonement for sin; it is, rather, an expression of love--not love which brings death but love which will face death. As discussed earlier, Wilde could not, perhaps, grasp the full psychology of ordinary love, but he demonstrates in Vera at least an appreciation of love's potential

and elevates it to a higher level, concretely expressed, than he does anywhere else in his works. But again, despite its deviation from the formula of love-brings-death, Vera, like The Duchess of Padua, makes death the concomitant of love.

Neither of the two plays includes the element of self-fulfillment or development expressed in Wilde's theoretical writings, in the novel, and in the "De Profundis." Rather, both are composed for dramatic effect and fail, partly because he was unable to translate his theory later expressed in the "De Profundis" of making form "instinct with feeling" into reality, and partly because his genius for the inversion of concepts, which functions brilliantly in his comic dialogues and in the treatment of love as that which is sterile and destructive, worked to prevent any positive or psychologically valid presentation of the emotion.

The two fragments, A Florentine Tragedy (1895) and La Sainte Courtesane, of uncertain date, are clever exercises in irony as well as in psychological verisimilitude. But they are weakened by a surfeit of organically unnecessary conceits, repetitions, and general magniloquence. In all three plays is demonstrated Ojala's thesis that Wilde's use of words involved treating them as objects to be valued for their own sake, quite apart from their communicative values. For all their charm, the stories of A House of Pomegranates (1891) suffer from the same affection for words, which become their

own excuse for being to a sometimes distracting degree. In the "Fisherman and His Soul" the Emperor of Ashter opens his treasure chamber to the soul, who reports its contents to his separated master:

Thou couldst not believe how marvelous a place it was. There were huge tortoise shells full of pearls, and hollowed moonstones of great size piled up with red rubies. The gold was stored in coffers of elephant hide and the gold dust in leather bottles. There were opals and sapphires, the former in cups of crystal, and the latter in cups of jade. Round green emeralds were arranged in order upon thin plates of ivory, and in one corner were silk bags filled, some with tortoise stones, and others with beryls. The ivory horns were heaped with purple amethysts, and the horns of brass were chalcedonies and sards. The pillars, which were of cedar, were hung with strings of yellow lynx-stones. In the flat oval shields there were carbuncles, both wine colored and colored like grass.¹

However, Wilde's style in the stories and in the three above-mentioned plays is simply another demonstration of his philosophy of art which places style above meaning and form above content. In any search for consistency in the works, it is in this area that one principally finds it. By and large it is here too that one finds Wilde's greatest excellence. With the exception of instances of pomposity or overexuberance, both of which are symptomatic of his lack of discipline, Wilde must ever be saluted for his style. However meaningless, shallow, or sentimental the content of almost any of his works, the choice of words--or quality of language--in which it is embodied surpasses that of most major writers of English. This excellence is found most

¹Ibid., p. 264.

consistently in the novel, the essays, and the four modern plays. It often turns from excellence to affectation and exaggeration, most commonly in the stories and in the plays set in the Renaissance or in antiquity. On the other hand, those very qualities, joined with pervasive sensuality, make Salome, whatever its limitations as drama, into an operatic libretto par excellence. The nature of opera, like that of ballet, demands exaggeration, repetition, and expansive gesture and action. It is appropriate that Richard Strauss, also considered a decadent in art, should have provided a musical setting for the play.

Salome, apparently composed originally in French, was probably completed in 1891, although the exact time and the exact process of composition are both uncertain.¹ The English translation, done by Lord Alfred Douglas and illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley, appeared in February of 1894. No more appropriate combination of talents could exist for the work. And although Wilde was not pleased with Douglas' translation, complaining of its unworthiness of Douglas as "an ordinary Oxonian" and its "schoolboy faults,"² it is in many ways the most characteristic of Wilde's works. It contains most succinctly and pointedly those elements which dominate those works. There is decorative or music-like use of language, of words chosen for their shape and sound and

¹Letters, p. 305.

²Ibid., p. 432.

for their connotative value rather than for immediate lucidity. Like the eleventh chapter of The Picture of Dorian Gray, it is at once a melodic evocation of sensuality and one of decay and perversity. Salome plays a combination of Eve and Serpent to Jokanaan's Adam. Her approaches to the white innocence of the prophet reflect that same urgency for union to be found in the behavior of Satan, Claggart, and Lord Henry, yet more urgently expressed:

Jokanaan, I am amorous of thy body! Thy body is white like the lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed. Thy body is white like the snows that lie in the mountains of Judea and come down into the valleys. The roses of the garden of the queen of Arabia are not so white as thy body. Neither the roses in the garden of the queen of Arabia, nor the feet of the dawn when they light on the leaves, nor the breast of the moon when she lies on the breast of the sea. There is nothing in¹ the world so white as thy body. Let me touch thy body.¹

But Jokanaan, who knows that "by woman came evil into the world," will have none of Herodias' daughter and consistently rejects her advances, for here is an Adam who will listen "but to the voice of the Lord God."² He is not tempted by Salome to the knowledge of corrupt sensuality. He has seen and condemned corruption in the mother of Salome and is the servant of purity even to the point of death. He has become the embodiment or expression of purity even as Christ is the embodiment of suffering and humility, and Salome, finding her desires for that purity blocked, can only destroy

¹Works, pp. 543-544.

