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NEGATIVE EROTICISM: LYRIC PERFORMATIVITY  
AND THE SEXUAL SUBJECT IN OSCAR WILDE'S  
"THE PORTRAIT OF MR. W. H."

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In discussions about the methods and aims of sexuality studies in literary criticism, perhaps no other writer has been more central, or more controversial, than Oscar Wilde. Richard Kaye notes that Wilde's writings have occasioned a "creative dialectical rupture" between critical enterprises he refers to as "Gay Studies" and "Queer Theory." According to Kaye, gay studies authors have understood Wilde to be an uncomplicatedly self-aware homosexual man, while queer theorists have stressed Wilde's circulation within the culture "as [a] historical figure and cultural commodity."<sup>1</sup> Thus, while popular writings by Stephen Gee, Richard Ellmann, and Byrne Fone have perpetuated a sentimental account of Wilde as the tragic victim of Victorian sexual repression and an early martyr for gay rights, studies by queer theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Ed Cohen, Alan Sinfield, and Gary Schmidgall have brought together psychoanalytic and Foucauldian theory to examine Wilde's mythical status as a cultural product who decisively influenced the discursive invention of the homosexual subject during the late nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, there exist today two opposing critical accounts of Wilde: the one, an emotionally powerful but historically naïve narrative constructed by gay studies scholars that can be considered humanist, and the other, a rigorously historicized, anti-essentialist queer account of Wilde's subversive eroticism that can be construed as anti-humanist.<sup>3</sup> Yet while Kaye criticizes the universalizing and normative impulses underlying gay studies readings of Wilde, he also faults historicist queer critics for "treating literary texts as simply another discourse." He argues that anti-humanist queer theories minimize Wilde's specifically aesthetic and philosophical significance by construing the writer's subjectivity to be a mere "refraction or residue of history."<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I examine how Wilde himself negotiates the dialectical opposition between humanist and anti-humanist understandings of sexual subjectivity in his novella "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." (1889, rev. 1921). Wilde's fiction, which tells a complex story about the creation

and circulation of a homoerotic interpretation of William Shakespeare's sonnets, undoubtedly rejects the notion that an individual has transparent and unmediated access to his sexual desires: an assumption that humanist gay studies approaches take for granted in their characterizations of Wilde as a self-consciously homosexual writer. At the same time, however, Wilde's story turns to idealist aesthetic philosophy to caution against jettisoning humanist notions of selfhood entirely. I argue that "Mr. W. H." thus paradoxically demonstrates how the experience of homoerotic desire actually gestures toward subjectivity's self-grounded nature—its limited, yet perdurable form of autonomy—by revealing language's limited ability to articulate the truth of the subject.

Wilde describes the relationship between language and subjectivity in terms borrowed from G. W. F. Hegel's theory of lyric, which he would have encountered as a student at Oxford in the 1880s. Hegel's account of the lyric utterance provides a theory of the performative that is similar to, but also crucially different from, the version of performativity offered by queer theory. While queer critics, following Judith Butler, have argued that non-essentialist, performative notions of selfhood enable the subversion of social norms through creative acts of citation and reiteration, Hegel suggests that linguistic self-expressions do not necessarily have any meaningful relationship to the self from which those expressions originate. In "Mr. W. H." this estrangement between language and selfhood becomes most apparent when the individual attempts to articulate his homoerotic desires through an act of literary-critical judgment.<sup>5</sup> By exploring the implications of Hegel's performative theory of lyric for acts of literary interpretation (and, ultimately, for all acts of self-interpretation), Wilde's narrative uses the transgressive power of the homoerotic to suggest that a coherent sense of self is gained only when the individual accepts that the subjective experience of selfhood can never be objectively confirmed within language.

In "Mr. W. H." neither empirical evidence nor intersubjective recognition provides adequate proof that one really experiences the homoerotic desire one believes oneself to desire. Wilde's characters run up against the very limits of their capacity for self-understanding when they attempt to express their sexual desire within language. By doing so, they dramatize Hegel's insight into the radical negativity of lyric utterance, the moment when the individual realizes there is no longer any guarantee that the language of self-analysis meaningfully interprets the self from which that language originates and proceeds. This inability to express their homoerotic desires throws Wilde's

characters violently back upon their own existence, creating a fatal misrecognition: they believe that the inability to articulate their erotic desires indicates an irremediable failure of the self, rather than a failure of language. Instead, I suggest that Wilde's unnamed narrator, who comes to realize that language can never capture the truth of the self, demonstrates how a specifically aesthetic attitude toward erotic desire's resistance to linguistic articulation can provide the ground for a limited yet perdurable form of autonomous subjectivity.

#### I. READING "MR. W. H."

"Mr. W. H." presents a reading of Shakespeare's sonnets that purports to reveal the identity of Mr. W. H., the famous "Onlie Begetter of These Insuing Sonnets" mentioned in Shakespeare's dedication.<sup>6</sup> Mr. W. H. is identified as a young actor named Willie Hughes, a member of Shakespeare's troupe who became the object of his erotic longing and the inspiration for his dramatic art. Rather than presenting this theory in the form of a literary-critical essay, however, Wilde embeds this interpretation within a narrative frame that recounts the origin and circulation of this theory of the sonnets among three men: the unnamed narrator of the story, his friend Erskine, and Erskine's deceased friend Cyril Graham, the supposed originator of the so-called Willie Hughes theory of the sonnets.

The controversial Willie Hughes theory these three characters find so strangely compelling did not originate with Wilde, but was first proposed in 1766 by the literary critic Thomas Tyrwhitt and subsequently endorsed by Edmund Malone in his influential 1790 edition of the sonnets. In 1839 the Willie Hughes theory was accepted but severely condemned by the noted literary critic Henry Hallam, who admitted his personal regret that the poems had ever been written and maintained that "[t]here is a weakness and folly in all excessive and misplaced affection, which is not redeemed by the touches of nobler sentiment that abound in this long series of sonnets."<sup>7</sup> Yet by the time Wilde wrote "Mr. W. H." in the late nineteenth century, this theory had largely fallen out of fashion among Shakespeare scholars. As the narrator of "Mr. W. H." states, late-Victorian scholars had concluded that "[Lord] Pembroke, Shakespeare, and Mary Fitton are the three personages of the Sonnets; there is no doubt at all about it."<sup>8</sup>

The story begins when the unnamed narrator of "Mr. W. H." learns of the Willie Hughes theory from Erskine, who, in turn, has received the theory from his Oxford friend Cyril, an "effeminate" acting enthusiast

who supposedly discovered the existence of Willie Hughes as a result of “working [through the] purely internal evidence” provided by the poems themselves (37). Erskine tells of how Cyril presented him with a portrait of Willie Hughes in order to prove the veracity of the interpretation. Erskine goes on to tell of his discovery that the painting was a forgery commissioned by Cyril himself, and of Cyril’s subsequent suicide in the name of the Willie Hughes theory.

Although Erskine finds the Willie Hughes theory untenable, the narrator is convinced by Cyril’s interpretation, and proceeds to narrate the process by which he goes through the sonnets in search of evidence in support of the theory. The narrator’s reading of the sonnets offers digressions on the history of boy actors on the Renaissance stage, the Renaissance revival of Neoplatonic thought, and the significance of the “Dark Lady” mentioned in the later part of Shakespeare’s sonnet sequence. After writing a letter to Erskine outlining the evidence in support of the Willie Hughes theory, however, the narrator discovers that he no longer believes the theory himself. Yet he soon learns that his letter has reconvinced Erskine of the theory and inspired him to travel to the continent in order to find evidence that will persuade the now-unbelieving narrator of the existence of Willie Hughes. Two years later, the narrator receives a letter from Erskine declaring his intent to commit suicide in the name of the Willie Hughes theory. The narrator travels to the continent in hopes of saving Erskine but finds that he is already dead. He soon discovers, however, that Erskine died after a long struggle with tuberculosis rather than by suicide. The story ends with the narrator ambiguously claiming that, whenever he looks at the forged painting of Mr. W. H. (his inheritance from Cyril by way of Erskine), he now believes that “there is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare’s Sonnets” (101).

