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Catching All Passions in His Craft of Will:
Portraits and Pater in Oscar Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr. W. H."

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at
Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

CATCHING ALL PASSIONS IN HIS CRAFT OF WILL: PORTRAITS AND PATER IN OSCAR WILDE'S "THE PORTRAIT OF MR. W. H."

By Rebecca Elizabeth Jones, B.F.A., B.S., M.A.

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Director: Dr. Nicholas Frankel
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This thesis examines Oscar Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." as the product of Wilde's long interest in critic Walter Pater's literature and scholarship. From its first iteration published in 1889, through Wilde's ongoing revision and expansion into the version commonly anthologized today, "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." is an evolving work that mirrors Wilde's enduring relationship with the art and ideas of his former teacher. This relationship is explored in three contexts: Pater's contribution to Wilde's understanding of the Renaissance period; the steady influence of Pater's ideas and persona on Wilde's other major works from the period that saw the publication and revision of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.;" and the particular influence of Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* on the structure and themes of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." Because of

Pater's extensive writings on art, and Wilde's passionate interest in the subject, many of these intersections occur around the image of the portrait in Wilde's work.

Introduction

Oscar Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." is a complex work of prose that combines elements of fiction and scholarship to recount a history of literary obsession. "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." seems also to have had an obsessive hold on its author, who continued to work on it for a number of years after its initial publication in 1889 in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Monthly*. Wilde's presentation of three characters' fixation on the identity of an Elizabethan actor who might be the subject of sonnets by William Shakespeare develops themes that were of great significance to Wilde personally, and which have become central to Wilde's image and legacy. One of these themes is identity and personality (and, to a lesser degree, gender) as forms of artifice. As an aesthetic construction, identity in "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." is governed by the same precepts that circumscribe art in general and portraiture in particular. A forged portrait of the actor at the center of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." furnishes additional opportunities for Wilde to interrogate the line that separates identity from artifice, and art from authenticity. Placing this theme in a work whose events describe literary research, and whose genre resists definition, extends questions of identity to the struggle between art and scholarship.

Walter Pater is a presence that reverberates throughout "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." Wilde was a first-year student at Oxford when he read the art and literary critic's seminal work *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, published the year before. Wilde would meet Pater two years later, as a student in his class, and Pater remained a monumental intellectual and artistic influence on Wilde's work for the rest of Wilde's life. He regularly referred to Pater's *Renaissance*, much of which he had committed to memory, as "my golden book" and in 1897, more than twenty years after first reading it, described Pater's work as the "book which has had such a strange influence over my life" in his lengthy letter from prison, *De Profundis* (Ellmann

47). It is unsurprising that a personality and intellect on the scale of Wilde's would struggle with so strong an influence, however. In his work across multiple genres, Wilde applies a full spectrum of responses to his task of assimilating the impact of Pater's ideas on the development of his own, sometimes receiving Pater's work as an eager student and admiring reader, and sometimes pushing against the weight of Pater's influence by adopting the persona of Pater's rival and critic.

This thesis examines "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." as the product of Wilde's long interest in Walter Pater's literature and scholarship. From its first iteration published in 1889, through Wilde's ongoing revision and expansion into the version commonly anthologized today, "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." is an evolving work that mirrors Wilde's enduring relationship with the art and ideas of his former teacher. This relationship is explored in three contexts: Pater's contribution to Wilde's understanding of the Renaissance period; the steady influence of Pater's ideas and persona on Wilde's other major works from the period that saw the publication and revision of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.;" and the particular influence of Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* on the structure and themes of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." Because of Pater's extensive writings on art, and Wilde's passionate interest in the subject, many of these intersections occur around the image of the portrait in Wilde's work.

"The Portrait of Mr. W.H." concerns an eighteenth-century theory that identifies a beautiful young actor named William Hughes as the fair young man addressed in Shakespeare's sonnets. It is recounted by a man who was initiated into this theory by his friend Erskine, who had first learned of it from the late Cyril Graham. Erskine tells the narrator about Graham's obsession with the theory, an obsession that inspired Graham to forge a portrait to corroborate the theory that Hughes was Shakespeare's "fair youth." The fixation leads Graham ultimately to

commit suicide. Like Erskine and Graham, the narrator becomes obsessed with the theory of Willie Hughes, as well, and begins a period of extensive scholarship in an attempt to prove Willie Hughes' existence and his status as the dedicatee of the sonnets of William Shakespeare. "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." frequently reads as a work of literary scholarship; enfolded into it are copious references from a range of sources, including quotations from Shakespeare's sonnets, translated passages from Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino, as well as biographers and literary scholars from various periods. After presenting wide-ranging evidence in support of Willie Hughes as the W.H. to whom the poems were dedicated, the narrator loses interest in the theory. This coincides with a rekindling of Erskine's interest in it, culminating with Erskine's death. Initially led to believe that Erskine's death had been a suicide, the narrator learns that he died of consumption. "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." ends with the narrator looking at the spurious portrait of Willie Hughes and feeling once again that the theory may be valid after all.

The first chapter presents an opportunity to explore the Victorian-infused portrait of the Renaissance that Wilde paints in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." Drawing on Wilde's readings of contemporary biographical criticism of Shakespeare's Sonnets, and Wilde's lifelong interest in Walter Pater's 1873 *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, the introductory chapter examines how Wilde's understanding of the Renaissance is inflected by Victorian values.

The second chapter of this study establishes context for a Pater- and portraiture-focused discussion of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." by analyzing Wilde's other works during the 1888-1890 period. Inspired by Pater, Wilde presents increasingly forceful arguments in favor of a view of art that privileges the subjective and the imaginative over the factual. "Pen, Pencil and Poison," like "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," is an experiment with Pater's imaginary portrait genre. The fact that its main character resembles Pater in several respects crystalizes the essence of

Pater in this biographical essay about Thomas Wainwright. Like “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” Wilde’s 1890 novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* shows the author’s intensifying interest in the portrait as an artistic genre, and as a tangible, quasi-living presence. In Wilde’s 1890 dialogue/essay “The Critic as Artist,” the third work examined in the chapter, we see Wilde’s exploration of Pater’s concept of aesthetic criticism, and its insistence on the supremacy of the audience’s subjective impression of art – a philosophy that Wilde illustrates in the final section of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.”

The third chapter examines the presence and meaning of multiple kinds of portraiture in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” It analyzes Wilde’s portrait imagery in the story in terms of the history of English portraiture and looks at the unique qualities ascribed to the portrait genre through the history of art. It also addresses the way that Wilde creates tension in the story by positioning verbal or ekphrastic portraiture as a counterpoint to the qualities of the physical portrait of Mr. W. H. Verbal and visual portraiture come together in the chapter’s conclusion, with a reading of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” in the context of Walter Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits*.

“The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” is first mentioned in Wilde’s 1887 letter to the business manager of *New York Daily Tribune* editor Whitelaw Reid: “I am writing another story at present, and should be very pleased to forward you advance proofs should you care to publish it. The story is connected with Shakespeare’s Sonnets” (*Complete Letters* 325). In the years following its July 1889 publication in *Blackwood’s*,¹ “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” was under

¹ In *Additions and Corrections to Richard Ellmann’s Oscar Wilde*, Horst Schroeder wonders why it took Wilde so long to finish the story. Noting that Wilde’s years of working on it coincided with his journalism career, Schroeder wonders, “Was it his editorship of *The Woman’s World* and his other commitments that made it impossible for Wilde to finish the story in 1887?” p. 99-100

substantial revision for what Wilde hoped would be a book-length publication. In 1893, Elkin Mathews and John Lane announced that the expanded version was slated to be published by the Bodley Head. Mathews and Lane dissolved their partnership in 1894, however, with Lane retaining control of the Bodley Head. Wilde lobbied Mathews and Lane separately in order to secure publication of the book-length “Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” but both sensed that its homoerotic overtones were potentially scandalous and backed away from the project. (Schroeder, *Composition, Publication and Reception* 31-31)

The *Blackwood's* story, as it was published for the first time, is a narrative of intrigue that Wilde organized in three sections. Section I sets out the premise, establishing the narrator's new passion for the portrait and for the tragic figure of Cyril Graham and culminating with the narrator's receipt of the forged portrait and his vow to “take up the theory where Cyril Graham left it, and I will prove to the world that he was right” (*Blackwood's* 11). *Blackwood's* second section details the narrator's growing obsession with the theory and his process of assembling (and manufacturing) evidence to support it. The third and final section in *Blackwood's* reverses the passions on display in Section I and shows the narrator's inexplicable loss of interest in the theory that had obsessed him: “I was perfectly indifferent to the whole subject. . . . Perhaps by finding perfect expression for a passion, I had exhausted the passion itself” (*Blackwood's* 18). When Wilde revised the text, he organized it in five sections to accommodate lengthy new discussions that function almost as mini-essays within the narrative. In these insertions we see Wilde's continued inquiry into the ideas of Walter Pater, and into the beauty and meaning of the portrait.

Chapter One

Facing the Renaissance

The setting and subject of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” place it in large part in the world of the Renaissance, and one of Wilde’s projects in this work is to give a face and identity to that period. Wilde does this by engaging with two bodies of work: the biographical criticism of Shakespeare that was popular in the late nineteenth century, and Walter Pater’s essays on the Renaissance. The Shakespeare criticism and history of art that Wilde uses to support the theory of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” are Renaissance in subject, but Victorian in approach. Thus, the face that Wilde gives to the Renaissance in his story is one that embodies a Victorian tendency to view the era in psychological and phenomenological terms.

Wilde displays a reading of the Sonnets that is steeped in the nineteenth-century interest in biographical criticism of Shakespeare. This interest is present in the original version, and Wilde’s additions to the expanded text of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” heighten this tendency. The 1800s were a time of heightened inquiry into Shakespeare’s life and works, fueled by major advances in Shakespeare studies just before the opening of the nineteenth century - so much so that scholars including Peter Stallybrass and Margreta de Grazia contend that the Shakespeare that we study today is largely a construction of the late eighteenth century.² Prior to 1780, the available publication of the Sonnets was a reproduction of John Benson’s edition of 1640, which

² See Peter Stallybrass. “Editing as Cultural Formation: Sexing the Sonnets.” *Modern Language Quarterly*, 54:1, March 1993. 91-103 and Margreta De Grazia. *Shakespeare Verbatim: The Reproduction of Authenticity and the 1790 Apparatus*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1991.

featured substantial changes to Shakespeare's poems, including a reordering of Shakespeare's sequence, conflation of sonnets to create longer poems, and changes in pronouns to make the beloved of the first 126 sonnets female rather than male. Malone, in returning to Shakespeare's 1609 Quarto (the first printed edition of the poems), did so with an interest in showing the man behind the Sonnets. Malone also attempted to write a new biography of Shakespeare that drew on newly discovered primary documents. Malone's work was reissued in 1821 with additional commentary from John Boswell, Jr., and it is this edition that presents the characters we associate with the Sonnets (Shakespeare, a young man, a rival poet, and the dark lady). Boswell was concerned that Malone's presentation of the Sonnets portrayed a homosexual Shakespeare. In an attempt to rehabilitate Shakespeare's reputation, Boswell suggests that male-male friendships in the Renaissance were typically presented in the language of romantic love, that the poems were written to a patron, and that the poems were exercises written on various topics for the amusement of a private audience and not necessarily biographical. (Stallybrass 93-4).

The Sonnets as a document of Shakespeare's inner life, a concept that Malone developed in the 1790s, set the tone for a renewed interest in the subject that characterized scholarship in the second half of the nineteenth century. Biographical criticism of the Sonnets, along with histories of the boy-actors of Shakespeare's stage, furnished a lens through which Wilde could examine the English Renaissance and see the face of Willie Hughes. Among the nineteenth-century proponents of biographical readings of Shakespeare's Sonnets were Shakespeare critic and forger John Payne Collier, Irish critic and poet Edward Dowden, and English poet and critic John Addington Symonds. Wilde's expanded text features two lengthy additions based on his readings of John Payne Collier's three-volume *English Dramatic Poetry and Annals of the*

Stage.³ Wilde's later version also provides a 2860-word discussion of Neoplatonism that opens with a description of the actor's unique creative power as an artist: "[Thomas] Nash with his venomous tongue had railed against Shakespeare for 'reposing eternity in the mouth of a player,' the reference being obviously to the Sonnets. But to Shakespeare, the actor was a deliberate and self-conscious fellow worker who gave form and substance to a poet's fancy and brought into Drama the elements of a noble realism" (321-2). Schroeder's *Annotations* explain that Wilde probably obtained this reference from Collier's three-volume work on Shakespeare. It is worth noting that Collier was a well-known Shakespeare scholar and a notorious forger who manufactured many documents that he attributed to Shakespeare and Shakespeare's contemporaries to fill in biographical gaps. "Wilde made extensive use of Collier's influential three-volume publication when he wrote the enlarged Mr W.H.," says Schroeder, "but, unlike in the case of Symonds, Pater, and Dowden, he never mentioned him by name – perhaps because Collier had already been found out as another literary forger. Collier's publication is listed in the 1895 catalogue" (17-18). Wilde makes substantial use of Collier again when his narrator tries to determine the identity of the Sonnets' "Dark Lady" in Section IV.

Wilde's narrator acknowledges that the account in the Sonnets leaves us with little concrete knowledge of the woman's identity and addresses himself to trying to fill in the missing information. He assumes that she was a woman of financial means who was not of noble birth, noting from references Wilde took from Collier that women from such circumstances were fascinated by the Elizabethan stage.⁴ Schroeder identifies changes Wilde made to diction in order to make the plays on words more convincing, including changing Shakespeare's phrase "bookes

³ Listed in the catalogue of the forced sale of Wilde's effects, April 24, 1895. Other Shakespeare works included in the catalog were Massey, Malone, Swinburne, and Symonds. *Facsimile Catalogue*, p. 5-6.

⁴ Wilde, "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." Collins, 338; Schroeder's *Annotations* explain that the evidence from "The Actor's Remonstrance" and from Cranley's "Amanda" come from Collier, Volume III. 50-51

of thy devotion” to “bookes of her devotion,” and altering Cranley’s “changes hues with the chameleon” to “changes hews with the chameleon” (*Annotations* 51). Manningham’s Table-book, the diary of a late sixteenth/early seventeenth century barrister, is the source (by way of Collier) of a story about a “certain citizen’s wife” who was so taken by one of the actors that she asked him to come to her house that evening. The fact that Manningham’s account specifies that the actor in question was Richard Burbage and not Willie Hughes is explained by Wilde’s narrator as a change that Manningham made in order to “give point to the foolish jest about William the Conqueror and Richard the Third,” that concludes the diary.⁵ Besides, explains Wilde’s narrator, the reference must have been to Hughes because Burbage’s short stature and portly physique “would not have fascinated the dark woman of the Sonnets” (338).

In the late nineteenth century, Dowden’s biographical reading of the Sonnets was widely disseminated. “The Sonnets by the late nineteenth century were being reproduced in school editions that quoted Dowden as saying that ‘in the Renaissance epoch, among natural products of a time when life ran swift and free, touching with its current high and difficult places, the ardent friendship of man with man was one” (Stallybrass 102). Schroeder’s *Annotations* also identify Dowden’s 1881 *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare* as the source of the vast majority of the quotations from the Sonnets in Wilde’s expanded text of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.”

Aligned with Wilde’s interest in biographical criticism of the Sonnets is his pursuit of the history of boy-actors in Shakespeare’s day, and the lives of Shakespeare’s boy-actors is the focus of many of Wilde’s additions that form Section III in the revised story. In both texts, the narrator encounters a singing “William Hewes” in an account of the last days of the 1st Earl of Essex,

⁵ Wilde, “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” Collins, 338-339 and Schroeder, *Annotations*, 51.

only to discover that the Earl died when Shakespeare was twelve years old. He comforts himself with the fact that at least the name Hews was closely connected with the stage, citing the example of the first English actress Margaret Hews. In the revised text, Wilde adds the example of a Thomas Hews, whose “The Misfortunes of Arthur” appeared at Gray’s Inn in 1587.⁶ Both versions express the narrator’s frustration at his inability to prove the existence of Willie Hughes authoritatively, and to link him to Shakespeare. After this brief statement (“But the proofs, the links – where were they? Alas! I could not find them. It seemed to me that I was always on the brink of absolute verification, but that I could never really attain to it”⁷), Wilde places his longest addition to the original text, nearly 7000 words. The first part of this insertion makes up the remainder of the revised Section III. “I thought it strange that no one had ever written a history of the English boy-actors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and determined to undertake the task myself,” says the narrator as he prepares to address the subject. Horst Schroeder points out that, in fact, such histories did exist in Wilde’s era, including an article by Amy Strachey titled “The Child Players of the Elizabethan Stage,” which appeared in *The Woman’s World* in September 1888 – a date that coincides with Wilde’s editorship of the magazine, and with his composition/revision of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” (*Annotations* 29-30). Wilde briefly calls back an idea from Section II when he describes the boy-actors as “delicate reeds through which our poets had sounded their sweetest strains,” and claims that, while Shakespeare was unique among other poets and dramatists, Willie Hughes was but one of many beautiful and arresting young performers of the Elizabethan stage (328). A roll-call of Elizabethan boy-actors, about whom the narrator collected information in a “little book with fine vellum leaves and damask

⁶ Schroeder, *Annotations to “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.”* 29. Schroeder’s notes indicate that in the case of the first English actress and the author of “The Misfortunes of Arthur,” the surname was more commonly spelled “Hughes.”