²Ibid., p. 544.

it. But in his death Jokanaan achieves that same perfection or culmination of expression that his master is shortly to achieve and thereby finds union with him. He is no more a tragic figure in any real sense than is Christ as Wilde understands Him.

Rather, it is Salome who provides the tragedy. On one level in the play, whiteness or pallidness or silver expresses purity and virginity when associated with Christ and the prophet. Jokanaan is like a "thin ivory statue . . . an image of silver . . . a moonbeam, like a shaft of silver. His flesh must be cool like ivory."¹ John's head is placed upon a shield of silver.² The moon is a virgin³ and is hidden by dark clouds at the death of Jokanaan,⁴ as at the destruction of purity by evil. But whiteness is also the color of death and sterility and when associated with Salome becomes at once a symbol of her character and that of the result of her character. The play opens upon an alternating comparison of the moon to the princess Salome:

The Young Syrian: How beautiful is the princess Salome tonight!

The Page of Herodias: Look at the moon! How strange the moon seems! She is like a woman rising from the tomb. She is like a dead woman. You would fancy she was looking for dead things.

¹Ibid., p. 543.

²Ibid., p. 558.

³Ibid., p. 540.

⁴Ibid., p. 559.

The Young Syrian: She has a strange look. She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. You would fancy she was dancing.

The Page of Herodias: She is like a woman who is dead. She moves very slowly.¹

Her pallor is observed again and again by the young Syrian:

"How pale the princess is! Never have I seen her so pale.

She is like the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver."² She is like a "silver flower."³ The young page of

Herodias, like a chorus, combines and expresses the thematic relationship of Salome to the moon and death: "Oh! How strange the moon looks. You would think it was the hand of a dead woman who is seeking to cover herself with a shroud."⁴

And again at the suicide of the young Syrian: "I knew that the moon was seeking a dead thing, but I knew not that it was he whom she sought. Ah, why did I not hide him from the moon? If I had hidden him in a cavern she would not have seen him."⁵ After Herod and his court have fled in fear and revulsion from the scene and Herod has ordered the death of Salome, "a moonbeam falls on Salome, covering her with light";⁶ and at this moment she is crushed beneath the

¹Ibid., p. 537.

²Ibid., p. 538.

³Ibid., p. 540.

⁴Ibid., p. 542.

⁵Ibid., p. 545.

⁶Ibid., p. 560.

shields of Herod's soldiers.

There is an opposition of two major themes within the play which whiteness serves to represent and emphasize. There is the theme of simple lust and animal sensuality embodied in the characters of Herod and Herodias. These are fully human. Their reactions are those of full-blooded and more or less balanced people. The colors associated with them are varied and brilliant. They have sinned--their marriage is incestuous and has been made possible only through the murder of Herod's brother--and are haunted by the guilt of that sin. Their punishment is threefold: their marriage is sterile--Herodias' black miter is "sewn with pearls";¹ Jokanaan torments them with the anger of God like a voice from the tomb--his black cistern prison was earlier the prison of Herod's brother; and Salome drives Herod to an insanity of lust and her mother to frightened jealousy. But again both operate within a framework of recognizable humanity. To Herod the moon is looking not for the dead but for lovers, and he too, having just spoken of Salome, indirectly parallels the moon with her:

The moon has a strange look tonight. Has she not a strange look? She is like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. She is naked, too. She is quite naked. The clouds are seeking to clothe her nakedness, but she will not let them. She shows herself naked in the sky. She reels through the clouds like a drunken woman. I am sure she is looking for lovers. Does she not reel like a drunken woman? She is

¹Ibid., p. 538.

like a mad woman is she not?¹

What Knight has said of Hamlet (see p. 89) could be said of Salome. She is somewhat a Hamlet figure who, obsessed with death, brings herself and the object of her love to death as to a goal. In fact, by his revising of the biblical account of the prophet's death, in which Herodias prompts Salome's request, into one in which Salome herself is the major agent, Wilde sets up a situation analogous to that in Hamlet: that of the uncle-stepfather, the adulterous mother, the child motivated by that outside the pattern of ordinary humanity. In such case, the prophet's purity becomes not a positive but a negative thing, and his devotion to his Lord a variation upon the Claggart-Budd theme. Here the identification or unity is one of purity rather than of shared corruption, but one which must include death as its culmination. Jokanaan anticipates the death of Jesus as a certainty: "Where is he, who in a robe of silver shall one day die in the face of all the people?"² and "The day of him who shall die in a robe of silver has not yet come."³ The significance of whiteness becomes then that of death and sterility pursued by Jokanaan and by Salome in their separate ways. It is Jokanaan's death-like and death-foretelling whiteness which motivates Salome, and this whiteness

¹Ibid., p. 546.

