

THE CONFLICT OF AESTHETICS AND ETHICS
IN THE PROSE WORKS OF OSCAR WILDE

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The works of Oscar Wilde still seem fated to be dealt with in terms of Wilde's life and character, and there are few independent studies of Wilde which attempt to relate his statements in Intentions with the rest of his artistic creations. Part of the problem in dealing with the works of Oscar Wilde has been to reconcile the apparent ambiguities which emerge in his works, and it has been my intention to put these contradictions into perspective by relating most of the ambiguities to the interaction of aesthetics and ethics. This thesis proposes that the basis of the aesthetic-ethic conflict in Wilde is related to the inherent clash of art and morality in Aestheticism, and that many of the statements that Wilde makes which appear to be equivocal involve instances whereby Wilde attempts to confound rational attitudes with imaginative elements which subvert the rational and attempt to unify elements in man which are primal and contrary. One might say that the essential problem can best be stated in Wilde's own words from De Profundis: "To be entirely free, and at the same time entirely dominated by law, is the eternal paradox of human life that we realize at every moment." Within this paradox exists the portrait of a man who acknowledges man's potential for freedom, yet also

feels very strongly the external and internal pressures which force one to renounce one's freedom. In the works of Oscar Wilde this conflict can most conveniently be described as the conflict of aesthetics and ethics in the sense that Wilde uses aestheticism and art as the main expressions of individual freedom, and ethics as a forcible reminder that man is not free, that he must ultimately answer to his conscience or to the law for his freedom. With aestheticism and art being placed in a position contrary to the concepts of ethics and morality, and since Wilde considered art and aestheticism to be the 'finest' expressions of individual freedom, then it is inevitable that we must have a vision of art and aestheticism being related to the 'criminal' and 'subversive', which is a moral response to the problem. This use of demonic and criminal imagery in relation to the discussion of aestheticism and art is a prime example of an ethical intrusion into the world of art which creates interpretive difficulties in the works of Oscar Wilde. In essence the discussion of criminality and subversion in relation to the idea of aestheticism is an attempt to reveal an inherently moral attitude towards aestheticism which is not always immediately apparent in the works of Wilde.

The focus of this thesis is on the complex relationship of aesthetics and ethics as revealed in the dynamics of 'wit' and the imagery of criminality and subversion in Intentions, The Picture of Dorian Gray and the 'fairy tales'. The first chapter provides an overview of the kinds of distinctions that I will be making in the thesis and points out the relations between art and morality, aesthetics and ethics, wit, and the vision of art as being criminal and subversive. Chapter II develops into a more specific look at the conflict of aesthetics and ethics in the prose works of Oscar Wilde and reveals the various ways in which these tensions appear to manifest themselves. Chapter III consists primarily of an attempt to define terms and clarify the terminology somewhat. As such the chapter is a close examination of the kinds of thinking inherent in making aesthetical, ethical and scientific statements, as well as a close examination of aestheticism. Chapter IV consists of a discussion and clarification of the possible 'subversive' elements in Wilde's Intentions and these are related to Wilde's aestheticism. These elements of subversive aestheticism are then related to The Picture of Dorian Gray in an attempt to reveal the ethical and aesthetical complexity of the novel and hence of Wilde's artistic vision. Chapter V further

reveals Wilde's ambivalence with respect to aestheticism and Jung is used to provide some perspective to that ambivalence. The Conclusion offers a series of clarifying remarks on aestheticism in relation to Jung, as well as the therapeutic justification of art and aesthetics as an instrument of psychic liberation.

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CHAPTER I

. . . what is meant by the irrational and the non-logical in much modern discussion is merely the rediscovery of the ordinary transactions between the self and the world, or between subject and object.

Marshall McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy, p. 278.

Words in a poem, sounds in movement, rhythm in space, attempt to capture personal meaning in personal time and space from out of the sights and sounds of a de-personalized, dehumanized world. They are bridgeheads into alien territory. They are acts of insurrection. Their source is from the silence at the centre of each of us.

R.D. Laing, The Politics of Experience, p. 37.

A measure of the inability of the critics to place Wilde in any particular category with respect to his works and accomplishments is revealed in the enigmatic title given to the majority of books written about him. The caption states simply Oscar Wilde, and there is rarely any concerted effort to codify or categorize his works in any explicit sense. This singular attitude towards the works of Oscar Wilde can be viewed from two different perspectives: either that the important thing about the works of Oscar Wilde is that they were written by Oscar Wilde, or that it is essentially impossible to unify criticism with respect to Wilde under any other cohesive title. The former attitude has always included a large number of adherents, and for many years there existed a certain intellectual attitude towards Wilde which managed to infer that ". . . Wilde would now have been forgotten if it were not for the 'scandal'."¹ The critical climate with respect to Wilde is now beginning to change and, perhaps due to the recent exposition in 1966 on 'Wilde and the Nineties,'² more scholars are attempting to ascertain what Wilde was talking about behind the 'mask' that he so often projected and what was significant about his technique and ideas. In any case it is necessary to move in behind the 'mask' and facade of aestheticism that Wilde so

often projected. Perhaps it is due to the difficulty of penetrating the 'mask' that few critics have committed themselves to any comprehensive view of Wilde, letting the name Wilde bear the weight of the contradictions. It is the purpose of this thesis to attempt to impart and elucidate a measure of the complexity which pervades the canon of Wilde, and this attitude is related to the problem of aesthetics and ethics and their relation to each other. Also, I will not only show that aesthetics and ethics are the basis of the essential conflict which pervades his works, but will also attempt to show how this conflict is involved with the dynamics of style, characterization and ultimately, the essence of Wilde's art.

Throughout the collected works of Wilde there seems to exist an outright attack on ethics, or at least on the kind of thinking involved in ethical or moral judgements. It may at first appear that aestheticism is the only concern of Oscar Wilde, with ethics and morality serving the servile function of foil or scapegoat to further exemplify his aesthetic orientation. In place of ethics as a study of contemporary moral actions, Wilde seems to be proposing an aesthetical theory of action which some critics, notably Mann³ and

Ellmann,⁴ have peripherally related to the statements of Nietzsche. A closer examination of the canon of Wilde, however, seems to belie this apparent intention and many contradictions and ambiguities emerge which must be clarified. Instead of circumventing the issue by attempting to blame these contradictions and ambiguities on the supposed vageries and shallowness of Wilde's style and thought, I propose to reveal the extent to which an ethical consciousness underlies Wilde's aesthetic consciousness and how the two operate in conjunction with each other.

One could say that the essential problem that Oscar Wilde faces in the pursuit of aestheticism is the same one that his protagonist Dorian Gray faces in The Picture of Dorian Gray. That is, to what extent is a man able to fashion his own moral code without being influenced by the mores and morality of society. Further on in the thesis I point out that the portrayal of Dorian Gray exemplifies the paradox ". . . of a man which wishes to experience the unusual, to be unique, to be different, and yet is unable to accept his own uniqueness."⁵ One could conceivably say that the above pursuit of individualism is the driving force behind the Aesthetes and Wilde himself makes a

similar comment on the condition of man in De Profundis when he says that to ". . . be entirely free, and at the same time entirely dominated by law, is the eternal paradox of human life that we realize at every moment."⁶ Wilde has designated here the thematic element which dominates his literary works. In essence he is asserting that the pursuit of Aestheticism in the expression of art--which Wilde also points out is the ". . . finest expression of individualism that the world has ever known"⁷--must necessarily conflict with the law and morality at some point. Wilde continually portrays the mask of freedom and individualism in his works, yet beneath this facade of antinomianism exists the ethos of a man who is plagued with ethical and moral problems from both external and internal sources (by conscience and by law).

In essence, one must say that Wilde is concerned with the conflict of aesthetics in the sense that he is concerned with the clash of art and morality. The works of Oscar Wilde, particularly The Picture of Dorian Gray and the short stories, tend to be portraits of a problem in which the active pursuit of aestheticism, in some form, is dealt with in conjunction with an alien or restricting moral code. At times the tension

is overt, as in the relationship of the aesthete Dorian Gray and his moral portrait, and sometimes the dichotomy and tension are implicit, as in the 'bunburying' of The Importance of Being Ernest or the clashes of art and reality in the short stories and the 'fairy tales'. In any case this concern with the eternal paradox of man as being simultaneously free yet imprisoned by his own conscience, as being unique yet unable to accept his own uniqueness, leads to a situation where a vision is projected of the artist as criminal with art as subversive.

The vision of art as subversive activity and the idea of the artist as criminal helps us to view the tension of aesthetics and ethics in the works of Oscar Wilde in a clearer light. The reference to aesthetics in this case refers to both the idea of art and the process of aestheticism, while the term ethics is meant to be a blanket term referring to an incipient morality which is unavoidably present, even in so-called amoral discussions. It is as if Wilde, in his attempt to present an acceptable view of aestheticism, was constantly in collision with ethical and moral problems which he could only acknowledge in a peripheral fashion. The spectre of ethics takes many forms, but is most apparent

in The Picture of Dorian Gray and can be thought of as an expression of conscience, or law, or both. It is significant that Wilde was constantly concerned with attempting to reduce the pervasive influence of ethics, particularly as related to the 'official Victorian fantasy' and that the use of 'wit' for which Wilde is famous, is one means of accomplishing that end. The dynamics of the process of 'wit' as a subversive element in relation to social morality, and particularly in relation to the 'official Victorian fantasy,' will be more closely dealt with in subsequent chapters.

The above doubts and ambivalent feelings are quite apparent in most of the works of Oscar Wilde, and the resulting tensions and dichotomies are best discussed within the concept of 'decadence'. Decadence, particularly English decadence of the 1880's and 1890's, has been called many things, most of them of a negative or, at best, of a qualifying nature. One thing that most critics agree on is the aesthetic and sensual nature of the Decadent movement. The implications of calling something 'aesthetic' are manifold, but one of its implications is a rejection of many of the elements of contemporary civilization that men take very much for granted. In the inveterate individualism of the Decadents

this rejection includes, as we have pointed out above, a rejection of law as a model for behaviour. The crisis of conscience appears at this point, however, and although few Decadents acknowledge the influence of conscience on their rejection of social mores, in the depiction of his bewildered protagonist, Dorian Gray, Wilde shows that the problem was more than subliminally present.

Pure aestheticism, as proposed by Walter Pater, tended to be acceptable for a variety of reasons, but primarily because it was kept safely in the mind. Pater's proposals simply imply a kind of aesthetic contemplation which really amounts to a variety of ascetic aesthetic puritanism. Pater's aestheticism remains relatively secure from any repressive critical attack because he does not take the radical step of saying that one should attempt to beautify that which is ugly. With the increasing awareness that rationality and technology, instead of creating the ideal world that men hoped it would, were instead creating an ugly mechanical world devoid of beauty which threatened to devour the humanity which had created it, some enthusiasts began to attempt to create oases of beauty in the jungle of Industrialism. Dandyism and Bohemianism evolved through attempts

to counter the abject conformity of the middle class and an art flourished which corresponded to this life style.⁸ This art which evolved in an attempt to inject colour and vitality into the 'official Victorian fantasy' became called 'decadent' by its opponents, and the Decadents, in their perverseness and with the realization that the way to extend their message was to confound the public, embraced the label 'decadent' as their own. Only the idea of decadence with its implications of decay and finality can adequately describe the nature of a movement whose function it was to reveal to men that the 'Victorian fantasy' was dead, and that ways of living life were as important as making a living.

One should not think that the above process was all 'sweetness and light,' and that the Decadents enjoyed a brief moment of unrestrained freedom with no consequences. Karl Beckson points out that Yeats preferred to designate the Decadents of the 1890's as the "Tragic Generation"¹⁰ because so many came to such unfortunate ends as ". . . early death, madness and suicide."¹¹ Beckson succinctly points out the problem of the situation in his concluding paragraph to the "Introduction" to Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890's:

But the English Aesthetes and Decadents command our attention by their determination to transform their lives into works of art, to center the meaning of life in private vision in order to resist a civilization intent on debasing the imagination and thus making man less human. The courage to do this was considerable--then, as it is now--and the danger of failure made life a perilous, though extraordinary adventure.¹²

It is important to note that the source of failure in many cases was a psychic one in that the Decadents degenerated into alcoholism, madness and suicide. It is my contention that the failure was due to the attempt to counter a dying social order in the form of the 'official Victorian fantasy,' and it is inevitable that the clash between the Aesthetes and the Victorians be fought on the basis of morality. Wilde essentially depicts the psychic problem of the "Tragic Generation" in his study of Dorian Gray in relation to his picture, for what we have is Dorian Gray, who essentially represents the position of the Aesthetes in his mode of living, being placed in relation to his 'picture' which is essential a graphic illustration of the ethical problems resulting from his moral transgressions.

To keep the terminology alive, I will reiterate for a moment. Aesthetics is a blanket term used by Oscar Wilde to designate a certain attitude towards

art and the world. Normally aesthetics means only the study of beauty, but Wilde extends the definition in Intentions to include a certain philosophy of life, a certain way of viewing the world, and could more accurately be called aestheticism. Within the structure of this thesis the aesthetic vision and aestheticism will be used interchangeably. In Intentions Wilde also extends the idea of aestheticism to be synonymous with individualism and thus the problems of individualism in relation to society must be considered. Aestheticism is also synonymous with the 'imagination' and 'irrationalism' in the sense that aestheticism is a celebration of these attitudes in a victory over rationalism (particularly the kind of rationalism typified by science and 'reasonable' ethics). The problem with aestheticism is that although it claims to be amoral, it necessarily comes in conflict with a mode of thinking that is moral and which we will designate as ethical, because again this is the term Wilde uses to describe attitudes which tend to be concerned with labelling ideas and art objects in terms of contemporary morality. Since ethics is to be viewed in terms of social morality, it is inevitable that ethics be synonymous with the 'official Victorian fantasy.' Ethics in this thesis is also intended to be synonymous with rationalism in the sense that

the kind of morality and ethical structure that Wilde was concerned with tended to be associated with the 'reasonable' point of view and the Aesthetes were anything but reasonable. The nature of the kind of reason that I am referring to will become apparent in the discussion on 'wit' in the next chapter where we will see the function of wit in the subversion of reason. Wilde attempted to show that one could circumnavigate ethical thinking (viewing life in moral terms, particularly in terms of the 'official Victorian fantasy') and his statements of Intentions are the result of such an effort. The extent to which moral and ethical considerations conflict with Wilde's theories of aestheticism and how this conflict results in the vision of art as 'subversive' and the artist as 'criminal' with 'wit' being used as an instrument of that subversive criminality is the concern of this thesis.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹James Laver, Oscar Wilde, Longman's Green & Co., London, 1968, 5.
- ²Charles Ryskamp, Wilde and The Nineties, Princeton University Library, Princeton, 1966.
- ³Thomas Mann, "Wilde and Nietzsche," Oscar Wilde, ed. R. Ellmann, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1969, 169-171.
- ⁴Richard Ellmann, "The Critic as Artist as Wilde," The Artist As Critic, Random House, New York, 1968, x.
- ⁵See this thesis, p. 106.
- ⁶Oscar Wilde, The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, ed. J.B. Foreman, Collins, London, 1966, 891. All subsequent quotations from Oscar Wilde are from the above edition unless otherwise noted.
- ⁷"The Soul of Man Under Socialism," Works, p. 1090.
- ⁸See particularly Karl Beckson, "Introduction", The Eighteen Nineties, Holbrook Jackson, Capricorn, New York, 1966, i-vi.
- ⁹Karl Beckson, Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890's, Random House, New York, 1966, xxxix.
- ¹⁰Ibid., p. xl.
- ¹¹Ibid.

CHAPTER II

There is nothing sane about the worship of beauty. It is too splendid to be sane. Those whose lives it forms the dominant note will always seem to be pure visionaries.

Oscar Wilde, The Critic as Artist, p. 1048.

The nineteenth century is a turning point in history, simply on account of the work of two men, Darwin and Renan, the one the critic of the Book of Nature, the other the critic of the Books of God.

Oscar Wilde, The Critic as Artist, p. 1057.

There is a certain amount of difficulty involved in talking about Oscar Wilde at this point, 70 years after his death. Artifice is in rather ill-repute at the moment and the usual clichés tossed off about Oscar Wilde referring to his purported shallowness, artificiality and trivialness do not encourage the young scholar to look beyond the 'bon mots' of his wit, this is unfortunate since there is a depth to Oscar Wilde which goes beyond the martyrdom of his dishonorable ending and the facade of his brilliant wit. Even the compliments that he receives are backhanded ones, inferring that the limited stimulating nature of his ideas is inherent in the fact that youth ". . . pass rapidly beyond the 'Wilde stage'."¹⁷ To the person who has never transcended the mere wittiness of his aphorisms and the cleverness of his ambiguity, the above comments may seem quite true. However, for the reader who has even the remotest interest in art and the complex relationship of art with life and the art of living, it can be said that few critics have managed to create such brilliant and perceptive comments on the nature and complexity of art as Wilde has done, particularly in his Intentions.

To help recapture the essence of Wilde, it is prudent to return briefly to the period in which he wrote.