Although literary critics have paid considerably less attention to “Mr. W. H.” than the rest of Wilde’s *oeuvre*, the consensus is that the novella represents, in fictional form, the psychological and linguistic complexities inherent to acts of aesthetic criticism. Some scholars have bracketed the homoerotic aspects of the tale in their attempts to understand “Mr. W. H.” as a paradigmatic example of the “art-criticism” described in Wilde’s critical dialogues such as “The Decay of Lying” (1891) and “The Critic as Artist” (1891).<sup>9</sup> Other commentators have attempted to make sense of the novella’s explicit homoeroticism by arguing that it presents Wilde’s struggle to articulate a language for desire between men that escapes the pathologizing sexological discourse surrounding male same-sex desire in the late nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

These studies all share the implicit assumption that Wilde had a clear and coherent sense of himself as the possessor of a stigmatized sexual identity. Yet, as Joseph Bristow has argued, before the trials in 1895 that led to his imprisonment for acts of “gross indecency,” “there is little evidence to suggest that Wilde had much or any interest in the ways in which sexual behavior had become a focus of fascination for [fin-de-siècle] thinkers. . . . Wilde, until the time of his prison sentence, had no perception of himself as either a ‘homosexual’ or an ‘invert,’ even though these almost interchangeable labels were gaining credibility within scientific circles in the mid-1890s.”<sup>11</sup>

There is, however, another group of specifically queer critics who have provocatively brought together poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory to argue that the story foregrounds the linguistic indeterminacy lying at the heart of literary interpretation in order to reflect or repeat the psychic incoherence lying at the heart of sexual desire. According to William A. Cohen’s deconstructive reading, the discovery of the name Willie Hughes encoded within the language of the sonnets is a figure for “the basic contradiction of language, the impossible striving after a univocal correspondence between signifier and signified. As the exemplary case of language’s indexical capacity, the name can thus be understood as a false work that tells the truth about the falseness—that is, the arbitrary, unmotivated character—of language in general.” Cohen reads the forged portrait of Mr. W. H. as “the ‘perfect representation’ not of some referential reality but of the name figured in the sonnet. . . . [I]f the forgery represents the theory in visual form, it is only *as* a counterfeit—not as a representation of the real—that it induces belief.”<sup>12</sup> Cohen not only suggests that Wilde’s story functions as an allegory for the *différance* that inevitably compromises the finality of linguistic meaning, he also posits that Wilde connects this insight regarding linguistic instability to the fundamentally unstable nature of sexual secrets: “For in the process of staking out a terrain for literature that is codified and enigmatic, Wilde simultaneously proposes that certain sexual secrets provide a key to the interpretive puzzle just as plausibly as do the literary ones.”<sup>13</sup> Cohen’s reference to “sexual secrets” recalls Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, which defines the modern subject as a subject that possesses sexual secrets about him- or herself that must be kept hidden, therefore effecting the self-disciplining of the subject.<sup>14</sup> Cohen concludes, “Wilde’s aversion to an unequivocal affirmation of homoeroticism” (that is, his refusal to name or define the specific nature of the homoerotic bonds represented in the story) “has less to do with an intentional negativity about sex than with his positive program for literature.”<sup>15</sup> Wilde thus draws upon

the ambiguously secret status of homoerotic desire as a resource for exploring the intractable ambiguity of literary language itself.

Richard Halpern elaborates upon Cohen's account of the move from image to text by mapping it onto the conjunction between the discourses of sodomy and sublimity. Halpern argues that the Willie Hughes theory "circulates in, and is structured by, the [psychoanalytic] field of the transference," whereby "belief is always staged for, and in behalf of, a nonbelieving Other."<sup>16</sup> Halpern further claims that "[f]or Wilde, transference defines not only an intersubjective dynamic but an economy of exchange among separate aesthetic and erotic spheres."<sup>17</sup> Wilde's story deploys the move from image to linguistic sign "Mr. W. H." in order to elucidate language's capacity to translate beauty from one artistic medium to another. This movement, according to Halpern, is "precisely the mark" of the Hegelian sublime insofar as "the medium of speech manifests an ungraspable or unspeakable aspect within beauty."<sup>18</sup> The translation between image and sign is, however, "supplemented by a second and even more important field of translation between the sexual and the aesthetic" accomplished by means of Freudian sublimation.<sup>19</sup> Sublimation of the erotic into the aesthetic can only be accomplished "by separating out an impure portion, and this portion does not simply vanish."<sup>20</sup> The impure remainder manifests itself in Wilde's story through the rhetoric of sodomy: a discourse that occupies, along with the sublime, a space that is beyond representation, but which can be gestured toward through the language of unspeakability. This sodomical rhetoric "works to heighten, rather than disperse, the sense of a dreadful secret" in Wilde's story by vaguely intimating the "unnameable sin" rather than the explicit portraying homosexual acts, and Halpern thus concludes that "Wilde does not render sodomy sublime so much as he creates a sublimity that sodomy cannot possibly answer to."<sup>21</sup>

Like William Cohen, Halpern's reading of "Mr. W. H." productively complicates the relations among homoeroticism, identity, and language in Wilde's novella. The turn to the notion of *différance* to explain Wilde's deployment of homoeroticism, however, relies on the unstated assumption that linguistic structures can be mapped onto psychic structures. This is due to the reliance, shared by Cohen and Halpern, on Lacan's poststructuralist version of Freudian psychoanalysis, which famously claims that "the unconscious is structured like a language."<sup>22</sup> Hence Cohen's reading of "the name" and Halpern's Lacanian interpretation of Hegel's sublime both posit at the heart of "Mr. W. H." a *mise-en-abyme* of linguistic representation.

Yet a cursory examination of Wilde's story reveals that acts of literary interpretation, rather than being absolutely foreclosed by *différance*, continue unabated. The problem, it seems, does not lie in linguistic interpretation in and of itself. Rather, in Wilde's story it is no longer evident that acts of interpretation have any necessary or significant relationship to the self from which they originate. I argue that, instead of representing a Lacanian understanding of Hegel's sublime, Wilde's representation of the relationship between subjectivity, homoeroticism, and aesthetic criticism was influenced by a much more proximate and immediately germane source not mentioned by either Cohen or Halpern: Hegel's discussion of the performativity of poetic language in his theory of lyric.

## II. "ALL ART BEING TO A CERTAIN DEGREE A MODE OF ACTING. . ."

The concept of performativity is key for analyzing the conjunction between homoeroticism and self-estrangement that is characteristic of the homosocial circulation of the Willie Hughes theory. Throughout "Mr. W. H." Wilde imbricates the act of articulating the Willie Hughes theory with two other types of performative acts: the theatrical performances of the boy-actor Willie Hughes and the poetic performance of Shakespeare's sonnets themselves. Wilde's story thus presents literary interpretation itself as a kind of performance, one that stands alongside these other aesthetic acts in its creative relationship to the subject. The interpretive performance of the Willie Hughes theory offers characters the opportunity to express their unique sexual subjectivity through the articulation of their homoerotic desire. Yet these performances also demonstrate the process by which acts of self-interpretation collapse upon themselves to reveal the limitations of the subject from which those self-interpretive statements proceed.

My turn to Hegelian thought to explain these performances might seem far-fetched, given the generally flippant and insouciant tone of Wilde's writings compared to the strenuous seriousness of Hegel's philosophy. Yet although Hegel is never mentioned explicitly in "Mr. W. H.," Wilde's thinking about Shakespeare had long been influenced by idealist thought by the time he wrote this story. This is especially apparent in his essay on stage costume in contemporary productions of Shakespeare, "The Truth of Masks," which ends with the assertion that "it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can realize Hegel's system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks."<sup>23</sup> During Wilde's years at Oxford from 1874 to 1878, Hegel dominated academic philosophical and religious discourse. Wilde was



greatly influenced during his university years not only by British idealist philosophers such as Benjamin Jowett, T. H. Green, William Wallace, and F. H. Bradley, but also by the Hegelian leanings of Walter Pater, his mentor in art-criticism. The idealist strain in Wilde's writing was recognized as early as 1892, when Max Nordau, in his infamous study *Degeneration*, classed Wilde with Friedrich Nietzsche as "egomaniacal individualists who had willfully distorted Hegel's idealism."<sup>24</sup> In addition, philosophically inclined scholars have long recognized the signal importance of Hegel's thought within Wilde's aesthetics. Smith and Helfand note that major literary critics of the early twentieth century such as William K. Wimsatt, Cleanth Brooks, and René Wellek have recognized Wilde's aesthetics to be part of the Hegelian idealist tradition, and Rodney Shewan has discussed the Hegelian elements present within Wilde's notion of "soul."<sup>25</sup> More recently, Philip E. Smith and Michael Helfand's edition of his Oxford commonplace book has established once and for all Wilde's detailed and extensive knowledge of Hegel's works.<sup>26</sup>

The influence of Hegel's theory of performativity can be seen in the opening lines of Wilde's novella. The story begins with a discussion between Erskine and the narrator regarding famous literary forgeries. When the topic of Thomas Chatterton's forgeries of medieval poems comes up, the narrator exonerates Chatterton's crime by suggesting that the word "forgery" cannot apply to an act committed solely in the name of aesthetic perfection.<sup>27</sup> He claims that because "Art" is "to a certain degree a mode of acting," works of art do not make substantive claims about reality that can be adjudicated as either true or false, right or wrong. Instead, the narrator suggests that an aesthetic creation should be understood to be a type of performance in which the artist strives to actualize his "personality" as an ideal that transcends the "accidents and limitations of real life" (33). In other words, the narrator suggests that the forged aesthetic object is performative: it enacts the artist's ideal self for the benefit of an audience of interpreters. The artist, instead of erasing his personality to create an autonomous aesthetic object, uses the forgery's illusion of historical verisimilitude as part of a performance of selfhood that has been purified of accident and limitation—including, in the case of Chatterton, the accident of having been born in the eighteenth century instead of the Middle Ages. In the narrator's view, works of art can only be evaluated according to their effectiveness in presenting an idealized version of the artist's subjectivity, even (or especially) when the artist presents the work as the product of someone else's subjectivity.