²Ibid., p. 542.

³Ibid., p. 543.

is a figure of the death which she herself gains at the end.

The theme of sterility and death is played in variation in the secondary action involving the page of Herodias and the young Syrian. The Syrian's passion for Salome parallels hers for Jokanaan, and his previously cited remarks contain the same insistence upon whiteness as do Salome's descriptions of Jokanaan, again with the page providing a chorus of warnings and references to death. The Syrian's love for Salome may be of the same species as hers for Jokanaan, and the page's anguish seems to indicate a very thinly veiled homosexual attachment. He is struck by the danger Salome presents both to the Syrian's life and to his affections: "You are always looking at her. You look at her too much. It is dangerous to look at people in such a fashion. Something terrible may happen"¹ and "Do not look at her. I pray you not to look at her."² When the Syrian kills himself in despair over Salome's passion for Jokanaan, the page speaks both of his love for the Syrian and of the Syrian's Narcissus-like behavior:

He was my brother, and nearer to me than a brother. I gave him a little box of perfumes, and a ring of agate that he wore always on his hand. In the evening we used to walk by the river, among the almond trees, and he would tell me of the things of his country. He spake ever very low. The sound of his voice was like the sound of the flute, of a flute player. Also he much loved to gaze at himself in the river. I used to

¹Ibid., p. 538.

²Ibid., p. 540.

reproach him for that.¹

That Wilde should include such a sub-plot more than suggests a realization on his part of the relationships existing among obsession with or desire for death, narcissism, and homosexuality. Nowhere else in the works is the subject of inversion so directly approached, although often it is implicit. Further, here even more than in Dorian Gray, the whole work breathes perversity. Even in its decorative passages--which constitute so much of the play--there is a constant tenor of the abnormal, of nature in decay and death. The careless reader might miss these elements in Dorian Gray, but none could do so in a reading of Salome. And yet so much is indirect, is present only through the repetition, alternation, and emphasis of otherwise innocent terms and phrases.

The play is, in its own terms, a masterpiece which almost spans the Romantic Movement in its scope--from the gothic to the decadent--and one also which expresses in small the range of Wilde's highest art: a vibrant and musical use of language, a brilliant repetitive use of object-image in the cataloging of color, jewels, and textures--though this at times seems to weaken the play, the evocation of the exotic and the grotesque, and its theme of love which brings death. Its delicate double treatment of the theme attests to Wilde's mastery as an artist.

¹Ibid., p. 545.

To condemn the play, as it has been condemned, for its sensuality and morbidity is to miss the point. Wilde was to defend the moral integrity of Dorian Gray (see p. 18) as a kind of sop to respectability. No such defense is really necessary for Salome. Its clear structural association of decadence with death, of spiritual and emotional disease bringing sterility and destruction, is sufficiently clear--clearer than elsewhere in Wilde because of its dramatic simplicity--and to disapprove of Salome's behavior because it is unhealthy or morbid is to misunderstand the thematic uses made of the elements of the play.

In all those works of Wilde's which might in any sense be called tragic, there is nowhere else so controlled a use of character and action or of avoidance of dialogue inappropriate to tone or theme. Here form and content are in almost perfect harmony, and the form itself has integrity quite apart from content.

CHAPTER V

MORALITY AND ART

I have treated Wilde in this study on one hand as a theoretician of the relationship of art to behavior and of experience to self-development and on the other as an artist whose own psychological quirks determined the structure and content of his works. It is not a simple task to reduce all these things to a formula which would provide a tidy definition of Wilde's art or demonstrate his consistency or inconsistency in putting theory into practice.

One must separate the threads or themes of his life and art as best he can. There is first the aesthetic philosopher who in the early stages of his development saw art principally as decorative and entirely as a matter of form. Life imitates art but has no proper function in relation to art except as providing a need for it--the imperfection of nature is the cause of art,¹ and nature imitates art, deriving its colorings and lines from the spectator's re-orientations which art has provided. But art never ex-

¹Ibid., p. 909.

presses anything except itself¹ and has no obligation to anything outside itself, not even to that which it may attempt to represent: "The only portraits in which one believes are the portraits where there is very little of the sitter and a very great deal of the artist."² The content of the work is not any reality external to the work; it is the style or form of the work itself. What is called "realism" is no art at all because it places content over form. Further,

art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and nonexistent. This is the first stage. Then life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle. Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment. The third stage is when life gets the upper hand, and drives art out into the wilderness. This is the true decadence, and it is from this that we are now suffering.³

As suggested in the chapter on "De Profundis," Wilde was to shift somewhat away from form-for-form's-sake into a greater concern for what is represented, and form becomes the embodiment of its content. But throughout the earlier works Wilde demonstrates a far greater interest in form and style than in subject, attempting to give concreteness to the theory that truth is a matter of style. This produced in

¹Ibid., p. 924.