The Nineteenth Century was "an age of transition,"¹⁸ or so those intellectuals and artists who participated in the attempt to create some viable set of values for the period felt. The sense of "moving down the ringing grooves of change"¹⁹ was extremely intense and, although all ages may be referred to as ones of change, yet the members of the Nineteenth Century were probably more aware than most of being pivotal points between past and future values. As a result the criterions and standards that passed for 'present values' were grasped with all of the vigor, strength and desperation of a drowning man clutching at the proverbial straws, hence creating the vision that many have of the 'official Victorian fantasy' of drab sobriety and ultra-conservatism. It is almost a cliché to say that the impetus of the change resulted from the Industrial Revolution with its resulting stress on materialism and linear, perceivable logic which led, for a variety of reasons, to the destruction of faith due to the 'higher criticisms' and the further erosions of faith resulting from Darwin's traumatic revelations on the origin of man. Thus, due to the sudden widespread influence of material-positivism and linear thought, the non-linear and less tangible values of art became less and less acceptable and the split between the artist and his public continued to erode quite rapid-

ly. It is this intense emphasis on the so-called factual and useful that led to the emergence of aestheticism. The process developed through the Pre-Raphaelites and Pater to the Decadent movement of the Eighteen Nineties and the emergence of Oscar Wilde for Aestheticism in the main, became part of the attempt to counter the debilitating influences of industrialism and to create the kinds of conditions whereby man could become aware of the beauty in his life in lieu of corporate ugliness. Thus, where many of the Victorians had been actively involved in various attempts to recreate firm foundations of values through religion or culture (Newman and Arnold respectively), others, such as the aesthetes and Socialists, were attempting to create their bases of values. The main concern of this thesis is to discuss the works of Oscar Wilde, particularly the prose works, in an effort to reveal to what extent he was influenced by these two major theories on how man should lead his life. This is not intended to imply that Wilde was a Socialist, for he was an aesthete more than anything else; rather this thesis represents an attempt to show how Oscar Wilde, besides being an aesthete, also coped with the ethical problems inherent in being a member of society and how these ethical principles often tended to conflict with certain aesthetic principles that he

held.

The tensions in Oscar Wilde, the elements that lead to the complexity in his life, art, and statements on art, can be attributed to many causes, but it seems to me that the bedrock of the problem must invariably be related in some way to his art. Wilde himself realized this, particularly towards the end of his career, for he states in De Profundis that one of the books that he would like to write when he is released from prison is "The Relation of the Artistic Life to Conduct":

As regards . . . the relation of the artistic life to conduct, it will no doubt seem strange to you that I should select it. People point to Reading Gaol and say "There is where the artistic life leads a man." Well it might lead to worse places. . . . Two of the most perfect lives that I have come across in my own experience are the lives of Verlaine and of Prince Kropotkin: both of them men who passed years in prison.²⁰

That Wilde accepted the subversive nature of the artistic life is fairly obvious and he even justifies it by saying that the ". . . chief war was against the philistines. That is the war every child of light had to lead."²¹ This indicates that Wilde recognized that the main problem to be dealt with in the "Artistic Life" would be intricately related to a dialectic of aesthetics

versus ethics; the essential conflict of whether a man should attempt to create 'good works' or 'beautiful works'; whether a man should devote himself to the task of attempting to create the artistic work of such brilliance and beauty that a man can say "That is where the artistic life leads," or whether a man should attempt to follow the postulates of conventional morality and lead the kind of life that it could be said "That is where the virtuous life leads." The simplest and most obvious reply to the above problem, mainly because Wilde seemed to be saying it so often, is that Wilde would say that Life, since it is a reflection of art, could best be judged in aesthetical rather than ethical terms. In The Critic as Artist, Wilde comments on the above idea:

To be good, according to the vulgar standards of goodness, is obviously quite easy. It merely requires a certain amount of sordid terror, a lack of imaginative thought, and a certain low passion for middle-class respectability. Aesthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere. . . . Aesthetics, like sexual selection, makes life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, and variety and change.²²

Although Wilde acknowledges that ethics are necessary in that they make ". . . existence possible",²³ he is

very careful to point out that in any conflict between the two 'aesthetics are higher than ethics.' The aesthetical theory of behavior that Wilde seems to be proposing could conceivably be stated as follows: In any given situation was the man, at that particular moment, while committing that particular act, in harmony both with himself and the situation that he acted in? If so the act was good and if not then it was not good. Thomas Mann, who comments on the similarity between Wilde and Nietzsche, notices the similarity between their two philosophies of aestheticism: "Not for nothing have I coupled the names of Nietzsche and Wilde--they belong together as rebels, rebels in the name of beauty. . . ."24

However, it is also quite apparent that Wilde was highly aware of the contradictions and problems that this kind of assertion must involve. In reality the above position must necessarily entail a conflict with custom and prevailing morality that will tend to place the aesthete outside society and result in both actions and recriminations that can border on the 'criminal'. Thus, there seems to exist in Wilde the tension of a man who feels compelled to act in the interests of beauty and guided by a code of aesthetics, yet must constantly be on the alert to avoid being incarcerated by the society that he so often attacks.

The above would appear to indicate that Oscar Wilde tended to lead a somewhat schizophrenic life based on the desire to achieve two mutually exclusive goals. Other critics such as W.H. Auden have noted this dual tendency in Wilde:

Another kind of writer might have found the disreputable bohemian existence to which, as an ex-convict, he was limited — a relief--at least there was no need to keep up pretenses--but for Wilde the Bunburying, the double life, at one and the same time a bohemian in secret and in public the lion of respectable drawing rooms had been the exciting thing. . . .²⁵

Thus, just as there is evidence of public compliancy and private deviation and rebellion in his life, it may be interesting to investigate the possibility of finding in his art the evidence of a social moralism which can underlie the amoral aestheticism. Auden in the above quotation, is referring to Wilde's inability to rationalize to himself his decline in social status and since Auden attributes Wilde's final downfall to this, it may also be pertinent to ask why Wilde was never able to rationalize this problem. Auden attributes Wilde's ambivalence to his desire for money and social position in saying that ". . . for Wilde the approval of society was essential to his self-esteem."²⁶ Although my thesis does not conflict to any large degree from that

of Auden's for he does not attempt to explain why social approval was so necessary for Wilde, I feel that it can be shown that the source of the problem was due to a conflict of values that Wilde was never really able to resolve; the conflict of the values of aesthetics and ethics or, the conflict of social morality and art.

It is at the point where individual actions tend to contravene social morality that the conflict of aesthetics and ethics will make itself most apparent in the works of Oscar Wilde. Essentially it is in the position of Decadence as the assumption of aesthetic codes that the inevitable clash between aesthetics and ethics will occur. The existence of this clash manifests itself in many ways in Wilde's works and we should almost be able to predict the conflict due to the conflicting demands of Wilde's classical academic background and education in relation to aestheticism.

That this conflict between his classical background and his aestheticism was an integral and conscious part of Wilde's problem is expressed in one of his more famous poems called Helas, which is worth quoting in its entirety for the insight that it offers into the tensions and doubts that Wilde experienced:

To drift with every passion till my sould
 Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play,
 Is it for this that I have given away
 Mine ancient wisdom and austere control?
 Methinks my life is a twice written scroll
 Scrawled over on some boyish holiday
 With idle songs for pipe and vi~~l~~ay
 Which do but mar the secret of the whole.
 Surely there was a time I might have trod
 The sunlit heights, and from life's dissonance
 Struck one clear chord to reach the ears of God:
 Is that time dead? Lo! with a little rod
 I did but touch the honey of romance--
 And must I lose a soul's inheritance?²⁷

The poem is basically a romantic confession of temptation and the ensuing regret that follows the acquiescence to this temptation. It is mainly the nature of the temptation and the source of regret that we are interested in. The depiction of the soul as a "stringed lute" is reminiscent of the traditional Romantic use of the imagery of the 'aeolian harp' to depict man's aesthetic harmony with nature. This almost helpless submission to the forces of aestheticism is countered with the loss of "ancient wisdom and austere control" which can be interpreted as a fairly bald reference to socially induced intellectual controls on irrational passions. The surprising characteristic of the above tension is that in the Romantics, at least in Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode,"²⁸ the quality of the imagery is reversed. In Wilde the loss of "Ancient wisdom and austere control" is deemed to be regrettable yet, in Coleridge, the in-

trusion of rationalism in the form of "viper thoughts, that coil around my mind",²⁹ is regreted because it threatens to signal the end of Coleridge's aesthetic and creative relationship with nature.

The final lines in Helas are an allusion to I Samuel 14 where Jonathan, after having been instrumental in winning a great victory for the Israelites and being forbidden by his father Saul to partake of any food for the rest of the day, sticks his staff into some honey and eats it. This act on Jonathan's part provides a precedent for the remainder of the Israelites who commence a bloody pillage. Saul, who is unaware of the identity of the initial violator, offers that life to God as recompense for the disobedience of the Israelites. When Jonathan's role is discovered and the threat to his life is made known, his reply is: "I did but taste a little honey with the end of the rod that was in my hand and lo, I must die."³⁰ What must have appealed to Wilde about this particular allusion is the nature of the honey that Jonathan ate; although there was a proclamation out against eating the honey, Jonathan couldn't believe that it was forbidden because the honey caused him to be enlightened. This peculiar tension between the enlightening yet forbidden nature of the

passions and instincts is apparent throughout Wilde's works and is not confined entirely to this poem, although it is in this poem that the greatest sense of regret seeps through.

Throughout much of Wilde's art there is a constant reference to a loss and resulting guilt due to his desire to cast off the ethical asceticism implicit in the above phrase ". . . ancient wisdom and austere control." In Panthea, Wilde makes further statements which accentuate the above conflict:

Too young art thou to waste this summer night
 Asking those idle questions which of old
 Man sought of seer and oracle, and no reply was told

For . . . to feel is better than to know,
 And wisdom is a childless heritage,
 One pulse of passion--youth's first fiery glow--
 Are worth the hoarded proverbs of the sage:
 Vex not thy soul with dead philosophy,
 Have we not lips to kiss with, hearts to love
 and eyes to see! ³¹

The above quite obviously implies a statement of aestheticism which rejects the rationalism of the philosopher as a resolution of the questions that man is plagued with and instead the intuitive awareness of aestheticism is being offered as a solution. The above comments by Wilde, in their essence, do not differ in any large degree from the precepts of the Romantics of the aes-

the command to fast, must still pay with his life for a moment's pleasure and enlightenment.

The essence of much of the above is contained within a paradox that Wilde utters in De Profundis: ". . . to be entirely free, and at the same time entirely dominated by law, is the eternal paradox that we realize at every moment."³³ Beyond this paradox it can be seen that Wilde has noted the unfortunate contradiction that must inevitably follow the active pursuit of aestheticism in that the aesthete, through his intense subjective relationship with the world, re-attains part of the heritage of harmony and joy that man lost when he began to objectify the world around him but, through the intense individualism which accompanies this almost mystical association with the world, tends to become alienated from society. This is partly due to the intense privacy of the aesthete's vision and partly due to the fact that a conflict of moral and social values must inevitably occur at some point.

A brief excursion into Freud's "Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious" will perhaps clarify some elements of the complex psychological nature of the above tension and its resulting 'subversive' quality as it exists in

the works of Oscar Wilde. As far as Freud was concerned there were basically two distinguishable kinds of wit. The first which is described as fundamentally "harmless" or abstract"³⁴ is wit which refers back to itself and seems to serve no other purpose than to elicit pleasure from the manipulation of language. Wilde in some cases, as for example the massive pun that he develops in "The Model Millionaire"--"Millionaire models" remarked Alan, "are rare enough: but, by Jove, model millionaires are rarer still."³⁵--seems to fall into this general category. On the other hand, the type of wit that Oscar Wilde tends to be most concerned with is that which Freud designates as "tendency wit"; wit which is "tendentious",³⁶ tends to be directed at people and their foibles, and is inclined to have both aggressive and defensive motivations. In essence this wit is "hostile wit"³⁷ as opposed to "obscene wit", the other category of tendency wit that Freud distinguishes. It is not really necessary to deal with 'obscene wit' in relation to the majority of Oscar Wilde's works for Wilde rarely seems to be concerned with any explicit demonstration of obscene wit. Also, the motivations behind obscene wit are quite similar, at least in their aggressive and defensive quality, to the motivations behind hostile wit and this is primarily what we are

interested in. As Freud points out in "The Function of Wit":

It now becomes comprehensible what wit accomplishes through this service of its tendency. It makes possible the gratification of a craving (lewd or hostile) despite a hinderance which stands in the way: it eludes the hinderance and so derives pleasure that has been so inaccessible on account of the hinderance. The hinderance in the way is really nothing more than the higher degree of culture and education. . . .³⁸

The final sentence in this quotation is noteworthy, for, as we pointed out previously, it is this basic source of tension that we find revealed in Helas when Wilde says:

Is it for this [passion] that I have given away
Mine ancient wisdom and austere control?³⁹

The above 'passion' then leads to 'the loss of a soul's inheritance for touching the honey of romance.' As Freud points out:

Owing to the repression brought about by civilization many primary pleasures are now disapproved by censorship and lost. But the human psyche finds renunciation very difficult: hence we discover that tendency-wit furnishes us with a means to make the renunciation retrogressive and thus to regain what has been lost.⁴⁰

The above statement by Freud essentially complements what I have previously mentioned with respect to the

tension in the works of Wilde in that it can be argued that there is a tension between his aestheticism (in Freud's terminology a primary pleasure) and ethics (the mass censorship and repression of society) which manifests itself in his art although it is particularly apparent in his wit. The role of this wit in the dynamics of the tension becomes even more apparent when we look more closely at what Freud postulates about the function of wit.

Freud notes that wit "must be imparted."⁴¹ That is, the dynamics of a wit-work situation is created when there are at least two people involved with a third, society (in the form of moral codes or an actual person), constantly at hand. The motivation behind wit is to create the psychological atmosphere whereby A can communicate a point of view (which is socially unacceptable) across to B, simultaneously eliminating the power of the third (mythical or real) person and attracting as many onlookers and participants as possible on the side of A. We can infer from this that wit would tend to be more feasible in dialogues and probably explains why Oscar Wilde was able to write some of his best artistic criticism such as The Decay of Lying and The Critic as Artist, as a dialogue between two mythical person-

ages. In these particular cases one character serves as a foil for the other who elucidates the aesthetic philosophy by providing witty sallies which ostensibly clarify the nature of his argument to the person who represents the 'normal' point of view, while really attacking society who is Freud's third person, in this case the reader. In essence:

Wit permits us to make our enemy ridiculous through that which we could not utter loudly or consciously on account of existing hindrances; in other words wit affords us the means of opening up otherwise inaccessible pleasure sources.⁴²

In this way wit serves as a perfectly acceptable rebellion against authority by, instead of meeting an attack head-on, circumnavigating the problem and turning it onto the attacker without incurring social repercussions.

'Wit as verbal guerilla warfare' would be an appropriate term for the dynamics of the situation for essentially what happens is that one takes the barb of the enemy and turns it back upon him.

Although I have singled out the dialogues of Intentions as some of the examples of Wilde's wit, I hasten to point out that, successfully or unsuccessfully, the same sort of verbal guerilla warfare, the same satiric attacks on social norms and values continue in

one form or another throughout most of his works. This tends to delineate the position of a man who, although he is aware enough of his own philosophies, is sensitive to the restrictive elements of social morality and is impelled to attack what he feels is the unreasonable authoritarianism of morality. What is central to my thesis, however, is the fact that not only is the restrictive force that Wilde is in tension with an external force (from law) but also exists as an internal force, the result of his classical cultural heritage. This tension also accounts for his incipient feelings of criminality which I have made slight reference to in the past but with which I will be dealing more fully in the future. This imagery of criminality which permeates the works of Wilde is an expression of the tension of the conflict of aesthetics and ethics and expresses closely related ambivalent feelings about the placement of aesthetic standards within moral codes.

The idea of art in relation to criminality is a very interesting one. Wilde saw that art was a reflection of the extraordinary rather than the ordinary:

What is abnormal in life stands in normal relations to Art. It is the only thing in life that stands in normal relations to Art.⁴³

The criminal classes are so close to us that even the policeman can see them. They are so far away from us that only the poet can understand them.⁴⁴

The above illustrates that Wilde was quite aware of the peculiar relationship between art and criminality and in both De Profundis and Pen, Pencil and Poison, Wilde attempted to portray the diverse effects that criminality could have on the quality of art and society. Wilde was also very much concerned with the development of individuality through art and so-called criminal actions. In The Ballad of Reading Gaol Wilde goes so far as to say that each man, because of his uniqueness, has the potential to become a criminal:

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!⁴⁵

Later in The Ballad of Reading Gaol, Wilde attacks society for allowing these 'unique' acts to be punished, thereby destroying the one thing that society should be most pledged to uphold, the individuality of each man:

I know not whether Laws be right,
Or whether Laws be wrong;
.....
But this I know that every Law
That men hath made for Man
Since Man first took his brother's life,

And the sad world began,
 But straws the wheat and saves the chaff
 With a most evil fan.
:.....
 It is only what is good in Man
 That wastes and withers there: [Reading Gao1]⁴⁶

The implications of looking at actions in terms of 'criminality' indicates something about the ethical thinking of Oscar Wilde. After all, a basis of thinking which does not view anti-social actions in terms of rebellion or revolt, which can have favourable ethical connotations, depending upon one's political viewpoint, but must see these actions in terms of criminality, would imply that there is at least a lingering degree of doubt present. As one reads throughout the canon of Wilde one soon becomes aware of the fact that Wilde is almost obsessed with the idea of Art as a sin, although it does tend to retain the quality of a divine transgression. The depth of this obsession with criminality in relation to art becomes most apparent when we view the number of works that deal, either explicitly or implicitly, with criminal activity of some sort.