The narrator thus also implies that all art is “a mode of acting” in the theatrical sense. He suggests that the artist’s expression of selfhood, which is accomplished through an act of aesthetic creativity, is the presentation of a self that is produced in and through that creative act, not the representation of a self that exists prior to or outside of the aesthetic performance. In a typically Wildean inversion, the deep subjectivity that supposedly precedes the creative act is, in fact, an *ex post facto* illusion created by the aesthetic performance. As Gilbert states in Wilde’s dialogue “The Critic as Artist,” “When a great actor plays Shakespeare . . . [h]is own individuality becomes a vital part of the interpretation. . . . In point of fact, there is no such thing as Shakespeare’s Hamlet. If Hamlet has something of the definiteness of a work of art, he has also all the obscurity that belongs to life. There are as many Hamlets as there are melancholics.”<sup>28</sup> Gilbert asserts that the role of Hamlet, Western literature’s representative of deep interiority and individuality *par excellence*, only comes to its full fruition through many individual interpretations by a multitude of actors, and that no textual original of Hamlet exists outside of or prior to the many particular instantiations of that role. By interpreting the narrator’s assessment of Chatterton’s forgery in light of Gilbert’s assertion, one can see that Wilde collapses the two possible definitions of the term “acting.”

Wilde’s narrator implies that works of art should be considered a form of *doing* on the part of the artist that cannot (or should not) be evaluated either as true or false, let alone right or wrong. In his reference to aesthetic creation as “a mode of acting,” some critics might understand Wilde’s narrator to be anticipating queer theory’s concept of performativity. This idea, which has its origins in the writings of philosopher J. L. Austin, and has subsequently been discussed in the writings of Jacques Derrida, Shoshana Felman, Butler, and Sedgwick, is a cornerstone of poststructuralist-influenced queer theory.<sup>29</sup> These thinkers use performativity to formulate non-essentializing theories of identity, and to explore the role of language in the construction of subjectivity by making reference to various processes by which linguistic and bodily acts work to reiterate and/or subvert normative social and sexual practices.

Wilde, however, was too shrewd of a dialectician to celebrate performativity merely as an opportunity for the aesthetically self-created subject to subvert social norms. He suggests that there exists some aspect of subjectivity that must be located outside of the performative act. Although, as Gilbert says in “The Critic as Artist,” there is no ideal

Hamlet that exists apart from individual performances of the role, the fact that there are “as many Hamlets as there are melancholics” suggests that the unique selfhood of each individual actor inflects his particular performance of the role. These actors certainly do not embody the bounded selfhood beyond language typically associated with notions of subjective autonomy insofar as the uniqueness they lend to Hamlet is given character within the dramatic performance itself. Yet the irreducible individuality of each performance hints at the existence of some perdurable form of selfhood that performative acts can neither contain nor efface.

Wilde surveys the contours of this perdurable aspect of the self by exploring how performative acts paradoxically gesture toward a qualified form of autonomy by casting doubt upon the subject’s ability to acquire knowledge about itself through language. It is my contention that “Mr. W. H.” makes recourse to Hegel’s performative theory of poetic utterance, which provides a more salient and historically grounded framework for understanding the vicissitudes of aesthetic interpretation for the acquisition of self-knowledge in Wilde’s story than queer theories of performativity. I suggest this is not only because Wilde had a deep and comprehensive knowledge of the *Ästhetik*, but also because “Mr. W. H.” shares with Hegel’s theory the belief that lyric poetry represents the simultaneous triumph and crisis of art in its relationship to subjectivity.

According to Hegel, poetry stands as the preeminent artistic form of the modern era in its combination of the musical representation of spiritual interiority with the external, material, and phenomenal character of sculpture and painting. Moreover, he asserts that poetry is the medium through which “the mind expresses all of its fantasies and art to the mind.”<sup>30</sup> As Jan Mieszkowski explains, in Hegel’s *Ästhetik* “[p]oetry’s uniqueness stems from the fact that the subject and the object of poetry, the medium and the message, are one in the same. . . . [P]oetry can deal with any and every topic in any and every fashion because in the final analysis what poetry really expresses is the mind’s apprehension of itself to itself in itself.”<sup>31</sup> Hegel asserts that the human imagination, “that universal foundation of all the particular art-forms and the individual arts,” is both the proper material and the proper medium of poetry.<sup>32</sup> Yet because poetry has no restrictions on either its form or its content, it “appear[s] as that particular art in which art itself begins . . . to dissolve. . . . [P]oetry destroys the fusion of spiritual inwardness with external existence to an extent that begins to be incompatible with the original conception of art, with the result that

poetry runs the risk of losing itself in a transition from the region of sense to that of spirit.”<sup>33</sup> Even as poetry represents the moment of ultimate conjunction between the inward and outward self and the purest expression of the subject’s ability to interpret its expression of selfhood back to itself, its very “success leads it astray—in its autonomy, it threatens to abandon its mediating role and evacuate itself of any representational duties whatsoever.”<sup>34</sup>

Lyric poetry exceeds the drama and the epic in its capacity to express the self’s ideas and inner feelings. Moreover, Hegel asserts that lyric utterances cannot “be so far continued as to display the subject’s heart and passion in practical activity and action, i.e., in the subject’s return to himself in his actual deed.”<sup>35</sup> As Mieszkowski explains, “Hegel . . . insists that because lyric is the highpoint of artistic subjectivity, the expression of interiority as such, it must be grasped as an *act* of self in a way that epic and drama cannot be. The important thing to realize is that a lyric act of self . . . must remain stillborn.” According to Mieszkowski, the expression of self through lyric thus occurs in a language “that acts in such a way that the action can never be grasped as the coordination of a self and an act. . . . Lyric acts without becoming someone’s action.”<sup>36</sup> The language of lyric poetry “does not present itself as a discourse that understands itself in and as its own acts of self understanding. This is a language that never offers a grammar or syntax that could serve as a model for relations between agents and their deeds or subjects and object.”<sup>37</sup>

Instead, according to Hegel, lyric is the place where the imagination “is essentially distinguished from thinking by reason of the fact that . . . it allows particular ideas to subsist alongside one another without being related, whereas thinking demands and produces dependence of things on one another[.]”<sup>38</sup> Lyric poetry thus represents the violent negation of both art and thinking: “Lyric . . . becomes the outpouring of a soul, fighting and struggling with itself, which in its ferment does violence to both art and thought because it oversteps one sphere without being, or being able to be, at home in the other.”<sup>39</sup> Mieszkowski concludes that, for Hegel,

lyric poetry cannot self-clarify or self-interpret in the course of articulating itself as the product of its own articulations. Where lyric subjectivity is concerned, the self’s expression of itself to itself is as destructive as it is creative. . . . Lyric fails to demonstrate that its own self-interpretation begins and ends with the acts by which it makes its own significance self-evidently meaningful to itself. On the most basic level, this means that the self-interest of self—the notion of the self as even minimally self-related or self-concerned—has lost its inevitability.<sup>40</sup>

Lyric poetry's expression of this loss of self-relatedness thus could be considered performative, but in a very different sense than the way the term is used in poststructuralist queer theory. While critics such as Butler have argued that non-essentialist, performative notions of selfhood enable the subversion of social norms and the radical rethinking of ethics through creative and/or destructive acts of citation, reiteration, and resistance, Hegel states that lyric poetry reveals that linguistic self-expressions do not necessarily have any meaningful relationship to the self from which those expressions originate and proceed. Poetic language demonstrates that linguistic acts of self-interpretation need not lead to greater self-knowledge or self-consciousness. Lyric poetry thus epitomizes language's capacity to embody absolute negativity—a force that cannot be recuperated or redeemed by the dialectical process.