²Ibid., p. 928.

³Ibid., p. 917.

practice in the comedies and the novel a puppet-like manipulation of characters and contrivances of plot in which only the use of language can be considered high art. In The Duchess of Padua both structure and language are merely pompous and the effect when it is not ludicrous is merely melodramatic. In Vera, with its contemporary setting, there is far closer correspondence between style and desired effect, although apparently this is true of the play only as literature: its failure as a stage piece indicates that when translated into action it fails to demonstrate this correspondence. It could be suggested that its production was ill-timed and that had it appeared earlier or later it might have had greater success. It would not, of course, succeed today even if it were a much better play; the taste of contemporary audiences has moved too far from melodrama and sentimentality to allow for that. Of the "beautiful colored, musical things such as Salome, and A Florentine Tragedy, and La Sainte Courtesane,"¹ only Salome combines form, language, and content into a whole in which the aesthetic ideal is made concrete.

In the poetry, the same problems of sentimentality and abstractness earlier discussed limit the works as art. Only rarely can the Poe-like form-is-content or style-is-content theory be seen as successful in producing the desired effect: "The Sphinx," with its evocation of the past and of

¹Letters, p. 492.

death; "The Harlot's House," in which connotations, sounds, and shapes of words give a vivid impression of both sordidness and of the artificiality of love when it is reduced to the lust of harlotry:

Like strange mechanical grotesques,
Making fantastic arabesques,
The shadows raced across the blind.

We watched the ghostly dancers spin
To sound of horn and violin,
Like black leaves wheeling in the wind.

Like wire-pulled
Slim silhouetted skeletons
Went sidling through the slow quadrille.¹

The House of Pomegranates stands outside the usual manner of Wilde's works. The relative brevity of each of the stories avoids the clumsiness of construction which mars the longer works. In only a few of them does Wilde's theory of form and style play a noticeable or serious part: "The Young King," "The Birthday of the Infanta," and "The Fisherman and His Soul" (the latter two containing again the theme of love bringing death). Otherwise the tales are merely clever inventions gracefully told and largely without the heavy verbal overlay theoretically aimed at heightening effect.

In the "De Profundis" and "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," Wilde comes closest to presenting art which is concerned more with the sitter than the painter. The vision is translated by the artist, but his function is to heighten

¹Works, p. 778.

the reality of the object rather than to invent it. Form is far from being dismissed, but it becomes almost a servant rather than a master, and we find Wilde approaching that "realism" he had earlier condemned--not in any usual sense of Naturalism or Realism but with far greater concern for external reality and experience than he had previously shown. Form must be "instinct with feeling" rather than possessing merely perfection in itself. The reality of human experience must affect art so that it becomes something more than mere decoration or effect for the sake of effect.

A constant element in Wilde is the concept of development of the self by experience. There is no deviation from a goal of individualism. It dominates "The Soul of Man under Socialism," is prominent in "The Critic as Artist," is the superficial theme of Dorian Gray, and is brought to its culmination in the "De Profundis." Its limits are expanded from the assertion in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" of the individual's right to do and be what he will when freed from the various tyrants which restrict his freedom to a more specific definition in "The Critic as Artist," in which sin is "an essential element of progress" and an "intensified assertion of individualism." A yet stronger statement is implicit in Dorian Gray, in which all experience and all sensation are suggested as the means not only of asserting individualism but of self-fulfillment and of the making of one's life a work of art. This is the method which

was to bring about that ultimate being of one's self rather than other people as urged in the "De Profundis." If Lord Henry's "curing of the soul through the senses" has any working definition, it is the formation of a soul or personality whose nature and responses are uniquely its own, free of any influence by society or by other individuals. Lord Henry tells Dorian at their meeting:

There is no such thing as a good influence, Mr. Gray. All influence is immoral. . . . Because to influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of someone else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him. The aim of life is self-development. To realize one's nature perfectly--that is what each of us is here for.¹

It was only through experience itself that Wilde came to expand the concept to include the value of suffering and humility in the making of the "deeper man" as he considered himself to have become by the time of the writing of the "De Profundis."

The philosophy is rather more than that which holds that man is the sum total of his experiences, although it is obviously related to it. The difference, as developed in the "De Profundis," is that all experience must be "realized" and that everything that is realized is right. Its rightness lies not in any moral content or reference but in the fact of its realization both in the sense of perception

¹Ibid., pp. 28-29.

and that of incorporation, for the personality involved must function both as artist--a function which involves conscious and creative action--and as a work of art, as that which in itself expresses the reality it embodies. The form must be instinct with feeling, with experience realized. While one reading of Dorian Gray could interpret the changing of the portrait as a giving form to the reality of Dorian's soul and as a moral comment upon his career and a damning of the concept of self-development, to do so would be to make Wilde contradict a major part of his philosophy. And although the integrity of the work as art is questionable, the reversal of one of the artist's major themes is unlikely, and one would be driven to regard the novel, as one could regard Salome, as little more than an improving tale designed to illustrate the fate of those who behave badly and as a warning against the living of the artistic life.