Pen, Pencil and Poison is the record of an artist who achieves intellectual depth through his art of poisoning; The Soul of Man Under Socialism and De

Profundis deal with the justification of crime by showing how it helps to develop culture and how it is instrumental in developing individualism. The Decay of Lying deals peripherally with the same attitude for, as Richard Ellmann points out in "The Artist as Critic as Wilde,"⁴⁷ the title of The Decay of Lying is rather a strong way of indicating that man's imagination is deteriorating, although I suppose it does indicate that perhaps the deterioration has reached the point where the imagination can be viewed as criminal. Several of the other prose works deal, at one level or another, with some aspect of criminality. Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and The Picture of Dorian Gray are the most obvious examples of this; however, this attitude also appears, albeit much more subtly, in several of the other short stories. The Canterville Ghost is a tale about the spirit of a man who has committed a crime and must be forgiven by an innocent person before he can die. The Young King is not only a study of crime in relation to power, but this criminality and power is inextricably connected with the ambiguous beauty of the ornaments of power. It seems to me that it would be difficult to argue that Wilde is always using the idea of 'criminality' for shock value alone as the overall use of such imagery is much too pervasive for it to have a continuing shock value. How-

ever, it is possible to view this attitude as evidence to show that Wilde tended to have a highly ambivalent attitude with respect to the ethical validity of art. At first this ambivalence may appear as if it culminates in an irreconcilable contradiction and yet, as Ellmann points out, there is a possibility of union:

In his criticism and in his work generally, Wilde balanced two ideas which . . . look contradictory. One is that art is disengaged from actual life, the other that it is deeply incriminated with it. . . . That art is sterile, and that it is infectious, are not beyond reconciliation. Wilde never formulated their union, but he implied something like this: by its creation of beauty art reproaches the world, calling attention to the world's faults by their very omission; so the sterility of art is an affront or parable. Art may also outrage the world by flouting its laws or by picturing indulgently their violation. Or art may seduce the world by making it follow an example which seems bad but is discovered to be better than it seems. In these various ways the artist forces the world toward self-recognition, with at least a tinge of self-redemption.⁴⁸

The next chapter in which we look at the specific theoretical problems of aesthetics and ethics in more detail may provide us with a clearer picture of the problems involved in such a reconciliation.

FOOTNOTES

- 17George Woodcock, The Paradox of Oscar Wilde, Macmillan, N.Y., 1949, p. 249.
- 18Walter E. Houghton, "Character of the Age," Ibid., p. 1.
- 19Alfred Lord Tennyson, Locksley Hall, line 182.
- 20Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, p. 934.
- 21Ibid., p. 932.
- 22Complete Works, p. 1057.
- 23Ibid.
- 24Thomas Mann, "Wilde and Nietzsche," Oscar Wilde, ed. Richard Ellmann, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1969, p. 171.
- 25W.H. Auden, "An Improbable Life," Oscar Wilde, p. 127.
- 26Ibid., p. 127.
- 27Works, p. 709.
- 28S.T. Coleridge, "Dejection: An Ode," English Poetry and Prose of the Romantic Movement, ed. G.B. Woods, Scott, Foresman, Chicago, 1950, pp. 386-388.
- 29Ibid., p. 388.
- 30I Samuel 14:43.
- 31"Panthea", Works, p. 780.
- 32Ibid., pp. 781-782.
- 33"De Profundis", Ibid., p. 891.
- 34Sigmund Freud, The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, p. 688.
- 35Oscar Wilde, Works, p. 223.
- 36Sigmund Freud, Basic Writings, p. 689.

- 37 Freud, Writings, p. 692-693.
- 38 Ibid., p. 692.
- 39 Oscar Wilde, Works, p. 709.
- 40 Freud, Writings, p. 697.
- 41 Ibid., p. 731.
- 42 Ibid., p. 698.
- 43 "A Few Maxims For the Instruction of the Over-educated,"
Works, p. 1203.
- 44 Ibid., p. 1204.
- 45 "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," Ibid., p. 844.
- 46 Ibid., p. 858.
- 47 Richard Ellmann, ed., The Artist as Critic, Oscar Wilde,
Random House, New York, 1968, p. xx.
- 48 Ibid., pp. xxvi-xxvii.

CHAPTER III

To be good, according to the vulgar standard of goodness, is obviously quite easy. It merely requires a certain amount of sordid terror, a lack of imaginative thought, and a certain low passion for middle-class respectability.

Oscar Wilde, The Critic as Artist, p. 1057.

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.

From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.

William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

In his "Preface" to The Picture of Dorian Gray and in The Critic as Artist, both written at approximately the same time, Oscar Wilde makes some seemingly contradictory and outrageous remarks about the relationship between aesthetics and ethics:

There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all.

No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.

Vice and virtue are to the artist materials of an art.

All art is quite useless.⁴⁹

All art is immoral.⁵⁰

. . . the sphere of Art and the sphere of Ethics are absolutely distinct and separate.⁵¹

Aesthetics are higher than ethics.⁵²

Also, to help obscure the matter even further, Oscar Wilde in one of his letters to the press during the furious debate on The Picture of Dorian Gray states emphatically that the book can be considered a "moral one".⁵³ As one can see, there is a somewhat contradictory use of the words 'aesthetics' and 'ethics' and it becomes necessary to examine the rest of the works more closely to ascertain the degree to which the above ambivalence represents a desire to shock the reader and the degree to which the above contradictions reflect a

personal ambivalence. The usual explanation that is tendered by the critics in an effort to 'explain' the above types of statements, other than resorting to an attack on his morals and intelligence, is to refer to them as representing a technique called the "transvaluation of words."⁵⁴ That is, what the critics usually try to say is that by changing the point of view part way through a statement, Oscar Wilde manages to oppose a converse point of view with the original point of view, thereby obscuring the meaning and protecting himself as well as satirizing one or both of the points of view in the juxtaposition. An example of this may be seen in the "Preface" to The Picture of Dorian Gray:

The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.

The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.⁵⁵

Thus in the above aphorisms, Wilde has managed to attack the 'official Victorian fantasy' by pointing out both its irritating 'common sense' and its ostrich-like inability to face itself, as well as managing to inflict several subtle cuts on the artistic definitions of Romanticism and Realism.

The above may appear somewhat obscure for the moment but the above process that I have described in Wilde is very similar to what Freud says about the techniques of creating wit through plays on words or through asserting the contradiction of statements:

He who intentionally tries to make use of wit-work, . . . soon discovers that the easiest way to answer an assertion with a witticism is to concentrate one's mind on the opposite of this assertion and trust to the chance flash of thought to brush aside the feared objection to this opposite, by means of a different interpretation.⁵⁶

I am not denying the validity of this attitude towards the style of Oscar Wilde, for it is a fairly adequate description of the mechanics of his style. However, what we are primarily interested in is an examination of why such an attitude has a tendency to pervade Wilde's works and to see what degree this ambiguity goes beyond style and point of view to become firmly embedded in the 'ethos' of Oscar Wilde as expressed in his art.

Although Decadence is an important element in any discussion of Oscar Wilde, it is important not to over-emphasize the importance of Decadence in the thesis for to do so would tend to place limitations on Oscar Wilde as well as on my study. It is well to keep in mind what Holbrook Jackson is careful to emphasize in The

Eighteen Nineties:

Oscar Wilde, for instance, bridged the chasm between the self-contained individualism of the Decadents and the communal aspirations of the more advanced social revolutionaries.⁵⁷

In this quotation Jackson is essentially giving fair warning that a discussion of Oscar Wilde as a pure Decadent, with all that this point of view entails, is more limiting than enlightening. Although Oscar Wilde was an inveterate individualist, it becomes quite apparent in The Soul of Man Under Socialism that this individualism tended to take a rather unique form. The above refusal to relegate Oscar Wilde to the ranks of the Decadents of course begs the question of what that movement consisted of, but what I hope to be able to do is imply an answer to that particular question while actively pursuing the nature of the aesthetical-ethical conflict in Oscar Wilde.

Before we move into any comprehensive discussion of aesthetics and ethics, it is essential that we have a fairly clear conception of the substance of our terminology. The problem with any discussion of aesthetics and ethics in literature is that it is often difficult to establish the theoretical bounds of these areas. In essence what we are usually concerned with are the

premises that are involved in making aesthetical and ethical statements. Since our main concern is to arrive at a viable terminology for our discussion rather than in taking up any philosophical cudgels, I propose to use the terminology of Edward Bullough whose philosophical distinctions in the area that we are concerned with are quite clear and whose premises, in many respects, tend to resemble the aesthetic premises of Pater and Wilde.

Edward Bullough in his Aesthetics: Lectures and Essays, attempts to deal with four kinds of distinctions in human attitudes and human consciousness. Although this may be termed as a 'fragmented' way of dealing with human consciousness, it is interesting to note where the following distinctions can lead us. Bullough essentially takes a humanistic attitude towards aesthetics and through this approach describes the 'practical', 'ethical', 'scientific', and 'aesthetical' consciousness. Essentially what these four areas of human consciousness comprise are a classification of the kinds of premises that subsume the above kinds of thinking. Bullough's reason for dwelling more on the human element rather than on the artistic object is that, as he so rightly says:

When we call a thing aesthetic, the reason is to be sought as much, nay even more, in the subjective attitudes of the recipient

as in the objective features of the thing itself. Everything can, at least theoretically, become for me an aesthetic object, whether it be meant to effect me this way or not.⁵⁸

This statement, in its essence, does not differ to any large degree from the assertions that Pater makes about the aesthetic attitude in his "Introduction" to The Renaissance and the assertions that Oscar Wilde makes in his Critic as Artist. In any case it must be relatively apparent that if we use Bullough's theories we will not be guilty of distorting Wilde's aestheticism to any large degree. Thus we can now delve more deeply into Bullough's theories and see how, if we can become more aware of some of the distinctions that we habitually make when we talk about the 'beautiful', the 'moral' or the 'scientific', we will be able to talk about these areas with a greater degree of sophistication and distinction.

The consciousness that is probably the least useful for our purpose, primarily because of its highly amorphous nature, is the one which Bullough designates as the 'practical' consciousness which essentially amounts to an incoherent and complex amalgamation of the 'ethical', 'aesthetical' and 'scientific' consciousness. Its other most significant quality is its intense egocentricity. An adequate description of the 'practical' consciousness

is hindered by the highly individual amalgamation of all of the other kinds of consciousness and, as such, is dealt with in terms of the other three distinctions. Needless to say, this particular manifestation of the consciousness is probably the closest in operation to what we regard as the human consciousness while the other three tend to represent ideals that modern man strives to achieve. To reiterate: the one overriding quality of the practical consciousness is its "peculiarly anthropocentric"⁵⁹ view alluded to above. Bullough points out that ". . . considerations of utility, the pursuit of private or practical interests, the perfectly legitimate participation in the struggle for existence are expressions of this . . . attitude."⁶⁰ As such this particular attitude can be related, in many ways, to an outlook that Oscar Wilde was categorically opposed to. The description of the practical consciousness can be said to embody the concept of 'philistinism' with its heavy strain of utilitarianism and moral codes, or any other codes for that matter, based for the most part on public opinion and characterized by a strong distrust of intellectualism. As Oscar Wilde emphasizes in De Profundis in relation to the battle that he fought and that all artists and 'children of light' must fight:

His (Christ as artist) chief war was against the philistines. That is the war that every child of light has to wage. Philistinism was the note of the age and the community in which he lived. In their heavy inaccessibility to idea, their dull respectability, their tedious orthodoxy, their worship of vulgar success, their entire pre-occupation with the gross materialistic side of life, and their ridiculous estimate of themselves and their importance, the Jew of Jerusalem in Christ's day was the exact counterpart of the British Philistine of our own.⁶¹

The position of the 'scientific' consciousness is much different from the above attitude of the practical consciousness. The main distinguishing qualities of the scientific consciousness consist in its rationality (of a special kind), and in its quest of knowledge for the sake of knowledge. It differs from the practical consciousness in its non-teleological outlook which prohibits it from any consideration of ultimate causes. Its "retrospectively explanatory"⁶² rationality, whose sole function it is to predict phenomena rather than to discuss absolute origins, is its main characteristic. However, as Bullough is very careful to point out, the above is not intended to imply that the so-called rationality of the scientific consciousness indicates that it is an 'objective' means of looking at the world for

what this 'objectivity' amounts to is a 'one sided subjectivity'.⁶³

A close examination of the works of Oscar Wilde seems to indicate that Wilde has very few quarrels with what we have designated as the scientific consciousness as long as it never becomes a controlling factor in life. As far as Wilde was concerned, science was mainly concerned with facts and as long as these facts were amenable to artistic manipulation he considered them 'dead' and harmless. An equitable amalgam of his attitude towards science can be determined from what he says about archeology in The Truth of Masks: "For archeology, being a science, is neither good nor bad, but a fact simply. Its value depends entirely on how it is used, and only an artist can use it."⁶⁴ In essence Wilde is saying that the method of arriving at the fact does not really concern him, just as long as the facts are amenable to imaginative manipulation. As Wilde indicates in Phrases and Philosophies For the Use of the Young: "Science is the record of dead religions."⁶⁵ What Wilde is primarily interested in is vitality and life. An instance where Wilde acknowledges the superiority of science, at least over the ethical point of

view, occurs in The Rise of Historical Criticism:

History, no doubt, has splendid lessons for our instruction, just as all good art comes to us in the herald of the noblest truth. But to set before either the painter or the historian the inculcation of moral lessons as an aim to be consciously pursued, is to miss entirely the true motive and characteristic of both art and history, which is in one case the creation of beauty, in the other the discovery of the laws of the evolution of progress.⁶⁶

(underlining my own)

In the above case it is fairly obvious that Wilde is viewing the study of history as a science and he indicates that it can have a major role, with art, in the discovery of truth. On the other hand, ethics does not merit the same kind of consideration and is deemed to be a hinderance to the process of pursuing truth.

'Ethical' consciousness, in Bullough's view, operates within premises which are the direct opposite of the scientific consciousness, yet still continues to be linear. As such, where science deals with phenomena in terms of causality, ethics deals with acts in terms of finality. Thus science deals in terms of "retrospective explanation",⁶⁷ whereas ethics deals in terms of "prospective explanation"⁶⁸ which, ". . . even when judging actions it [ethics] only appears to go back-

wards in order to gain from the vantage-point of the motive a prospective view of the act and its consequences."⁶⁹ As in the case of science the dynamics of the ethical consciousness are designated as rational, but again this not imply that the process is 'objective'. On the contrary, as is the case with science, ethics also presents a rather one-sided subjectivity, although this time it represents the other side of the quest for truth and knowledge.

As we shall soon see in some detail, Oscar Wilde's attitude towards ethics was an extremely ambivalent one for he both lauds and attacks various aspects of it. From the point of view of ethics as an ideal and an intellectual endeavor, there can be little doubt that Wilde felt that ethics must serve some function in the intellectual and active life of man. In spite of the many negative comments on ethics in relation to aesthetics in his works, there is evidence to show that Wilde is in fact concerned with the development of ethics in man. In some instances the reference to ethics is rather subtle as in De Profundis when Wilde is attacking Lord Douglas in saying "But while I see that there is nothing wrong in what one does, I see that there is something

wrong in what one becomes."⁷⁰ Or earlier, in De Profundis, when Wilde talks about leaving England to avoid Lord Douglas ". . . in order to try and get rid of a friendship that was entirely destructive of everything fine in me either from the intellectual or the ethical point of view."⁷¹ More explicitly: "But most of all I blame myself for the entire ethical degradation that I allowed you to bring on me."⁷² In all fairness it is important to point out that part of the source of the above degradation referred to in the above quotation is due to the fact that Wilde had permitted his individuality to be compromised for ". . . the basis of Character is will power, and my will power became absolutely subject to yours."⁷⁴ One could quite easily infer that it was rarely the actual intellectual quest for ethics that Wilde was opposed to or upset about, but rather the narrow contemporary versions of ethics which disgusted him. It seemed to Wilde that man's drab and dreary existence in England at the end of the nineteenth century could be alleviated through both art and an enlightened socialism and yet the inhibiting factor seemed to be the rigid contemporary morality which, for reasons briefly noted earlier, was almost forced to be dogmatic, somewhat repressive, and utilitarian to a fairly large

degree. The result is, of course, that many of the inhibiting factors that Wilde encountered in his active pursuit of aestheticism tended to revolve around ethical attacks of which the term 'decadent' is only a mild example.