### III. READING THE PORTRAIT

Although Hegel's comments on performativity derive specifically from his analysis of lyric poetry, I suggest that Wilde's novella shows us how the limitations of lyrical language have implications for the relationship between language and subjectivity more generally. Wilde demonstrates this by showing how the collapse of subject and object that seems characteristic of lyric poetry actually occurs itself in all self-reflexive linguistic acts, including the literary-critical assessment that Immanuel Kant refers to as acts of "subjective universal" judgment.<sup>41</sup> Wilde shows that Hegel's account of lyric performativity actually applies to all attempts to gain self-knowledge through language.

Specifically, Hegel's theory of lyric allows us to see that the story of Cyril Graham's obsession with a homoerotic interpretation of a sonnet cycle is not only about a forgery committed in order to prove an aesthetic theory. It is also about his attempts to attain self-knowledge through an aesthetic encounter with the homoeroticism found in Shakespeare's poetry. The portrait of Mr. W. H. itself thus stands as both the literal and metaphorical embodiment of Cyril's quixotic desire to attain erotic self-knowledge through a literary-critical interpretation of Shakespeare's sonnets. When Erskine presents the painting as prelude to the story of Cyril Graham, the narrator sees

A full-length portrait of a young man in late sixteenth-century costume, standing by a table, with his right hand resting on an open book. He seemed about seventeen years of age, and was of quite extraordinary personal beauty, though evidently somewhat effeminate. Indeed, had

it not been for the dress and the closely cropped hair, one would have said that the face, with its dreamy, wistful eyes and its delicate scarlet lips, was the face of a girl. (34)

Mr. W. H. stands next to “the two masks of Comedy and Tragedy,” which indicate his profession as an actor (34). Using a magnifying-glass to take a closer look at the book, the narrator spells out the words “To The Onlie Begetter Of These Insuing Sonnets” (35), and realizes that the Mr. W. H. referred to in the title of the portrait is none other than Shakespeare’s Mr. W. H.

We soon learn, however, that the painting is a forgery commissioned by Cyril in order to prove the veracity of the Willie Hughes theory to Erskine. The thematic connection between poetry and acting accentuated in both the painting and in the Willie Hughes theory suggests the complex motivations underlying the commission of the forgery. Erskine relates that the Willie Hughes interpretation began one day when Cyril summoned him to his rooms in London. Cyril tells Erskine “he had at last discovered the true secret of Shakespeare’s sonnets; that all the scholars and critics had been entirely on the wrong track; and that he was the first who, working purely by internal evidence, had found out who Mr. W. H. really was” (37). Although Cyril’s use of “purely internal evidence” initially indicates that he is prepared to offer a traditionally lyric interpretation of Shakespeare’s sonnets as autotelic and hermetically self-sufficient, we soon learn that this internal evidence indicates “that the young man to whom Shakespeare addressed these strangely passionate poems must have been somebody who was a really vital factor in the development of his dramatic art” (38). By suggesting that the young man addressed *in* the sonnets is not the primary inspiration *of* the sonnets themselves, but rather of Shakespeare’s plays, Cyril roundly rejects common late-Victorian interpretations of the sonnets as an entirely idealized and self-referential edifice, “merely a philosophical allegory . . . in [which] . . . Shakespeare is addressing his Ideal Self, or Ideal Manhood, or the Spirit of Beauty, or the Reason, or the Divine Logos, or the Catholic Church” (40).

The philosophical-allegorical interpretations referenced by Cyril are, in fact, direct quotations from two major articles on Shakespeare’s sonnets: the first, novelist and critic John A. Heraud’s “A New View of Shakespeare’s Sonnets: An Inductive Critique,” published in *Temple Bar* in 1862, and the second, the anonymously authored “New Views of Shakespeare’s Sonnets: The ‘Other Poet’ Identified,” a two-part article published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in 1884 and 1885.<sup>42</sup> There is substantial external evidence indicating that Wilde was

familiar with both of these essays. Cyril follows Heraud by mocking the “German commentator” who suggests “Mr. W. H.” stands for “Mr. William Himself,” and according to Wilde’s letter of inquiry to *Blackwood’s*, the two-part article of 1884–85 provided the direct inspiration for the writing of “Mr. W. H.”<sup>43</sup> Both Heraud’s essay and the *Blackwood’s* article concur that the sonnets represent the high point of Shakespeare’s artistic achievement as the precursor to a certain version of the transcendental, high-Romantic lyric, and both also agree that the interpretive key to understanding the entire sonnet cycle is the infamous sonnet 20, “A woman’s face with nature’s own hand painted.” Readers and critics have long recognized this sonnet to be Shakespeare’s most markedly homoerotic poem: its speaker makes reference to a young man as “the master mistress of my passion.”<sup>44</sup>

Heraud asserts that, in this sonnet, Shakespeare finally “passes out of the dramatist into the poet,” by apostrophizing his “*alter-ego*, in the ideal personality, in the universal humanity,” through the image of “masculine beauty.”<sup>45</sup> Heraud proceeds to offer this rhetorical question: “For does not the poet himself declare, that the Ideal Man, the Friend, who he has addressed, has all along been identified with himself—has simply been his Objective Self?” He asserts that the theme of sonnets “is the love of the One for the Many; but the Many, how multitudinous soever, are yet properly but the reflex of the One, and the sum of both is the Universe. That Shakespeare saw this as clearly as any German sage of later times is to me manifest; but he had not theorized it.”<sup>46</sup> In this idealist, Kantian-cum-Coleridgean interpretation, Heraud evacuates all individual specificity and erotic physicality from the figure of the young man. Instead, he suggests that the movement of the sonnet cycle from praise of the object to the praise of the subject, and from praise of the subject to praise of the universal subject, recapitulates in its very form the operations of consciousness itself as it is conceptualized within philosophical idealism. Heraud thus understands the sonnets to be a completely self-referential and autotelic whole, the forerunner and epitome of lyric subjectivity in its high-Romantic mode.

Similarly, the author of the *Blackwood’s* articles maintains that the sonnets represent the culmination of Shakespeare’s aesthetic achievement insofar as they represent the utmost embodiment of his subjective communion with the divine logos: “He foretells, as with prophetic certainty, that his verse would be the permanent memorial of the life, name, and glory of the immortal beauty and love of which he sings.”<sup>47</sup> By identifying the “other poet” referenced in the sonnets as none other than Dante Alighieri, the author suggests that, like

Dante, Shakespeare's sonnets anticipate the Romantic sublime: "[T]hough the thought, imagery, and style of both Dante and Shakespeare exhibit their great powers, . . . yet these two gifted and singularly able writers alike confess that the glory of their theme far exceeded the measure and the reach of their skill, even when taxed and stretched to the utmost possible extent."<sup>48</sup> According to the author, Shakespeare attempted to gesture towards this unrepresentable "Divine Wisdom" by giving it a human form. Instead of making use of the ideal of feminine beauty, as Dante did with Beatrice, Shakespeare represents the divine in "the anonymous form of manly and youthful beauty."<sup>49</sup> The conjunction between masculine beauty and divine logos is nowhere more apparent than in sonnet 20, where "[f]or the full expression of his poetical invention, idea, or device, it was necessary to add to this form of manly beauty the figure of the woman." The author goes on to assert that "this complex figure, as pictured and described in the 20th sonnet, contains in it and expresses the poetical invention, idea, or device, on which all the sonnets depend. It is 'the master mistress' of Shakespeare's 'passion.' And the critic able to interpret and expound that 20th sonnet ought to be able to interpret every sentence, from first to last, in all the sonnets."<sup>50</sup> Much like Heraud, the author literally renders the young man of the poems anonymous and allegorical in the very process of placing this homoerotic celebration of masculine beauty at the center of Shakespeare's poetic vision.

These characteristic late-Victorian readings attempt to present Shakespeare's sonnet cycle as his utmost poetic achievement, just the sort of self-referential, self-interpretive lyric whole theorized by Hegel in the *Ästhetik*. They do so by placing the figure of the beautiful young man at the center of the sonnets, yet evacuating him of any material, physical, or erotic specificity. Cyril Graham's championing of the Willie Hughes theory is a rebellion against these impulses, as he returns physical and erotic materiality to the figure of the young man by trying to "de-lyricize" the sonnets. Erskine asserts that Cyril "felt, as indeed I think we all must feel, that the Sonnets are addressed to an individual—to a particular young man whose personality for some reason seems to have filled the soul of Shakespeare with terrible joy and no less terrible despair" (40). Cyril's focus on the "individual," the "particular," and "personality" is an attempt to ground the sonnets in the physical and emotional reality of Shakespeare's lived experience—an interpretive act that, in some ways, anticipates the attempts of modern gay studies scholars to return Wilde's writings to his own lived reality as a repressed late-Victorian homosexual.