As I have suggested earlier, Wilde compromised in the area of convention in the modern plays in which the basic moral attitudes of society go unchallenged. But that is not to say that Wilde did not criticize the society in which he lived. The modern plays are all what can be called "problem plays" which in some fashion attack the imperfections of a complacent society. Lady Windermere's Fan, produced in February of 1892, the best among the obvious social criticisms, attacks the meretriciousness of a society which will condone the keeping of mistresses but

can never forgive the sin of a woman who has acted directly and openly in defiance of convention. Mrs. Erlynne is not a sympathetic character until the third act when a belated sense of maternal affection causes her to compromise herself still further in order to save her daughter, Lady Windermere, from scandal. Previous to this she is capable of blackmail, utilizing Windermere's love for his wife and concern for her reputation to milk him of money. But it is made clear in the play that Mrs. Erlynne is the victim of an unforgiving society which has driven her from sin to sin. Her sacrifice convinces her daughter, who remains unaware of their relationship, that Mrs. Erlynne is capable of nobility. But Lady Windermere, as Morse Peckham has pointed out, learns nothing regarding the imperfections of her moral convictions. She learns that evil exists beside good, but she still divides evil and good according to the standards of society:

Lord Windermere: Child, you and she belong in different worlds. Into your world evil has never entered.

Lady Windermere: Don't say that, Arthur. There is the same world for all of us, and good and evil, sin and innocence, go through it hand in hand. To shut one's eyes to half of life that one may live securely is as though one blinded oneself that one might walk with more safety in a land of pit and precipice.¹

Much the same difficulty exists in regard to A Woman of No Importance, coming a year later than Lady Windermere's Fan, in which the problem of the earlier play is reversed, and it is a father, rather than a mother, who has abandoned

¹Ibid., p. 414.

wife and child, in this case an illegitimate one. Lord Illingworth belatedly interests himself in the career of his grown son and comes to regard him with sufficient affection to offer a tardy proposal of marriage to "Mrs. Arbuthnot" in order to share his son's life. Lord Illingworth himself functions on a low emotional level and is as cavalier about the suffering of his former mistress as he has been about his earlier promise to marry her. Mrs. Arbuthnot, however, is consumed with guilt and hatred for her former lover. Her life is made hideous by her sin and she projects it into good works on one hand and into loathing on the other. Rather than "realizing" her experience, she is guilty of the supreme vice of shallowness and has fidgeted for twenty years over her unacceptability as a mother. In other words, like Lady Windermere, she accepts those standards by which one survives in spite of one's experiences and mistakes rather than growing or developing because of them. She is a better woman but not a deeper one, and she translates self-condemnation into a kind of reinforcement in her son of the very standards which have caused her suffering:

Mrs. Arbuthnot: I have brought him up to be a good man.
Lord Illingworth: Quite so. And what is the result?
 You have educated him to be your judge if he ever finds you out. And a bitter, and unjust judge he will be to you.¹

An Ideal Husband, along with The Importance of Being

¹Ibid., p. 442.

Earnest, was first performed immediately before Wilde's disastrous legal action against Queensberry in which he found himself turned from plaintiff into defendant. The play concerns itself with intrigue and blackmail. The intrigue serves to point up the opposition between the surface morality of English politics and society and the real morality of those ambitious for power. Sir Robert Chiltern, a rising young politician, is threatened by the exposure of his betrayal, years before, of a state secret for a profit which was the basis of the fortune which has enabled him to succeed and to gain a reputation for spotlessness. Society's demand for the appearance of perfection in its leaders--of a kind of Adam-before-the-Fall purity--is paralleled by Lady Chiltern's conception of the character of her husband. When Lord Goring, Chiltern's confidant, attempts to prepare her for a possible revelation of her husband's youthful crime, she proves incapable of entertaining the possibility of his imperfection:

Lord Goring: Lady Chiltern, I have sometimes thought that perhaps you are a little hard in some of your views on life. I think that . . . often you don't make sufficient allowances. In every nature there are elements of weakness, or worse than weakness. Supposing, for instance, that--that any public man, my father, or Lord Merton, or Robert, say, had years ago, written some foolish letter to someone.

Lady Chiltern: What do you mean by a foolish letter?

Lord Goring: A letter gravely compromising one's position. I am only putting an imaginary case.

Lady Chiltern: Robert is as incapable of doing a foolish thing as he is of doing a wrong thing.