The next concern is that which Bullough designates as the aesthetic consciousness. As a mode of viewing and talking about the world it differs from the scientific and the ethical in many ways. Its fundamental difference is that it makes few of the claims to the rational and the objective that either science or ethics makes. Also, the aesthetic consciousness is rarely concerned with causality and finality. This is not entirely true as we may be interested in various causal or final things about the work of art in the sense that we may be more than peripherally interested in how or why a work was produced. Normally though, when we talk about the aesthetics of an object we are primarily concerned with what a work does to us. As Bullough points out:

Aesthetic response remains centered on the work, drawing its enjoyment from it and reflecting it back upon it. That the other points of view are possible is, of course, a truism: the History of Art, sociological and ethical studies of Art, Aesthetics itself, are evidence of that. But the

aesthetical attitude is neither scientific nor ethical. It rests in the work without transcending it either forwards or backwards. It is, in distinction to the formulas adopted before, neither retrospective nor prospective, but 'immanent'; neither explanatory nor final, but 'contemplative'. And this is true not only of Art, but of Nature and Life when these are viewed aesthetically.⁷⁴

Bullough is essentially saying that although we may be interested, at some time or other, in historical or other peripheral discussions of a work of art, our motivation for doing this is to increase our aesthetic awareness. From the above quotation it is possible to see how one could develop an aesthetical view of Life, Art and Nature which could permit aesthetical interpretations which never revert back to any considerations of morality, epistemology or utility. The implications of this kind of aesthetical viewpoint are such that it may be possible to argue that men could carry out certain acts and view objects in such a way that these acts could be judged for their aesthetic quality alone, and would be particularly free of ethical judgements based on any contemporary principle of 'reality'.

That Oscar Wilde was intensely concerned with the implications of the above vision of aesthetics becomes

highly apparent in his discussions of criminality in relation to culture and art. Pen, Pencil and Poison is, in its quintessence, a justification of criminality in relation to art in which Wilde implies that criminality can deepen comprehension and artistic insight. Since the ". . . supreme vice is shallowness,"⁷⁵ this deepening of comprehension can be viewed as a notable achievement:

His [Thomas Wainwright's] crimes seem to have had an important effect on his art. They gave a strange personality to his style, a quality that his earlier work lacked. . . . The development of Mr. Wainwright's style seems to me far more subtle and suggestive. One can fancy an intense personality being created out of sin.⁷⁶

Wilde could also envisage a justification of criminality in relation to culture:

There is no essential incongruity between crime and culture. We cannot re-write the whole of history for the purpose of gratifying our moral sense of what should be.⁷⁷

This is primarily due to the fact that "Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion."⁷⁸ Although criminality places a somewhat poor second to art in developing individuality, since

both are concerned with the exceptions to the law rather than the norm Art and crime are closely related in one section of The Soul of Man Under Socialism:

Art is the most intense mood of Individualism that the world has known. Crime, which, under certain circumstances, may seem to have created Individualism, must take cognisance of other people and interfere with them. . . . Art is Individualism and Individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. Therein lies its immense value. For what it seeks to disturb is a monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine.⁷⁹

In the above series of quotations on the interrelationship of Art and Crime in conjunction with the development of culture, Wilde has implied that criminality and art are both negatively and inextricably related from a social viewpoint, particularly when they are the catalysts and forces of change in an unyielding and decaying social structure. Other implications of this particular ethical viewpoint of art will be further dealt with in the next chapter on Intentions where there is a discussion of Wilde's attempts to justify the relationship of criminality and art.

Another area where Bullough denotes a difference between the rationalism of the scientific and ethical approaches and the irrationalism of the aesthetical

approach is in the sensuousness and concreteness of the latter as compared with the generalizations and abstractions of the former. While both science and ethics tend to be concerned with large sets of figures and test cases in relation to the theories that they are trying to prove or disprove, aesthetics, or at least the aesthetic consciousness, tends to be most interested in the peculiarity and uniqueness of each case. I have pointed out above how this can be interpreted (by the philistines) to mean that due to the intensely private nature of the aesthetic vision this interest can be interpreted as being related to the 'criminal'. The practical consciousness may be interested in the particularity and the uniqueness of each case, but here again the interest is more in the pursuit of utility and maintaining the status quo rather than in attempting to discover something new or unique.

There is another distinction that we should be prepared to clarify here and that is the nature of the viewer's relationship with the aesthetic object. In the cases of the ethical and scientific consciousness, the inevitable result of the technique of generalization and abstraction is a form of detachment and objectivity which treats each case as the same within a hypothetical framework.

Needless to say, the aesthetical point of view is subjective to a very high degree but, as we pointed out in relation to the "anthropocentric"⁸⁰ nature of the practical consciousness, so is it subjective to a very high degree. In fact it is quite feasible to say that the practical consciousness possesses the greater degree of subjectivity of the two. As Bullough so aptly points out: "For though aesthetic appreciation is distinctly 'individual' as opposed to the non-individual 'objective' stand of Science, it is also peculiarly 'impersonal' by contrast with the practical."⁸¹ Thus, the aesthetic consciousness, although it can be considered quite subjective in relation to Science and Ethics, is also characterized by a certain "disinterested" quality when discussed in relation to the practical consciousness. The interesting characteristic about this "disinterested" quality is that the aesthetic viewpoint restrains one from looking at an object other than in respect to the beauty that the object may possess and should not succumb to emotional interjections of morality which may ignore the beauty in favour of condemning the supposed immorality of the object. This "disinterested" quality is closely analogous to the mode of contemplation in which there is a close personal relationship between subject and object, yet the element of detachment is constantly

present.

The problem now consists of attempting to show what happens when we put these various distinctions to work in a specific instance. Bullough indicates some of the implications on pp. 66-68 in his Aesthetics, but most of the instances reflect the aesthetic asceticism of Pater and do not fully examine the wide range of possibilities which can exist when an attempt is made to look at objects in a purely aesthetical fashion. One way that we can arrive at a fairly clear conception of what can happen under the conditions of a purely aesthetical philosophy, is to adapt the approach taken by Steven Marcus in The Other Victorians where, to clarify the nature of a pornographic world view, he creates a mythical state called "pornotopia".⁸² By imitating this concept and postulating the existence of a state called 'aesthetopia', we can accomplish the dual functions of creating a graphic illustration of the world view implied by aesthetics as well as creating a hypothetical portrait of Aestheticism.

Before we move into a construct of the hypothetical world view of 'aesthetopia', it is well to understand the nature of any utopian world view. First of all, for all intents and purposes the utopia is an ideal world

and thus, as Marcus points out, it is "an ideal type" and "not an average of anything."⁸³ In fact it

. . . is formed by "the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct." In substance he [Max Weber] states, "this construct is like a utopia which has been arrived at by the analytical accentuation of certain elements of reality." And [Weber] goes on to add that "in its conceptual purity, this mental construct cannot be found anywhere in reality. It is a utopia."⁸⁴

Even though the word 'utopia' means "no place",⁸⁵ and Marcus is very quick to quote Max Weber on the phantasy nature of the utopian vision, such a mental construct can offer valuable insight into certain hypothetical aspects of the aesthetic vision which can be useful, particularly when compared to 'pornotopia'. In any case, if we take the basic postulates that Bullough puts forth with respect to the premises of the aesthetic consciousness, we will have a vision of what 'aesthetopia' looks like and may freely compare it with our own world view.

On a superficial level at least, it would be fairly simple to create a vision of 'aesthetopia' for our main concern will be to fix the values of time and space and

this should not be difficult in view of the information that we possess. Since the emphasis in 'aesthetopia' will, as Pater so aptly pointed out, be centred around 'experiences', there will really be no such thing as time. The participants' main concern will be to experience as many things as possible, never considering the ethics or utility of a situation. In other words it will always be 'experience time' and never 'evaluation time'. This is not entirely true as one will have to step back from the object or the experience and constantly be aware of the effect, but in this case the aesthete is not rationally categorizing the situation but rather concentrating on being aware of the various impressions. In a sense one becomes both actor and spectator in a pseudo-dramatic situation whereby one feels impressions and simultaneously examines the nature of the impressions. As soon as one abstractly and rationally attempts to evaluate a situation, one immediately emerges from aesthetopia. All circumstances are 'immanent' and all thoughts of 'causality' and 'finality' are absent. As a result what we consider morality or ethics has become aesthetical in its action. The finality that ethics consists of can never exist in an aesthetopia in the way that Bullough has postulated that it would because the finality of the act ends with the contemplation. The member of

aesthetopia is not obliged to consider finality (or ethics) beyond the actual perception and contemplation of the immediate act. If in the state of detached aesthetic contemplation the act is not considered to be a good one, then the act becomes 'bad'. However, this distinction, although it can be considered an ethical statement, resides only within the 'immanence' of the situation and therefore must be considered aesthetical rather than ethical.

As a statement about Aestheticism, it seems to me that the above discussion of aesthetopia, brief as it is, fairly adequately describes the movement that Pater is so often credited with launching in his statements in The Renaissance:

"To see the object as in itself it really is," has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly What effect does it [the aesthetic object] really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?⁸⁶

The above quotation is a statement of aesthetic criticism as impressionism and provides a brief outline of the

questions that an aesthetic critic should be concerned with. A more complete description of the dynamics of the process of aesthetic perception appears later on in "The Conclusion" to The Renaissance:

But when reflection begins to play upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence; the cohesive force seems suspended like some trick of magic; each object is loosed into a group of impressions--colour, odour, texture--in the mind of the observer. And if we continue to dwell in thought on this world, not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them, it contracts still further: the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind. . . . Each one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of the world. Analysis goes a step further still, and assures us that those impressions of the individual mind to which, for each one of us, experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight; that each of them is limited by time, and that as time is infinitely divisible, each of them is infinitely divisible also; all that is actually in it being a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it. . . .⁸⁷

The mood reflected by Pater in the above series of quotations is closely analogous to the state of mind that we hypothesized would be present in an aesthetopia and, while some critics may find some theoretical objections to it, there is very little that one could designate as immoral in the theory. While Pater says very little

about the comparative positions of art and morality in The Renaissance, he does say something relatively similar to what we have said about aesthetopia in his "Wordsworth" in Appreciations:

That the end of life is not action but contemplation--being as distinct from doing--a certain disposition of the mind: is, in some shape or other, the principle of all the higher morality. In poetry, in art, if you enter into their true spirit at all, you touch this principle in a measure: these, by their very sterility, are a type of beholding for the mere joy of beholding. To treat life in the spirit of art, is to make life a thing in which means and ends are identified: to encourage such treatment, the true moral significance of art and poetry.⁸⁸

The above quotation is an example of a discussion of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, art and morality, which is similar to the relationship that we postulated would exist in an aesthetopia; that a person in an aesthetopia made ethical statements only within the framework of aesthetics and never beyond the immanence of the situation.

Up to this point we have attempted to deal with the world view of aestheticism in relation to both art and morality, and we have compiled a series of quotations by Pater to further consolidate that view and attest

to its authenticity in relation to British Aestheticism. We might ask ourselves why and how such a point of view became so popular so quickly, as well as what the aesthetes were attempting to accomplish. Generally speaking, aestheticism, as well as being an expression of individualism which had begun to make itself felt as a force during the Romantic movement near the turn of the Nineteenth century, was also an attempt to create a viable alternative to the alienating influences of rationalism by creating a philosophy which re-emphasizes man's subjective relationship with his environment. One might say that Blake condenses the psychic problem of the age in these lines from The Mental Traveller:

The Guests are scatter'd through the land,
 For the eye altering alters all;
 The senses roll themselves in fear,
 And the flat earth becomes a ball;

The stars, sun, Moon, all shrink away,
 A desert vast without a bound,
 And nothing left to eat or drink,
 And a dark desert all around.⁸⁹

In the above lines Blake is developing a beautifully condensed and succinct account of what has happened to the psychic life of man in the period of time since the rationalism of Galileo and Copernicus for, due to the influence of their theories we no longer have the security and satisfaction of being the centre of the universe

with the sun and moon protectively revolving around us, but must now accept the fact of our isolation and alienation. The intent of the aesthete is to attempt to reverse this process and re-educate men to review their environment so that even if man must endure the psychic stresses of one-dimensional technology and rationalism, he will at least be aware of his immediate environment. When man sees the beauty in an ordinary object, the aesthete feels that man frees himself, to a degree, from the constricting nets of linear and, to again quote Blake from The Mental Traveller:

The sun and stars are nearer rolled.
 The trees bring forth sweet Extasy
 To all who in the desert roam;

As in The Mental Traveller when the return to joy and happiness occurs when there is a return to some sort of meaningful relationship with the environment, so it was held by the aesthetes that the primary function of aestheticism was to help revitalize that lost relationship and to create a viable alternative to the 'privitizing' and alienating nature of rationalism and rampant industrial urbanization.

The discussion up to this point has tended to revolve around the natura and resulting psychic attitudes

of aestheticism, and this inevitably leads us on to the question of what Decadence can be said to consist of. Although the two terms Aestheticism and Decadence are often used in an interchangeable manner by many literary critics, there are distinctions between the two movements although I will admit that the two are interconnected to a very large degree. The philosophy of aestheticism lies at the root of the whole discussion and the dividing line between Aestheticism and Decadence occurs along the amorphous line between aestheticism as an idea and a private vision, and aestheticism as a mode of living and a philosophy for directing action. The distinction that I am attempting to make here can be made more clear if we go back to our discussion of pornography for a moment. Certain acts, such as violent or sexual acts, can be construed as 'acceptable' as long as they are kept within the confines of a book or the mind but, as soon as these ideas become associated with action, a very heavy repressive reaction tends to evolve. In the case of pornography or any other activity that can easily be construed of as anti-social, this is merely stating the obvious. The case of aestheticism is much more subtle than that. As a philosophy of contemplation, aestheticism seems to initiate few grounds for attacks, or at least incarceration. Looking at art and thinking

about art is a highly acceptable social activity (at least theoretically) and few people would feel morally opposed to someone who happened to spend a great deal of time meditating about art. However, as soon as there is a concerted effort to put aesthetic ideas into action, it became necessary to affix a label on the actions which, in the case of aestheticism, became called Decadence. It should be noted that the stress in the theories of Walter Pater is on the 'contemplation' of beauty, and there is a repudiation of 'action' implied in saying that ". . . the end of life is not action but contemplation--being as distinct from doing--a certain disposition of the mind: is, in some shape or other, the principle of all the higher morality."⁹⁷ Pater personally rejected the actions of the Decadents to the point where he withdrew the "Conclusion" to The Renaissance because ". . . it might possibly mislead those young men into whose hands it might fall,"⁹⁸ particularly the rather non-contemplative invocation to ". . . burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy,"⁹⁹ for, ". . . not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end."¹⁰⁰ The public repudiation of certain parts of the "Conclusion" was, no doubt, a brilliant public relations move by Pater to increase the sales of his book as one can imagine

young men flocking to buy the book so that they could be corrupted by a master. In any case it is quite easy to see how a philosophy which had a 'quietist' and contemplative background could suddenly become a byword for action. To show the influence that Pater had on Oscar Wilde, Wilde is quoted by Yeats with respect to The Renaissance that it ". . . is my golden book; I never travel anywhere without it."¹⁰¹ It is history that Pater's aestheticism, either directly or indirectly, influenced most of the young men who subsequently became labelled Decadent although it is difficult to say whether The Renaissance was an influence or an excuse. In any case the end result of acting out Pater's aestheticism occurs when one desires to become a living work of art--as in Dandyism--or when one concentrates on creating beautiful things and experiencing strange adventures outside of any consideration of social morality. Thus, where Pater attempts to create a vision of 'aesthetic puritanism' whereby objects--particularly artistic artifacts--are viewed through an aesthetic filter, the Decadent usually carried on a life which tended to subvert contemporary morality. The model Aesthete is probably Pater himself, while the model Decadent is typified by Huysmann's Des Essientes or Wilde's Lord Wotton or Dorian Gray (although there are distinctions to be

made in the case of the latter two that will be considered later) whose experiential experimentations and aesthetic theories are outside of any considerations of contemporary morality. In fact as we noted above in relation to Decadence, most of the acts of the above three fictive characters tend to emphasize the forbidden and exotic because the feelings--aesthetic and otherwise--become more intense when related to the forbidden. This emphasizes the point that although aestheticism was supposed to imply a love of the intelligence and the imagination for its own sake, this did not necessarily mean that the love was, as in the case of Pater, an austere and ascetic love, for it also became, in the case of the Decadents, an example of demonic love in which great pleasure was taken in attacking social mores and creating absurd and exotic alternatives to the Victorian fantasy.