As such, Cyril's focus on Shakespeare's actual emotional reality and the material reality of the young man is of a piece with Wilde's own youthful ideas about poetry. In his Oxford commonplace book, Wilde states:

In proportion as poetry separates itself from human passions and feeling, so does it lose its own essence, and the quality of its power. Wordsworth's sonnet on the advantage of Compulsory Education is as unfit a subject for poetic art as are those flights of transcendent imagination to which Shelley sometimes soared. *One flies too high: the other does not fly at all*: So the pure intellect and the pure imagination are not themselves the right mainsprings of noble song which has [its] natural roots in the passionate side of nature.<sup>51</sup>

The young Wilde, like Cyril, believes that the "essence" of poetry can be found only in "human passions and feeling," the subjective emotional responses to actual things, events, and people in the world. Both the youthful Wilde and Cyril specifically position themselves against a certain version of the high-Romantic lyric that vaunts the expression of the "transcendent imagination" above the "passionate side of nature." This lyricism was, for Wilde, embodied by Percy Bysshe Shelley's poetry, and was, for Cyril, enshrined by those critics who try to understand Shakespeare's sonnets as philosophical allegory written in praise of an abstract and imageless sublimity.

Cyril's wish to return the sonnets to the "passionate side of nature" requires him, therefore, not only to insist on the material reality and erotic appeal of the young man, but also to remove the sonnets from the ethereal realm of the autotelic lyric utterance. "Who was he," Cyril asks,

whose physical beauty was such that it became the very cornerstone of Shakespeare's art; the very source of Shakespeare's inspiration; the very incarnation of Shakespeare's dreams? To look at him as simply the object of certain love-poems was to miss the whole meaning of the poems: for the art of which Shakespeare talks in the Sonnets is not the art of the Sonnets themselves, which indeed were to him but slight and secret things—it is the art of the dramatist to which he is always alluding. (40)

Cyril, by placing the young man as the "cornerstone," "source," and "incarnation" of Shakespeare's creativity, simultaneously finds "a whole new meaning to the poems" hidden in the sonnets that, ironically, displaces their centrality in Shakespeare's poetic oeuvre, where they

had been situated by the late-Victorian critical establishment. This emphasis on the embodied form of the young man renders the poems “slight and secret things” in comparison to “the art of the dramatist,” which uses the materiality of the performing human body as its primary tool of expression.

By deemphasizing the aesthetic significance of Shakespeare’s lyric in favor of his drama, Cyril discovers that the young man of the sonnets emphatically is not an allegorical embodiment of the “Objective Self” or “Divine Wisdom,” but rather a very real erotic object, “none other than the boy-actor for whom he created Viola and Imogen, Juliet and Rosalind, Portia and Desdemona, and Cleopatra herself” (41). For Cyril, the sonnets do not add up to a self-referential lyric whole, but are instead a means of deciphering the relationship between the dramatic works and the individual who inspired them by eliciting Shakespeare’s erotic desires. The difference between Cyril’s approach to the sonnets and that of other late-Victorian critics can be seen most clearly in his interpretation of sonnet 20. Rather than presenting the poem as the figural key that will unlock the meaning of the entire sonnet cycle, Cyril finds the actual name of the boy-actor punningly encoded in the sonnet’s seventh line: “A man in hew, all *Hews* in his controwling.” Cyril thus asserts that the last name of the boy-actor must be “Hughes,” because “[i]n the original edition of the Sonnets, ‘*Hews*’ is printed with a capital letter and in italics, and in this, he claimed, showed clearly that a play on words was intended” (42). Cyril’s emphasis on Shakespeare’s wordplay calls attention both the materiality of language and its ability to reference a material reality that occurs outside the operations of the poems themselves.

Although he claimed to have discovered the name “Willie Hughes” from the language of the poems, Cyril’s overall erotic and embodied reading of the sonnets stands as an aesthetic interpretation that is also, simultaneously, an act of self-interpretation. Erskine declares, “Cyril Graham’s theory evolved . . . purely from the Sonnets themselves.” Moreover, Cyril’s theory depended

for its acceptance not so much on demonstrable proof of formal evidence, but on a kind of spiritual and artistic sense, by which alone he claimed could the true meaning of the poems be discerned. . . . He went through all the Sonnets carefully, and showed, or fancied he showed, that, according to his new explanation of their meaning, things that had seemed obscure, or evil, or exaggerated, became clear and rational, of high artistic import. (41–42)

Cyril insists that the “true meaning” hidden within the poems does not take the form of empirically verifiable “evidence” that can be objectively adjudicated as either true or false. Instead, it can be “discerned” only by those who, like Cyril, have developed a particular kind of attunement to the feelings expressed by the poems, “a kind of spiritual or artistic sense.” To someone who has cultivated his aesthetic discernment by engaging with the homoeroticism of the sonnets, what had seemed aesthetic imperfections coalesce into something “of high aesthetic import.” Moreover, Erskine’s use of loaded terms such as “obscure,” “evil,” and “exaggerated” implies that the elements transformed into something “clear and rational” by Cyril’s spiritual or artistic sense are precisely the homoerotic references that caused Henry Hallam such regret.<sup>52</sup>

In essence, Cyril knows that the Willie Hughes theory is true because he believes himself to share the same homoerotic desires that Shakespeare possessed. The logic Cyril deploys in defense of his delyricizing interpretation of the sonnets attempts to save Shakespeare’s poems from the bloodless hermeticism of late-Victorian critical consensus by returning them to the embodied reality of Shakespeare’s erotic desire for Willie Hughes. We soon learn, however, that Cyril’s homoerotic interpretation of the sonnets have become untenable even to himself. Cyril does not lose his faith because empirical evidence has failed to prove the historical existence of Willie Hughes, however. (Though, of course, it has.) Nor is it accurate to say that he loses his faith because he ceases to believe in the theory per se. Instead, it would be more accurate to say, instead, that Cyril ceases to believe in his belief in the theory.<sup>53</sup> When he realizes that his interpretation of the sonnets cannot escape from the logic of the performative lyric utterance that he has tried so ardently to reject, Cyril begins to feel a self-estrangement that is created in and through the very act of articulating his completely subjective aesthetic impressions.

Erskine inadvertently forces this realization upon Cyril when he maintains: “before the theory could be placed before the whole world in a really perfected form, it was necessary to get some independent evidence about the existence of this young actor, Willie Hughes” (43). Cyril does not become upset because he is afraid that there will be no evidence supporting his interpretation. To the contrary, Cyril becomes agitated because Erskine refuses to confirm Cyril’s own unquestioning belief in the theory. According to Erskine, Cyril became inordinately disturbed by his suggestion that they search for empirical evidence in support of the historical existence of Willie Hughes. Cyril “became

a good deal annoyed” by what he called Erskine’s “philistine tone of mind, and indeed was rather bitter on the subject” (43). Cyril turns angry at the mere suggestion that Erskine needs external, empirical evidence in order to believe in his interpretation. According to Erskine, “we discovered nothing, of course,” in the way of historical evidence supporting the Willie Hughes theory, “and each day the existence of Willie Hughes seemed to me to become more problematical” (43). Erskine’s loss of faith puts the increasingly frantic and desperate Cyril “in a dreadful state,” such that he “used to go over the whole question again and again, entreating me to believe” (43–44). Cyril’s worry is not whether the Willie Hughes theory is not objectively true, but rather that Erskine’s failure to believe in the Willie Hughes theory will somehow undermine Cyril’s own belief in the theory.

Cyril’s disturbance stems from the fact that Erskine’s encounter with his impressionistic and homoerotic interpretation of Shakespeare’s sonnets does not compel the “kind of spiritual or aesthetic sense” that induces immediate assent: a phrase that recalls one of the foundational works of idealist aesthetics, Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Kant asserts that aesthetic judgments characteristically take the form of what he calls “subjective universals.” This apparently oxymoronic term means that one’s aesthetic impressions are, on the one hand, entirely subjective and incommunicable between subjects; that is, the actual experience of an object’s beauty cannot be given to someone else in or through language. Yet because these aesthetic judgments are disinterested and do not depend on private conditions, one feels, on the other hand, that this impression ought to be shared by others. This is why people articulate their aesthetic judgments as if they were inherent properties of the aesthetic object, or logical necessities: one says, *this is beautiful*, rather than *I believe this to be beautiful*. Kant asserts that, because this subjective universal is not founded on an objective principle, it stems from “a subjective principle, which determines only by feeling rather than concepts, though nonetheless with universal validity, what is liked or disliked.”<sup>54</sup> Kant refers to this principle as the *sensus communis*.