⁷ Wilde, “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” *Blackwood’s*, 17; Wilde, “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” *Complete Works*, p. 328.

silk cover,” follows. Fourteen actors are mentioned here; again, Wilde’s source for almost all of them was John Payne Collier’s *The History of English Dramatic Poetry to the Time of Shakespeare: and Annals of the Stage to the Restoration*.⁸ As he lists the names of some of Shakespeare’s boy-actors, the narrator comments on each performer’s expertise in portraying women on the stage, concluding this portion with the suggestion that certain men are more adept at playing female roles than any female actress could be (328-9). These historical investigations into the biographies of the boys (including Willie Hughes) who portrayed Shakespeare’s characters on the stage mirror the biographical scholarship on Shakespeare’s Sonnets that was just becoming available to Wilde.

Along with biographical studies of Shakespeare, the work of Walter Pater is the other pillar upon which Wilde’s understanding of the Renaissance is built. Pater’s enormously influential 1873 collection *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* furnishes Wilde with a great deal of the history, philosophy and aesthetics that he applies to the composition and revision of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” Wilde’s reading of Shakespeare’s plays and Sonnets also intersects with Pater’s writings on Shakespeare in the 1889 collection *Appreciations*, and Wilde’s “Portrait of Mr. W.H.” demonstrates Pater’s contribution to Wilde’s understanding of Shakespeare.

Pater also applies the late nineteenth-century interest in biographical criticism to his reading of Shakespeare and, like Wilde, evinces an impulse to link the content of the Sonnets with that of the plays. “*Love’s Labours Lost* is one of the earliest of Shakespeare’s dramas,” says Pater in his “Loves Labours Lost” essay anthologized in *Appreciations*,⁹ “and has many of the

⁸ Schroeder, Annotations to “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” 31-36. Schroeder cites Collier as the source of Wilde’s references to all of the boy-actors listed here, except for the last three; Wilde’s references to Stephen Hammerton, Charles Hart, and Edward Kynaston are taken from John Addington Symonds’ 1884 volume *Shakespeare’s Predecessors in the English Drama*.

⁹ Pater’s “Love’s Labours Lost” originally appeared in *MacMillan’s Magazine* in December 1885.

peculiarities of his poems, which are also the work of his earlier life.” Pater enumerates those networks: “This connexion of *Love’s Labours Lost* with Shakespeare’s poems is further enforced by the actual insertion in it of three sonnets and a faultless song; which, in accordance with his practice in other plays, are inwoven into the argument of the piece and, like the golden ornaments of a fair woman, give it a peculiar air of distinction” (*Appreciations* 167). Wilde follows suit in his narrator’s zeal for the Sonnets as a sort of skeleton key to the plays. “Along with most students of Shakespeare, I had found myself compelled to set the Sonnets apart as things quite alien to Shakespeare’s development as a dramatist, as things possibly unworthy of the intellectual side of his nature,” says the narrator of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” as he reflects on his new understanding of the relationship between the plays and the Sonnets. “I saw that the moods and passions [the Sonnets] mirrored were absolutely essential to Shakespeare’s perfection as an artist writing for the Elizabethan stage, and that it was in the curious theatre conditions of that stage that the poems themselves had their origin” (313-314). Like Pater, Wilde’s narrator offers internal evidence “from the characteristics of language, style, and the like” to suggest that the Sonnets were from Shakespeare’s early period, and Wilde’s narrator connects their light and dark imagery to Shakespeare’s long narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* and *Love’s Labour Lost* from the same period. He quotes Walter Pater’s assessment from his essay on *Love’s Labour Lost* that the Sonnets exalt the judgment of the senses “above all slower, more toilsome means of knowledge.”¹⁰ Wilde’s narrator works backward from the 1598 publication date of *Love’s Labour Lost*, referencing Edward Dowden’s suggestion that it was written and produced for the stage ten years earlier (Schroeder’s *Annotations* 54), and concludes, therefore, that Shakespeare

¹⁰ Pater’s *Appreciations* and *MacMillan’s Magazine* December 1885, p. 90.

must have met Willie Hughes in 1585 and speculates that Hughes “may, after all, have been in his boyhood the musician of Lord Essex” (339).

Pater’s essay “Shakespeare’s English Kings,” similarly weds the form and content of Shakespeare’s poems to those of his plays. Here, Pater speaks of “the irony of kingship,” which he defines as “average human nature, flung with a wonderfully pathetic effect into the vortex of great events; tragedy of everyday quality heightened in degree only by the conspicuous scene.” Pater believes that, in depicting English kings including King John, Richard III and Henry IV, Shakespeare uses the power of language to bridge the divide between “average human nature” and extraordinary circumstances. Calling our attention to, “the utterance of common humanity straight from the heart, but refined like other common things for kingly uses by Shakespeare’s unflinching eloquence,” Pater maintains that Shakespeare’s poetic language is the transformative element that confers the ultimate regality on figures who were ploddingly chronicled by English historians such as Hall, Holinshed, and Stowe (*Appreciations* 193). The role of Shakespeare’s poetic language in his histories of England’s kings is the crucial factor in the plays’ artistic unity, in Pater’s view. “In art generally, unity of impression is a note of what is perfect,” says Pater. “Then lyric poetry, which in spite of complex structure often preserves the unity of a single passionate ejaculation, would rank higher than dramatic poetry.” The result, for Pater, is a new level of artistic integrity: “a play attains artistic perfection just in proportion as it approaches that unity of lyrical effect” (210-1). Pater’s analysis of Shakespeare’s lyric poetry as key to royal figures’ grandeur on the stage supports Wilde’s inclination to link the content of the Sonnets to that of the plays.

Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, however, was Pater’s strongest influence on Wilde’s aesthetic methodology, as well as his content knowledge of Renaissance

history and art, and greatly informs “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” Pater, who was an Oxford don during Wilde’s years at Magdalene College, Oxford, collected nine of his previously published essays on art and literature and brought them out in book form in 1873. The first edition of *The Renaissance* included a famous and controversial Conclusion that espoused living fully in the beauty and pleasure of the present moment as “success in life.” Although the Conclusion was criticized for encouraging decadence and immorality, prompting Pater to withdraw it from future printings, it was a key component of the edition that Wilde read in 1874, as a first-year student at Oxford. From that first encounter, Pater’s *Renaissance* dominated Wilde’s intellectual development and profoundly shaped his views on art and philosophy for the rest of his life. As Wilde’s “golden book,” the book “which has had such a strange influence over my life,” (*The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 735) Pater’s 1873 work was foundational to Wilde’s understanding of the Renaissance period, and formed the central framework for Wilde’s aesthetics. The Preface and Conclusion to Pater’s *Renaissance* advocate a radically subjective and impressionistic approach to art, one that takes a scientific process of observation and turns it inward, training it on one’s own aesthetic responses. Termed “aesthetic criticism” in Pater’s Preface to *The Renaissance*, this bold elevation of individual subjective experience also characterizes the approach to art and literature that Wilde displays in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” The chapters that make up *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* furnish the source material behind much of Wilde’s understanding of Renaissance art, particularly with respect to the nature, obligations and aesthetics of art, and we see the impact of Pater’s ideas on Wilde’s development of portraiture themes in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.”

Pater begins *The Renaissance* with an introduction that opens up the timeline traditionally circumscribing the Renaissance period. The Renaissance, says Pater, begins in the late Middle

Ages and ends in France in the seventeenth century, with Joachim du Bellay. He emphasizes that throughout history, beauty is usually pursued in solitude, but that some favorable eras draw like minds together: “The various forms of intellectual activity which together make up the culture of an age, move for the most part from different starting-points, and by unconnected roads” (*The Renaissance* xiii). The critic, according to Pater, is one whose aesthetic receptivity is ignited by a detailed and methodical attunement to his own impressions. “The aesthetic critic, then, regards all the objects with which he has to do, all works of art . . . as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations. . . . This influence he feels, and wishes to explain, analyzing it, and reducing it to its elements” (*The Renaissance* ix). Pater applies this subjective approach to studies of Leonardo, Michelangelo, Botticelli, and others.

In their content and aesthetics, these studies from Pater’s *Renaissance* enrich Wilde’s layered portrait of Mr. W. H. In a passage second only to the Conclusion in its familiarity to readers of *The Renaissance*, Pater presents Leonardo da Vinci as the supreme visionary portraitist. In Leonardo’s *La Gioconda*, Pater sees magnificent individuality of form and complexity of character. In terms that anticipate ideas in the Conclusion, Pater awakens the reader’s perception of the perhaps now too-familiar painting, reminding us that “the picture is a portrait” and pointing out that we may have forgotten this fact in our over-exposure to *La Gioconda*. Pater counters the idea that she was “but his ideal lady,” asserting instead that “there is much of mere portraiture in the picture[, as] is attested by the legend that by artificial means the presence of mimes and flute players that subtle expression was protracted on the face.” The result is a portrait that exists in three spheres: physical, intrapersonal, and transpersonal. Pater conveys the physical realm through carefully selected details, including the subject’s slightly-weary eyelids, and the rocky, watery landscape setting that seems almost to give rise to her form.

More important in Pater's ekphrasis are the inner realm of *La Gioconda*, and her relationship to shared cultural history. Her beauty emanates from her interior world quite literally, according to Pater: "It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions." Her beauty and her quietly powerful inner state are significant, but secondary to her representation's ability to conjure multiple human histories at once, and that is what makes the picture great. Her portrait conveys elements of the stories of Eastern merchants, Leda, Helen of Troy, and St. Anne. It is, according to Pater, "the fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern thought has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea" (125-6). While Pater forcefully proclaims *La Gioconda's* connection to a broad swath of history and culture, it is important to note that these are reflections of Pater's impressionistic and subjective experience of the painting. Pater's richly personal analysis of Leonardo's portrait of *La Gioconda* suggests the way that Wilde's narrator approaches the painted portrait of Mr. W. H.

Wilde's portrait of Mr. W. H., like Leonardo's *La Gioconda*, similarly seems to possess an independent inner life that has a curious power to transport the consciousness of the viewer. When we first encounter the portrait, it moves its owner Erskine to tears as it elicits a "strange fascination" in the narrator (302-3). Although revealed to be a forgery early on, its emotional effect on those who encounter it is authentic. The emotional force of the forged portrait is unmitigated by time and experience, and even separates the audience from time. By the end of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," the narrator feels that he has lived a portion of his life within Shakespeare's century, even as he confesses that he is no closer to understanding the painting's

strong effect on his life: “Had I been merely influenced by the beauty of the forged portrait?” he asks. “To the present day, I cannot understand the beginning or the end of this strange passage in my life” (347).

In “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” Wilde frequently characterizes the actor on the stage as a kind of living portrait that gives a human face to the playwright’s intent. “All that is necessary is to ‘copy what in you is writ’. To place you on the stage as you are in actual life,” muses the narrator as he pieces together Shakespeare’s working relationship with his prized actor Mr. W.H. (317). In his description of stage personae, too, we see Wilde apply a Paterian understanding of the aesthetic critic’s response to human representations in art. Section II introduces the image of the actor as “instrument” through which theatrical ideas and emotions are expressed. In the opening sentences of Section V, however, Wilde changes the direction of this process, recounting the story of a hypothetical Elizabethan audience member who genuinely experiences the emotions and experiences that the actor “feigns” on stage. Like Pater’s *La Gioconda*, the stage persona expands to become a mirror of the viewer’s emotional landscape: “Behind the bright and quickly-changing pageant of the stage, he saw himself, as one sees one’s image in a fantastic glass. The very words that came to the actors’ lips were wrung out of his pain. Their false tears were of his shedding” (343). Inspired by Pater, Wilde presents the view that the heightened reality experienced through art is the lens with which we see the unfamiliar territory of the soul – territory accessed uniquely through art.

For Wilde and for Pater, the effect of a portrait is far more important than its faithful representation of physical likeness. The portrait, in Pater’s estimation, should capture an individual likeness in a way that conveys it without being excessively restricted by it. In his chapter on Luca Della Robbia, Pater refers to the idea of *Allgemeinheit*, eighteenth-century

Johannes Winckelmann's term for the ancient Greek sculptor Pheidias' desire to "seek the type in the individual, to abstract and express only what is structural and permanent, to purge from the individual all that belongs only to him, all the accidents, the feelings, and actions of the special moment, all that (because in its own nature it endures but for a moment) is apt to look like a frozen thing if one arrests it." The cost of adhering too slavishly to realism in a portrait, according to Pater, is loss of humanity; in seeking only the physical authenticity, the artist loses the subject's "subtle extract or essence" and the result is a portrait that fails to speak to people beyond the age that produced it (66). Pater distinguishes between realism and individuality, pointing out that Michelangelo's work captured a unique character but avoided "a too-hard realism." Part of Michelangelo's method for capturing individuality, according to Pater, sometimes was leaving work partially incomplete, a technique that suggests rather than realizes form (68). The portrait drawings Erskine encounters by chance in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." are also extremely captivating to Erskine, perhaps because they are also studies and not finished works. "One unlucky day I was in a print shop in Holborn," says Erskine, "When I saw upon the counter some extremely beautiful drawings in silver-point. I was so attracted by them that I bought them" (310). These drawings quickly lead to Erskine's discovery that the portrait of Mr. W. H. is forged. The authenticity of the painted portrait of Mr. W. H., however, exists within the compass of Pater's view of portraiture: the portrait's effect on Cyril Graham, Erskine, and the narrator is the animating force of Wilde's narrative and therefore a more important truth than a factual peccadillo with regard to origin.

Pater's aesthetic criticism and its focus on the effect of a work of art reinforce the link that Pater and Wilde see between the Sonnets and Shakespeare's stage. We see this link as the narrator looks back on his own highly "theatrical" experience of vicarious emotions that came

from his reading of the Sonnets. As the narrator takes stock of the Mr. W. H. that he gleaned from the Sonnets, he finds that the emotions to which the poems gave rise are more authentic than other parts of his life: “Art, as so often happens, had taken the place of personal experience.” The narrator feels at one with the events described in the Sonnets, as though they were episodes from his own autobiography. He also muses on the plastic nature of the imaginary productions in his imagination, in which the play or the cast could easily change according to his mood. The strictures of time join in that plasticity as he reminds himself, “And yet it was in this century that it had all happened. I had never seen my friend, but he had been with me for many years . . .”(344).

Wilde sees in drama a similar ability to elicit heightened emotion, and this is also couched in terms inspired by Pater’s *Renaissance*. In his discussion of the unique quality of drama as an art form, Wilde openly refers to Pater’s assessment of the qualities and proper use of artistic media: “as one of the most fascinating critics of our day has pointed out, it is to the qualities inherent in each material, and special to it, that we owe the sensuous element in Art, and with it all that in Art is essentially artistic” (324). This passage presents echoes of Pater’s essay on Giorgione: “It is the mistake of much popular criticism to regard poetry, music, and painting . . . as but translations into different languages. . . . The sensuous material of each art brings with it a special phase of quality of beauty” (*The Renaissance* 130). Pointing out the lack of motion in bronze and marble, the lack of color in the sculptor’s media, and the lack of “fullness of form” in the painter’s *métier*, Wilde asserts, “It is the Drama only that, to quote the fine saying of Gervinus, uses all means at once, and appealing to both eye and ear, has at its disposal . . . the intense realism of visible action.” The danger of drama’s “perfection,” however, is its tendency toward “ignoble realism and unimaginative imitation.” Wilde explains that Shakespeare

uniquely elevated theatre above the realm of mere “bombast or . . . clowning” and created parts that fully utilize the actor and that are “only truly revealed to us on the stage” (324).