Lord Goring: Nobody is incapable of doing a foolish

thing. Nobody is incapable of doing a wrong thing.¹

When forced to confront the truth, she is not too stunned to operate with perfect puritan logic:

You sold a cabinet secret for money! You began your life with fraud! You built up your career on dishonor! Oh, tell me it is not true! Lie to me! Lie to me! Tell me it is not true!²

Like her society, Lady Chiltern finds revealed imperfection unworthy of love:

And how I worshiped you! You were to me something apart from common life, a thing pure, noble, honest, without stain. The world seemed to me finer because you were in it, and goodness more real because you lived. And now-- oh, when I think that I made of a man like you my ideal! The ideal of my life!³

Chiltern himself regards his sins much as Dorian Gray regards his. It is not something which is to be realized or repented; it is that which can bring ruin through exposure of its record. Chiltern's portrait is the letter by which he gained wealth through selling himself:

The sin of my youth, that I had thought was buried, rose up in front of me, hideous, horrible, with its hands at my throat. I could have killed it forever, sent it back into its tomb, destroyed its record, burned the one witness against me.⁴

Lord Goring summarizes the social or political problem in advising against confession:

If you did make a clean breast of the whole affair, you

¹Ibid., p. 496.

²Ibid., p. 505.

³Ibid., p. 506.

⁴Ibid.

would never be able to talk morality again. And in England a man who can't talk morality twice a week to a large, popular, immoral audience is quite over as a serious politician.¹

So again experience or sin becomes that which limits or threatens. And it is only in spite of the past that one can succeed in any sense rather than because of it.

The letter--the embodiment of the sin--is in fact destroyed, and despite Lady Chiltern's insistence upon her husband's withdrawal from politics and her resignation to the fact that "I set him up too high,"² Chiltern, through Goring's insistence, does in the final scene go driving off to Downing Street to accept a cabinet post, expecting one day to become prime minister. Mrs. Cheveley, the black-mailer and herself blackmailed by Lord Goring for a theft of jewelry, articulates the problem of the play and the problem to which Wilde addresses himself:

Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues--and what is the result? You all go over like nine pins--one after the other.³

Again Wilde argues the truth of human nature and for a realization of that truth. An Ideal Husband has never been a popular play. And yet it is the one among the modern plays which can be said to hold up an unclouded mirror to

¹Ibid., p. 492.

²Ibid., p. 533.

³Ibid., p. 480.

society and tell it directly that its success is based upon dishonesty: the dishonesty of profiteering from trust and the dishonesty of wearing a mask of virtue to conceal sin. The concepts of sin and virtue are once more, however, those accepted by Wilde's audience and no other system of morality is suggested, except occasionally in the dialogue which is characteristically not always in harmony with the action of the play. In fact, the happy ending of the play suggests a kind of agreement with the brand of morality it has exposed. For Chiltern's dishonesty is left unexposed and he can therefore proceed along the path which theft and hypocrisy have enabled him to follow. Had he publicly expressed genuine regret for his sin, attempted to atone for it, and been destroyed by a society outraged at his incompetence in both thievery and hypocrisy, the play might stand as a more integrated social comment.

Wilde's philosophy of self-development was not completely formulated until the "De Profundis," and, until then, suffering was not admitted as an element. But "what the world calls sin" was so admitted. Why do the characters in the modern plays behave so rather than asserting their individualism? The reasons may be simple enough: the dramatic plea for tolerance and forgiveness of transgressors is all that Wilde's theatrical audiences could tolerate. To assert the total wrongheadedness of a society which condemned illegitimacy and what is considered the bad woman

but preferred to remain oblivious to or ignorant of its own very real sins would be to alienate that audience. Far easier--and far more profitable--to present such arguments as could be made within the acceptable moral framework of society. Wilde's success as a popular playwright depended upon a number of elements for salability: wit, melodrama--including the use of the repentant sinner, which always succeeds, and an avoidance of the truly shocking; the Victorian or puritan at his worst will rejoice in the risqué (illegitimacy, the woman with a past) but he will not tolerate a frontal attack upon his standards or any expansion of his too-restricted catalogue of sins. Only in The Importance of Being Earnest is the whole structure of values of English society attacked, and it is attacked in such a way that it is easy to misunderstand what the play is about. Further, Wilde was not the social critic that Shaw was and could not treat the larger problems of universal society as opposed to the merely contemporary problems of insular England. That he could not successfully use the stage for the making of arguments is at least as great a loss to art as Shaw's inferiority to him as a maker of dialogue. Unhappily, the dialogue vanishes with the play and the play vanishes from the stage when its subject, the treatment of the subject, or the characters become passé.