Although Kant is careful to maintain that the *sensus communis* only entails the expectation that one’s aesthetic judgment should be shared by others, not that guarantee that it will be, Erskine’s disbelieving “philistine tone of mind” presents a profound challenge to Cyril’s “spiritual or aesthetic sense.” Rather than providing Cyril with the experience of self-extension that is usually elicited by the *sensus communis*, Erskine’s refusal to share in Cyril’s “spiritual or artistic sense” of the sonnets presents a challenge not only to the Willie Hughes

theory, but also to the integrity of Cyril's subjectivity itself. Because Cyril's aesthetic interpretation of the sonnets is tied to his homoerotic desires, Erskine's refusal of the interpretation appears to be a rejection of Cyril himself. Erskine, by foreclosing Cyril's erotically motivated experience of the *sensus communis* so emphatically, forces Cyril into the profoundly unsettling sense of isolation and incompleteness that throws Cyril against the limitations of his own existence.

In a last-ditch effort to convince him of the theory's truth, Cyril presents Erskine with the eponymous "Portrait of Mr. W. H." as proof of the objective historical existence of Willie Hughes, and his significance for Shakespeare's literary genius. As the reader already knows, however, the portrait is a forgery. Both Cyril's attempt to return Shakespeare's sonnets to the material reality of his erotic desire, and his attempt to prove the objective historical reality of that desire, founder upon the limitations of the self. Cyril's forged painting reveals the limitations of the subject's capacity either to express or efface the self through aesthetic interpretation, and the consequent impossibility of escaping the autotelic logic of the lyric utterance. The self-reflexive nature of this forgery is literally figured on the canvas itself, when we realize that the portrait of Mr. W. H. is, in fact, a portrait of Mr. Cyril Graham. As Erskine describes him, Cyril Graham shares many physical qualities with the young man represented in the portrait. Cyril is "effeminate" and "somewhat languid in manner," "the most splendid creature I ever saw, and nothing could exceed the grace of his movements, the charm of his manner" (36). He was "always cast for the girls' parts," in the student productions of Shakespeare mounted by Cambridge's Amateur Dramatics Company, "and when *As You Like It* was produced he played Rosalind. You will laugh at me, but I assure you that Cyril Graham was the only perfect Rosalind I have ever seen" (37). Perhaps most tellingly, Erskine asserts, "the two things that really gave [Cyril] pleasure were poetry and acting" (36).

Cyril's forged painting thus catches him in the performative logic of the lyric. In his attempt to prove the historical existence of Willie Hughes, and thus to remove all traces of his own subjective impressions of the sonnets, Cyril has created nothing but a "realization of his own personality." The portrait literalizes the fact that, in the search to find the real historical person that inspired Shakespeare's poems, he has only found himself, dressed up as another. Moreover, as Erskine presciently suggests, the forgery is itself a type of performative, an act committed for Cyril's sake only. Cyril tells Erskine that he commissioned the painting "purely for your sake. You would not be convinced

in any other way. It does not affect the truth of the theory.” Erskine replies, “The truth of the theory! . . . The less we talk about that the better. You never even believed in it yourself. If you had, you would not have committed a forgery to prove it” (46). Erskine is even more correct than he realizes: if Cyril had any doubt as to the truth of the Willie Hughes theory, then a forgery would do nothing to assuage that doubt. If the painting convinced Erskine to believe in Willie Hughes, Cyril would always know that Erskine’s belief was elicited under false pretenses. Rather, the only truth that could be confirmed by Erskine’s belief would be that the Willie Hughes theory is an interpretation that can be believed by someone other than Cyril himself. Even if the historical existence of Willie Hughes could never be proven conclusively, Erskine’s belief would at least confirm for Cyril that the theory, and thus his homoerotic desires, are objectively meaningful—that they can have some sort of coherent existence outside of his own head.

Thus, while the inability to confirm of a literary interpretation would hardly seem the stuff of compelling fiction, “Mr. W. H.” shows that this problem of inter-subjective confirmation is more than merely epistemological. In response to Erskine’s accusation, Cyril shoots himself with a revolver “in order to show [Erskine] how firm and flawless his faith in the whole thing was” and “to offer his life as a sacrifice to the secret of the Sonnets” (46). Yet, as Erskine states with admirable clarity, “a thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it” (47). Erskine implies that Cyril found it impossible to continue living in the face of the apparent failure of the Willie Hughes theory. Willie Hughes has betrayed him on three counts: not only has it resisted confirmation through recourse to empirical evidence, and failed to establish that his homoerotic desires could be shared by anyone else, but most devastatingly, it has entirely undermined Cyril’s faith that he could ever attain a coherent and meaningful sense of self.

As Wilde’s novella goes on to demonstrate, however, the profound sense of existential meaninglessness that drives Cyril to suicide is the result of a fundamental confusion regarding the relationship between language and self. Cyril interprets Erskine’s failure to reciprocate his belief in the Willie Hughes theory as evidence of his own damaged and inadequate subjectivity, one that has been perverted by homoerotic desire. This is because he believes that his failure to communicate his subjectivity in and through language reflects the inadequacy of his individual subjectivity, rather than being merely a property of language itself.<sup>55</sup> Wilde’s narrator, on the other hand, comes to the opposite conclusion: he discovers that language’s inability to articulate

his homoerotic desires proves that selfhood may persist beyond language's ability to articulate it.

#### IV. "A TRAGIC FORM OF SCEPTICISM. . ."

Much to Erskine's surprise and dismay, the story of Cyril's "sacrifice to the secret of the Sonnets," instantly convinces the narrator of the truth of the Willie Hughes theory. "It is the only perfect key to Shakespeare's Sonnets that has ever been made," the narrator asserts, "It is complete in every detail. I believe in Willie Hughes" (47). In the next three sections of the novella, the narrator creates an elaborate interpretation of the sonnets based upon the Willie Hughes theory that encompasses a wide-ranging discussion of Renaissance intellectual and cultural history, including the Neoplatonic revival, the role of boy-actors on the stage, the famous "Dark Lady" of the later sonnets, and even the origin of the "Romantic Movement of English Literature" (which the narrator, somewhat remarkably, also traces back to the influence of Willie Hughes) (69). The narrator's ecstatic embrace of the Willie Hughes theory is, however, followed by an account of his traumatic loss of faith, one that mirrors Cyril's own tragic loss of faith. Yet, in contrast to Cyril, the narrator can survive this loss once he realizes that the language's failure to capture the immutable truth of his erotic subjectivity can be personally and intellectually enabling. The narrator realizes that he has the ability to craft a linguistic utterance that can gesture towards the presence of a subjectivity that exists beyond language's limitations.

In the narrator's initial enthusiasm for the Willie Hughes theory, it becomes clear that he believes the theory not only to be "the only perfect key" to Shakespeare's sonnets, but also to be the only perfect key to expose the truth of his sexual subjectivity to himself. "How curiously it had all been revealed to me!" the narrator exclaims, "A book of Sonnets, published nearly three hundred years ago, written by a dead hand and in honour of a dead youth, had suddenly explained to me the whole story of my soul's romance" (93). The narrator believes that the sonnet cycle expresses the absolute truth of his innermost self and his innermost desires, his "soul's romance," in its entirety. He explains that, in rereading the sonnets from the vantage point of the Willie Hughes theory, "it seemed to me that I was deciphering the story of a life that had once been mine, unrolling the record of a romance that, without my knowing it, had coloured the very texture of my nature, had dyed it with strange and subtle dyes" (91). The narrator

thus represents his acquisition of erotic self-knowledge as a strange sort of literary metempsychosis. In a nearly delusional act of identification, the narrator relates that his experience of reading the sonnets is akin to remembering having actually experienced every detail of the love affair between Shakespeare and Willie Hughes: "Yes, I had lived it all," the narrator maintains, "I had stood in the round theatre with its open roof and fluttering. . . . I saw *As You Like It*, and *Cymbeline*, and *Twelfth Night*, and in each play there was some one whose life was bound up into mine, who realized for me every day, and gave shape to every fancy" (92). Through this dramatic over-identification with the content of the sonnets, the narrator thus undergoes collapse between subject and object characteristic of Hegelian lyric performance. Although the narrator believes himself to have gained perfect erotic self-knowledge through this collapse, it becomes apparent that he experiences near-complete loss of self through this act of literary interpretation. By imagining that he actually inhabited the mind, body, and soul of Shakespeare, the narrator allows the story of the sonnets to stand in for "the whole story of [his] soul's romance."