The motif of the double is aligned with the imagery of portraits and stage personae in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” Pater examines the phenomenon of the double in his chapter on two French poets of the Middle Ages. The thirteenth-century poem “L’Amitiez de Ami et Amile” uses the motif of the double to develop the proto-Renaissance ideas including love of intellect and imagination, and the desire for more beautiful way of life. This old French romance is the story of two friends, one of whom, Amis, was sick with leprosy because he had committed perjury to save his friend Amile. Many of the events in the poem are dependent on the curious physical resemblance between Amis and Amile: “The friendship of Amis and Amile is deepened by the romantic circumstance of an entire personal resemblance between the two heroes so that they pass for each other again and again and thereby into many strange adventures,” says Pater of the recurring “twin” imagery in the poem (8). Addressing the meaning of Amis and Amile’s similarities, Pater connects the physical likeness to an interior connection between the two friends: “That curious interest of the Doppelgänger. . . being entwined in and out through all the incidents of the story, like an outward token of inward similitude of their souls.”¹¹ Although not technically portraiture, the motif of doubles and doppelgängers in Amis et Amile has elements in common with the portrait, including the notion of perfected physical likeness that illustrates qualities of a person’s soul.

In the tradition of Pater’s “Amis et Amile” chapter, Wilde bookends “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” with the imagery of doppelgängers and magical portraiture. In the first section of “The

¹¹ *The Renaissance*, p. 9; Here, Pater also describes two beautiful cups (“like children’s cups”), magical objects that “by their resemblance help to bring the friends together at critical moments” and thus reinforce the imagery of reflection, doubles, and objects with unusual powers. These images are present in Wilde’s narrative, as well.

Portrait of Mr. W. H.”, Wilde positions the beautiful and tragic Cyril Graham as Mr. W.H.’s doppelganger. Described as having the same physiognomy (fair skin and hair, scarlet lips, a delicate frame) Cyril and Willie Hughes also have a special affinity for Shakespeare’s characters, indicating that, like Amis et Amile, they are also spiritually united. The story closes with a nod to the concept of the portrait as container of supernatural energies – the portrait as living vestige of a deceased (or imaginary) person. Wilde’s interest in personal doppelgangers (Cyril Graham/Mr. W. H.; subject/portrait) perhaps extends also to historic periods, in the idea that themes Wilde was exploring in the late nineteenth century (male friendship and love; the relationship of the muse to the artist) were doppelgangers of major elements of the Renaissance worldview.

The meditation on the power of doubles and doppelgangers in “Two Early French Poets” foregrounds Pater’s confrontation of the obligations of portraiture elsewhere in *The Renaissance*. He asserts that replicating physical characteristics is not enough. In his chapter on Botticelli, Pater states that Botticelli is a visionary painter and that this fact distinguishes him from predecessors including Giotto, Masaccio, and Ghirlandaio. Botticelli’s genius, “usurps the data before him as the exponent of ideas, moods and visions of his own,” according to Pater. Botticelli is great because he, “plays fast and loose with those data, rejecting some, isolating others, and always combining them anew.” When applied to portrait subjects, this visionary approach is powerful and potentially dangerous. Pater tells the story of Botticelli’s donor portrait of Matteo Palmieri, reputed author of a poem that depicted the human race as descendants of the race of ambivalent angels who refused to take sides in the battle between Jehovah and Lucifer. Botticelli’s portrait was “somehow suspected of embodying in a picture the wayward dream of Palmieri, and the chapel where it was hung was closed” (54-5). The

dangerous side of the painted portrait is also a theme in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” and pointedly pervades the story’s conclusion.

Finally, Pater’s work enriches Wilde’s concept of philosophical learning during the Renaissance, particularly where male friendship and the relationship between artist and muse is concerned. In one of most erudite portions of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” Wilde links Shakespeare’s revolutions in theatre with the slightly earlier dissemination of Plato’s *Symposium*, translated by Marsilio Ficino in 1492 and made available in England by way of sixteenth century French translations by Leroy and Joachim du Bellay. The dialogue structure of the *Symposium* was an influence on Shakespeare, according to Wilde’s narrator, as was Diotima’s theory that Beauty presides over births, including the birth-like process of artistic creation (325). Wilde contrasts artistic “progeny” with physical children born of marriage, working backward to analyze the “conception” that leads to the birth of works of art. Wilde finds that this conception occurs in friendship between men, which is more spiritual than physical procreation precisely because it is elevated above the sphere of “gross bodily appetite” and allows the soul to assume prominence (325).

The painted portrait was celebrated in the Renaissance, a period characterized by erudition, celebration of the self, and yearning for an ancient golden age. This unique temporal setting, and its attendant interests and values, color Wilde’s “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” In the story’s bold experimentation with traditional ideas about history and fiction, and in its unquenchable interest in a wide spectrum of the arts, we see elements of its author. In its exploration of visual art and poetry, we also see the influence of Walter Pater on Wilde’s art, craft and vision. Through the visual and intellectual face of the Renaissance that Wilde receives from Pater’s influential work on the period, and from the new vision of the Sonnets as an

outward expression of Shakespeare's inner character, Wilde uses his source material for "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." to give a face to the Renaissance period. Because of those materials' Victorian inflections, however, that face is one that resembles Wilde's own.

Chapter Two

Wilde's Portraits of Pater

A lifelong interest in the work of Walter Pater characterizes Wilde's intellectual life throughout his career, and Pater's influence on Wilde was especially strong during the 1888-1890 period. This span of years comprises Wilde's initial publication of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." in *Blackwood's*. It is also the period when Wilde completes three other works whose imagery and Paterian themes present important similarities with "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." Taken together, Wilde's "Pen, Pencil and Poison" (1889), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and "The Critic as Artist" (1890) demonstrate Wilde's attention to Walter Pater's persona and tastes, as well as to Pater's literary and aesthetic innovations.¹² Paterian strains, as well as the image of the portrait, are a through-line linking these three works with one another and with their contemporary, "The Portrait of Mr. W. H."

Exactly when Wilde composed the version of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." published in *Blackwood's* in July 1889 is somewhat uncertain. Horst Schroeder places the beginning of the composition timeline around October 1887, when Wilde refers to the story for the first time. The reference appears in a letter to the business manager of the *New York Daily Tribune*.¹³ "I am writing another story at present," says Wilde, "and should be very pleased to forward you

¹² Wilde's reviews published in two magazines further document his engagement with Pater around this period; Wilde's brief review of *Imaginary Portraits* appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on June 11, 1887; Wilde's review of Pater's *Appreciations* ran as "Mr. Pater's Last Volume" in *Speaker* on March 22, 1890.

¹³ It is catalogued in the *Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde* as a letter to the paper's editor-in-chief Whitelaw Reid, although in point of fact, it is written to the unnamed business manager.

advance proofs should you care to publish it. The story is connected with Shakespeare's Sonnets" (*Complete Letters* 325; *Additions and Corrections to Richard Ellmann's Oscar Wilde* 99). Schroeder places the end of Wilde's original composition period at April 1889, but acknowledges Frank Harris' 1918 assertion in *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions: Together with Memories of Oscar Wilde by Bernard Shaw* that Wilde sent the manuscript to *Blackwood's* only after he received a rejection from *Fortnightly Review* (*Composition, Publication and Reception* 9). Within this timeline, Schroeder connects a textual curiosity in the story to a topical event of 1888-1889. At the end of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," Wilde's narrator describes the painted portrait as being in the style of "Ouvry" (350). Schroeder's search for an Ouvry who could have furnished the reference was futile, but he does locate a catalogue of an important exhibition of portraits, miniatures, and personal effects connected with the Royal House of Stuart at the New Gallery, Regent Street. The exhibition opened on December 31, 1888 and included a 1578 portrait by "one P. Oudry, a Frenchman of the school of Clouet II" (*Composition, Publication, and Reception* 11).¹⁴ The Ouvry reference appears in the *Blackwood's* version of the story, indicating that if Schroeder is correct about its origin, Wilde completed the original published version sometime after January 1889. In 2002, Schroeder stated that, because of its similarity to other works of 1889-90, he believes that "'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' in its published form is essentially a late rather than an early product of the period October 1887 – April 1889" (100).

When Wilde's biographical essay "Pen, Pencil, and Poison" was published in *The Fortnightly Review* in January 1889, Wilde had reviewed Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* for

¹⁴ Largely because of the Ouvry/Oudry quibble, Schroeder's 1984 book on the composition, publication and reception of *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* asserts that we must assume Wilde originally composed it "not before the beginning of 1889." In Schroeder's thorough 2002 review of Ellmann's second edition of *Oscar Wilde*, he is able to trace a reference back to the *Complete Letters* and revise the beginning of the timeline earlier.

the *Pall Mall Gazette* less than two years earlier. *Imaginary Portraits* is Pater's fictionalized account of four figures from varied moments in history, a work that Wilde's review characterizes as "a singularly attractive book" by an "intellectual impressionist." Pronouncing his former teacher's hybrid of history and fiction "a series of philosophic studies in which the philosophy is tempered by personality," Wilde responds positively to Pater's task to "give a sensuous environment to intellectual concepts." Wilde concludes that "Mr. Pater has never written a more subtle psychological study" than that of Sebastian Van Storck, subject of the imaginary portrait Wilde praises as the collection's strongest.¹⁵ Wilde was developing both "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." and "Pen, Pencil and Poison" in 1888. Wilde's study of Thomas Wainwright in "Pen, Pencil, and Poison," like "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," is an experiment in Pater's imaginary portrait genre that addresses questions of aesthetics in a distinctly Paterian vein.

Many critics identify the imaginary portrait as unique to Pater's narrative form.¹⁶ Termed "non-fictional fictions and critical non-criticisms" by William Buckler, Pater's imaginary portraits are, as the name implies, hybrids combining fiction and nonfiction. Buckler points out that Pater's imaginary portraits also contain elements of autobiography but that, with the form's strong overlay of imagination, "even one's personal experience is not peculiarly one's own and that literal biography is history with blinkers on" (Buckler 39). Pater's impulse to fuse and expand fiction and nonfiction also allows the imaginary portrait form to incorporate elements of myth (Monsman xi-xvi). The mythic element in Pater's imaginary portraits provides an additional platform for literary innovation, giving Pater "the freedom to create his own myths or

¹⁵ Wilde, Oscar. "Mr. Pater's Imaginary Portraits." *Pall Mall Gazette*, June 11, 1887. <http://www.readbookonline.net/read/9874/24027/>. Wilde's review also praises Pater's aesthetic choices and narrative discretion: "Mr. Pater has the true spirit of selection, the true tact of omission."

¹⁶ Bizzotto, Elisa. "The Imaginary Portrait: Pater's Contribution to a Literary Genre." See also Gerald Monsman's *Pater's Portraits: Mythic Pattern in the Fiction of Walter Pater* and William E. Buckler's Introduction to *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts*.

to put inherited fictions like those of Dionysus, Hippolytus, and Apollo to new mythological uses.” Thus, according to Buckler, myth in Pater’s imaginary portraits encourages the reader to “see things whole and to value them at their ‘eternal worth,’ literal fact having only so much interest as our imaginative sense invests in it” (Buckler 39-40).

Pater offers little in the way of definition of the literary genre that he is credited with inventing. Pater’s sole clue to the definition of the imaginary portrait is a reference to the genre that Pater gives in a letter dated 17 April 1878 written to George Grove: “It is not, as you may perhaps fancy, the first part of a work of fiction, but is meant to be complete in itself; though the first of a series, as I hope, with some real kind of consequence in it . . . I call the M.S. a portrait, and mean readers, as they might do on seeing a portrait, to begin speculating – what came of him?” (*Letters of Walter Pater* 30). Bizzotto identifies additional characteristics of the imaginary portrait genre. These include the imaginary portrait’s relationship to Pater’s role as an art critic and therefore a reflection of Pater’s interest in painting. Bizzotto also cites the imaginary portrait’s connection to an interplay of the “sister arts” of literature and painting and, thus, its status as a reflection of a late nineteenth-century interest in artistic hybridization. Most significant, according to Bizzotto, is the genre’s eliciting the reader’s imaginative response, exemplified in the question Pater poses in the letter, “What became of him?” This question suggests the literary form’s roots in portrait painting, and also “implies the reader’s active and sympathetic involvement with the central personality involved in the story” (Bizzotto 214-5).

Four of Pater’s imaginary portraits appeared in *Macmillan’s* between 1885 and 1887 and were published in book form as *Imaginary Portraits* in 1887. Wilde’s June 11, 1887 review of the book in the *Pall Mall Gazette* begins with a comment on the role of the imagination in the stories’ creation and reception, calling the stories, “these Imaginary or, as we

should prefer to call them, Imaginative Portraits of his.” Wilde’s distinction between “imaginary” and “imaginative” offers an insight into his assessment of the stories’ relationship to fact. The *Oxford English Dictionary* states that “imaginary” means “existing only in imagination or fancy; having no real existence; not real or actual,” while “imaginative” is defined as “of, relating to, or concerned in the exercise of imagination as a mental faculty.”¹⁷ The wording of Pater’s title is more defensive about the role and importance of the imagination, as it argues that his portraits are fictional. Wilde’s choice of “imaginative” indicates a perspective on the literary genre that gives a closer connection with historic figures and events, indicating that Wilde saw Pater’s stories (and the imaginary portrait form) as works that engage the imagination, but are not necessarily solely the product of it.

Wilde’s “Pen, Pencil and Poison” is a work in which fact and imagination have a similarly complex relationship, and in it we see Wilde experimenting with the technique of imaginary portraiture in his chronicle of the life of English artist, author, and criminal Thomas Griffiths Wainwright (1794-1847). In its intertextual blending of fiction and nonfiction, its interest in the “sister arts” of literature and visual art, and its mythic approach to dandyism and aestheticism “Pen, Pencil and Poison” is both a biographical essay and an exercise in imaginary portraiture.

The intertextuality in “Pen, Pencil and Poison” shapes its fiction/nonfiction hybridity. Like a scholarly essay, “Pen, Pencil and Poison” quotes and paraphrases a range of sources on Wainwright, as well as Wainwright’s own writings. Wilde’s handling of source material often suggests that it is being used more for purposes of aesthetics and characterization than for

¹⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*. <http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/>. The OED also indicates that “imaginary” formerly referred to “existing only as spirit, not corporeal.”

evidentiary support. At the same time, “Pen, Pencil and Poison” has a strong central character and narrative structure that at times make it read more like a short story and give it elements of the fiction/nonfiction blending associated with Pater’s imaginary portraits. Wilde characterizes Wainwright directly, through descriptions of his sometimes-Paterian temperament and intellectual tastes. Wilde also describes Wainwright indirectly, through excerpts, both real and imaginary, from Wainwright’s art criticism and from writings on Wainwright by Charles Lamb, W. Carew Hazlitt and others. Josephine Guy observes that Wilde “never makes clear the extent or nature of his borrowings. Rather, his habit of mixing direct quotation with summary and paraphrase has the effect of eliding the distinction between his own words and those of his sources” (Guy 412). The varied sources and voices in “Pen, Pencil and Poison” link it to Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits*, which references authentic source material, created journal extracts, and imagined visual portraits to convey character. The rich layering of material from outside sources, combined with observations in the author’s voice, also give “Pen, Pencil and Poison” a strong resemblance to “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.”¹⁸

Like Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits* and Wilde’s “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” “Pen, Pencil and Poison” is rooted in the realm of the visual arts, another signature of imaginary portraiture. Wainwright’s avocation as an art critic opens multiple opportunities for Wilde to touch on the Western art canon, and a list of the names invoked in “Pen, Pencil and Poison” reads like the index of an art history textbook: Watteau, Lancret, Rubens, Giorgione, Rembrandt, Correggio,

¹⁸ See also Guy and Small’s analysis of Wilde’s intertextuality compared with that of Pater and Ezra Pound in *Studying Oscar Wilde*, pp. 104-110. Guy and Small address the more robust scholarship behind Pater’s intertextual references in works like *Marius the Epicurean*, contrasting them with the lighter hand evident in Wilde’s use of scholarly references. They point out that the dense pattern of references in Pound’s work demand’s the reader’s familiarity with their antecedents and that, thus, Pound was more in the tradition of Pater than Wilde.

Giulio Romano, and Michelangelo are all named here.¹⁹ Pater's *Renaissance* and *Imaginary Portraits* are steeped in ekphrasis. Wilde follows suit, quoting Wainwright in "Pen, Pencil and Poison" to create miniature visual-verbal works of art within the essay, as in Wainwright's meditation on "The Crucifixion"²⁰: "Darkness—sooty, portentous darkness shrouds the whole scene: only above the accursed wood, as if through a horrid rift in the murky ceiling, a rainy deluge—'sleety-flaw, discoloured water'—streams down amain, spreading a grisly spectral light, even more horrible than that palpable night. Already the Earth pants thick and fast! the darkened Cross trembles! the winds are drops—the air is stagnant—a muttering rumble growls underneath their feet, and some of that miserable crowd begin to fly down the hill. . . ." (Guy 111-2). In Wainwright's words as presented by Wilde, we detect a Paterian tendency to link multiple strong, subjective impressions of a work of art, and to declare them in forceful, sensual language.