It is in the question of the correspondence between the psychology of Oscar Wilde the man and that of Oscar

Wilde the artist that the closest parallels are to be found. His most successful device for creating wit consisted of the reversal or inversion of the ordinary, the expected, or the appropriate. In The Importance of Being Earnest, Algernon complains of his manservant: "Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them?"¹ Later he remarks concerning a recently widowed acquaintance, "I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief."² And the whole of the play is itself an inversion of values in which the trivial is solemnly even passionately dealt with and the serious is disposed of casually.³

A Florentine Tragedy and La Sainte Courtesane, are both exercises in reversal and realization. In the first, the wife of a cloth merchant becomes enamored of a prince. The apparent contrast of personality between Guido, heir to the throne of Florence, and Simone, her husband, misleads Bianca. The merchant is a matter-of-fact figure whose appreciation of his wife is limited to the area of virtue: she is to him "most honest if uncomely to the eye"⁴ and "she has her virtues as most women have, but beauty is a gem she

¹Ibid., p. 322.

²Ibid., p. 328.

³For a treatment of Wilde's method in the play see Otto Reinert's "Satiric Strategy in The Importance of Being Earnest," College English, XVIII (October, 1956), 14-18.

⁴Works, p. 674.

may not wear."¹ But to Guido she is one whose beauty "is a lamp that pales the stars and robs Diana's quiver of her beams" ² Bianca is clearly bored by her husband. That boredom is intensified by Guido's courtliness. She says "How like a common chapman does he [Simone] speak! I hate him body and soul. Cowardice has set her pale seal upon his brow."³ Yet when the rivalry culminates in a duel it is Simone who demonstrates courage and can disregard his wounds, while Guido, finding himself at Simone's mercy, begs for release and cowers before death, asking even Bianca for aid. The experience provides revelation for both Simone, who has taken Bianca's plainness for granted, and for Bianca, who has viewed her husband as both bore and coward. The play ends with an ironic reversal of attitude:

Bianca: Why did you not tell me you were so strong?
Simone: Why did you not tell me you were beautiful?⁴

La Sainte Courtesane is highly reminiscent of Salome with its theme of purity opposed to corruption. Here the corrupt princess, Myrrhina, attempts to seduce the hermit Honorius from his singleminded and ascetic contemplation of Christ and renunciation of the physical. On one level Myrrhina is the body and Honorius the spirit. On another

¹Ibid., p. 681.

²Ibid., p. 674.

³Ibid., p. 679.

⁴Ibid., p. 685.

Myrrhina is evil and Honorius good. The spiritual without the body has nothing with which to gauge its values and judgments, and the body without the spirit has no values to gauge. The ironic reversal of roles--each is convinced by the other--is of symbolic value rather than merely ironic value. It becomes a statement of fulfillment. Myrrhina has experienced everything except holiness, and her conversion will complete her experience. Honorius has not known corruption and therefore is spiritually incomplete--he is merely a prude. Now, Myrrhina can repent of her sins and therefore "realize" them, and Honorius can learn the reality and nature of evil he has shunned:

Honorius: Why didst thou tempt me with words?

Myrrhina: That thou shouldst see sin in its painted mask and look on death in its robe of shame.¹

Thus truth, or realization, is discovered in the reversing of roles--in the experience of that which is the opposite of what one has experienced before. This concept is in harmony with Wilde's view of self-fulfillment and, further, mirrors his art of epigram in which so often the reversal of a cliché brings forth an immediately recognizable truth. It is a loss to art, and perhaps to our moral insight, that Wilde could not pursue the theme of reversal on a grander scale. Dorian Gray pursues the opposite of his purity, but as I have indicated in Chapter III, the ending of the novel and the obscurity of the meaning of the

¹Ibid., p. 690.

portrait's restoration and of that restoration's relationship to Dorian preclude an interpretation consistent with the rest of the novel.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In this study I have attempted to demonstrate Oscar Wilde's failure to translate his concepts of art and the artistic life into a consistent and consistently practiced aesthetic. Part of the reason for his failure may lie in the very nature of his philosophy: it is impossible to separate the aesthetic aspects from the moral ones. To Wilde, the only morality is that which lies in the integrity of art and in the completeness of the artistic life. Morality--a standard of behavior--exists, but it is to be defined and measured in strictly aesthetic terms. Perhaps only a perfect artist could have translated Wilde's ideal into either art or life--as Wilde found Jesus to have done. Wilde himself, hindered by a lack of discipline and an abnormality related to that lack, could not give substance to the vision expressed in its fullest development in the "De Profundis." The result is a flawed or incomplete art in which the aesthetic ideal, as well as its concomitant moral view, is compromised.

Wilde's life was to end with both a joke ("I am dying

beyond my means")¹ and a conversion to Roman Catholicism, a lapse from consistency which may, under the circumstances, be forgiven him. But it was a life in which was played out the very substance of his art. A personal charm beguiled most who knew him; a high capacity for criticism and critical theory allowed him to contribute to a better understanding of the art of his day and of other periods as well. "The Importance of Masks" demonstrates a rare perception of the wholeness of art as opposed to any partial approach to or appreciation of it. The range of his creativity surpassed that of most artists the world regards as great. His drama, despite its limitations from the point of view of our day, must be regarded as a step forward in the development of modern dramaturgy; his short stories include graceful fairy tales, solemn, ballet-like works such as "The Fisherman and His Soul" and "The Birthday of the Infanta"; a joining of horror and absurdity as in "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" anticipates the method of Evelyn Waugh; his experimentations with the revenge play and the problem play, along with the single novel, even with the imperfections I have suggested, show an impulse to broad creation and a willingness to attempt any genre as well as considerable courage as an artist.