Although he eventually realizes the vacuity of his identification with the sonnets through his attempts to re-convince Erskine of the truth of the Willie Hughes theory, the narrator first writes a letter to Erskine that offers a "passionate reiteration of the arguments and proofs that my study had suggested to me." After sending the letter, though, the narrator discovers that after putting "all [his] enthusiasm" and "all [his] faith" into convincing Erskine of the theory, he actually no longer finds it terribly convincing himself: "It seemed to me that I had given away my capacity for belief in the Willie Hughes theory of the Sonnets," the narrator states, "that something had gone out of me, as it were, and that I was perfectly indifferent to the whole subject" (94). Feeling that he has been somehow emptied out of his capacity for belief by writing the letter to Erskine, the narrator eventually admits to himself,

"I have been dreaming, and all my life for these two months have been unreal. There was no such person as Willie Hughes." Something like a faint cry of pain came to my lips as I began to realize how I had deceived myself, and I buried my face in my hands, struck with a sorrow greater than any I had felt since boyhood. After a few moments I rose, and going into the library took up the Sonnets, and began to read them. But it was all to no avail. They gave me back nothing of the feeling that I had brought to them; they revealed to me nothing of what I had found hidden in their lines. (95)



In referring to his belief in Willie Hughes as a type of “dreaming,” the narrator recognizes that his experience of deep identification with the sonnets was a merely a fantasy. He acknowledges that his belief that the sonnets revealed to him, in objective form, the true “story of his soul’s romance” was merely elaborate self-deception. The mutually reciprocal relationship he believed existed between himself and the sonnets now seems to be merely the projection of his own desires onto the poems: he “brought” feeling to the sonnets, but in return they give him “back nothing.”

This realization presents a profound challenge to his sense of self, one that parallels the challenge to Cyril’s self that occurred when Erskine refused to mirror his unquestioning belief in the Willie Hughes theory. Instead of feeling the exhilarating sense of self-extension promised by the Kantian *sensus communis*, the narrator must confront the limits of his own subjectivity. The romance that seemed to “really” exist in the sonnets was merely the projection of his own homoerotic desires that he mistook for objective reality. The narrator’s loss of belief in the theory is thus (like Cyril’s), completely devastating on a personal level. He admits that his current indifference towards the theory is “a bitter disappointment” (94), and that his self-deception strikes him “with a sorrow greater than any I had felt since boyhood” (95). He tells Erskine, “‘I wish I could believe the Willie Hughes theory,’ . . . I would give anything to be able to do so. But I can’t. It is a sort of moonbeam theory, very lovely, very fascinating, but intangible. When one thinks that one has got hold of it, it escapes one” (97–98). The narrator speaks openly of the anguish that Cyril’s suicide only implied. His loss of belief in the “moonbeam” Willie Hughes theory, and the self-interrogation that follows hard upon it, fills him with deep “sorrow.” This sorrow is the result of his loss of a sense of connection and identification with the sonnets’ homoeroticism. Once the capacity for belief “escapes one,” one is left gazing dejectedly into the shallowness of one’s own reflection.

Unlike Cyril, however, the narrator survives this loss of faith by realizing the true nature of this despair. The narrator expresses this hard won wisdom in his surprisingly empathetic reaction to Erskine’s fake suicide. Although Erskine insists in a letter to the narrator that he will kill himself “for Willie Hughes’ sake, and for the sake of Cyril Graham, whom I drove to death by shallow scepticism and ignorant lack of faith,” the narrator soon learns that, although Erskine is dead, he did not actually commit suicide (98). Instead, he wrote the note aware of his imminent demise from tuberculosis. Erskine’s attempt

to convince the narrator by presenting his death as a suicide is, in a sense, a type of “forgery” that parallels the forged painting Cyril used to convince Erskine of the Willie Hughes theory. Although the narrator is initially confused by Erskine’s motives for lying about his death, he eventually concludes that:

He was simply actuated by a desire to reconvert me to Cyril Graham’s theory, and he thought that if I could be made to believe that he too had given his life for it, I would be deceived by the pathetic fallacy of martyrdom. Poor Erskine! I had grown wiser since I had seen him. Martyrdom was to me merely a tragic form of scepticism, an attempt to realize by fire what one had failed to do by faith. No man dies for what he knows to be true. Men die for what they want to be true, for what some terror in their hearts tells them is not true. (100)

Just as Cyril’s decision to commission a forged painting suggested that he was afraid of not actually believing in the Willie Hughes theory, so too does Erskine’s forged suicide indicate his own “terror” of doubting his faith in the Willie Hughes theory. Moreover, the narrator realizes that Erskine believed, just as Cyril did, that “reconverting” someone to the theory was the only way of assuaging that doubt.

The narrator, however, instead of exhibiting the sense of betrayal Erskine felt towards Cyril, feels nothing but pity for Erskine. In contrast to the “shallow scepticism” Erskine says he directed toward Cyril, the narrator believes that Erskine’s fake martyrdom is the result of a “tragic scepticism.” This skepticism is tragic rather than shallow, the narrator suggests, because it arises from a form of self-doubt that is entirely unnecessary and misguided. It is an attempt to bridge the wholly imaginary gap between what men “want to be true” and “what some terror in their heart tells them is not true.” In other words, I am suggesting that the “tragic scepticism” the narrator identifies in Erskine describes the anguish one feels when forced to confront the apparently insurmountable gulf between the subjective experience of what one wants to believe (in this case, his belief in and identification with Willie Hughes) and one’s ability to confirm that belief through a self-originating act, such as the act of linguistic self-interpretation *via* literary criticism. The “terror” that Cyril and Erskine feel as a result of this skepticism is thus rooted in a tragic misunderstanding: they destroy themselves (or, in what ultimately amounts to the same thing, claim to have destroyed themselves) because they believe that language is unable to articulate their faith in Willie Hughes. They interpret this linguistic failure as a sign that their subjectivities are irrevocably damaged and inadequate due to their perverse homoerotic desires.

Meanwhile, the narrator's ability to recognize this skepticism as tragic, and the pity he feels towards "the pathetic fallacy" of Erskine's false martyrdom, suggests that he has "grown wiser" through his encounter with the Willie Hughes theory.<sup>56</sup> Yet the narrator chooses to convey the implications of this wisdom not through the actual content of his utterances, but through the specifically aesthetic qualities of his unique narrative voice. It is within the register of the aesthetic that Wilde locates the perdurable aspect of the subject that language can neither contain nor efface, the selfhood that Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist" suggests must exist outside of the performative act. The specifically aesthetic quality of subjectivity becomes most apparent in the last line of the novella, when the narrator admits to the reader, "I think there is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare's Sonnets."<sup>57</sup> This statement expresses, in highly condensed form, the narrator's realization that a form of perdurable subjectivity transcends language's ability to express it. The line seems, at first glance, to be a rather puckish refusal of closure: the narrator wants to neither confirm nor deny the viability of the Willie Hughes theory. More significantly, though, the phrasing of the statement carefully sidesteps issues of both grammatical and personal agency. Although he initially prepares the reader for an unequivocal statement of his beliefs by beginning with the assertion "I think," a clever deployment of the infinitive form allows him to float the abstract possibility of the theory's truth without indicating anything about his personal commitment to the theory. Yet this evacuation of linguistic agency does not entail the complete erasure of the narrator's subjectivity. On the contrary, the wry detachment conveyed by the narrator's tone and style, its aesthetic qualities, certainly convey something of his personality and outlook, even though we learn nothing explicit about the specific content of his beliefs. The narrator adroitly avoids the problem of the self-reflexivity by allowing literary voice to stand in for the explicit articulation of selfhood. This voice conveys the presence of the self without saying anything specific about it. In this way, the narrator uses the specifically aesthetic techniques of style and tone to gesture towards the presence of a subjectivity that is necessarily condemned to articulate itself within a fundamentally inadequate language, yet cannot be either created or destroyed by that language.

"Mr. W. H." can thus be understood to reject some of the foundational assumptions of both the sentimental humanism of gay studies and the skeptical anti-humanism of queer theory. Wilde's deployment of Hegel's performative theory of lyric in his novella demonstrates the

psychic dangers inherent in both the emotional over-investment in the literary object *and* the assumption that the subject's perdurability is merely an illusion constructed by language. One could ultimately assert that the studied seriousness characteristic of these two interpretive frameworks must inevitably fail to do justice to the studied frivolity characteristic of Wildean style. Yet in crafting a distinct literary voice that expresses the subject's boundaries while at the same time gesturing beyond them, Wilde shows us a form of homoerotic desire that creatively refuses its entrapment within the inevitable limitations of language. By doing so, Wilde suggests that artistic expressions of the self's desires do not merely subvert or uphold normative social categories, but may in fact create the very conditions that make social critique possible. There is really a great deal to be said about the desiring subject, Wilde suggests, once one realizes one cannot possibly say everything.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Richard A. Kaye, "Gay Studies/Queer Theory and Oscar Wilde," in *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, ed. Frederick S. Roden (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 192.