Wilde introduces the description of Rembrandt's *Crucifixion* in terms that echo Pater's aesthetic criticism, telling us that Wainwright, "deals with his impressions of the work as an artistic whole, and tries to translate those impressions into words, to give, as it were, the literary equivalent for the imaginative and mental effect." The closing of Wainwright's account of Rembrandt's *Crucifixion* is suggestive of Pater's ideas about the subjective existence of a work of art. "Rembrandt never painted this sketch, and he was quite right. It would have lost nearly all its charms in losing that perplexing veil of indistinctness which affords such ample range wherein the doubting imagination may speculate. At present it is like a thing in another world. A dark gulf betwixt us. It is not tangible by the body. We can only approach it in spirit" (Guy 111-2). Wainwright's description of Giulio Romano's "Cephalus and Procris" also possesses

¹⁹ Guy points out that Watteau's popularity in the late 19th century owed a great deal to Walter Pater's "A Prince of Court Painters" p. 428.

²⁰ Schroeder points out that "The picture which gave Wainwright such a thrill was Rembrandt's etching catalogued today as "The Three Crosses." *The Wildean* No. 36, p. 43-5.

the quiescence and synesthesia that we associate with Pater's descriptive writing, describing a vista in which "flowers exhale sad perfume from their buds" and "fountain nymphs within the wood melt into tearful waters" as Cephalus holds the body of Procris in his lap, "now helpless, heavy, void of all motion, save when the breeze lifts her thick hair in mockery" ("Pen, Pencil, and Poison" *Complete Works* 1099-1100).

Wilde's attention to physical manifestations of beauty, design and craftsmanship transcends the realm of fine arts in "Pen, Pencil and Poison." A strong sense of place is also a characteristic of Pater's imaginary portraits. Wilde tells us that Wainewright is "keenly sensitive to the value of beautiful surroundings, and never wearies of describing to us the rooms in which he lived, or would like to have lived." Pater's "A Child in the House," the first piece in the collected *Imaginary Portraits* reviewed by Wilde, starts with a meditative description of main character and Pater-proxy Florian Deleal's childhood home: "Tracing back the threads of his complex spiritual habit, as he was used in after years to do, Florian found that he owed to the place many tones of sentiment afterwards customary with him, certain inward lights under which things most naturally presented themselves to him" (Pater, *Imaginary Portraits* 5). The setting associated with one's youth shapes character and story in each of Pater's subsequent imaginary portraits. The impact of surroundings on the development of aesthetic and spiritual awareness opens the imaginary portrait form to descriptive passages that recall not only portraiture, but other painting genres including still life, landscape and genre painting. "A Prince of Court Painters" is recounted through imagined diary entries composed in the speaker's father's workroom, which is being renovated, while "Denys l'Auxerrois" presents a detailed description of architecture and city planning in the French Middle Ages- a contrast with Denys' earthy house cut into the side of a hill. The icy landscape of "Sebastian van Storck" reflects the main

character's cold temperament, and in "Duke Carl of Rosenmold," a similar coolness pervades the court of the grand-duke until Carl delivers his realm to the aesthetic and spiritual warmth of the Mediterranean worldview.

The main character in "Pen, Pencil and Poison" is repeatedly described as a lover of beautiful surroundings and fine objects, yet his sensitivity to environment is perhaps at odds with his transient lifestyle, which places him in several temporary homes as an orphaned child, followed by boarding school. Once his criminal career commenced, his quarters consisted of hotels, followed by prisons. If physical environment shapes spiritual formation, which it does in Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*, Wainewright's rootlessness reinforces his status as a spiritually stunted character. In all of these respects, the attention that Wilde devotes to interiors and landscapes, and the way that they inform character, is consistent with Pater's technique in *Imaginary Portraits*.

The mythic aspect of the imaginary portrait genre is evident Wilde's exploration of the archetype of the dandy in "Pen, Pencil and Poison," and in this archetype we see aspects of both Pater and Wilde. Wilde's picture of Wainewright as a man whose obsession with beauty is matched by his moral laxity is the essence of decadence. In "Pen, Pencil and Poison," Wilde pointedly brings morality into the discussion of aesthetics in his portrayal of Wainewright as an "amateur of beautiful things," as well as "a forger of no mean or ordinary capabilities, and as subtle and secret poisoner almost without rival in this or any age." The juxtaposition of Wainewright's refined sensibility with his moral impairment illustrates aestheticism's precept that art exists only for its own sake, for the pleasure of the viewer and unshackled from the yoke of morality. This idea, in the context of a biographical essay, gives Wilde opportunity for sustained, dramatic application of ideas about art as a law unto itself, an idea that he also puts

forward in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” as well. The first two thirds of “Pen, Pencil and Poison” depict Wainwright’s early life and burgeoning aesthetic temperament in terms strikingly reminiscent of Walter Pater. “He writes about *La Gioconda*, and early French poets and the Italian Renaissance,” says Wilde, alluding to chapters of Pater’s *Renaissance*. He goes on to describe Wainwright’s love of beautiful surroundings and passion for the color green, indicative of “a certain moral laxity, if not of a decadence of morals,” and the effect that aesthetics have on Wainwright recall Pater: “As an art-critic he concerned himself primarily with the complex impressions produced by a work of art,” and those impressions are powerful enough that they acquire their own agency. Taste is perfectible, according to Wainwright, through exposure to great beauty; in the end, taste becomes “a form of right judgment.” (“Pen, Pencil and Poison,” *Complete Works* 1093-7).

Josephine Guy sees Wainwright’s tastes as clear allusions to Pater. Guy also states that the work’s subtitle “A Study in Green” refers to the green lighting and décor of Pater’s residence at Brasnose College, and his sporting a “brilliant apple green tie” at a private viewing at the Royal Academy. Surveying these images, along with Wainwright’s Paterian aestheticism, Guy claims that “Pen, Pencil and Poison” may be an imaginary portrait of Walter Pater.²¹ In his 2010 review of “The OET Complete Works, Vol IV. III: ‘Pen, Pencil and Poison,’” however, Horst Schroeder, however, maintains that Guy overstates her case for Wainwright as proxy for Walter Pater. Schroeder’s critique of Guy’s scholarship in the OET edition of “Pen, Pencil and Poison,” includes Schroeder’s correction to what he terms Guy’s misinterpretation of the references to the

²¹ See Guy’s commentary on “Pen, Pencil and Poison” in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, Vol. IV. Guy explains that green held an unwholesome, quasi-sinister association in the late nineteenth century, and that it was associated with decadent sexuality due to the use of green carnations as a marker of male homosexuality. Wilde also wore the green carnation on occasion; pp. 410-411.

color green.²² Citing evidence from William Sharp's 1894 *Atlantic Monthly* essay "Some Personal Reminiscences of Walter Pater," Schroeder sees a stronger association between Pater and the color gold. Sharp recalls his first meeting with Pater and the golden quality of light in Pater's rooms on that occasion. Sharp also reminisces about Pater's musings on the color gold ("He began to speak in a low voice about the color gold, the gold of nature, above all the chemic action of golden light, and how it was 'the primary colour of delight' throughout nature and in nearly all art. 'Through all writing, too, that is rare and distinctive and beautiful,' he said, 'there is a golden thread.'") Schroeder cites Pater's own references to golden imagery in the paintings of Titian from "The School of Giorgione" chapter of *The Renaissance*. (Schroeder, *The Wildean*, 31-2).

In *Studying Oscar Wilde*, Guy and Small acknowledge that there is a case to be made for Wilde as the presence beneath "Pen, Pencil and Poison's" decadence, and its attendant references to the color green. Pointing out that green was "not a neutral color in English culture of the 1880s and 1890s," Guy and Small explain that green had an established association with Decadent sexuality by the end of the nineteenth century. Works such as *English Poems* by Richard Le Gallienne (1892) and the satirical novel *The Green Carnation* by Robert Hichens (1894) crystalized the idea of green as the color of Decadent desire.

While Wilde's portrayal of Wainewright draws on historical sources about the eighteenth-century artist-criminal, Wilde creates a portrait of a Wainewright who possesses a Paterian intellect and a Wildean persona. There is an unmistakable current of hostility in Wilde's portrayal of Pater through the guise of Wainewright. Guy and Small suggest that

²² Schroeder. *The Wildean*, No. 36, Jan. 2010 p. 30. In summary of Guy's evidence, Schroeder remarks, "That's all there is," pronouncing it "pretty thin."

Wilde's aggressive stance toward Pater may have been motivated by competition. While Wilde's oeuvre is certainly better known than Pater's today, Guy and Small point out that in Wilde's day the opposite was true. "Pater's critical writings and fiction consistently outsold those of Wilde. Moreover, with the possible exception of his first book, *The Renaissance* (1873), they were also consistently better received by critics and academics" (Guy and Small 105). Schroeder concurs, reminding us that Pater's essay on Style was published to universal critical praise in 1888. The publication of "Style" came shortly after Matthew Arnold's death in April 1888 and coincided with Wilde's completion of his first major critical essay for a serious publication ("The Decay of Lying"). Thus, according to Schroeder, Wilde many have suddenly seen Pater as his rival as heir to Arnold's mantle (Schroeder, *The Wildean* 31-2).

When Wilde anthologized "Pen, Pencil and Poison" in his collection 1891 *Intentions*, he added two crucial sentences that had not appeared in the magazine text of "Pen, Pencil and Poison": "A mask tells us more than a face. These disguises intensified his personality" ("Pen, Pencil and Poison," *Complete Works* 1095). In *Wilde's Intentions*, Danson finds that this addition connects "Pen, Pencil and Poison" to an inquiry into masks and personality that Wilde undertakes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "The Critic as Artist," and "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." Specifically, this addition supports Wilde's conclusion that, "whether the mask disguises an absence [of personality] or whether it is the surface to an unusual depth, the superior personality (more intense or more diverse) is measured by its deviance from the norm – by insincerity and sin" (95). Wilde's portrait of Wainwright as a personality reflects a contemporary Victorian interest in personality as a social, clinical, and media phenomenon (95-6). The interest in personality that Wilde displays in "Pen, Pencil and Poison" is, according to Rodney Shewan in *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism*, a way to link moral decay to aesthetic concerns. "To the

moralist, Wainewright is a citizen,” says Shewan. “To the artist-as-critic, a personality. Personality creates the artist, and while genius separates him in quality from ordinary people, personality separates him in kind” (77). Wainewright’s tastes and connoisseurship may be aligned with Pater, but it is Wilde who furnishes the template for the eighteenth-century forger and murderer’s personality. Pater was, by most accounts, not a strong personality. His Preface to *The Renaissance*, however, betrays an interest in personality. Pater’s aesthetic critic asks, “What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*?” (viii). Pater goes on to explain that, “the function of the aesthetic critic is to distinguish, analyze, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a . . . fair personality produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure” (ix). This interest in the aesthetics of personality also anticipate Wilde’s next great work of fiction, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Whether Wilde intended his portrait of Wainewright to be a historical digest, a coded portrait of Pater, or a coded portrait of himself, the fact remains that “Pen, Pencil and Poison” marks a significant step in Wilde’s artistic and intellectual development. In its experimentation with the imaginary portraiture genre, its obscuring of the line between fiction and history, and its themes of art, beauty and forgery, it is an important turning point for Wilde, and one whose aesthetic themes and literary techniques draw on the work of Walter Pater, and connect it with “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.”

The painted portrait, rather than the imaginary one, takes center stage as Wilde deepens his inquiry into art, identity, and morality with the July 1890 publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*. The story of a beautiful young man’s tutelage under an older aesthete, and his transformation into an *objet d’art*, has themes that resemble those of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” And like Wilde’s narrative about Shakespeare’s muse, *The*

Picture of Dorian Gray was immediately received as a study in decadent aestheticism and sexuality. The novel's approach to portraiture and male friendship align it with "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." So does its debt to the ideas of Walter Pater, which often appear in the words of Lord Henry Wotton, one of the three main characters. The Lippincott's edition was condemned for immorality and strong homosexual overtones, meeting with so much controversy that Lippincott's bookseller W. H. Smith withdrew its July 1890 edition from newsstands and railway bookstalls because the press claimed *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was indecent.²³ Wilde softened the homoerotic content and expanded the thirteen-chapter Lippincott's version of the novel from thirteen to twenty chapters to create a book edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for Ward, Lock and Company in 1891. In revising the Lippincott's text into the 1891 novel, Wilde also made significant deletions in order to tone down the story's homosexual overtones.²⁴

The novel's opening image shows artist Basil Hallward and aging aesthete Lord Henry Wotton looking up at the portrait of a "young man of extraordinary personal beauty" in a scene whose composition introduces the character triad that makes up the novel. Like Mr. W. H., Dorian Gray first appears not as a person but as a portrait essentially venerated by worshippers. The triangular composition suggests the central conflict in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which traces the fraught relationship between the beautiful young man and the portrait that embodies his sins to become a living, demonic entity. Dorian Gray is a contemporary Adonis, a muse whose beauty animates Hallward's artistic impulse. He also ignites, and comes under the dangerous influence of, Lord Henry's decadent aestheticism. Lord Henry Wotton is an aristocrat

²³ Frankel, Nicholas. Textual Introduction. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011, pp 39-40. See also Bristow, Joseph. Introduction. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. xxiv.

²⁴ Frankel, 2011. Some of the deleted passages include artist Basil Hallward's confession to Dorian, "Somehow I have never loved a woman . . . I was only happy when I was with you" and Lord Henry's "strange pleasure in saying things to him I know I shall be sorry for having said," p. 11.

whose education, refined aesthetics, and age position him to be Dorian's Svengali. He exerts his decadent influence on Dorian by encouraging the latter's effete pleasure-seeking and consciousness of his own beauty. From his first contact with Wotton, Dorian's self-concept is permanently altered: "The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before."²⁵

A dangerous literary obsession is also common to both "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." and Wilde's novel. Under Lord Henry's guidance, Dorian also becomes obsessed with a beautiful and troubling book clearly based on Joris-Karl Huysmans' 1884 novel *A Rebours* (*Against the Grain*), a controversial French work that chronicles the main character's retreat into the hedonistic inner-world of his own desires and artistic tastes. As Dorian moves from one aesthetic passion to the next (perfumes, jewels, vestments), his character becomes more amoral and his personality more passive. When his heartless spurning of love-interest Sybil Vane leads to the young woman's suicide, Lord Henry helps him analyze the event in aesthetic terms: "Sometimes, however, a tragedy that possesses artistic elements of beauty crosses our lives," says Lord Henry. "Some one [sic] has killed herself for love of you. I wish that I had ever had such an experience. It would have made me in love with love for the rest of my life."²⁶ Lord Henry is the voice of aestheticism, radically removed from questions of ethics or morality. His decadent vampirism and its pernicious influence on Dorian Gray make Wotton the logical successor to Thomas Wainewright in the chronology of Wilde's work. Where Wainewright allegedly infected his victims with poisonous crystals, Wotton infects his victim with a more

²⁵ Frankel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 102. Frankel also cites Walter Sickert's Royal Academy exhibition review of 1897, which states that a portrait should be evaluated in terms of its ability to "[tell] its story of sympathy and comprehension through years of silent appeal."

²⁶ Wilde, Oscar *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Joseph Bristow, Ed. Oxford : Oxford University Press, Askews and Holts., 2008, p 87.

abstract – but equally potent – poison: seductive ideas about beauty and pleasure, and license to misuse them as a model to govern personal relationships. The result is the equally disastrous.

Throughout the novel, Lord Henry quotes and paraphrases Walter Pater. In his review of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Pater objected to Wilde's portrayal of "Lord Henry Wotton, who speaks so many of Pater's sentences."²⁷ As in the Paterian pastiches that characterized "Pen, Pencil and Poison," *The Picture of Dorian Gray* also presents passages that evoke Pater's literary style. Lord Henry's "To realise one's nature perfectly – that is what each of us is here for" is a paraphrase of Pater's urging that we "be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy" (Ellmann 317). Of the novel, Pater also complained, "I wish they would not call me a hedonist. It gives such a wrong impression to those who do not know Greek" (Bloom 152). Frankel observes that Lord Henry's call for a "new Hedonism" alludes to Pater's novel *Marius the Epicurean*'s chapter titled "The New Cyrenaicism," which describes the protagonist's impulse toward a life of refined pleasures and cultivated tastes. Pater's narrator says that a life lived within "actual moments as they pass" will sometimes require a bold, active transcendence of the moral order, making Wilde's reference to a "new Hedonism" a specific criticism of what Wilde saw as Pater's excessive passivity and timidity (Frankel 29). Wilde develops Wotton as a Paterian figure with agency, an approach that may illustrate a misapplication of Pater's method. Ideas that Pater espoused in his own quasi-monastic life of contemplation become dangerous manipulations and self-justifications when applied to the dynamic, chaotic world of human interaction.