FOOTNOTES

- 49 Oscar Wilde, "The Preface," The Picture of Dorian Gray, Signet, N.Y., 1962, pp. 17-18.
- 50 "The Critic as Artist," Works, p. 1039.
- 51 Ibid., p. 1048.
- 52 Ibid., p. 1058.
- 53 Oscar Wilde, "To the Editor of the Daily Chronicle," The Letters of Oscar Wilde, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis, Harcourt, Brace, New York, 1962, p. 263.
- 54 Richard Ellmann, "The Artist as Critic as Wilde," The Artist as Critic, p. xxii.
- 55 Ibid., p. 17.
- 56 Sigmund Freud, "Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious," Basic Writings, pp. 756-757.
- 57 Holbrook Jackson, "Fin de Siecle-1890-1900," The Eighteen Nineties, Capricorn, New York, 1966, p. 27.
- 58 Edward Bullough, "The Modern Conception of Aesthetics," Aesthetics: Lectures and Essays, ed. E.M. Wilkinson, Stanford Press, Stanford, 1957, p. 70.
- 59 Ibid., p. 71.
- 60 Ibid., p. 71.
- 61 Wilde, "De Profundis," Works, p. 932.
- 62 Bullough, Aesthetics, p. 72.
- 63 Ibid., p. 72.
- 64 Wilde, Works, p. 1069.
- 65 Ibid., p. 1205.
- 66 Ibid., p. 915.
- 67 Bullough, Aesthetics, p. 72.

- 68 Bullough, Aesthetics, p. 73.
- 69 Ibid.
- 70 Wilde, Works, p. 915.
- 71 Ibid., p. 881.
- 72 Ibid., p. 877.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 Bullough, Aesthetics, p. 74.
- 75 Wilde, "De Profundis," Works, p. 896.
- 76 Wilde, "Pen, Pencil and Poison," Works, p. 1007.
- 77 Ibid., p. 1008.
- 78 Wilde, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," Works, p. 1081.
- 79 Ibid., pp. 1090-1091.
- 80 Bullough, Aesthetics, p. 71.
- 81 Ibid., p. 77.
- 82 Steven Marcus, "Conclusion: Pornotopia," The Other Victorians, Bantam, Toronto, 1967, pp. 269-289.
- 83 Ibid., p. 270.
- 84 Ibid.
- 85 Ibid., p. 271.
- 86 Walter H. Pater, "Preface", The Renaissance, Johnson Reprint, New York, 1967, p. 9.
- 87 Ibid., pp. 219-220.
- 88 Walter Pater, "Wordsworth", Appreciations, Johnson Reprint, New York, 1967, p. 62.
- 89 William Blake, "The Mental Traveller," English Poetry and Prose of the Romantic Movement, p. 190.
- 90 Ibid., p. 191.

- 97 Walter Pater, Appreciations, p. 62.
- 98 Walter Pater, "Conclusion", Renaissance, p. 218f.
- 99 Ibid., p. 221.
- 100 Ibid., p. 220.
- 101 William Butler Yeats, "Autobiography", Victorian Poetry and Poetics, p. 731.

CHAPTER IV

Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained; and the restrainer or reason usurps its place and governs the unwilling.

William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

Indeed, I am inclined to think that each myth and legend that seems to us to spring out of the wonder, or terror, or fancy of tribe and nation, was in its origin the invention of one single mind.

Oscar Wilde, The Critic as Artist, p. 1021.

Every single human being should be the fulfillment of a prophecy. For every human being should be the realization of some ideal, either in the mind of God or in the mind of man.

Oscar Wilde, De Profundis, p. 928.

The work done up to this point has essentially created the theoretical groundwork so that we may be able to move through a closer examination of the works of Oscar Wilde to indicate specific examples of the aesthetical and ethical tensions that I have been referring to. We have seen how there are many theoretical indications of the conflict in the nature of the wit that Wilde uses (tendency wit), and in the constant references to, and justifications of, the idea of criminality in relation to art. We have also seen how the theory of aestheticism can remedy some of the feelings of alienation induced by the greater objectivity and abstraction of the sciences, although the intense individualism that this aestheticism evolves can be the precursor of other problems, particularly ethical problems. Essentially what I am going to do now is examine the aesthetic theories of Wilde, particularly as exemplified in his Intentions, and then relate these theories to the basic movements in his prose works, particularly The Picture of Dorian Gray, in an effort to develop a clearer picture of the problems of aesthetics and ethics in the works of Oscar Wilde.

The essence of this portion of the thesis evolves from The Picture of Dorian Gray where Oscar Wilde, in

the juxtaposition of Dorian Gray with his portrait, manages to augment and magnify the conflicts and tensions involved in a discussion of the 'good' and the 'beautiful'. Many critics have been compelled to say, in relation to The Picture of Dorian Gray, that Wilde here reveals himself as a moralist, as an aesthetic Victorian and puritan who, through the rather routine destruction of his hero Dorian Gray, destroys the whole validity of his aesthetic theories as expressed in Intentions. Karl Backson calls The Picture of Dorian Gray a 'novel with a conventional ending,'¹⁰² and Wilde himself, in a letter to the Editor of the St. James Gazette during a debate with the critics when the novel first appeared, says that the book can be considered a "moral tale".¹⁰³ The usual approach of the critics is to say that by destroying Dorian Gray who is, at least theoretically, the example of his aestheticism in action, Wilde is supposedly implying a negative ethical judgement on his own aestheticism. Thus it is said that the puritanism in Wilde forces him to eliminate his 'decadent' hero in a somewhat poetic manner which supposedly corresponds with the ethical depravity and immorality of his actions. It is my contention that the death of Dorian Gray is significant, not for the usual ethical (or at least 'normal' ethical) reasons. Dorian Gray becomes

"a withered, wrinkled and loathsome"¹⁰⁴ corpse, not due to any moral retribution on the part of the author, but simply because Dorian had become a bad work of art. Once one becomes aware of Wilde's theories with respect to 'good' and 'bad' art, particularly as expressed in The Decay of Lying, the above assertion becomes apparent.

The Decay of Lying is discussed in relation to The Picture of Dorian Gray in an attempt to reveal how the principles of 'the art of lying' are put into effect in the novel and to reveal the subtle changes that Dorian moves through in relation to aesthetic and moral values as the novel progresses. In his ambiguously satiric article on aesthetics, The Decay of Lying, Oscar Wilde fabricates some of his most famous statements on the relationship of Art to Life and Nature. The use of the word "lying" in the title is significant for at least several reasons. While the reference is an ironic thrust at middle class views on art, it also undercuts Plato's ambiguous attack on art in the Republic which condemned some kinds of art as a lie and, in effect, became the dubious authority for attacks on the validity of art. The word 'lying' as I indicated earlier in Chapter II, tells us something about Wilde. By saying

that man's ability to create imaginative things is related to lying, Wilde is making a rather strong ethical comment on the creative process. As Richard Ellmann points out:

Each of the four essays that make up Intentions is to some degree subversive, as if to demonstrate that the intentions of the artist are not strictly honorable. The first and the last, "The Decay of Lying" and "The Truth of Masks," celebrate art for rejecting truths, faces and all that paraphernalia in favour of lies and masks. . . . He [Wilde] prefers 'lying' because it sounds more wilful, because it is no out pouring of the self but a conscious effort to mislead.¹⁰⁵

What the above attitude described by Ellmann indicates about Oscar Wilde or his art is difficult to determine at this point. We could say that the above attitude is a pose held by Oscar Wilde to 'epater le bourgeois' and that he really believed that art was a sacrosanct activity. However, the extent to which Wilde infers that art is somehow 'subversive' is so consistently held one cannot help thinking that such pervasive use of the idea would tend to reduce its shock value, and that perhaps Wilde had other reasons for using the idea. It is possible that Wilde is constantly aware of the dichotomy that he had set up between art and morality, and that he is torn between the problem of attempting to justify to himself the validity of his art while realizing that, in terms of the Nineteenth century ethic,

what he is doing is subversive. That is, Wilde accepts the principle that what he is doing is subversive in terms of contemporary ethics, but in terms of the total development of culture and the eventual psychic liberation of man, what he is doing is justifiable. If for no other reason, the idea of criminality can be justified in the easing of consciences that it engenders. To clarify this we need only look to Carl Jung to understand that

The meeting with ourselves belongs to the more unpleasant things that may be avoided as long as we possess living symbol-figures in which all that is inner and unknown is projected. The figure of the devil, in particular, is a most valuable and acceptable possession, for as long as he goes outside in the form of a roaring lion, we know where evil lurks; . . . With the rise of consciousness since the middle ages, to be sure, he has been considerably reduced in stature. But to take his place there are human beings to whom we gratefully resign our shadows. With what pleasure, for instance, we read newspaper reports of crime! A true criminal becomes a popular figure because he unburdens in no small degree the consciences of his fellow men, for now they know once more where evil is to be found.¹⁰⁷

I am not saying that this is precisely what Wilde is getting at in the nature of art and criminality as surrogate, but, if one views Wilde's final vision of 'the artist as Christ,'¹⁰⁸ one cannot help thinking that somehow Wilde had envisaged a process whereby the artist

had taken on the unacknowledged sins and guilts of men and become their scapegoat.

In any case, to justify the creation of artistic illusion in the eyes of his readers, Wilde found it necessary to place the status of beauty on an equal or higher level than that of conventional morality, and it is essentially this that he does in The Decay of Lying and The Picture of Dorian Gray. The basic premises of Wilde's doctrines on art are derived from the French movement of 'Art for Art's sake' which, when translated into action, becomes closely akin to Pater's dictum from the "Conclusion" to The Renaissance of 'experience for the sake of experience' rather than for the fruits of experience such as knowledge. This leads to a situation in which

Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external resemblance. She is a veil rather than a mirror. She has flowers that no forests know of, birds that no woodland possesses. She makes and unmakes many worlds, and can draw the moon from heaven with a scarlet thread. Hers are the 'forms more real than the living man,' and hers the great archetypes of which things that have existence are but unfinished copies.¹⁰⁹

In essence Wilde is saying that what is created in good art is a completely new world whose values are higher

than those of real life or nature. This is because Nature and Life tend to imitate Art and because the values of aesthetics are based on beauty which is of more value and more enduring than morality. The suggestion that art is a 'veil' is also very interesting for the idea can be interpreted in two different ways. If one thinks of a veil in terms of "forms more real than the living man," the function of the veil can be viewed as something insidious in that it is preventing man from seeing something that he should be permitted to see; or else the veil can be viewed as something which serves the merciful function of obscuring a reality that man would be unable to accept unless the reality is manipulated and obscured slightly.

In any case, when one places aesthetics above ethics, the inevitable result is the conclusion that 'life is merely a reflection of art,' with art tending to shape life more than life shapes art. Incidentally, Blake also asserts a principle which is similar to this in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell which will clarify the direction of our thought somewhat and give it perspective:

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their

enlarged and numerous senses could perceive. . . . Thus began Priesthood:
 Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales.
 And at length they pronounced that the Gods
 had order'd such things. Thus men forgot
 that all deities reside in the human breast.¹¹⁰

Blake is asserting here that all order in nature is the result of art, of the 'Poetic Principle'¹¹¹ which is the first principle. That is, men would like to say that the order of nature as we perceive it is due to divine antecedent and thus they tend to forget that "all deities reside in the human breast." Wilde also says something surprisingly similar to this in The Critic As Artist: "Indeed I am inclined to think that each myth and legend that seems to spring out of the wonder, or terror, or fancy of tribe and nation, was in its origin the invention of one single mind."¹¹² When Wilde subsequently says that "Life imitates art far more than art imitates life," we can see that it is quite conceivable that he is not merely being facetious in order to shock but really means what he is saying. The inescapable result is that one must say that both Wilde and Blake concur in saying that the ultimate source of moral codes and laws in the culture of man are the result of poetic creations. By its primary existence then, the 'poetic principle' is implied to be superior to moral law.

The above conclusions are not quite as ridiculous as they may first appear if we look at them in general epistemological terms. What Wilde is fundamentally saying is that the surrounding world of nature has no order and that art, since it is ordered, tends to give order to the life around it. Aestheticism represents a sensual ordering of that reality and the function of a new art form is to cause the imagination which, at least theoretically, desires to be creative and seek new forms and, in effect, to imitate the new art forms. Both Wilde and Blake would probably concur with the idea that man tends to accept 'old ideas' as truth and views 'new ideas' as lies, erroneously assuming that there was some divine purpose behind the old ideas and that the new ideas, since they are quite obviously man-made, must somehow be inferior. Men tend to think that "morality is the one thing that cannot be improved, since every modification of habitual morality is, in its application, an immorality."¹¹³ Jung's commentary on this quotation states: "In this bon mot there is something more serious, since it carries an undeniable fact of feeling, against which many a pioneer has stumbled."¹¹⁴ Thus man, by thinking this way, denies the divinity within himself and prefers to pursue the alien divinities of dogma and fact, thereby repressing the vital energies

of creation within himself. As Wilde so aptly points out:

Scientifically speaking, the basis of life--the energy of life, as Aristotle would call it--is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting the various forms through which the expression can be attained.¹¹⁵

Oscar Wilde develops the above idea further, on page 978, when he deals with the various stages that art tends to evolve through from 'good' art to 'bad' art, and it is interesting to note that Dorian Gray evolves through relatively the same sort of process. Stage one is the highest stage where art is 'pure imagination dealing with what is unreal and non-existent.'¹¹⁶ This is deemed to be good because 'reality', or life, has not intruded on the scene and the only criterion for judging art is purely aesthetic. This is the realm of 'purely abstract and decorative objects and creations whose sole origins are imaginative and pleasurable.'¹¹⁷ Stage two occurs when life becomes fascinated with the creations of art and begs to become a part of the work of art. In this stage

Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to facts, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps

between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment.¹¹⁸

Looking at the above quotation in more familiar terms; when the first stage is myth and pure artistic illusion with its fantastic and divine figures, the second stage that Wilde mentions is related to what we call the genre of romance literature with its larger than life characters and part real and part supernatural environment. The final stage occurs when "life gets the upper hand and drives art out into the wilderness."¹¹⁹ Generally speaking, this final stage roughly corresponds with what we call naturalism with, what Wilde would consider, its fatal intrusion of 'logos' on 'mythos'; in essence the result of selling one's birthright for a mess of facts.¹²⁰

A close reading of The Picture of Dorian Gray will show that the novel is quite closely related to the above theories of art in its theme and movement. Dorian Gray is essentially a work of art created by the subtle verbal strokes and ideas of Lord Henry in that Dorian becomes completely detached from normal moral values and gravitates towards living almost totally in the world of aesthetic experiences, the area that we have designated as 'aesthetopia'. The whole point of the novel

is to depict a man living in a world of art, not as a poet or other artistic creator, but as an aesthetic spectator whose function it is to feel, but never actively participate in, the drama of life. As we shall see, it is through the participation in a 'drama' with the actress Sybil Vane that this characteristic becomes quite clear. The novel then, is a comment on life and art and it depicts, through the juxtaposition of Dorian Gray and his picture, an exploration of the results of following Wilde's aesthetic in a 'fictive' situation.

It is interesting to note how the artistic illusion is created whereby the work of art, in this case Dorian Gray's portrait, reflects life, and life, in the person of Dorian Gray himself, reflects the characteristics of a work of art. The first instance of metempsychosis-- in this instance the transference of the aesthetic soul from the work of art to Dorian Gray and vice versa-- emerges in Chapter one of the novel when Basil Hallward declares to Lord Henry that he 'has put too much of himself into the picture'¹²¹ of Dorian Gray to ever exhibit it. There is certain amount of irony in this fear for it is quite justified, not because the picture reveals anything about Basil's personality, but because the portrait that Basil has created eventually inspires Dorian Gray to murder him. Essentially what

Basil has accomplished in his painting is to create a life-like figure of beauty which can be receptive to the ethical soul of Dorian Gray, while Lord Henry proceeds to breathe the aesthetic soul, or attitude, into Dorian himself through his amoral aesthetic suggestions. Just as Dorian Gray had such a profound effect on Basil while the painting was being created, so Lord Henry has a powerful effect on Dorian with his exotic and bewildering suggestions:

Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind and poisons us. The body sins once and has done with its sin for action is a mode of purification. Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure, or the luxury of a regret. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it and your soul grows sick with longing for the things that it has forbidden itself, with desires for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful.¹²²

Through a constant shower of subtle suggestions and insinuations Lord Henry slowly persuades Dorian Gray to live the kind of life that is possible only in an aesthetic dimension, in which the only criteria for 'good' or 'evil' are concerned with the aesthetic quality, or the depth of aesthetic feelings, that the experience induces. Much of the above theory is summed up in the following assertion by Lord Henry:

I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream--I believe that he would gain such fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of medievalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal--to something finer; richer than the Hellenic ideal it may be.¹²³

The "Hellenic ideal" is a reference to Plato's Ideality, yet it is essential to note that the source of joy in the above quotation is essentially Dionysian. The classicism of the "Hellenic ideal" is essentially Apollonian with all of the restraints that Hellenism implies. Lord Henry is obviously advocating a return, not to the restrained ethos of the Doric mode with its resulting 'sickness and longing,' but rather to "something finer, richer than the Hellenic ideal," to the unrestrained life of the Dionysiac, in which one's mode of living is characterized by an aesthetic morality.¹²⁴ One should note also that Lord Henry refers to the 'ideality' of art, which, although it is a reference to Plato's ideals, involves a theory which is contrary to what Plato proposed in the Republic. It is essential to remember that Plato rejected, at least in portions of the Republic, 'mythos' and art as sources of the Ideal. The section that I am referring to states:

We have, then, a fair case against the poet and we may set him down as the counterpart of the painter, whom he resembles in two ways: his creations are poor by the standards of truth and reality, and his appeal is not to the highest part of the soul but to one which is equally inferior. So we shall be justified in not admitting him into a well-ordered commonwealth, because he stimulates and strengthens an element which threatens to undermine the reason. . . . he gratifies that senseless part which cannot distinguish great and small, but regards the same things as now one, now the other; and he is an image-maker whose dreams are phantoms far removed from reality.¹²⁵

On the other hand, Lord Henry and Oscar Wilde are both asserting that the essence of art represents a transcendent vision related to a greater truth and ideality than is possessed by objects in the real world. At a superficial glance through The Picture of Dorian Gray, it would at first appear that the above potential function of art is not upheld and that, in fact, the reverse is shown to be true. A closer examination of the text reveals that the failure of certain aesthetic theories can be shown to be due to aesthetic rather than ethical reasons.