To conjecture as to the cause of Wilde's urge to defeat, his obsession in life with that which would destroy him and in art with the uncompleted purpose, with love ending

¹Renier, p. 157.

in death, is to be guilty of mere theorizing. Bergler's treatment of the problem of homosexuality provides a creditable explanation of the phenomenon, but to accept it without reservation is to be guilty of falling victim to a current "idol of the theatre." The fact remains, however, that in art as in life, there is in Wilde a constant playing out of the pattern Bergler suggests. I have discussed at length the relation of tempter and tempted in Dorian Gray, attempting to demonstrate by analogs the pattern of the destructive relationship common in tragedy of a particular kind. Love becomes that which destroys rather than that which nourishes and creates. Its consummation is sterility and death rather than creation and life. Salome's passion is for the death-head behind the whiteness of Jokanaan's brow, Lord Henry's for the hideousness of the corrupted portrait. In Douglas as in his "panthers" Wilde courted destruction:

People thought it dreadful of me to have entertained at dinner the evil things of life, and to have found pleasure in their company. But they, from the point of view through which I, as an artist in life, approached them, were delightfully suggestive and stimulating. It was like feasting with panthers. The danger was half the excitement.¹

He was to complete the cycle of flawed tragedy in life as he had done in his works. The hero figure must bring destruction upon himself, and the suffering of that destruction is the only culmination of the tragic career. This is the theme of Dorian Gray, of Salome, of "The Ballad of Reading

¹Letters, p. 492.

Gaol," and of Wilde's life, into which he was unable to translate the revelations of the "De Profundis."

Wilde was much gifted and his career promised to be that of a writer who, though not of the very first order, might eventually contribute really major additions to the body of British literature. But he ended in defeat and disgrace, leaving his name for decades the byword for degeneracy, his aesthetic philosophy the sign of that degeneracy, and his works contaminated in the eyes of the world by their creator's sin to the extent that only in very recent years have genuinely serious studies of the art of Wilde been attempted. Rather, the great bulk of writing about Wilde has been only about Wilde the man; the works have suffered neglect as serious art, and this neglect is largely the result of their author's notoriety. An attitude of "can anything good come out of Nazareth" has caused the dismissal of Wilde's art, and a conviction that it would shortly disappear into oblivion has been the common one. Furthermore, any championing of the works or even a scholarly approach to them was for a time punished by the suggestion, implicit or explicit, that the sin of the writer was somehow transmitted by the work or was in fact what constituted the attraction to the works. Whatever the moral gravity of Wilde's personal behavior, he was guilty of a perhaps much greater sin in the area of art. He at once put his own art outside the pale of academic respectability and added greatly to the

popular superstition that all art is effeminate and all artists worse. He almost at one fell swoop destroyed both himself and his art. Mercifully the art itself is capable of resurrection and currently appears to be experiencing such. Further, contemporary criticism, fed as it is by the New Criticism, examines with far greater objectivity than the criticism of Wilde's day. We are less interested in the moral content of art and the character of the artist than in the artistic virtues or failures of his productions.

I have attacked much in Wilde--his compromises with popular taste in violation of his own dogma that it is the public's duty to become artistic, not art's to be popular, his lack of discipline and penchant for melodramatic effect at the expense of artistic integrity, as well as his incapacity to preserve and develop his talents by the preservation of his life and reputation. But against these failures must be seen the artist who used the English language as no other writer has ever used it, one whose wit seldom slipped below the level of comic genius and who brought a sharpness of comedy to the English stage which had not existed there since the eighteenth century, and one who could both theorize about art with brilliance and execute it with equal brilliance. Wilde has been accused too often of imitativeness, but what artist does not imitate at least in the sense of building upon the invention of those who precede or surround him? Only seldom in the history of art can entirely original

geniuses be found, and Wilde was not of these. But it is with not too great reservation that one can accept Wilde's description of himself:

The gods had given me almost everything. I had genius, a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring: I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art: I altered the minds of men and the colours of things: there was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder: I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or the sonnet, at the same time that I widened its range and enriched its characterisation: drama, novel, poem in rhyme, poem in prose, subtle or fantastic dialogue, whatever I touched I made beautiful in a new mode of beauty: to truth itself I gave what is false no less than what is true as its rightful province, and showed that the false and the true are merely forms of intellectual existence. I treated Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction: I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me: I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram.¹

¹Ibid., p. 466.

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