²⁷ Ellmann, p. 323. See also Pater's objection in the same review that "Lord Henry's hedonism left no place for the higher pleasures of generosity and renunciation," quoted in Ellmann on p. 318.

The Picture of Dorian Gray has a magical-portrait motif that connects it to “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” as well as to “Two French Poets” and “Botticelli” in Pater’s *Renaissance*. Basil Hallward’s portrait of Dorian becomes almost a fourth character as it changes and scrupulously reflects its subject’s sins - even as Dorian remains supernaturally young. In this way, the sitter and the portrait trade places, with the portrait reflecting the ravages of age and experience, while the sitter lives on as an unchanging, ideal likeness; a record of a lost former self. John Paul Riquelme analyzes this reversal in terms of the myth of Narcissus, the beautiful boy of Greek myth who fell in love with his reflection in a pool of water only to destroy it with his kiss. Lord Henry makes this connection early in the novel, saying “Why my dear Basil, he is a Narcissus, and you – well, of course you have an intellectual expression, and all that. But beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins. Intellect is in itself a mode of exaggeration, and destroys the harmony of any face” (Riquelme 609-631). Wotton’s statement foreshadows the portrait’s grotesque transformation resulting from Dorian’s losses of innocence.

The Picture of Dorian Gray’s imagery and ideas are closely aligned with its near-contemporary “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” Against a philosophical framework that espouses beauty as an ultimate truth, both stories depict an older, cultivated intellectual man’s relationship with a preternaturally beautiful young male protégé. In both stories, the beautiful young man is frozen as an artistic representation of his most appealing physical self – a perfect portrait. This is an idea present in Shakespeare’s Sonnets, as well. Shakespeare’s speaker fails to freeze the youth’s beauty, except through the language of the sonnets themselves. Like the forged portrait of Shakespeare’s male muse that has taken over the lives of Cyril Graham, Erskine and Wilde’s narrator, Basil Hallward’s painting of Dorian has magical properties and proves to be stronger than the humans who contemplate it. Both stories also illustrate the darker nature of

aestheticism. Wilde's confident assertions of artistic philosophy are safe, discrete and amusing in his essays. In his fiction, however, those precepts cease merely to be philosophical treatises, and they take a darker turn. Radical aestheticism proves considerably more dangerous when it is at work in the activities of living characters.

In Wilde's fullest expression of his aesthetic philosophy, "The Critic as Artist," Wilde elevates the critic as the true agent of originality and creative force. His strong case for self-discovery through art resembles the meditations on art and experience in the final section of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." These precepts also extend Pater's ideas on aesthetic criticism presented in the Preface to *The Renaissance*. In "The Critic as Artist," Wilde returns to the dialogue format that he employed a year and a half earlier in "The Decay of Lying." The dialogue's structure offers the same advantages to this essay, effectively allowing Wilde to interview himself, and anticipating the reader's questions and answering them in "mini-essays" that Josephine Guy believes were developed by a process of accretion.²⁸ In this essay, the dialogue's celebration of voice and language also supports view of language as the ultimate form of creative expression. "The Critic as Artist" proclaims that the life of the mind, the critical process whose currency is language, is the force that advances the arts and is thus a greater achievement than a life of action and artmaking.

First published under the title "The True Function and Value in Criticism; With Some Remarks on the Importance of Doing Nothing: A Dialogue" in July and September, 1890 in *The Nineteenth Century*, the dialogue opens with Gilbert, Wilde's proxy, tepidly reviewing the work of several writers including Pepys, Browning, and Walter Scott. With minimal prodding from

²⁸ Guy states that "The Critic as Artist" appears to have started out as a "relatively short and sketchy dialogue, to which he added more and more detail, usually by expanding his examples," p. xlv.

his interlocutor Ernest, Gilbert damns the work of Robert Browning with fulsome, rather than faint, praise: “George Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning. He used poetry as a medium for writing prose. . . . yet still he is great.”²⁹ From here, “The Critic as Artist” turns from the work of the artist to the function of the critic, as Wilde builds on the idea that the critic’s process of selection, interpretation and innovation is the true process that gives rise to art. Danson points out that Wilde challenges Matthew Arnold’s “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” and its view that the role of criticism is to produce a current of fresh ideas for the creative artist. Wilde, according to Danson, pushes Arnold’s thesis a step further by making the critic the equal, and even the superior, of the artist.³⁰

Advancing ideas that Pater articulated in the Preface to *The Renaissance*, Wilde voices a passionate endorsement of the subjective reception of a work of art, stating that this process becomes as generative as the process of creating painting or sculpture. “The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticizes as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour,” says Gilbert. In fact, the critic is less dependent on tangible materials than the artist is. “Anything will serve his purpose” (1124). Why? Because “the highest criticism really is the record of one’s own soul . . . His sole aim is to chronicle his own impressions.” The essential subject of art criticism is autobiographical, says Wilde, because it resides in the critic’s subjective experience; thus, art criticism is a “creation within a creation” (1125). Wilde picks up Part II of the dialogue with a discussion of art and personality, another agent through which the critic imparts a necessary subjective, impressionistic element to the life of a work of art. Gilbert

²⁹ Wilde, Oscar. “The Critic as Artist.” *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. New York: Harper Collins, 2003, p 1110-1. Wilde also accuses the members of the Browning Society, theologians of the Broad Church Party and the authors of Mr. Walter Scott’s Great Writers Series of “trying to explain their divinity away.”

³⁰ Danson, p. 130-140. Danson also says that Wilde was inspired by Arnold’s and Pater’s roles as public intellectuals and sought that status for himself in this essay.

explains that historical context can be helpful, but the critic must not use history or other forms of knowledge “as a riddling Sphinx, whose shallow secret may be guessed and revealed by one whose feet are wounded and who knows not his name” (1130). Rather, the critic should seek to intensify art’s mystery by mixing his own personality in with it. The resulting synergy will be “an element of revelation” (1131).

Wilde’s assertion that a work of art’s true existence resides within the viewer is an idea heavily indebted to Pater’s concept of aesthetic criticism. In his Preface to *The Renaissance*, Pater directs the aesthetic critic to see the object “as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly” and to ask “what is this song or picture . . . to me? What effect does it really produce on me? (viii). The answers to those questions, according to Pater, are the primary data of art criticism. Criticism, then, is not defined by action or scholarship, but by temperament. “Our education becomes complete in proportion as our susceptibility to these impressions increases in depth and variety,” says Pater. The job of the critic is to distinguish which specific characteristics of a work produce the experience of beauty or pleasure in the critic. “His end is reached when he has disengaged that virtue, and noted it, as a chemist notes some natural element, for himself and others” (ix-x). In answer to Ernest’s question about the qualifications of a critic, Gilbert paraphrases Pater’s ideas and emulates his language, replying, “Temperament is the primary requisite for the critic – a temperament exquisitely susceptible to beauty and to the various impressions that beauty gives us.”³¹

Favoring the life of the mind, Wilde presents inaction as a key distinction between artist and critic. Refuting received notions of the usefulness and virtue of activity, Gilbert makes the

³¹ “The Critic as Artist,” *Complete Works*, p. 1146. This statement immediately follows remarks by Gilbert that denigrate the significance of rationality and ethics as requisites for the enlightened critic.

case for inaction as the more difficult and valuable path: “More difficult to do a thing than to talk about it? Not at all. That is a gross popular error,” says Gilbert, “Men are the slaves of words” (“The Critic as Artist,” *Complete Works* 1121). Gilbert’s assertion that it is, in fact, more difficult to talk about a thing than to do it privileges Pater’s passive, receptive, language-rich temperament, as well as the medium (literature) and genre (criticism) of Wilde’s own body of work. In making criticism the father of artistic advancement, Wilde notes that, like art, criticism works with materials and puts them into a form that is original, instructive and delightful; for Wilde, criticism is a “creation within a creation.” Not only does this process advance the individual arts, it also consolidates them. “By transforming each art into literature, [the critic] solves once and for all the problem of Art’s unity,” says Gilbert.³²

Referring to his generation as “the elect,” an age called to do nothing, Gilbert praises the life of quiescent contemplation in words borrowed from Pater: “We live in an age that has surpassed *la citta divina*. Access to true paradise and immortality through beauty – as Mr. Pater suggests somewhere who would trade the curve of a single rose leaf for the formless intangible Being which Plato rates so high?” (“The Critic as Artist,” *Complete Works* 1136-7). Wilde also seeks to demonstrate that language is often as invulnerable to the effects of time as other art objects are (sometimes more so), and that language is therefore essential to artistic legacy. In an extended meditation on art “not as expressive but as impressive purely,” he quotes Pater’s La Gioconda passage in *The Renaissance*. Wilde presents this lengthy quotation to demonstrate that Pater’s ekphrasis has become part of La Gioconda’s permanent heritage and has enriched the

³² “Ibid, p. 1129. In the paragraph leading up to this observation about art’s unity, Gilbert gives a nod to Walter Pater’s familiar endorsement of music as an art form because it “can never reveal its ultimate secret.” Similarly, the critic “reproduces the work that he criticizes in a mode that is never imitative.”

painting by making it “more wonderful than it really is, and reveal[ing] to us a secret of which, in truth, it knows nothing” (1126).

In “The Critic as Artist,” we see Wilde craft an aesthetic philosophy that also colors the approach to the portrait that he uses in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” The radical subjectivity that Wilde advocates in “The Critic as Artist” renders artistic expression (and, by extension, criticism) a form of self-portraiture. The landscapes that Corot painted were “but a mood of his own mind,” and the great figures of Greek or English drama were “simply the poets themselves.” The more significant the work, according to Wilde, the more the artist has placed himself in its creation. While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may have been based on people from the streets of London, “Hamlet came out of his soul, and Romeo out of his passion,” because, “the more objective a creation appears to be, the more subjective it really is.” Indeed, an artist’s work is so full of the artist that it becomes autobiography; Shakespeare’s plays reveal their author to us precisely because in them he proposes not to talk about himself. Gilbert’s passionate defense of biographical criticism resembles that of the narrator in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” even though Gilbert claims to find the plays more revealing: “His plays reveal him to us absolutely, and show us his true nature and temperament far more completely than do those strange and exquisite sonnets, even, in which he bares to crystal eyes the secret closet of his heart.” In both “The Critic as Artist” and “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” the response to beauty is where essential truth is believed to reside.

Wilde’s final section of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” illustrates the process of aesthetic criticism, of the critic-as-artist, in dramatic terms. The section’s opening vignette describes a young Elizabethan watching a production of *Love’s Labours Lost*, and the artifice of the theater is contrasted with the heightened realism of the young man’s experience. “He was conscious

that everything was ‘feigned’, that nothing came ‘from the heart,’” but “behind the bright and quickly changing pageant of the stage, he saw himself as one sees one’s image in a fantastic glass.” The reason is that “it is Art, and Art only, that reveals us to ourselves” (342-3). This scene leads to the narrator’s reflection on his immersion, via scholarship and criticism, into the world of the Elizabethan stage in his quest to find Mr. W. H. “Yes: I had lived it all,” he muses as he “remembers” his experience of the sights and sounds of Shakespeare’s stage. The Dark Lady had been his rival, and he now remembers Mr. W. H. not as his scholarly subject, but as his friend. The narrator’s experience has also added something to Shakespeare’s plays and poems, and those works have correspondingly become part of his autobiography. “The soul had a life of its own,” he concludes, “and the brain is its own sphere of action. . . . the soul, the secret soul, was the only reality” (344).

In “Pen, Pencil and Poison” we see the outlines of imaginary portraiture, which Wilde applies also to “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in its vivid and dangerous portrait imagery, resembles “The Portrait of Mr. W. H” in its approach to beauty and male friendship, while the aesthetic criticism of “The Critic as Artist” also animates Wilde’s search for Shakespeare’s muse. Behind all four of these major works that Wilde was shaping in the critical years of 1888-1890, we also see the face and hear the voice of Walter Pater.

Chapter Three

Picturing Mr. W.H.

“The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” is a sort of crucible in which Wilde experiments with images and ideas central to his other great works of the late 1880s, and to his concept of the Renaissance. Like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” uses the image of the portrait to interrogate ideas about art and authenticity. These interrogations, placed in a work whose shape is taken from Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits* and thus linked to “Pen, Pencil and Poison,” lead to conclusions that suggest the aesthetic criticism that Wilde espouses in “The Critic as Artist.” The result is a many-layered work of prose whose portrait imagery and imaginary portrait structure proclaim the subjective experience of beauty as truth.

Both the narrator of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” and Oscar Wilde himself, approach portraits with some ambivalence. The portrait (spurious though it may be) at the center of the story is invoked as evidence; because its features are consistent with imagery in Shakespeare’s Sonnets, and because it is beautiful, it must therefore be “true.” Elsewhere, the story presents challenges to the received notion of portraiture as a strictly mimetic form. In this way, the portrait shapes the text as the narrator, inspired by the beauty and mystique of a forged painting of Willie Hughes, creates a Paterian hybrid of fiction and history to validate the false portrait’s credentials. Portraits can function both as works of art and as historic objects, which can make a portrait’s relationship to tangible facts difficult to ascertain. Wilde similarly blurs the boundary between fiction and history in his creation of the “Portrait of Mr. W. H.” The work is famously

difficult to classify definitively as either fiction or criticism. Wilde's own authorial history with the text offers little guidance as to how he himself classified it, having published it as a work of fiction in 1889, only to ask William Blackwood in a letter dated 7 July 1889, "Will you compromise and bring it out in a special volume of essays and studies by me?"³³

Wilde also uses the portrait as a metaphor for ideas that he shared with Pater, including a shared belief in the authority of art and beauty, and a reverence for subjective experience as essential truth. Closely related to these values are Pater and Wilde's attraction to the idea of the possibility of an ideal self. The image of the painted likeness, and the ekphrasis through which verbal portraiture takes shape, is at work in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," as well as Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*. This image and theme, rooted in Pater's legacy to Wilde, underscore Wilde's own interest in the process of personality creation. From this vantage point, the portrait becomes a symbol of the perfectibility of personal image. Inspired by Pater's aestheticism, Wilde liberates the portrait from obligation to capture external likeness. Instead, the portrait as employed by Wilde and Pater is free to externalize internal truths. This interest in identity and personality in portraiture is confirmed in Wilde's 1887 review of *Imaginary Portraits*, which toward the end voices a desire for more personality on the part of the author: "Asceticism is the keynote of Mr. Pater's prose;" says Wilde, "At times it is almost too severe in its self-control and makes us long for a little more freedom."³⁴

³³ *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis, Eds. New York: Henry Holt, 2000, p. 405. Earlier in this brief letter, Wilde states that his story would not be appropriate for republishing in *Stories from Maga* because it is "too literary." He also suggests that the frontispiece of the stand-alone volume he is proposing could feature an etching of the fictitious portrait of Mr. W. H.

³⁴ Wilde, Oscar. "Mr. Pater's Imaginary Portraits." *Pall Mall Gazette*, June 11, 1887. <http://www.readbookonline.net/read/9874/24027/>. After noting that Pater's portraits are more "imaginative" than "imaginary," Wilde here goes on here to describe the pieces as "philosophic studies in which the philosophy is tempered by personality, and the thought shown under varying conditions of mood and manner, the very permanence of each principle gaining something through the change and colour of the life through which it finds expression."

Certain attributes of the forged Elizabethan portrait in Wilde's story link it to English miniature portraiture. The *Grove Dictionary of Art* places independent miniature or "limning," evolving from manuscript decoration, around 1520, about 75 years before Mr. W. H. The *Grove Dictionary* goes on to identify a locket-portrait gift to Henry VIII from Marguerite, Duchesse d'Alencon (sister of Francis I) in 1526 as the specific event that separated the miniature from the manuscript (638-9). The intimate relationship between audience and miniature portrait is also thematically consistent with "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." and the way that the small portrait becomes a fetish for the story's three main characters. The portrait miniature's roots in early books link it to the theme of literary history and obsession found in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." The miniature portrait is also a presence in the work of Shakespeare, as Christopher Lloyd and Vanessa Remington point out. In *Twelfth Night* (Act III, Scene IV), Olivia says to Viola, "Here, wear this jewel for me, 'tis my picture -- / Refuse it not, it hath no tongue to vex you." Hamlet tells Gertrude to compare images of his father and step-father Claudius: "Look here upon this picture, and on this, / The counterfeit presentiment of two brothers" (Act III, Scene IV). A miniature portrait of Portia also figures in the final casket scene in *The Merchant of Venice* (Act III, Scene II). (Lloyd and Remington 39). By the eighteenth century, miniatures were often displayed in groups on the walls. This practice continued into the nineteenth century as miniatures "increased in size in an attempt to repel the influence of the formal photograph" (Lloyd and Remington 39-41).