When Dorian Gray sees his newly finished portrait, the pact of metempsychosis is sealed for 'the sense of his own beauty comes on him like a revelation.'¹²⁶ Since he is now aware of both the preciousness and the

transcience of his beauty, he becomes afraid of losing it and becomes envious of the permanent quality of the painting:

It will never be older than this particular day of June. . . . If it were only the other way. If it were to be I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that--for that--I would give everything! . . . I would give my soul for that!¹²⁷

Essentially just 'that' happens, and in the ancient tradition of selling one's soul to the devil to receive material wealth, Dorian Gray so sells his soul to art that he may never feel the inexorable pangs of age nor may be forced to view the slow disintegration of his beauty by time. One can see that it is implied here that there is something demonic or subversive about art, upholding the Platonic theory that there may be a quality in art which seduces the consciousness and makes people somehow act immorally. This is again related to the idea that if art and the 'poetic principles' are the 'first principles', then it is inevitable that contemporary art be influencing us in subtle ways, just as the ethical principles of our parents were subtly induced by art. As we pointed out previously in relation to Jung; any change in morality can be conceived of as an immorality and it is appropriate that there be a degree of satanic

imagery in this particular section. There is a certain subtle irony in the imagery at this point for there can be a comparison between this situation and the idea of 'original sin' in the Garden of Eden. While Dorian is blissfully unaware of his own beauty he is happy and innocent, but as soon as he spies the 'apple' of beauty he becomes aware of the transience and limitations of the real world and, in a situation somewhat reminiscent of the dilemma of Tithonus, begins to desire immortality and beauty. Metaphorically speaking, the Satan of Eden has been replaced by the 'ideality' of art and yet, instead of being cast out of the Garden, Dorian is acquainted with further joys and aesthetic pleasures. In any case, after the fatal moment of metempsychosis, Lord Henry Wotton looks at the finished portrait of Dorian Gray and says "It is the real Dorian Gray--that's all."¹²⁸

The function of Chapter two seems to be to emphasize the process of metempsychosis and to clearly identify the roles that each character will play in the change. As the chapter opens there is a distinct separation between Dorian and his portrait. As the chapter unfolds there is gradual merging until finally, during the last viewing of the finished picture, the terminal trans-

formation occurs. The full implications of the above transformation do not become apparent until Chapter four where it becomes clear that Dorian Gray has definitely inherited the permanence of the aesthetic qualities of his picture and has begun to exist in aesthetopia, the ideal world of art, as a creation of Lord Henry.

Although we have noted previously the influence of Lord Henry on Dorian, the nature of Lord Henry's role as creator must be closely examined. In Chapter two Lord Henry says:

. . . to influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of someone else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him.¹²⁹

Inherent in the above quotation is the idea that Dorian ceases to become an individual as soon as he succumbs to the influence of Lord Henry. The role of Lord Henry as the creator of a living work of art is made even more explicit in Chapter three when Henry asserts in reference to his control over Dorian Gray that "He would seek to dominate him--had already indeed, half done so. He would make that wonderful spirit his own."¹³⁰ Later, in Chapter four, this is reiterated when Lord Henry says

that ". . . to a large extent the lad was his own creation."¹³¹ In essence Dorian Gray represents an attempt on the part of Lord Henry to create an ideal which will exemplify something 'far richer than the Hellenic ideal.' We can also see that Dorian Gray is not oblivious of this creator-created relationship, for he feels compelled to say to Lord Henry: "You filled me with a weird desire to know everything about life. For days after I met you, something seemed to throb in my veins There was an exquisite poison in the air. I had a passion for sensations."¹³²

The implications of the above involvement in the ideal world of pure beauty and sensation first become clear in Dorian Gray's fairy tale relationship with the unconscious aesthete Sybil Vane. Sybil, in her intense submission to her dramatic roles, is an analogue to Dorian as she is another person who lives almost entirely in the world of artistic illusion. Part of the function that she serves in the novel is to clarify the nature and depth of Dorian's involvement in the world of art. Just as she is rarely 'Sybil Vane the person' but rather tends to be an embodiment of the roles that she acts on the stage, so Dorian is rarely his original self and instead embodies the characteristics of his portrait.

As Sybil says after she falls in love with Dorian and, as a result ceases to be the magnificent actress that she was before she met him: ". . . acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. I thought it was all true."¹³³ Before Dorian 'freed her soul~~d~~ from its prison and taught her what reality really was,'¹³⁴ she had never discovered any meaning in life and could only find that meaning on the stage where she could safely feel the passions of Juliet and the 'beings' of her other parts. This is the major reason why she was such a successful actress; the artificiality of playing a part had never occurred to her and she needed the role-playing as a means to inject a safe passion and vitality into her life. As with Dorian Gray she became a great work of art because she had no soul to hide.

The fairy tale nature of their relationship is made quite clear in the names that they have chosen for each other. She is his 'Juliet', or whichever part she is playing that night, while he is her 'Prince Charming' who will give her the symbolic kiss which will arouse her from her dreams in the world of art and which will, ironically enough, be her kiss of death. With his love he 'frees her soul~~d~~ from its prison' and Sybil ceases

to call him Prince Charming and calls him by his real name. Her death is as much the result of destroying the artistic illusion by becoming a 'bad' work of art as in her final loss of Dorian's love, for she can no more live outside her world of artistic illusion than can Tennyson's Lady of Shalott. Sybil Vane emerges from her illusory world for the same reason that the Lady of Shalott does, by feeling love, which subsequently makes her aware of the realities that she had been shielding herself from. It is impossible for either the Lady of Shalott or Sybil Vane to live in the crass world of reality since they had both been so isolated from it; the Lady of Shalott by her isolation in the castle and Sybil Vane by her isolation from the world of real emotions by her profession as an actress. When Sybil is finally rejected by Dorian because she is no longer 'art consummate',¹³⁵ the pangs of rejection are real as compared to the illusory ones that she suffers as 'Juliet' and she feels that she must die to escape the pain. The destruction of Sybil Vane is closely analogous to the death of Dorian Gray for, just as she dies when she emerges from her illusory world, so Dorian Gray is rather spectacularly destroyed when he so emerges.

The development of the emergence of Dorian Gray from the world of art is an interesting progression, and since it is closely related to Wilde's aesthetic theories, we should deal with this emergence in substantial detail. As I pointed out at the beginning of this chapter; according to Oscar Wilde in The Decay of Lying the value of art is an inverse proportion to the degree to which reality is permitted to intrude itself upon the artistic object:

Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent. This is the first stage. Then Life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and demands to be admitted into the charmed circle. Art takes Life as part of her rough material, recreates it, refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style. . . . The third stage is when Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness. This is the true decadence and it is from this that we are now suffering.¹³⁶

Figuratively speaking, in his initial relationship with Lord Henry when Dorian first becomes aware of his own potential as an aesthetic object and in his fairy tale relationship with Sybil Vane, Dorian is dwelling in the first stages of 'pure imagination'. However, as soon as Dorian realizes that his picture is aging in lieu of his own corporeal body, reality begins to intrude

itself upon Dorian in the graphic illustration of the painting which is an ethical measure of Dorian's actions. In a very real sense it is Dorian's own portrait which aids in his destruction by measuring his distance from reality; in essence the distance of his aesthetopia from reality. The picture is actually, as Dorian refers to it in many instances, 'a visual representation of his soul,'¹³⁷ and as such represents a moral judgement of his actions in the real world. The psychology of this situation is very reminiscent of one postulated by Carl Jung in Psychological Reflections:

The man who looks into the mirror of the water does, indeed, see his own face first of all. Who ever goes to himself risks a confrontation with himself. The mirror does not flatter; it faithfully shows whatever looks into it; namely the face that we never show to the world because we cover it with the persona, the mask of the actor. But the mirror lies behind the mask and shows the true face. This confrontation is the first test of courage on the inner way, a test to frighten off most people.¹³⁸

In essence this is what happens to Dorian Gray; he becomes frightened of what the picture becomes as a reflection of his mortal soul and he commits the fatal mistake of attempting to change the picture by attempting to become an ethically beautiful person. This attempt to change must fail in Dorian's case since he

long ago gave up his soul for art's sake. Within the framework of aesthetic values in which he exists, Dorian is incapable of moral transgressions as long as he follows the aesthetic code of Lord Henry Wotton and pursues the dictates of his passions and senses.

The problem of Dorian Gray, in a sense, bears a very strong resemblance to the problem of Tithonus, who asked for the gift of immortality and then suffers the more horrible pangs of age and natural decay. As an analogue, Dorian desires to retain his beauty and to never age, but he must bear the burden of seeing that the 'good' and the 'beautiful' do not necessarily coincide. The mocking figure in the picture juxtaposes the morality of his actions with the aesthetic quality of his actions and provides a graphic illustration of the distance between the two. Dorian sells his soul to art and then is forced to suffer the humiliation of watching his soul in the picture rot and decay. Within his aesthetic conscience Dorian has no feelings of guilt at any of his actions as long as he follows the dictates of Lord Henry and is in harmony with himself. However, the picture is a constant visual reminder of how far he is deviating from the contemporary mores and ethics of 'normal' society, and it is this in-

cessant intrusion of moral and ethical reality into his life which finally destroys Dorian by inducing him to consciously aspire to moral beauty as well as aesthetic beauty. However, it is apparent that Dorian feels no guilt when he commits some crime against his fellow man; in fact his usual reaction is a form of narcissistic and childish petulance. This attitude is given symbolic credence when Dorian has the portrait placed in the room that he occupied as a child as soon as the slow decay of the picture begins to upset him.

The shortcomings and deficiencies inherent in leading a life in aesthetopia, aside from the obvious moral problems that ensue, begin to emerge in the latter part of the novel. As with his French counterpart Des Essientes, Dorian seeks to experience strange sensations and follows without question, the demands of his passions. Des Essientes may appear to be like Dorian but if one examines the two very closely, it becomes quite clear that Des Essientes possesses an intellectual depth and sensitivity that Dorian could never possess. The result is that the reader tends to develop the dual attitudes of disgust and sympathy in relation to Dorian Gray, for although he commits reprehensible acts, Dorian is a mere puppet created by Lord Henry. Dorian is

like Sybil Vane in that he never really participates in the drama of life. He remains a spectator and impartial observer on whom life is constantly acting while he is unable to react. Where Lord Henry Wotton had hoped to create, in the person of Dorian Gray, a living work of art that would be capable of both great joy and great sorrow, the final result is a man who remains detached from all that he does and feels sorrow only with respect to the loss of his moral innocence. When Dorian murders Basil Hallward, Dorian is portrayed as

Watching him [Basil] with that strange expression that one sees on the faces of those absorbed in a play when some great artist is acting. There was neither real sorrow in it nor real joy. There was simply the passion of the spectator.¹³⁹

In the world of Dorian Gray people have become mere objects on whom one vents passion, or conversely, has passion induced by them. Dorian murders Basil yet acknowledges it in a very detached manner as if it had been committed by someone else. The next morning, after a brief reverie induced by the Decadent artist Gautier's Emaux et Camees, Dorian says simply "Poor Basil! What a horrible way for a man to die."¹⁴⁰ In this comment the detachment of Dorian is complete for there is no sense of regret whatsoever. The picture, however, gives a visual and stark reminder of the enormity of the act

in the "Loathsome dew that gleamed, wet and glistening, on the hands, as though the canvas had sweated blood."¹⁴¹

Immediately after the accidental death of James Vane, Dorian can be clearly seen emerging from his aesthetopia or at least he is permitting himself, as Oscar Wilde indicated a 'bad' work of art would, to be influenced by the outside world, particularly with respect to moral considerations. Dorian begins to develop a strong sense of sin and vows to make his life more moral as well as beautiful, not realizing that in his world "Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others,"¹⁴² and that any ". . . preoccupation with ideas of what is right and wrong in conduct shows an arrested intellectual development."¹⁴³ Wilde would probably agree that much of Dorian's problem is revealed in the latter aphorism, as Dorian is incapable of establishing his own values and constantly refers to Lord Henry for spiritual aid. When Dorian indicates to Lord Henry that he is going to be 'good' as well as 'beautiful', Lord Henry scoffs at his moral aspirations and says: "There is no use in your telling me that you are going to be good. . . . You are quite perfect pray don't change."¹⁴⁴ To which Dorian replies: "No, Harry, I have done too many dread-

ful things in my life. I am not going to do any more. I began my good actions yesterday."¹⁴⁵ Lord Henry subsequently points out that the morality of Dorian's 'good action' is rather questionable since any damage that would have occurred with the relationship of Hetty had already been done. The disturbing notion that good deeds require considerably more than good intentions had never occurred to Dorian. After all, what Dorian does to Hetty under the guise of 'good' intentions is substantially no different than what he did to Sybil Vane who subsequently committed suicide. Dorian doesn't care to think that the damage has already been done, even where his good actions are concerned and now, to escape the haunting reflection of his portrait, he frantically attempts to create the illusion of purity:

Don't let us talk about it any more, and don't try to persuade me that the first good action that I have done for years, the first bit of self sacrifice that I have ever known, is really a sort of sin. I want to be better. I am going to be better.¹⁴⁶

Dorian subsequently begs Lord Henry never to let anyone else be 'poisoned by the decadent book that destroyed him,'¹⁴⁷ unaware that "art has no influence upon action"¹⁴⁸ and that Dorian had committed those crimes because he wanted to, not because he had to. The 'de-

cadent' book had merely reflected what was in Dorian to begin with. As Wilde somewhat perversely points out in "The Preface" to The Picture of Dorian Gray: "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors."¹⁴⁹ In any case Dorian begins to long ". . . for the unstained purity of his boyhood,"¹⁵⁰ as opposed to his previous desires for unstained physical beauty, yet juxtaposed with this desire are the deaths of James Vane, Sybil Vane, Alan Campbell, and Basil Hallward for whom he feels no compassion. The only thing that troubles Dorian is ". . . the living death of his own soul."¹⁵¹ Dorian Gray's attempts to achieve the best from the two separate categories of the 'good' and the 'beautiful', results only in an infuriating change in his picture in which "hypocrisy, cunning and curiosity"¹⁵² over-lay all of his other iniquities and the motivations of his good intentions are revealed. This final intrusion of Fact into Dorian's life, revealing to him the impossibility of merging the two worlds of social morality and art and the necessity of tolerating a "living death" impells him to destroy the objectification of his conscience and he is himself destroyed.

In view of what I have mentioned about Oscar Wilde's aesthetic as propounded in Intentions and in relation

to the character of Dorian Gray, it is somewhat difficult to understand Wilde's negative portraiture of Dorian Gray. This problem is significant when one considers that a destruction of Dorian can be considered a condemnation of the theories that Wilde spent most of his life both propounding and living. It is fortunate then that Oscar Wilde, in a series of letters to the press during the furious debate on Dorian Gray when it first appeared in print, offers his opinion of the character of Dorian Gray:

When I first conceived the idea of a young man selling his soul in exchange for eternal youth--an idea that is old in the history of literature, but to which I have given new form--I felt that, from an aesthetic point of view, it would be difficult to keep the moral in its proper secondary place; and even now I do not feel quite sure that I have been able to do so. I think the moral is too apparent. When the book is published in a volume I hope to be able to correct this defect.