<sup>2</sup> See Stephen Gee, "Gay Activism," in *Homosexuality: Power and Politics*, ed. Gay Left Collective (London: Alison and Busby, 1980), 198–204; Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1988); Byrne Fone, *A Road to Stonewall: Homosexuality and Homophobia in British and American Literature, 1750–1969* (New York: Twayne, 1995); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990); Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side: Towards a Genealogy of Discourse on Male Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1994); and Gary Schmidgall, *The Stranger Wilde: Interpreting Oscar* (New York: Dutton, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that the most emphatically anti-humanist works of queer theory have not looked to the writings of Oscar Wilde for inspiration. These include psychoanalytically oriented studies that have contributed to what has been termed the "antisocial thesis" or "turn to the negative" in queer studies. See, for example, Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004); and Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007). See also the forum commentary by Robert L. Caserio, Edelman, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean published as "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121.3 (May 2006): 819–28.

<sup>4</sup> Kaye, 202.

<sup>5</sup> There is, of course, a considerable amount of debate regarding what vocabulary to use when referring to pre-twentieth century sexual practices, desires, and identities. I have settled on the term "homoerotic" because it is the term most germane to this particular text: the narrator of "Mr. W. H." uses the Greek version of the word

“erotic” to refer to the relationship between William Shakespeare and Willie Hughes, and places that relationship within the larger historical context of same-sex desire and aesthetics going back to Plato’s discussion of *Eros* in the *Phaedrus*.

<sup>6</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 1839.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Hallam, *Introduction to the Literature of Europe in the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Centuries*, 4 vol. (London: John Murray, 1839), 3:504. See Margreta de Grazia, “The Scandal of Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” in *Shakespeare’s Sonnets: Critical Essays*, ed. James Schiffer (New York: Garland, 1999), 89–112. For a provocative alternate account of homoerotic readings of the sonnets, see Robert Matz, “The Scandals of Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” *ELH* 77.2 (Summer 2010): 477–508.

<sup>8</sup> Oscar Wilde, “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” in *The Soul of Man under Socialism and Selected Critical Prose*, ed. Linda Dowling (London: Penguin, 2001), 35.

<sup>9</sup> See Linda Dowling, “Imposture and Absence in Oscar Wilde’s ‘Portrait of Mr. W. H.’,” *Victorian Newsletter* 58 (1980): 26–29; Philip E. Smith and Michael Helfand, *Oscar Wilde’s Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of Mind in the Making* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), 87–95; Paul K. Saint-Amour, *The Copywrights: Intellectual Property and the Literary Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2003), 106–11; and David Wayne Thomas, *Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and the Aesthetic* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 160–65.

<sup>10</sup> See Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1986), 17–48; Kate Chedgzoy, *Shakespeare’s Queer Children: Sexual Politics and Contemporary Culture* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1995), 142; and Lawrence Danson, *Wilde’s Intentions: The Artist in His Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 106.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Bristow, “‘A Complex, Multiform Creature’—Wilde’s Sexual Identities,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 198–99.

<sup>12</sup> William A. Cohen, *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1996), 198.

<sup>13</sup> W. Cohen, 205.

<sup>14</sup> See Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>15</sup> W. Cohen, 212–13.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Halpern, *Shakespeare’s Perfume: Sodomy and Sublimity in the Sonnets, Wilde, Freud, and Lacan* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 46.

<sup>17</sup> Halpern, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Halpern, 47.

<sup>19</sup> Halpern, 48.

<sup>20</sup> Halpern, 49.

<sup>21</sup> Halpern, 51.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973*, vol. 20 of *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Robert Fink* (New York: Norton, 1998), 48. Both Cohen and Halpern’s readings build on Joel Fineman’s deployment of deconstructive theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis in his account of Wilde’s story as the *telos* of the quixotic literary project begun by Shakespeare’s sonnets themselves. Fineman defines this project as “the literary problematic that derives from the effort to imagine a visible language, a language in which there would be no difference between the *imago* of presentation (the ‘Portrait’) and

the *sign* of representation ("W. H."),” written in service of the impossible ideal of a self that is simultaneously both represented within and created by language (*Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986], 28).

<sup>23</sup> Wilde, "The Truth of Masks," in *The Soul of Man . . . and Selected Critical Prose*, 304. Originally published as "Shakespeare and Stage Costume," *Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review* 17 (January–June 1885): 800–18.

<sup>24</sup> Philip E. Smith, "Philosophical Approaches," in *Palgrave Advances*, 146. See Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1993), 443–44.

<sup>25</sup> See Smith and Helfand, *Oxford Notebooks*, 53; see also Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1977), 63.

<sup>26</sup> See Smith and Helfand, *Oxford Notebooks*, esp. 17–34. Julia Prewitt Brown deemphasizes G. W. F. Hegel's influence on Wilde in favor of integrating Wilde into a critical tradition that privileges the writings of Immanuel Kant and Matthew Arnold, which causes her to dismiss the manifest importance of dialectical argumentation in Wilde's writings; see *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1997).

<sup>27</sup> Wilde makes a very similar claim in his 1886 essay on Thomas Chatterton, which he delivered at Birkbeck College in London. See [*Essay on Chatterton*], unpublished manuscript, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles, Wilde W6721M3.E78 [1886?]. For a reading of the Chatterton essay and "Mr. W. H." in the context of literary forgery and copyright law, see Saint-Amour, 90–120.

<sup>28</sup> Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in *The Soul of Man . . . and Selected Critical Prose*, 246.

<sup>29</sup> See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962); Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983); Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1988); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), and *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004); and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Around the Performative: Periperformative Vicinities in Nineteenth-Century Narrative" in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2003), 67–92.

<sup>30</sup> Hegel writes: "[D]en Geist mit mellen Konzeptionen der Phantasie und Kunst . . . für den Geist ausspricht" (*Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik. Werke in zwanzig Bänden* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983], 225). Quoted in translation in Jan Mieszkowski, "Derrida, Hegel, and the Language of Finitude," *Postmodern Culture* 15.3 (2005): 27.

<sup>31</sup> Mieszkowski, 9.

<sup>32</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vol. (New York: Clarendon, 1998), 2:967.

<sup>33</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 2:968.

<sup>34</sup> Mieszkowski, 10.

<sup>35</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 2:1112.

<sup>36</sup> Mieszkowski, 10.

<sup>37</sup> Mieszkowski, 22.

<sup>38</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 2:1035.

<sup>39</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 2:1128.

<sup>40</sup> Mieszkowski, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 103.

<sup>42</sup> See John A. Heraud, "A New View of Shakespeare's Sonnets: An Inductive Critique," *Temple Bar* 5 (July 1862): 53–66. See also "New Views of Shakespeare's Sonnets: The 'Other Poet' Identified," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 135 (June 1884): 727–61; and "New Views of Shakespeare's Sonnets: The 'Other Poet' Identified. II.-Resemblances," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 137 (June 1885): 774–800.

<sup>43</sup> Heraud, 53; Horst Schroeder, *Oscar Wilde, "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.": Its Composition, Publication, and Reception* (Braunschweig: Technische Universität Carolo-Wilhelmina zu Braunschweig, 1984), 55.

<sup>44</sup> Shakespeare, sonnet 20, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 1997.

<sup>45</sup> Heraud, 57.

<sup>46</sup> Heraud, 60.

<sup>47</sup> "Other Poet" (June 1884): 751.

<sup>48</sup> "Other Poet" (June 1884): 749.

<sup>49</sup> "Other Poet" (June 1884): 753.

<sup>50</sup> "Other Poet" (June 1884): 754.

<sup>51</sup> Smith and Helfand, *Oxford Notebooks*, 119. Wilde's reference is to Percy Bysshe Shelley's "To a Skylark."

<sup>52</sup> See Hallam.

<sup>53</sup> Rachel Ablow argues that Wilde's portrayal of ambiguous belief in "Mr. W. H." indicates his engagement with the writings of Cardinal John Henry Newman, especially the latter's *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870). Ablow maintains that Wilde's story "suggests that the beliefs we adopt in reading fiction represent only an extreme version of the beliefs we ordinarily regard as our own" (157–58), and that the value of fiction is thus in its ability to allow us "to imagine who we are not" (172). In making her case, however, Ablow brackets off the issue of homoerotic desire, which seems to me to be the central issue at stake in Cyril's crisis of belief; see "Reading and Re-reading: Wilde, Newman, and the Fiction of Belief" in *The Feeling of Reading: Affective Experience and Victorian Literature*, ed. Ablow (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2010), 157–78.

<sup>54</sup> Kant, 123.

<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, Cyril's belief that the failure of language indicates the "failure" of sexual subjectivity is also central to the Lacanian negative turn in queer theory. See, for example, Edelman's discussion of the "sinthomosexual" in *No Future*, 33–66.

<sup>56</sup> This term is, of course, borrowed from John Ruskin, whose writings were deeply influential for most mid- and late-Victorian art critics, including Wilde. See "Of Pathetic Fallacy" in *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vol., ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903–12), 3:201–20.

<sup>57</sup> Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," 101.