The relationship between the portrait in the story and the miniature tradition is solidified by the mention of two specific artists. Small, often ornamented with metal and jewels, and frequently round or oval in format, the portrait miniature, according to Coombs, was perfected by sixteenth-century painter Francois Clouet (7-8). The narrator in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H."

remarks that, “In manner, and especially in the treatment of the hands, the picture reminded one of Francois Clouet’s later work (303). Horst Schroeder presents evidence that Wilde was thinking about miniature portraits when he was writing “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” but that the Clouet Wilde intended was actually Jean Clouet (c. 1485-1591), father of Francois Clouet (c. 1520). The narrator specifies that the portrait of Mr. W. H. was painted with “that hard severity of touch – so different from the facile grace of the Italians – which even at the Court of France the great Flemish master never completely lost.” Citing the mid-nineteenth century scholarship of the Comte de Laborde, Schroeder notes Jean Clouet’s distinct separation from the prevailing Italian taste of his era and points out that Wilde, too, approves of the portrait’s more Flemish character (Schroeder *Composition, Publication and Reception*, 9-10). This, along with Schroeder’s interpretation of Wilde’s reference to “Ouvry” as a slip for miniaturist “one P. Oudry” whose work appeared in an 1888-9 exhibition in London of works from the Royal House of Stuart, indicates that the forgery Wilde describes was a forgery with miniature characteristics (Schroeder *Composition, Publication and Reception*, 11).

Wilde describes Mr. W. H.’s portrait as a small panel picture in an old and somewhat tarnished Elizabethan frame. Its subject is not a bust but a full-length portrait of a young man “in late sixteenth-century costume.”³⁵ The youth, roughly seventeen years old and extraordinarily beautiful, stands by a table, with his right hand resting on an open book whose page reads, “To the onlie begetter of these Insuing Sonnets. . . .”³⁶ The origin story that Cyril Graham constructs for the portrait of Mr. W. H. is a little too-perfect in its details. When he presented the small

³⁵ Wilde, Oscar. “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. New York: Harper Collins, 2003. P 302. In referring to the subject’s clothing as “costume,” instead of “attire” or “dress,” it is possible that Wilde is planting a clue to the portrait’s untrue provenance.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 303. See also *Portraiture* by Shearer West’s (NY: Oxford University Press, 2004) for an overview of the use of mottos, emblems, and other clues to the character of the sitter. These devices, called *imprese*, “act as footnotes to the momentary image.” P. 51.

picture to Erskine, Cyril said that he had found it by chance, nailed to the side of an old chest that he bought at a farmhouse in Warwickshire – a provenance story that resembles the casket and portrait episode in *The Merchant of Venice*. The initials “WH,” according to Cyril, were inscribed on the front of the chest. Chance also plays a role in the discovery of Cyril’s forgery when Erskine finds a nearly exact duplicate of the image of Mr. W. H. in a print shop in Holborn. “There was no doubt whatever about it. It was almost a facsimile, the only difference being that the two masks of Tragedy and Comedy were not suspended from the marble table as they are in the picture but were lying on the floor at the young man’s feet” (311). The more prominent position of the theatrical masks is of interest, as it supports a concept about portraiture that Wilde experiments with in the story: the idea that the actor’s craft, at its highest level, results in a kind of living portrait that embodies the playwright’s vision on the stage. In the preparatory drawing, the masks lay at the youth’s feet and result in a composition that privileges the human subject. In the painting, however, the masks are mounted on a pedestal, a position that elevates the masks (and the actor’s avocation) closer to the compositional plane of Mr. W. H.

Wilde was engaged with the aesthetics of contemporary portraiture when he was writing and revising “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” According to Elizabeth Prettejohn, the privileging of beauty over factual truth in late nineteenth-century painting was anticipated by Sir Sidney Colvin in 1867 article on “the new tendencies in painting.” Colvin singles out nine artists for approval, among them Whistler, Moore and Leighton, whose project he identifies “as concerned with ‘beauty without realism’” (Prettejohn, *Beauty and Art* 139-143). Prettejohn identifies Swinburne as the source of the “Art for Art’s sake” value that is associated with Walter Pater’s aestheticism (124), and explains in “Aesthetic Value and the Professionalization of Victorian Art

Criticism 1837–78” that the end of the nineteenth century was the beneficiary of a new abundance and accessibility of art criticism thanks to the professionalization of the role of the art critic in the pages of popular magazines. She states that the professionalization of art criticism was one source of the notion of the aesthetic’s life of contemplation as described in the work of Pater and Wilde (Prettejohn “Aesthetic Value” 74-88).

In “Oscar Wilde and the Subject of Portraiture,” Nicholas Frankel presents the idea that in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” Wilde is “exposing the factual and historical pretensions of portraiture to the light.” The portrait is above all a beautiful object, independent of its faulty provenance. Its true test, according to Frankel, “consists in how deeply it is lived, felt, or experienced” in the consciousness of the viewer (9). Frankel also identifies two portraits of Wilde that connect the compelling beauty of the portrait to the themes of illicit homosexuality that characterize “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Whistler disciple R. G. Harper Pennington painted an oil portrait of Wilde in 1884 and presented it as a wedding gift, but Wilde came to associate it with his homosexuality, treating it as a shameful personal fetish, a “social incubus” that could never be publically exhibited (4). In 1895, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec completed a watercolor of Wilde, a painting whose dignity subtly underscores the ravages of the eleven years between it and Pennington’s portrait. Notably, the Wilde of the 1895 portrait has a face deemed mask-like and vaguely feminine by Frankel, as well as Theodore Duret (Frankel “The Subject of Portraiture” 16). These two portraits of Wilde and their connection to his private life reinforce the idea of the beautiful picture of Shakespeare’s young muse as a coded reference to homosexuality and aestheticism.

“The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” also addresses the work of the actor as a kind of portraiture. “All art [is] to a certain degree a mode of acting, an attempt to realise one’s own personality on

some imaginative plane out of the reach of trammeling accidents and limitations of real life,” says Wilde.³⁷ As the narrator becomes possessed by the Willie Hughes theory, he reflects on portions of Shakespeare’s Sonnets that portray the actor as the “face” of the playwright’s art. He sees the early cycle of the Sonnets as Shakespeare’s invitation to Willie Hughes to “go upon the stage and become a player.” In the narrator’s view, Shakespeare is dependent on the actor to “people with forms of your own image the imaginary world of the stage.” The narrator’s remarks and quotations from Shakespeare are replete with references to the portrait-like attributes of the actor. “Be not afraid to surrender your personality,” says the narrator, “to give your ‘semblance to some other’: / ’To give away yourself keeps yourself still, / And you must live, drawn by your own sweet skill.” He quotes from Sonnet 11, which further employs the imagery of the visual arts to describe the actor as portrait: “Nature -/ ‘Carved thee for her seal, and meant thereby, / Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die.’” Biological reproduction gives way to performance in Wilde’s reading of the Sonnets.

In order to support the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare’s Sonnets, the narrator famously cherry-picks portions of quotations throughout “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” and the snippets he presents often depict the actor as a portrait or copy. “All that is necessary is to ‘copy what in you is writ’; to place you on the stage as you are in actual life,” says the narrator, incorporating a quote from Sonnet 84. The actor-as portrait lives in the playwright’s mind, as well as on the stage. “For your beauty seems to belong to all ages and to all lands. Your shade come to visit me at night, but I want to look upon your ‘shadow’ in the living day, I want to see

³⁷ “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” *Complete Works*, p. 302. See also Jerusha McCormack’s “Wilde’s Fiction(s)” in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997.). McCormack suggests that for Wilde, the process of creating “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” was also influenced by the process of performance. He quotes Pearson’s biography of Oscar Wilde, which describes Wilde’s process of “turning an idea into an anecdote, the anecdote into a story, embroidering as he went along, and the freer play he gave to his imagination the deeper conviction he imparted to others and the more inclined was he to believe the story itself.” Pp. 107-8

you upon the stage,” says the narrator in terms that capture his own feelings, as well as those he ascribes to Shakespeare (316-8)

Shearer West writes that biography and portraiture have somewhat parallel development that follows a similarly outside-in trajectory. Early biography, like early portraiture, remains confined to important subjects – the nobility, high-ranking clergy, and political leaders. Both forms stress the higher worth of their subjects through carefully selected external revelations. In the later nineteenth century, biography started to explore more intimate aspect of the subject’s life and personality was emphasized. In the same period, portraits undergo a similar transformation, “from representation of generic traits to a greater probing of character.”³⁸ While biography and portrait are certainly related in their goals and processes, West sees them as having distinct and complementary strengths. “A portrait can take on only the most basic elements of a biography, while a biography cannot convey the presence of the individual with such immediacy and evocative power” (52). “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.,” in its exploration of both visual portrait and literary biography, also uses these two complementary processes to present a view of a historic personage.

In the narrator’s view, Shakespeare’s actor was not the playwright’s passive artistic medium, but “a deliberate and self-conscious fellow worker who gave form and substance to a poet’s fancy, and brought into Drama the elements of a noble realism.” This elevation of the actor’s art was, according to Wilde’s narrator, a characteristic that distinguished Romantic drama from its Classical roots, and one of Shakespeare’s key innovations in theatre. It was in this

³⁸ Shearer West 51-2; West also observes that early biographies could point out the faults of a subject, as in the case of Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* and Aubrey’s *Brief Lives*.

context of theatre's development that Shakespeare, according to Wilde, was able "to find Richard Burbage and to fashion Willie Hughes."³⁹

Central to the unique role of the actor are questions of audience that also come into play in the narrator's analysis, and the place of the audience forms another link between the actor and the visual portrait. A painted portrait typically positions a human representation in an elevated position, for viewing and contemplation by spectators. The actor similarly exists on the stage to be witnessed by others: "Here as elsewhere Shakespeare promised Willie Hughes immortality in a form that appealed to men's eyes – that is to say, in a spectacular form, in a play that is to be looked at." Like a painting, Willie Hughes is a depiction that inspires passion in others, but does not return it. The narrator demonstrates this with evidence from Sonnet 94, saying that Willie Hughes was one of those "That do not do the thing they most do show, / Who, moving others, are themselves as stone." The narrator adds that Willie Hughes "could act love, but could not feel it, could mimic passion without realising it." He follows this immediately with a quotation from Sonnet 93 that further consolidates Willie Hughes' gift for moving audiences while remaining impassive himself: "heaven in thy creation did decree / That in thy face sweet love should ever dwell; Whate'er thy thoughts, or thy heart's workings be, / Thy looks should nothing thence, but sweetness tell" (321-2). Toward the end, the narrator speculates on the circumstances of the death of Willie Hughes, believing that he must have died alone in his lodgings, apart from "those who had flocked in such numbers to see him, the 'gazers' whom, as the Sonnets tell us, he had 'led astray'" (341). The narrator's emphasis of Shakespeare's noun⁴⁰ also reinforces Mr. W. H.'s ability to inspire one-sided emotion. The *Oxford English Dictionary*

³⁹ "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." *Complete Works*, p. 322. Note the difference in verb choice ("find" versus "fashion"). History acknowledges the existence of Richard Burbage, but Willie Hughes must be constructed. This hints at Wilde's ambivalence about the historicity of the Willie Hughes theory.

⁴⁰ Shakespeare also refers to the Fair Youth's "gazers" in Sonnets 14 and 61

indicates that “to gaze,” in early use, meant “to look vacantly or curiously about; also, to stare, open one's eyes (with astonishment).”⁴¹ Thus, even Mr. W. H.’s imagined death comprises the attribute that characterized the life the narrator has created for him; namely, the state of being worshiped from afar.

Wilde’s carefully wrought depictions of Willie Hughes, interspersed with Shakespeare’s portrayals, create rich verbal portraits that exist alongside, and in opposition to, the painted portrait at the center of the story. Early in the first section, Erskine recounts how Cyril Graham used Shakespeare’s descriptions to refute Lord Pembroke (as represented in the Wilton portraits) as a possible candidate for the historic Mr. W. H. “[Cyril Graham] laid great stress on the evidence afforded by the Wilton portraits which represent lord Pembroke as a swarthy dark-haired man, while Mr. W. H. was one whose hair was spun like gold, and whose face the meeting-place for the ‘lily-white’ and the ‘deep vermilion in the rose’ being himself ‘fair,’ and ‘red,’ and ‘white and red,’ and of beautiful aspect” (306). Wilde is referring here to two portraits of William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke. Along with his younger brother Philip, William Herbert, they are known today chiefly through their association with Shakespeare’s works. They figure in the dedication to *Mr. William Shakespeare’s Comedies, Histories and Tragedies*, known today as the First Folio: TO THE MOST NOBLE AND INCOMPARABLE PAIRE OF BRETHREN / WILLIAM Earle of Pembroke, &c;. Lord Chamberlaine to the Kings most Excellent Majesty. / AND / PHILIP Earle of Montgomery, & c;. Gentleman of his Majesties” (Brown and Vlieghe 2266). Portraits of William Herbert were painted by Daniel Mijtens (c. 1625) and

⁴¹ OED Online. The earliest usage of “gazer” occurs fifty years before the Sonnets, in Erasmus’ 1548 translation of I. Luke xix. 4 “He [Zacheus] stood a lofte in a tree to see a gazer vpon one man and no mo.”

(posthumously, after Mijtens) by Anthony Van Dyck at Wilton, the brothers' ancestral home (Schroeder *Annotations* 4).

Drawing on descriptive lines from Shakespeare's Sonnets, Wilde's narrator pieces together a verbal portrait to validate the painted forgery that alternately possesses the three main characters of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." As he applies himself to his search for Mr. W. H., the narrator says, "Each poem seemed to corroborate Cyril Graham's theory. I felt as if I had my hand upon Shakespeare's heart and was counting each separate throb and pulse of passion. I thought of the wonderful boy-actor, and saw his face in every line."⁴² Like a painted portrait, Shakespeare's verbal likeness captures Mr. W. H. in the full flower of youthful beauty and immortalizes him in that exquisite state. The Mr. W. H. seen in Shakespeare's Sonnets will long outlive the poems' antecedent, and the audience. Poetry's longevity is asserted in Sonnet 81: "When you entombed in men's eyes shall lie, / Your monument shall be my gentle verse, / Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read, / And tongues to be your being shall rehearse, / When all the breathers of this world are dead."⁴³

The relative merits of various artistic media are a theme in this story: "The sculptor must surrender colour, and the painter fullness of form. The epos changes acts into words and music changes words into tones."⁴⁴ In his survey of media, Wilde suggests that the verbal portrait is more durable than other artistic representations. A theatrical performance exists in the moment

⁴² "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." *Complete Works*, p. 313. The pun on the word "line" supports the linkage of the verbal portrait with the visual tradition.

⁴³ "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." *Complete Works*, p. 321. It is worth noting that on pp 334-5, and throughout Section 4, Wilde also presents brief verbal portraits of "this black-browed, olive skinned woman, with her amorous mouth 'that Love's own hand did make,' her 'cruel eye,' and her 'foul pride' who figures in Shakespeare's Sonnets 127-154.

⁴⁴ "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." *Complete Works*, p. 324. This idea is also present in Pater's chapter on Luca Della Robbia in *The Renaissance*. He comments on the special limitations of sculpture; these material limitations result in heavy shadows, absence of color, and "individuality of expression pushed caricature." Pp. 65-6

and thus is inherently evanescent, and the physical materials of visual art are corruptible. A line from *Romeo and Juliet*, however, confirms that words are the artistic medium that offers the greatest longevity: “Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme” (319). Some of these passages are self-conscious, openly referring to the task of capturing a great physical beauty in words. The narrator invokes these themes in Sonnet 17: “If I could write the beauty of your eyes, / And in fresh numbers number all your graces, / The age to come would say, ‘The poet lies; / Such heavenly touches ne’er touched earthly faces”” (318). Like the media of the visual arts, human beings are also vulnerable to the physical ravages of time. At the end of Section 3, he meditates on time’s ever-present threat to youth and beauty, and articulates his intention to overcome it. “O carve not with thy hours my Love’s fair brow / Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen; / Him in thy course untainted do allow / For beauty’s pattern to succeeding men” (333). In these lines from Sonnet 19, we see the narrator’s understanding of Shakespeare’s challenge to the ravages of time. These self-conscious declarations of the power and longevity of poetry add intertextuality and self-consciousness to the narrative of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” as well. The story’s subtle elevation of poetry over other forms of art is presented in the context of Shakespeare’s sonnets and plays, but Wilde seems to be applying it also to himself in this story. Given Wilde’s avocation as a writer, his early work in poetry, and his mother’s status as a noted poet, it is unsurprising that poetry is presented here as the superior form of art: “But the poet is the supreme artist, for he is the master of colour and of form, and the real musician besides, and is lord over all life and all arts, and so to the poet beyond all others are these mysteries known,” declared Wilde in his 1885 review “Mr. Whistler’s Ten O’Clock” (*Complete Works* 949).