As for what the moral is, your critic states that it is this--that when a man feels himself becoming "too angelic" he should rush out and make a "beast of himself." I cannot really say that I consider this a moral. The real moral of the story is that all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment, and this moral is so far artistically and deliberately suppressed that it does not enunciate its law as a general principle, but realizes itself purely in the lives of individuals, and so becomes a dramatic element in a work of art, and not the object of the

work of art itself. Your critic also falls into error when he says that Dorian Gray, having a "cool, calculating, conscienceless character," was inconsistent when he destroyed the picture of his own soul, on the ground that the picture did not become less hideous after he had done what, in his vanity, he had considered his first good action. Dorian Gray has not got a cool calculating consciousnessless character at all. On the contrary, he is extremely compulsive, absurdly romantic, and is haunted all through his life by an exaggerated sense of conscience which mars his pleasure for him and warns him that youth and enjoyment are not everything in the world. It is finally to get rid of the conscience that has dogged his steps from year to year that he destroys the picture; and thus in his attempt to kill conscience Dorian Gray kills himself.¹⁵³

In view of the facts that the attacks on Dorian Gray were from the ethical point of view, it is inevitable that Wilde's defenses of the novel be from the ethical point of view also. Wilde acknowledges that Dorian Gray can be considered a moral work which should come as no surprise, for ". . . if a work of art is rich, and vital, and complete, those who have artistic instincts will see its beauty, and those to whom ethics appeal more strongly will see its moral lesson."¹⁵⁴ The above quotation points out the necessity of ambiguities in a work of art, and Wilde's discussion of the morality does not detract from my thesis that there is a conflict between aesthetics and ethics in the novel. The very presence of an ambiguity points this out. Wilde would,

no doubt, be willing to acknowledge that a general acceptance of the aesthetic creed would tend to create very real ethical problems and that Dorian Gray is a fictive account of what some of those problems could be. It is interesting to note, however, that Wilde himself acknowledges reasons similar to the ones that I have postulated for the demise of Dorian Gray, although as a concession to the public these have been presented in a moralistic way. Where I have said that Dorian Gray is destroyed for being a bad work of art for permitting ethical considerations to intrude on him, Wilde calls this an "exaggerated sense of conscience," and implies that Dorian's mistake is to be so weak as to pursue social morality merely as a balm to his conscience.

The results of the above exploration are ambiguous to a certain degree. As I have mentioned, there seems to be two opposing views of how Dorian Gray can be interpreted in the novel. Wilde, in fact, has acknowledged both of them. In the light of what Oscar Wilde has said about art and aestheticism in The Decay of Lying and in his other statements of Intentions, it would seem that Dorian is intended to represent a negation of the concept of aestheticism and Decadence. However,

if we move one step further and concede that Wilde realized the 'subversive' nature of his Intentions and, in effect, felt that they could be justified in the long run as principles of 'higher ethics', then the destruction of Dorian Gray can be viewed in the light of his being a failure as a Decadent rather than being due to his ostensibly 'criminal' actions. That is, Dorian fails because he is shallow and because he permits himself to be directed by Lord Henry and the vagaries of his capricious conscience. This is particularly in view of the fact that Oscar Wilde implies that the two greatest sins are those of 'shallowness' and permitting oneself to be unduly influenced by others.¹⁵⁵ Dorian Gray fails as the portraiture of a man who decides to live life by the aesthetic code, and fails because he is unable to face the fact that in making life 'beautiful', he may not appear 'good' in the light of conventional morality. Within Dorian Gray exists the paradox of a man who wishes to experience the unusual, to be unique, to be different, and yet is unable to accept his own uniqueness.

FOOTNOTES

- 102 Karl Beckson, "Introduction", Aesthetes and Decadents, Random House, New York, 1966, p. xxxii.
- 103 Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., The Letters of Oscar Wilde. Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1962, p. 259.
- 104 Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, Signet, New York, 1962, p. 234.
- 105 Richard Ellmann, "The Critic As Artist As Wilde," The Artist As Critic, p. xx.
- 106 Carl Jung, Psychological Reflections, ed. Jolande Jacobi, Harper & Row, New York, 1953, p. 213.
- 107 Wilde, "De Profundis", Works, p. 932.
- 108 Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," Works, p. 982.
- 109 William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," William Blake, ed. J. Bronowsky, Penguin, Middlesex, England, 1966, p. 99.
- 110 Ibid.
- 111 Wilde, Works, p. 1021.
- 112 Carl Jung, Psychological Reflections, p. 194.
- 113 Ibid.
- 114 Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," Works, p. 985.
- 115 Ibid., p. 978.
- 116 Ibid.
- 117 Ibid.
- 118 Ibid.
- 119 Ibid., p. 977.
- 120 Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, p. 23.

- 122 Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, p. 35.
- 123 Ibid.
- 124 For a discussion of aesthetics in relation to the religion of Dionysus, see W.H. Pater, "A Study of Dionysus," Greek Studies, Johnson Reprint, New York, 1967, pp. 1-47.
- 125 Plato, The Republic of Plato, trans. Francis Cornford, Oxford Press, New York, 1967, pp. 336-337.
- 126 Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, p. 41.
- 127 Ibid., p. 42.
- 128 Ibid., p. 43.
- 129 Ibid., p. 34.
- 130 Ibid., p. 52.
- 131 Ibid., p. 72.
- 132 Ibid., p. 63.
- 133 Ibid., p. 100.
- 134 Ibid.
- 135 Ibid. p. 70.
- 136 Wilde, Works, p. 978.
- 137 Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, pp. 110, 169.
- 138 Jung, Psychological Reflections, pp. 213-214.
- 139 Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, p. 168.
- 140 Ibid., p. 177.
- 141 Ibid., p. 185.
- 142 Wilde, "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young," Works, p. 1205.
- 143 Ibid.

- 144 Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, p. 221.
- 145 Ibid., p. 221.
- 146 Ibid., p. 222.
- 147 Ibid., p. 228.
- 148 Ibid.
- 149 Ibid., p. 18.
- 150 Ibid., p. 230.
- 151 Ibid., p. 232.
- 152 Ibid., p. 233.
- 153 Oscar Wilde, "To the Editor of the Daily Chronicle,"
The Letters of Oscar Wilde, p. 263.
- 154 Wilde, "To the Editor of the Scots Observer," Letters,
p. 268.
- 155 Both references here are to p. 44 of the thesis.

CHAPTER V

. . . life is terribly deficient in form. Its catastrophes happen in the wrong way and to the wrong people. There is a grotesque horror about comedies, and its tragedies seem to culminate in farce. . . . Things either last too long or not long enough.

Oscar Wilde, The Critic as Artist, p. 1034.

Dorian Gray's inability to accept his own uniqueness by attempting to aspire to ethical standards of beauty and perfection tends to prefigure the problem of Oscar Wilde. The secret of any comprehensive interpretation of Oscar Wilde resides in his self concept as Christ, and this is related to the dual vision that Wilde holds with respect to aesthetics and ethics. From what I have said up to this point in the thesis it must be quite clear that I am asserting that there are two distinct points of view within the canon of Wilde; one speaking from an aesthetic amoral point of view and the other from an ethical point of view, both tending to subvert and augment each other. This is not to imply that these two contraries are a negative characteristic because, as we shall see, they tend to coalesce in the development of a greater degree of consciousness. The ambivalent yet inextricable connections of aesthetics and ethics becomes most apparent in Wilde's discussions of aesthetics in Intentions. The connection between the two is not explicitly stated, although I have offered several suggestions as to their possible connection, and I should point out that even if the comments in Intentions are intended to be amoral, it is an inevitable result of our Christian legacy that we tend to view thoughts and acts in terms of 'good' or 'evil'. It must become

apparent that even in making so-called amoral comments, it can be construed that Wilde is also inferring moral interpretations of actions. The above amoral aesthetic voice is the point of view that Wilde uses in Intentions in which he protects himself from social sanctions by hiding his comments on art and morality behind a mask of incomprehensibility and paradox. In a letter to W.H. Pollock, Wilde justifies the above complexity and ambiguity by making a comment in relation to The Decay of Lying which had just been printed in the Nineteenth Century:

My dear Pollock, I am very pleased indeed that you like my article: the public so soon vulgarize any artistic idea that one gives to them that I was determined to put my new views on art, and particularly on the relations of art and history, in a form that they could not understand, but would be understood by the few. . . .¹⁵⁶

Within the above point of view can be discerned the same defensive motivation and desire to deceive that we observed in our discussions of 'wit'. In those particular chapters we pointed out that the function of the purveyor of wit is to carry out a verbal guerilla warfare on a person or persons who possess (either collectively or by law) more power. Wit is a simultaneous effort to short-circuit the alien power and create allies. The result, however, is a verbal attack which may be almost

incomprehensible, except to the few, and often involves a sliding rather than a fixed point of view. After all, what else are Oscar Wilde's epigrams but the non-linear projections of reality which attempt to oppose and confound the fantasy of rationalism by proffering its opposite. The other voice that is apparent within the canon of Wilde is the one that we may designate as the 'ethical' point of view, whose function it is to view actions in terms of morality. This is the point of view that Wilde tends to take when he is inclined to view actions in terms of morality in the sense that he is taking a moral as well as an aesthetic stand on an issue. This point of view becomes most apparent in his letters on The Picture of Dorian Gray, in De Profundis, and in many of his short stories. In many ways this point of view is not representative of the best of Oscar Wilde for the vision does tend to become rather strident and maudlin at times, particularly in De Profundis, but it does give us a fair idea of the complexity of his attitude and an insight into his efforts to create an amalgamation of the two visions.

The inevitable result of Wilde's concern with apparently irreconcilable opposites is, to paraphrase Jung, to make the symbolism of Christ inevitable. In

Aion Jung talks about the kind of thinking which transpires when one identifies the self with Christ and that section has a good deal of validity in our present discussion of Wilde:

Accordingly, the realization of the self, which would logically follow from a recognition of its supremacy, leads to a fundamental conflict, to a real suspension between two opposites (reminiscent of the crucified Christ hanging between the two thieves), and to an approximate state of wholeness that lacks perfection. To strive after 'teliosis'--completion--in this sense is not only legitimate but is inborn in man as a peculiarity which provides civilization with one of its strongest roots.¹⁵⁷

What Jung is essentially saying here is that only in the projections of contradictions is man definitely increasing his awareness and 'perfection'. A realistic realization of the self inevitably leads to two irreconcilable opposites (or apparently irreconcilable opposites), and it is in the striving to merge and complete these two opposites that man achieves his highest consciousness and also his lowest degradation. That is:

The individual may strive after perfection but must suffer from the opposite of his intentions for the sake of his completeness. . . .

The Christ-image fully corresponds to this situation: Christ is the perfect man who is crucified. One could hardly think

of a truer picture of the goal of ethical behaviour. . . . Whenever the archetype of the self predominates, the inevitable psychological consequence is a state of conflict vividly exemplified by the Christian symbol of crucifixion--that acute state of unredeemedness which comes to an end only with the words 'consummatum est'.¹⁵⁸

No one who has read the sections of De Profundis relating to the relationship between the artist and Christ can deny the validity of the above statement in relation to Wilde. Our original statement at the beginning of the chapter asserting that one of the secrets of understanding Oscar Wilde resides in the image of Wilde as Christ; a view which coalesces all of the polarities that exist in Wilde and reveal the ethical nature of his endeavors. The above aspect of Wilde has already been dealt with in depth by G. Wilson Knight in "Christ and Wilde,"¹⁵⁹ so I needn't attempt to justify my relating Wilde to Christ at this point. Besides, we are not so much interested in a tiresome pursuit of Christ symbolism as in the dynamics and conditions which make such symbolism necessary. Needless to say I am postulating that the central tensions which provide the motivations for such symbolism in Oscar Wilde are related to a conflict of aesthetics and ethics.

We have already dealt with the somewhat ambiguous

nature of the above tensions in the previous chapters, most notably in Chapter four where we showed that both an aesthetical and ethical interpretation can be derived from The Picture of Dorian Gray, both of which tend to contradict each other. There is evidence in the novel, when viewed in the light of Intentions, which can justify the unbridled pursuit of aestheticism, while there is also evidence to support a moral interpretation of the novel. In other words there tends to be an ambivalent attitude towards art in the novel. If we move into a discussion of several of the other prose works of Oscar Wilde, many of the things that we have said about the tension of aesthetics and ethics in Oscar Wilde will be more clearly revealed and the two disparate attitudes that I have postulated in the works of Oscar Wilde will become more apparent.

The Young King is a prime example of this ambiguous duality. The nature and function of art is treated with a great deal of equivocation in this short story in that art is envisaged as both corrupt and divine; both the objectification of evil and the source of redemption in the story. The strong influence of aestheticism in the early life of the young King is accentuated in the initial paragraphs of the story:

. . . and it seems that from the very first moment of his recognition he had shown signs of that great passion for beauty that was destined to have so great an influence over his life. Those who had accompanied him to the suite of rooms set apart for his service, often spoke of the cry of pleasure that broke from lips when he saw the delicate raiment and rich jewels that had been prepared for him, and of the almost fierce joy with which he flung aside his rough leathern tunic and coarse sheepskin coat . . . as soon as he could escape the council-board or audience chamber . . . and wander from room to room, and from corridor to corridor, like one who was seeking to find in beauty an anodyne for pain, a sort of restoration from sickness.¹⁶⁰

In the above quotation it is quite apparent that beauty serves an ambiguous dual function in the life of the young King. The aestheticism of the young King serves as the inducement to passion and pleasure, as well as inflicting the psychic numbing of an anodyne. The young King's feelings with respect to aestheticism gradually heighten until the time arrives for his coronation. At this point the passion for beauty becomes so powerfully felt that "Never before had he felt so keenly, or with such exquisite joy, the magic and mystery of beautiful things."¹⁶¹

At this point the young King undergoes a series of dreams that reveal to him the demonic nature of his kingly and beautiful raiments, and the origins of the

beauty which had been his pleasure and anodyne. The weaver who is weaving the king's robes in the dream seems to be saying that "Through our sunless lanes creeps Poverty with her hungry eyes, and Sin with his sodden face follows close behind her. Misery wakes us in the morning and Shame sits with us at night."¹⁶² Associated with the robes of the young King are all of the above degradations. The rest of the kingly raiments have a similar symbolic nature. The 'pearl' that will adorn the sceptre of the king, the emblem of regal authority and justice, is produced at the expense of a callous human sacrifice, and the rubbies that will adorn the king's crown are seen to be harvested in the misery of avarice, pestilence and death. Through the insight provided in his dreams the young King sees that the beauty that he admires in his kingly raiments emanates from the pain, sickness and death of his subjects. Stirred by the callous subjugation of his subjects, the young King reacts to the objects of regal authority that he had formerly envisaged as beautiful: "Take these things away, and hide them from me. Though it be the day of my coronation I will not wear them. For on the loom of Sorrow, and by the white hands of Pain, has my robe been woven. There is blood in the heart of the ruby and Death in the heart of the pearl."¹⁶³ In the above

quotation there is an explicit rendition of the demonic and evil quality of beauty, and although it could be argued that it is the young King's misplaced sense of beauty which causes the problem, it is also clearly stated that the beauty is related to the power of the king and that the source of beauty is related to the death and pain of others. It is important to note, however, that although beauty is implied to have a somewhat demonic and evil origin, aestheticism is quite clearly revealed to be the source of redemption of the young King. It is only through the sensitivity induced by his worship of beauty that the young king becomes aware of the subjugation of his people. Through the sensitivity induced by beauty, the young King is able to feel the injustices inflicted on his people in the name of the power that he had interpreted as beautiful.

At this point it should be re-emphasized that the young King never really sees the injustices done to his people and only becomes intuitively aware of their subjugation in dreams after long contemplation of the symbols of power. One cannot help feeling that Wilde intended the reader to see that it is the insight gained by the aesthetic contemplation of the symbols of power inherent in the robe, sceptre and crown that induced

the change in consciousness of the King. Thus it is quite ironic that the sensitivity and vision which will eventually provide the stimulus leading to a change in consciousness which will free the people, is built on their pain and sorrow.

Antithetical to the above short story on the relationship of power and art, and to help clarify the idea of aestheticism as a redeeming factor, we should look at The Birthday of the Infanta. In this short story we again have a tale which discusses the consciousness relating to the holding of absolute power, and see that there are no redeeming characteristics in the Infanta as are to be found in the young King. It can be argued that the difference between the young King and the Infanta revolves mainly around the differences in aesthetic consciousness of the two. The Infanta possesses only a limited degree of aestheticism related more to the pursuit of raw pleasure than beauty, and the distinction between her aestheticism and the aestheticism of the young King is succinctly expressed in the final lines of the story when she comments on the dwarf who has died of a broken heart: "For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts."¹⁶⁴ Thus where a humanist aestheticism redeems our vision of the young

King, no such humanism or insight is related to the Infanta. It should also be noted that the Infanta is the main aesthetic object in the story, and much of her power is implied to be related to the deceptive nature of her beauty. This is because everyone felt ". . . sure that one so lovely as she could never be cruel to anybody."¹⁶⁵ The somnambulent quality of her beauty dazes those who would oppose her and she is constantly shielded from any opposition and, in fact, from the necessity of ever feeling any pain herself. In this short story there is again a rendition of a circumstance where beauty is related to power, corruption and death. In this particular case the Infanta is so effectively shielded from reality by her beauty that she never moves beyond the narcissistic aestheticism of Dorian Gray but instead remains trapped in her own myth.