Tasked with capturing an individual's true likeness, while also idealizing it, portraiture is a genre rooted in themes of authenticity and artifice. Wilde explores these ideas in the story's meditations on the nature of art. He returns to a conclusion that he has reached in his essays of the period: that art is more satisfying when it reveals its artistic essence, when the audience knows that it is viewing art and not life. "Those arts are happiest that employ a material remote from reality," says the narrator following his survey of the strengths and weaknesses of artistic media. "And there is a danger in the absolute identity of medium and matter, the danger of ignoble realism and unimaginative imitation" (324). Wilde hints at the relationship between art and artifice at the beginning of the story, in the narrator's statement that prompts Erskine to introduce the story of Cyril's portrait of Mr. W. H. "I know we had a long discussion about Macpherson, Ireland and Chatterton, and that with regard to the last I insisted that his so-called forgeries were merely the result of an artistic desire for perfect representation."⁴⁵

Wilde's defense of Chatterton here is unsurprising, given his long interest in the literary forger whose status as a youthful prodigy, and whose tragic death at age seventeen, resemble elements of the stories of Cyril Graham and Mr. W. H. In a notebook of his reflections on Chatterton, Wilde also experiments with the idea that all art carries with it an undercurrent of forgery. "Nature of his genius --- was he mere forger with literary powers or a great artist? The [sic] latter is the right view," says Wilde in the Chatterton notebook. "Chatterton may not have had the moral conscience which is Truth to Fact – but he had the artistic conscience which is truth to Beauty. He had the artists [sic] yearning to represent and if perfect representation

⁴⁵ "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." *Complete Works*, p 302. See also Schroeder's *Annotations*, p. 3. Schroeder explains that, of these three eighteenth century literary forgers, Chatterton and his forgeries of medieval manuscripts exercised considerable influence on English literature. Chatterton (1752-70) was also a favorite subject of Wilde, who lectured twice on Wordsworth's "Marvelous Boy" (Wordsworth's term for Chatterton) and supported an unsuccessful effort to place a monument to Chatterton in the poet's school in Bristol.

seemed to him to demand forgery He must needs forge” (Bristow and Mitchell 403). In “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” Wilde echoes this passage from the Chatterton notebook in simpler terms: “to censure an artist for forgery was to confuse an ethical with an aesthetical problem” (302). In this statement, Wilde is telling us how to approach the forged portrait that will be introduced a few sentences later.

The defense of forgery is closely aligned with Wilde’s ideas about art as a mode of acting, and the performative nature of art is also discussed in Wilde’s Chatterton notebook. Wilde records remarks to this effect from poet and literary critic Theodore Watts (1832 – 1914), “All great artists have personality as well as perfection in their manner.” In *Oscar Wilde’s Chatterton*, Bristow and Mitchell point out that Wilde reframes Watts’ ideas to develop “an explicit theory of performance – ‘a mode of acting’ – with which to understand the shaping, if not staging, of a beautiful forged identity” (252). Issues of beauty, forgery and performance come together first in the figure of Cyril Graham, a beautiful young man with an unusual gift for theatrical performance, and the impetus behind the creation of the false portrait. Cyril’s signature characteristic is his passion for appearance and adornment. We are told that he loved to dress up and recite Shakespeare at Eton and at Trinity, and that he “always set an absurdly high value on personal appearance, and once read a paper before our Debating Society to prove that it was better to be good-looking than to be good.”⁴⁶ Cyril’s temperament and theatrical experience at school further set up an opposition between beauty and authenticity in which beauty is the victor. Here, questions of authenticity and performance also extend to gender, and we learn that Cyril was frequently cast for girls’ parts – and that he played them better than

⁴⁶ “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” *Complete Works*, p. 304. See also Lord Henry’s statement in Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “I admit that I think it is better to be beautiful than to be good. But on the other hand, no one is more ready than I am to acknowledge that it is better to be good than to be ugly.”

women did. Cyril Graham, presented as a sort of doppelganger to Willie Hughes, is described along similar lines as “effeminate” and as “very languid in his manner and not a little vain of his good looks.” Willie Hughes’ association with the feminine is underscored by the female roles played by Hughes (Viola, Imogen, Rosalind, Juliet), and stipulates that Shakespeare created these roles for him (307-8).

The narrator praises the plastic nature of gender as another key creative component in the development of Elizabethan drama, and another instance of the importance of artifice in the creation of art: “Of all the motives of dramatic curiosity used by our great playwrights, there is none more subtle or more fascinating than the ambiguity of the sexes” (330). The narrator indicates that, in interrogating the gender of character roles on stage, Shakespeare was building on ideas introduced by sixteenth-century playwright John Lyly. The result was a complex gender-crossing pattern in both Lyly and Shakespeare of boy actors playing the roles of young women whose characters are compelled by events in the plays to don male clothing and impersonate men. The story presents gender ambiguity not as a challenge for the Elizabethan stage to overcome, but as an aesthetic strength. On the Elizabethan stage, the association of boy actors with female roles is presumed. Wilde complicates the role of gender (and the gender of roles), however, by stressing that boys played women better than women on Elizabethan stage. “To say that only a woman can portray the passions of a woman, and that therefore no boy can play Rosalind,” says Wilde’s narrator, is to “assign to the mere accident of sex what properly belongs to imaginative insight and creative energy.” He tells us that the practice of male actors playing female roles obliged the Elizabethan audience to engage their “imaginative capacities,” to avoid over-associating the actor with the role he was playing and, ultimately, to train their focus on the essence of the role itself. The narrator proposes to confirm this by recounting

historical incidents when female performers played at St. Giles, Cripplegate and at Blackfriars, only to be “hissed, hooted, and pippin-pelted from the stage (332).

The artifice that is part and parcel of art in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” transforms the audience, as well. The story’s final section explores idea that audience experience of art is something that the audience “lives,” and, through this lens, audience experience of art becomes a form of self-portrait. A reference to Robert Tofte’s 1598 reminiscence about viewing *Love’s Labor Lost* opens Section 5.⁴⁷ Tofte reflects on the unreality of the performance that he is watching, a spectacle in which “everything was ‘feigned’” and which struck him as a merely “a show in jest,” when suddenly Tofte experiences a turn and the performance becomes real to him. “The moods of his own soul seemed to have taken shape and substance, and to be moving before him. . . . The very words that came to the actors’ lips were wrung out of his pain.” Here, Wilde presents the idea of audience response as more “real” than the work of art that elicits it, a concept that he also addresses in “The Critic as Artist.” The artifice that makes up stage performance is realized by the viewer into something authentic. “It is Art and Art only that reveals us to ourselves,” concludes the narrator at the end of his summary of Tofte’s experience. Memories of works of art he has witnessed (and therefore “lived”) come back to him here as a montage of verbal portraits; in the inner world of the viewer, these are not memories of performances, but of experiences – experiences so real that they become part of the audience’s autobiography: “Each new form of knowledge seems to me a mode of reminiscence” (345).

The end of the story grounds its events in the realm of evidence versus artifice – and artifice as evidence. After having been possessed by the portrait and the theory of Willie

⁴⁷ “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” Pp. 342-3; See also Schroeder’s *Annotations* p. 63.

Hughes, the narrator emerges from it as if waking up from a dream. “Had I been merely charmed by the beauty of the forged portrait, charmed by that Shelley-like face into faith and credence?” As the now-skeptical narrator begins to reexamine the Mr. W. H. theory, he finds that his position on the matter has again changed places with Erskine’s. He counters Erskine’s reignited belief, saying “There is no evidence at all. . . The only evidence for the existence of Willie Hughes is that picture in front of you, and that picture is a forgery” (346). But like the artifice that makes up the surface of other forms of art, the forged portrait has become something real, the undeniable center of a chapter in Erskine’s and the narrator’s lives. Although they never quite manage to believe in it completely at exactly the same time, the portrait of Willie Hughes and the story that it represents have passed into the realm of autobiography (as did the Tofte’s emotions at the performance of *Love’s Labor Lost*). This transformation into the real was hinted at in its first introduction in the story, when Erskine calls the picture “the only legacy I have ever received in my life.” A moment of confusion causes the narrator to conclude erroneously that Erskine, like Cyril, committed suicide under the weight of that legacy; he soon learns that Erskine died of consumption, apparently unrelated to the forged painting.⁴⁸ The narrator may be freed for the moment from the all-encompassing belief in Willie Hughes, but he is left with a new, and somewhat troubling, understanding about art and artifice. “Was Hugo right: Is affectation the only thing that accompanies a man up the steps of the scaffold?” he asks as he ponders the circumstances of Erskine’s death and the emotional state that preceded it. “No man dies for what he knows to be true. Men die for what they want to be true, for what some terror in

⁴⁸ See also Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor*, in which consumption is analyzed as the mode of death of those who “feel too much” throughout literature.

their hearts tells them is not true.” Again, it is artifice, and the audience’s corresponding suspension of disbelief that form the heart of what men live – and die – for.

But the painting’s legacy is strangely invulnerable and eternal. In the story’s final moments, Erskine’s mother presents the portrait to the narrator, articulating her son’s dying wish that it be given to him. We leave the world of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” in a scene over which the “curious work of art”⁴⁹ assumes a watched, and watchful, position in the narrator’s quarters. Its gaze contains the power of art’s artifice, and its inexhaustible life within the viewer. “Sometimes, when I look at it, I think there is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” says the narrator at the story’s inconclusive conclusion. Whether painting, story or performance, the legacy of the work of art is the reality created within the person who receives it. Stage, story and portrait are unified in their use of constructed identity, and in their performative essence. These artistic representations, says “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” also begin with aesthetic sleight-of-hand. Works of art do not end so much as shift shape and live on in a more personal form within the audience’s consciousness.

A work of art that lives in subjective majesty within the viewer’s consciousness is an idea also central to Pater’s oeuvre. “A Child in the House,” *Imaginary Portraits*’ brief introductory reminiscence, introduces themes of importance to the entire book, including aesthetics of domestic spaces and their role in early identity formation; the death of childhood; and breaking the boundary between the external world and inner spaces. Elements of this introductory vignette form a portrait of the story’s central figure (and Pater-proxy) Florian Deleal, whose name is suggestive of “flowering” and of Florence, the cradle of Pater’s beloved Renaissance.

⁴⁹ Note that it is no longer called a “portrait,” encompassing as it does so many other forms of artistic expression.

Like “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.”, Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits* also similarly positions visual portraiture within a significant turning point in history and culture. “A Prince of Court Painters,” takes place in the early eighteenth century, as artist Antoine Watteau’s brief career was bringing color and movement back to painting and helping establish the Rococo as successor to the Baroque. “Denys L’Auxerrois” uses imagery from the myth of Dionysus to place the reader in the world of the medieval cathedral-builders. Wilde’s favorite piece in the book, “Sebastian van Storck,” addresses seventeenth-century Dutch society and painting, and the philosophy of Spinoza. The book’s final piece, “Duke Carl of Rosenmold,” illuminates the German Renaissance: “Carl strives to awaken pre-Romantic Germany from cultural backwardness by acting as a northern Apollo who brings the light of southern art to his land.”⁵⁰ Like the use of a falsified likeness of Willie Hughes during a key moment in the development of world theatre in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.”, each of *Imaginary Portraits*’ stories uses a visual portrait as the entry point into a crucial moment in the development of art and ideas.

Imaginary Portraits is also linked with “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” in the use of an imagined portrait to confirm a desired “truth.” A strong current of wish-fulfillment moves through “A Prince of Court Painters” as it recounts the story of Watteau and aligns Walter Pater’s historic ancestor, the painter Jean-Baptiste Pater, to Watteau’s legacy. The story is told in imagined diary entries by the daughter of a colleague of Watteau’s father;⁵¹ the story’s documentary overtone gives “A Prince of Court Painters” a kind of intertextuality that resembles the interplay of references and scholarly quotations seen throughout “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” The narrative that the diary entries construct in part tells the story the creation of a painted

⁵⁰ Bizzotto, Elisa. “The Legend of the Returning Gods in Pater and Wilde” The Oscholars Library.

⁵¹ Lene Ostermark Johansen identifies her as Marguerite-Marie Pater. Introduction, *Imaginary Portraits*, p. 32

portrait of the diarist, begun by Antoine Watteau and left unfinished when he leaves the workshop in Valenciennes to seek artistic growth in Paris. The task of finishing the portrait is then given to Jean-Baptiste Pater, the speaker's brother who had been Antoine Watteau's artistic colleague/protégé for a time, but Jean-Baptiste's plodding, workmanlike artistic methods also prevent the work's completion. The different work processes of Antoine Watteau and Jean-Baptiste Pater illustrate the contrast between an artist and a craftsman. Of artisan-like Jean-Baptiste, the narrator says, "It is pleasanter for him to sketch and plan than to paint and finish." By contrast, Watteau is portrayed as a confident and spontaneous creative presence who "will hardly make any preparations for his work at all, or even clean his palette, in the dead-set he makes at improvisation." The cause, and effect, of that approach is "the petulant, sparkling French temper of this new era, into which he has thrown himself" (38-9). Inevitably, the differences in philosophy and methods between the two young artists causes a rift in their friendship. The final diary entries build toward Jean-Baptiste Pater's reconciliation with Watteau. Walter Pater places his ancestor in a central position in Watteau's final days; he is "occupied with cares of all sorts at the bedside of the sufferer" and ultimately will be "heir to his unfinished work" when it becomes clear that Watteau will not live much longer. In these final weeks, Jean-Baptiste is also redeemed artistically. We are told that Watteau is now eager to "give his old disciple what remains of himself, and the last secrets of his genius" (42). This artistic wish-fulfilment, within a portrait-centered fiction/nonfiction hybrid forms a link between "A Prince of Court Painters" and "The Portrait of Mr. W. H."

Preservation of a person's image at the time of his or her greatest physical beauty is a longstanding purpose and theme in the history of portraiture in the visual arts,⁵² and nowhere in *Imaginary Portraits* is this aspect of portraiture seen more clearly than in "Denys l'Auxerrois." Images of a beguiling young man depicted in ancient tapestries and stained glass provide the frame for "Denys l'Auxerrois," the second story in *Imaginary Portraits*. The narrator encounters these images of the striking young Denys while taking a walk through a medieval village. Like Willie Hughes, Denys exists in the story as a beautiful "object" whose association with ecstatic amusement has theatrical overtones. This quality is revealed when the presence of Denys suddenly enlivens a curious and curiously solemn ball game played on Easter day. "Leaping in among the timid children, he made the thing really a game," says Pater. "The boys played like boys, the men almost like madmen, all with a delightful glee which became contagious" (51). The counterpoint to sybaritic Denys is the "sage monk Hermes, devoted to study and experiment." Like Cyril Graham and Mr. W. H., Hermes raises questions of beauty's effect on the audience. We are told that the sight of Denys made old people feel young again and that Hermes was unable to keep Denys out of his mind "and would fain have discovered the secret of his charm, partly for the friendly purpose of explaining to the lad himself his perhaps more than natural gifts with a view to their profitable cultivation."⁵³ The studious Hermes watches Denys's combination of guilelessness and appetite with concern: "The wise monk Hermes bethought him of certain old readings in which the Wine-god, whose part Denys had played so well, had his contrast, his dark or antipathetic side was like a double creature, of two natures, difficult or impossible to harmonise." The invocation of Dionysus, the ancient god

⁵² Shearer West points out that "Young adult faces often considered ideal for portraiture because at this age, the face is fully formed but has not lost its freshness." P. 137

⁵³ *Imaginary Portraits*, p. 52. The relationship between Hermes and Denys also resembles the presumed rapport between Shakespeare and Willie Hughes, and between Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas.

whose rituals are associated with the development of theatre in the West, links Denys indirectly to the world of the stage and, thus, to “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.”. Denys gives rise to a coarse, vernacular religious festival in which he becomes the object of a “pretended hunting of the unholy creature became a real one.” He dons a rough hair shirt that draws blood from his lip, which prompts the crowd to tear Denys limb from limb and take pieces of Denys’s flesh in the story’s final reframing of the Marsyas myth (59-61). Compare this spectacle with the description of Mr. W.H.’s imagined final weeks on the English stage: “Perhaps on the trampled heath of Marston, or on the bleak hills of Naseby, the dead body of Willie Hughes had been found by some of the rough peasants of the district, his gold hair ‘dabbled with blood,’ and his breast pierced with many wounds” (“The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” *Complete Works* 341). Whether Willie Hughes disappeared due to violence, plague, or transport to Germany when Shakespeare retired from the stage in 1611, it is the portrait that is immortal and powerful, as the Wilde’s story’s last image attests. This invulnerability to human violence and disaster is something that Denys L’Auxerrois shares, and his story ends with a similar testament to the portrait’s quiet longevity: “So the figure in the stained glass explained itself. To me, Denys seemed to have been a real resident at Auxerre. On days of a certain atmosphere, when the trace of the Middle Age comes out, like old marks in the stones in rainy weather, I seemed actually to have seen the tortured figure there – to have met Denys l’Auxerrois in the streets” (62).

“Sebastian van Storck,” Wilde’s favorite piece in *Imaginary Portraits*, and “Duke Carl of Rosenmold” both feature protagonists whose temperaments contrast sharply with the prevailing mood and culture of their settings. Sebastian van Storck first appears as an image from the icy and deep-focus world of Netherlandish painting. Pater scatters the names of historic Dutch Baroque painters throughout this story, and Lene Ostermark-Johansen points out that “No less

than twenty-seven painters make their brief entrances and exits in the course of Pater's text."⁵⁴

As the son of a prosperous burgomeister, Sebastian has always been surrounded by art and beauty. Thomas de Keyser and other imminent artists want to paint Sebastian's portrait, but Sebastian has cultivated a personal philosophy of abstraction, detachment and self-effacement. At an early age, Sebastian came under the influence of a quote by Spinoza, "Whoso loveth God truly must not expect to be loved by Him in return." Inspired by his reading of Spinoza, Sebastian sees life's quest as the creation of a tabula rasa. The rich artistic environment in which he lives is no match for Sebastian's commitment to his anti-art nihilism; so great is Sebastian's austerity that he thus emerges as a sort of "disappearing" portrait that is defined by its very self-effacement. Sebastian is said to have two great loves, the sea and Mademoiselle van Westrheen. In their way, both destroy him. After an initial attraction, he comes to find the young woman "vulgar" and writes her a cruel letter that becomes part of his self-destructive legacy: ". . . in the room whither his mother went to seek him next day, littered with the fragments of the one portrait of him in existence."⁵⁵ The ruined portrait of him foreshadows the story's final episode, when Sebastian goes to a favorite place near the sea – "the place he liked best: a desolate house, amid the sands of the Helder. . . property now of the sea-birds, and almost surrounded by the encroaching tide" (81-2). This final, bleak backdrop forms a setting that mirrors Sebastian's philosophy and character. When Sebastian loses his life in this place, while saving a child during a storm, his act memorializes him almost as a portrait: "His parents were come to seek him, believing him bent on self-destruction, and were almost glad to find him thus." Given the likely alternative, dying "slowly, perhaps painfully, of a disease then coming into the world; disease

⁵⁴ Østermark-Johansen, Lene. "Introduction." *Walter Pater: 'Imaginary Portraits'* P. 32

⁵⁵ *Imaginary Portraits*, p. 75; Ostermark-Johansen also links Sebastian's first name to Saint Sebastian, the Victorian ideal of homoerotic love. "Introduction." *Walter Pater: 'Imaginary Portraits'* p. 34.

begotten by the fogs of that country,” Sebastian’s parents (and Pater’s readers) are given a more palatable picture of the demise of the main character.

Pater’s final imaginary portrait celebrates a character he credits with bringing warmth, light and Romanticism to Germany. Duke Carl of Rosenmold “strives to awaken pre-Romantic Germany from cultural backwardness by acting as a northern Apollo who brings the light of southern art to his land.”⁵⁶ Wilde’s review also praised Carl for his passionate love of art; indeed, Carl’s influences include Durer, Apollo, and “the contemporary French ideal in matters of art and literature,” and he was resolute to correct a northern fault he found in French models – “stump gothic tracery.”⁵⁷ Like Sebastian, Carl is a figure who is incongruous with his time and place. In developing his aesthetic and his personality, he reaches for the Mediterranean and is attracted to the French Rococo and its “imitation of the Renaissance” (89). When Carl goes to the country in pursuit of physical heat, he finds warmth as well as a love of the Middle Ages and the mystic soul of nature. In his artistic tastes, and especially in his emotional development, Carl prefigures the Romantic temperament in German culture and is seen as an early agent of the *Aufklärung*, or German Enlightenment of Goethe. An intricate mock-funeral that Carl stages for himself as a parody pageant at the beginning of the story is mirrored by Carl’s real grief at the death of his father toward the end: “With a real grief in his heart, he hastened now over the ground which lay between him and the bed of death. . . .” (99). A “beggar maid” Carl had seen much earlier and never forgotten was also at his father’s funeral. Carl’s experience of true grief breaks open his consciousness and he can now pursue real love: “His goodwill sunned her wild-

⁵⁶ Bizzotto, Elisa. “The Legend of the Returning Gods in Pater and Wilde” The Oscholars Library

⁵⁷ *Imaginary Portraits*, p. 86. Note that Carl’s qualm with French architecture centers on a Gothic, and thus Northern, characteristic. In her introduction to *Walter Pater’s Imaginary Portraits*, Ostermark-Johansen suggests that Carl’s aversion to all things northern borders on humor.

grown beauty into majesty, into a kind of queenly richness.”⁵⁸ She is described as a female personification of summer, and Carl’s marriage to her symbolizes the union of Germany with the fire of enlightenment.

“The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” is related to *Imaginary Portraits* in its use of the portrait, as well as documentary and visual intertextuality, to build creative hybrids that break the constraints of fiction and nonfiction and explore moments in history that the author finds personally and artistically compelling. In this respect, *Imaginary Portraits* serves a sort of artistic ancestor to Wilde’s story, which at times reads as the author’s experiment with the same elements and processes employed by Pater. *Imaginary Portraits* is the artistic underpinning of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.”, a culmination of the literary exercise in imaginary portraiture that he began in “Pen, Pencil and Poison.” The fiction/nonfiction hybridity, the heavy intertextuality, the undercurrent of wish-fulfillment, and mythic overtones that Wilde encountered in Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits*, and that Wilde experimented with in “Pen, Pencil and Poison” are dazzlingly realized in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” In form, scholarly purpose and artistic achievement, it is Wilde’s homage – and answer to – his teacher, colleague and competitor Walter Pater.

⁵⁸ *Imaginary Portraits*, p. 100; we learn here, too, that her name is Gretchen, a name that she shares with the main female character in Goethe’s *Faust*.

Conclusion

“The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” presents the reader with a rich array of Wilde’s passions in its mix of fiction, scholarship, art criticism and philosophy. Its narrative of a man obsessed with an uncertain story from the Renaissance period displays Wilde’s indisputable admiration for the era. Wilde’s passion for the Renaissance was ignited by his formative encounters with art and literary critic and Oxford don Walter Pater, and the intersection between Pater’s ideas and work and those of Wilde echo through “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” In its pages, Wilde’s narrator searches keenly for the beautiful young man he believes inspired Shakespeare’s Sonnets, and its content and tone indicate that Wilde shared his narrator’s zeal.

Wilde’s yearning for the Renaissance values of humanism, love of intellect and art, and celebration of platonic love reflect an interest in personal history and personality that characterizes Wilde and his era. The availability of intriguing new biographical approaches to Shakespeare’s Sonnets, along with Wilde’s ongoing immersion in his golden text, Pater’s *Renaissance*, make it perhaps inevitable that Wilde would return to his 1889 version of the story to add and refine its story and scholarship. In its biographical reception of Shakespeare’s Sonnets, and its connection of those poems to Shakespeare’s stage and presumed inner life, “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” is a revealing document of the nineteenth-century’s understanding of Shakespeare. Its undeniable debt to Pater’s *Renaissance* was present in its inception and intensified in Wilde’s expansion. In those revisions, we see Wilde’s ongoing relationship with Walter Pater. It is a relationship characterized by Wilde’s reverence for Pater’s Renaissance

vision and impressionistic aesthetic philosophy. It is also a relationship occasionally colored by Wilde's anxiety about Pater's influence.

A multifaceted and expansive work, "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." is connected not only to a broad range of scholarly influences, but also to Wilde's other major works from the last years of the 1880s. It stands to reason that a work of the complexity of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." would not entirely be "cut from whole cloth." Indeed, it is a work that was nurtured by images and insights that Wilde cultivated in other pieces, many of them engendered by Wilde's encounters with Pater. The imaginary portrait structure that characterizes "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." is also seen in its near-contemporary, "Pen, Pencil and Poison." If "Pen, Pencil and Poison" in fact also depicts unflattering aspects of Pater, perhaps its structural connection to Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* gave Wilde a reason to resist and critique the source of so strong an influence over his work. As does "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," *The Picture of Dorian Gray* allows Wilde to revel in the image of the painted portrait and ponder its unique powers. The strong emotional power of artist and muse, and of male friendship, is a proxy for Wilde's homosexuality in the novel, and in his exploration of Shakespeare's relationship with Willie Hughes. "The Critic as Artist" places the drama of the relationship between artist and viewer, as well as the spirit of creative innovation, within the enlightened consciousness of the most sensitive of audiences, the aesthetic critic. Each of these works intersects with the content and themes of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." And each has an artistic or intellectual connection to Walter Pater.

The portrait was of great interest to Wilde, and "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." is filled with varied types of Wildean experiments in portraiture, but with a Paterian pattern underneath. Its visual image of the portrait is inspired by Wilde's interest in artistic portraits from many eras,

and interest whetted in his classes with and readings of Pater. Wilde follows suit as he applies his avocation as a writer to create indelible verbal portraits of Mr. W. H., and the ekphrasis he brings to this task is another link to his artistic and intellectual mentor Walter Pater. In addition to visual and verbal portraiture, “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” presents Wilde’s application of the imaginary portrait genre, with its roiling currents of myth, memory and wish-fulfillment. The originator of the imaginary portrait form is also a current whose force we feel in the pages of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.”

It is clear that, at one time, Wilde intended to reveal his expanded, post-*Blackwood’s* portrait of Mr. W. H. to the world, but that did not occur until much later. Following Wilde’s arrest in April 1895, the manuscript disappeared from his house on Tite Street and was not seen again for many years. Wilde’s son Vyvyan Holland speculates that the manuscript was probably stolen along with many of Wilde’s other possessions during the sale of Wilde’s effects on April 24, 1895. The forced sale of Wilde’s library and other effects took place under the order of the sheriff at the behest of Wilde’s creditors following Wilde’s loss in a libel action against the Marquess of Queensberry. The introduction to the facsimile catalogue of the sale describes it as “one of the worst-conducted dispersals on record,” a spectacle at which “serious purchasers were far outnumbered by a mob of curious and sensation-seeking idlers whom neither the auctioneers nor the representatives of the Court could control.” Eyewitnesses to the sale reported instances of wanton damage, theft, and an atmosphere so chaotic that bidders could not communicate their bids to the rostrum. (*Sale Catalogues of the Libraries of Eminent Persons, Vol 1: Poets and Men of Letters* 371-2).

In an instance of life imitating art, Wilde had authorized artist Charles Ricketts to fashion a small “forgery” of the portrait of Mr. W. H., with the intention to have it serve as

frontispiece for a book-length edition of the expanded text. A small panel portrait of “Mr. W. H.” painted by artist Charles Ricketts was sold for one pound in the 1895 sale and is now lost or destroyed. Ricketts’ recollection of his last meeting with Wilde in 1897 indicates that even then, Wilde was unaware that his manuscript was missing. “I must return to literature, and you must print *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* It is one of my early masterpieces,” said Wilde. “Your picture, I am told, has vanished, but you will design me another wonderful masterpiece.”⁵⁹

Twenty-five years after the disappearance of the manuscript, it mysteriously reappeared in the hands of New York publisher Mitchell Kennerley. From June 17 - 19, 1921, the *New York Times* reported on this surprising piece of literary news daily, with its June 19 headline declaring, “Mitchell Kennerley, Publisher, Declines to Lift the Veil from Its Past” (*New York Times*, June 17-19, 1921). Kennerley, who had been an employee of John Lane’s in London before moving to New York, told the Times on June 20 that, “Wilde gave the manuscript to a literary friend, and asked him to prepare it for the printer, for it was in the house of this friend, who died, that the manuscript was found.” The friend was later identified in a letter from Kennerley as Frederick Chapman, a former office manager of John Lane’s. Kennerley says that he had withheld this information “because it would have embarrassed” Miss Anne Chapman, Frederick’s sister.⁶⁰ The longer version was published in 1921 in book form by Mitchell Kennerley in a one-thousand copy limited edition. That same year, Duckworth published ten copies in England for the purpose of securing British copyright. (Holland xi-xii). The expanded, book-length edition of

⁵⁹ Ricketts, Charles. *Recollections of Oscar Wilde*, 48. Ricketts’ reminiscence indicates that he was circumspect about Mr. W. H., telling Wilde, “Of course I will publish a work of yours, but let it be some other work.”

⁶⁰ Schroeder relates this story and expresses doubts about it, asking, “Are we to assume that, when Wilde’s friends were searching all over London to recover the ‘lost manuscript,’ Chapman should have withheld the manuscript for some private purpose?” *Composition, Publication and Reception*, 36-37.

The Portrait of Mr. W. H. was published for wide distribution in 1958 by Methuen, with an introduction by Vyvyan Holland.

Ricketts recalls that Wilde once quipped, “Perhaps you are right . . . ‘Mr. W. H.’ might be imprudent . . . the English public would have to read Shakespeare’s sonnets,” which Ricketts reports was “met with nervous laughter” (Ricketts 48). “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” particularly in its expanded form, was indeed a risky publishing – even imprudent - venture, and not because of its connection to the Sonnets. The shorter version published in *Blackwood’s* elicited moral criticism from the *Scot’s Observer*, which pronounced the story, “out of place in *Maga*,” and *The World*, which criticized the story’s “rapture on ‘the golden hair,’ tender fairy-like grace, dreamy deep-sunken eyes, ‘delicate mobile limbs,’ and ‘white lily hands,’” of a play-acting boy.” (Schroeder, *Composition, Publication and Reception* 14). Add to Wilde’s personal disgrace of 1895, and the fact that many of Wilde’s additions to the new version of the story dwell on ideas of platonic love between male friends or between artists and their male muses, and the result is a manuscript essentially unpublishable in Wilde’s lifetime.

Wilde’s expanded and revised manuscript was sold to rare book dealer Abraham Simon Wolf Rosenbach, with the purchase price of \$3,000 remitted to Kennerley on September 23, 1921⁶¹ and it is now held in the collection of the Rosenbach Foundation, part of the Free Library of Philadelphia. The document comprises pages from the original Blackwood’s printing, pasted onto 7” x 17” lined pages. The pages from *Blackwood’s* are emended with Wilde’s annotations, which include standard proofreader’s marks for deletions and capitalizations, as well as more substantial marginal notes to revise word choices or include additional text. In addition to the

⁶¹ Schroeder *Composition, Publication, and Reception*, p. 38. Here, Schroeder also convincingly speculates that no part of the purchase price accrued from Kennerley to Miss Anne Chapman.

emended pages, the manuscript also includes 78 new pages in Wilde's handwriting on the same 7" x 17" lined paper. Wilde has numbered all of the pages on the upper right in Arabic numerals, circled. While the *Blackwood's* story was organized in three sections, Wilde has renumbered the sections of his expanded story, and those section numbers appear in Roman numerals. In Wilde's handwritten pages that present quotations from Shakespeare, we see Wilde changing his handwriting to a smaller script with narrower margins to indicate an offset quotation. This change in handwriting, along with the section numerals and proofreader's marks, suggest Wilde's interest in the concept of the book as object, and the visual aspect of his texts on the printed page. They also confirm his strong aspirations for a published, book-length "Portrait of Mr. W. H." Wilde's revisions also betray a sense of typographical awareness. In shifting to smaller script and different margins, Wilde may be blurring the distinction between fact and fiction; quotation and original writing; and truth and artifice purposefully. In this respect, the look of Wilde's handwritten pages supports essential themes that he explores in the characters and events of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H."

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