Both of the above tales can be interpreted as moral parables on aestheticism and its relation to life. In one of Wilde's prose poems, The Artist, a comment is made which typifies the nature of the problem:

And out of the bronze of the image of 'the Sorrow that endureth forever' he [the artist] fashioned an image of 'the Pleasure that abideth for a moment.'¹⁶⁶

Although this quotation may at first seem like a verbal

equivalent of the Gordian Knot, one interpretation at least is really quite evident, for the statement applies to much of what we have been saying about art and aestheticism. What Wilde is really saying is: 'Out of the pleasure that we achieve in perceiving some great truth or insight emerges a lifetime of sorrow because of the alienation that it induces.' Each work of art that the artist creates embodies some truth that he has perceived and this perception places him that much further than his fellow man. This applies also to those who are able to perceive what the artist has to communicate. We have previously noted that it is one of the functions of aestheticism to increase insight, to make one more aware of the social and natural environment. In other words it could be said that it is the function of aestheticism to increase awareness. In the above short stories there is a discussion of the nature of this awareness. The pleasure of the young King is seen to emerge from the insight into the pain and sorrow of his people, while the pleasure of the Infanta is based on no such insight and, in fact, emanates from the pain and self-abasement of the dwarf. The pleasure of the Infanta results in no increased awareness since she is insulated by her own beauty from any necessity to feel pain. In the case of the young King there is a

Christ-like transference of the pain of the people onto the young King as a result of his aesthetic insight. This is the area where it could be argued that both the Infanta and Dorian Gray fail, since there is little evidence of any increased awareness on their part. This is not entirely true, for where the Infanta relinquishes no evidence of having a conscience, Dorian is destroyed because he is unable to face his conscience.

There can be little doubt that there is a dialectic in process in the above two short stories which involves both the aesthetical and ethical points of view. Aestheticism serves a critical function in the education of the young King, yet it is quite apparent that the intention of the above short story is to convey an ethical theme. There is a strong effort to indicate the source of injustice in the above short stories and to reveal the ambiguous nature of beauty and aestheticism. The Birthday of the Infanta accentuates the conclusions of The Young King through contrast. This is achieved by presenting two different tales of omnipotent despots, one of whom is redeemed by aestheticism, the other who is so insulated by her own beauty that she is unable to develop any sensitivity in relation to the pain of her subjects. Thus there is not only a dialectic in process

with respect to the various kinds of aestheticism within the two short stories, but this differentiation tends to be viewed in ethical terms in that there is quite obviously an ethical condemnation of the Infanta and an affirmation of the young King.

Lord Arthur Savile's Crime is another exploration in the ethical consequences of art and the ensuing 'criminality' of art. The discussion in Lord Arthur Savile's Crime is much more subtle than in the above short stories and retribution is subverted through the use of comedy and satire. It is fairly simple to see and understand the basic movement of Lord Arthur Savile's Crime if one keeps in mind the theory that Wilde has expressed in Intentions that 'art tends to shape life.' This short story is essentially an exemplification of the ironic relationship of art and life through 'duty', for the complete title of the story is: Lord Arthur Savile's Crime; A Study of Duty. Of particular interest in Lord Arthur Savile is the subversive role that 'suggestion' or art plays in the crime. In essence the artist is the chiromantist--the one whose 'science is so dangerous'--who suggests that Lord Savile will murder someone. The irony and humour in the story evolves from the fact that Lord Arthur, since he is a 'dutiful

young man,' believes that he must commit a crime to obey the prophecy and that since one has to commit a crime, one might as well get it over with. Beneath this facade of humour, however, a sense of the determinant nature of art begins to evolve and is closely related to the sense of predestination that emerges in The Picture of Dorian Gray when Dorian attempts to blame the ethical consequences of his actions on the influences of Lord Henry and the 'decadent book' that Lord Henry lent him.

After Lord Savile receives the prophecy that he will be a murderer and steps out into the street to look at the people and to ponder his next step, a ". . . strange pity came over him. Were these children of sin and misery predestined to their end as he was to his? Were they, like him, merely the puppets of a monstrous show?"¹⁶⁸ Implicit in this quotation are two important elements of art that we have dealt with in the past. One thing that is implied is that somehow through the experience with the chiromantist Lord Savile has managed to develop an intuitive insight into the forces which direct his life. We won't comment on the validity of his insights or whether he consciously realizes this change, but some change of perception is implicit in the comment that he makes about how he feels in rela-

tion to the experience that he has undergone. The most obvious element in the above quotation is the function of the artist as the manipulator of puppets; it is implied that the rest of the citizens are under a similar compulsion to 'do their duty.' This implies a problem for if we can relate the chiromantist to an artist (which I think we can), this creates the vision of the artist as manipulator and propagandist. It must be pointed out however, that this problem is not necessarily the fault of the artist, but rather the fault of the uncritical perception which we will deal with in a moment.

The separation and alienation of Lord Savile from the rest of the inhabitants of London is a direct result of the increased level of consciousness that he possesses as a result of his experience with the chiromantist: "He envied them [the other inhabitants of London] all that they did not know."¹⁶⁹ The insight which the chiromantist had given him with respect to his duty, along with the resulting separation of himself from the rest of humanity makes his transition to crime that much easier. While the other citizens of London can rest easily in their acquiescence to the dictates of social morality and still remain in harmony with themselves,

Lord Arthur Savile now feels that due to his greater insight he must commit a crime to achieve the same degree of harmony. Now the only question that bothers him is the purely practical and mundane one " . . . whom to make away with. . . ." ¹⁷⁰ The irony is similar to that in The Picture of Dorian Gray in that it is the artist who creates the conditions for the crime in the first place who is the one who must be destroyed: Basil Hallward because he first made Dorian aware of the 'apple' of beauty; the chiromantist because he puts the idea of murder in the mind of a 'dutiful' young man. In any case there is a suggestion of the powerful and subversive nature of art--be it poetry or palmistry--in the influence that it has on peoples' lives.

The subversive nature of art is satirized in this story as if to offset the more dangerous consequences in The Picture of Dorian Gray. It should also be noted that the main brunt of the satire actually falls on the Victorian concept of 'duty' which is ostensibly the force which compels Lord Savile to carry out the dictates of the chiromantist's art. No matter what the functional causes of Lord Savile's motivation are, it must be implied that the root cause of his actions are implicit in the art of the chiromantist. Thus we have

the situation where the art of the chiromantist, when ironically fused with the misplaced sense of duty of a young man, is visualized as being archetypal of the predicament of art in relation to man where ". . . the world is a stage, but the play is badly cast," where ". . . most men and women are forced to play parts for which they have no qualifications and our Guildensterns play Hamlet for us [and our] . . . Hamlets have to jest like Prince Hal."¹⁷¹

Implicit in the above discussions of Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and The Young King are ethical comments on art in which the position of art is viewed as very tenuous and ambiguous, combining elements of subversion and criminality with redemption and Christ. The effects and influences of art in The Picture of Dorian Gray and Lord Arthur Savile's Crime are viewed as being possibly criminal and subversive in the sense that the sensitive young aesthetes in them succumb to the magic of art. As a result they place themselves outside of social morality and commit acts for the mere sensation of committing the acts. However, there is a lesson being implied in the above stories also. What is being said is that it is necessary for the individual to rise above his art (particularly art as propaganda) and it is in

the cases where the individual is unable to do this that the problem arises. For example: where both Dorian Gray and Lord Savile were unable to accomplish this primary requirement; Lord Arthur because of his misplaced sense of duty and Dorian Gray because he was 'premature' and too shallow, the young King is redeemed because he is able to rise above his art and move beyond its hypnotic influence as is the "star child" in the short story of the same name. The problem that has occurred in each of the short stories where the influence of art is deemed to be 'subversive' in an inhuman or criminal sense is due to the fact that each of the characters who misuses the influence of aestheticism does so because they tend to believe implicitly in the prophetic nature of art rather than realizing its transitory and relevatory nature. That art is transitory and offers insight and not predictions, is not to imply that art and aestheticism are not useful and that it is necessary to immediately rise above art and ignore its perceptions. The story of the young King is a succinct reminder that man must be constantly aesthetically aware of the world around him and must constantly be in the process of attempting to achieve finer levels of discrimination and sensitization, for it is in these acts that the finest elements in man are released and become real-

ized in the outside world.

FOOTNOTES

- 156 Wilde, The Letters of Oscar Wilde, p. 236.
- 157 Carl Jung, "Aion", Psyche and Symbol, ed. Violet S. de Laszlo. Doubleday, New York, 1958, p. 58.
- 158 Ibid., pp. 58-59.
- 159 G. Wilson Knight, "Christ and Wilde," Oscar Wilde, ed. R. Ellmann, pp. 138-149.
- 160 Oscar Wilde, "The Young King," Works, p. 225.
- 161 Ibid., p. 226.
- 162 Ibid., p. 227.
- 163 Ibid., p. 230.
- 164 Wilde, "The Birthday of the Infanta," Works, p. 247.
- 165 Ibid., p. 238.
- 166 Wilde, "The Artist," Works, p. 863.
- 167 Wilde, "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime," Works, p. 171.
- 168 Ibid., p. 176.
- 169 Ibid., p. 178.
- 170 Ibid., p. 174.
- 171 Ibid., p. 174.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

But they [the artists] have given form and substance to what was within us; they have enabled us to realise our personality; and a sense of perilous joy, or some touch or thrill of pain, or that strange self-pity that man so often feels for himself, comes over us and leaves us different.

Wilde, The Portrait of Mr. W.H., p. 1194.

Society often forgives the criminal; it never forgives the dreamer. The beautiful sterile emotions that art excites in us are hateful in its eyes. . . . Contemplation is the gravest sin that any citizen can be guilty, in the opinion of the highest culture it is the proper occupation of man.

Wilde, The Critic As Artist, p. 1039.

In the previous chapter we have emphasized the nature of the two contrary voices in the prose works of Oscar Wilde in relation to the conflict of aesthetics and ethics. What this problem reduces to in the works of Oscar Wilde, at least once the dross has been removed from the discussion, is a conflict between rational and irrational thought; the essential conflict between accepting a view of the world which is totally based on rationalism, or accepting a view of the world which includes a so-called irrational point of view. The conflict of aesthetics and ethics as I have designated it in the works of Oscar Wilde is not precisely related to aesthetics and ethics, although this is the terminology that he tended to use. A more accurate delineation of the problem would entail pointing out the apparent chasm between rationalism and irrationalism (of a certain kind). Aestheticism happened to be the 'red flag' which so angered 'John Bull' and, as a result, aestheticism became the most effective banner to wave to induce controversy and question certain values related to industrialism. As I indicated in Chapter III and have since pointed out in closer examinations of his works, Oscar Wilde was not overly concerned with intellectual discussions of ethics, but rather tended to be upset with what such contemporary discussions de-

generated into. What Wilde objects to in the discussion of ethics, particularly in relation to aesthetics, is the single-minded, surface orientation of ethical arguments, particularly the ones which were more interested in justifying the 'official Victorian fantasy' than in attempting to explain the 'ethos' of Britain at the end of the nineteenth century. The constant so-called rational concern with immediate ends, partly due to the type of thinking that deals solely in terms of material ends leading to a pseudo objectivity in dealing with moral problems, creates a situation whereby only those elements of man that can be dealt with rationally and on the surface are dealt with and all other considerations are ignored. One might say that rational thought is mainly concerned with consciousness and surfaces and yet, like Jung, Wilde is concerned with what is below the surface and in the unconscious. In a sense the contradictions that would make a man 'kill the thing he loves' are what Wilde is really interested in. This is the realm of irrational thought, the abode where contradictions are reconciled and the suppressed elements and motivations of man prevail.

The above is hardly an intellectual revelation for modern man, and we do not tend to be as concerned with

rationalism and 'surface' considerations since we have had the benefit of Freud, Jung and other psychoanalysts to help us realize the existence of the unconscious. These influences make us aware of the fact that man, in spite of his pretensions, is imbued with only a facade of rationality, and that there are other, more primal and obscure considerations that influence the life of man and influence our ways of looking at the world. In a sense--a very vital sense at that--it is these unconscious and recondite considerations that Wilde is concerned with. This is not to imply that what Wilde has to say is commonplace for modern man, for it still seems that it is necessary for a McLuhan to say: ". . . what is meant by the irrational and the non-logical in much modern discussion is merely the rediscovery of the ordinary transactions between the self and the world, or between subject and object."¹⁷² It is precisely this attitude that Wilde has in mind when he says: "We call ourselves a utilitarian age, and we do not know the uses of any single thing. We have forgotten that Water can cleanse, and Fire purify, and that the Earth is mother to us all."¹⁷³ Wilde is also asserting the same thing as McLuhan when he says that "what the artist is looking for is that mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible: in which the outward

is expressive of the inward: in which form reveals."¹⁷⁴

The above, in their essence, are merely expressions of the realization that attempts to over-rationalize the life of man by basing man's values on surface considerations alone is doomed to failure. Many of the other artists of the period had begun to question the ultimate values of Rationalism, and in fact this strain of anti-rationalism was nothing new, having been expressed particularly well in the mysticism of Blake which lauded the Imagination. In The Eighteen Nineties Holbrook Jackson quotes John Davidson as saying: "Art knows very well that the world comes to an end when it is purged of Imagination. Rationalism was only a stage in the process."¹⁷⁵ Davidson continues to say that ". . . I, for one, decline to continue the eviscerated Life in Death of Rationalism. I devour, digest, and assimilate the Universe; make for myself in my testaments and Tragedies a new form and substance of Imagination; and by poetic power certify the semi-certitudes of Science."¹⁷⁶

The problem, of course, is not really rationalism, but merely the foundations on which we are basing rationalism. The attitude which tended to propound the theories of aestheticism then and 'irrationalism' now only wishes to make the irrational rational, and the aesthetic and artistic real. This is really no different from what

Wilde says above: "What the artist is looking for is that mode of existence . . . in which the outward is expressive of the inward: in which form reveals."¹⁷⁷

In this way Wilde is asserting that one of the main justifications for art is that it does tend to express the irrationalism of the 'inner' in a rational manner in which "form reveals" and outer contradictions become a part of inner unity.

The above attitude has been dealt with in relation to aestheticism in the earlier chapters where I pointed out that it was the hope of the aesthetes that through the pursuit of aestheticism, man would begin to re-attain vital relationships with the environment that he had begun to lose through extensive urbanization and industrialization. McLuhan argues that a major part of this alienation is due to man's inability to move beyond the 'content' of any media and perceive that there are many things that influence the life of man besides 'fact'. Much of the energy of the aesthetes was spent in attempting to show that 'facts' are dead--"Science is the record of dead religions."¹⁷⁸--and that it is constantly necessary to move beyond facts. An attempt to justify McLuhan's arguments would go beyond the scope of this thesis, but I will assert that both McLuhan and Wilde are essentially attempting to talk about the same problem

in the sense that they are both concerned with emphasizing those aspects of man that man tends to be most unaware of and yet influence him the most. McLuhan's attempt to reveal the 'folklore of industrial man' in The Mechanical Bride is an example of an attempt to release man from the numbing vision of twentieth century advertising and industrialism. Similarly, Wilde's paradoxes are an imaginative attempt to release men from the 'official Victorian fantasy.' Wilde's somewhat outrageous remarks in Intentions represent an attempt to reveal to what degree 'life follows art,' while McLuhan's comments in The Mechanical Bride represent a similar attempt to demonstrate to what degree the art of advertising is implicated in our lives. The point is not whether life tends to follow art, but whether life is tending to follow 'good art' in the sense that is the art leading to a greater awareness of the world, or is it merely being used as a tool to shut out and ignore problems; is art being used as an instrument of psychic emancipation, or is it a tool of oppression?

Whether McLuhan and Wilde are 'right' in the sense that their theories are scientific, provable and explainable is not the point. The important thing is whether we even see that there are irrational and somewhat ob-

scure influences on our lives and to establish to what extent we are being influenced by them. By merely becoming aware of these influences, we become more capable of understanding and being able to deal with the world in a semi-rational fashion.

An indication that we have made some steps in the right direction is apparent in the sudden influx and popularity of 'sensitivity training' and other techniques and attempts at re-orientating man to his environment and himself. Everett L. Shostrom in Man, the Manipulator is primarily concerned with pointing out how our so-called objective thinking tends to alienate us from our world, and particularly other people, through the manipulative process of viewing people as objects. Frederick S. Perls, a gestalt therapist who wrote the "Foreword" to Shostrom's book, says something about 'modern man' which is relevant to our discussion and points out some of the motivations behind Wilde's theories:

Modern man is dead, a puppet. This corpse-like behavior is part of every modern man. He is deliberate and without emotion--a marionette. He is reliable, but without live intentions, wishes, wants, and desires. His life is very boring, empty and meaningless. He controls and manipulates others and is caught in the web of his own manipulations. 179

The point is not new. Anyone who reads D.H. Lawrence or any other of a number of modern writers will see them make the same assertions. The point is that an effort is being made to define the continuum from 'deadness to aliveness' and that one of the efforts to accomplish this is through a non-linear fashion which assumes that each person possesses a 'personality' which can be released from manipulative techniques and become 'actualized'. Shostrom's solution to the problem is to attempt to make people aware of what they really are and what they really feel, so that through the stripping away of restricting facades and cultural prejudices they live life as they choose to live it rather than how others motivate them to live it. In a sense it is an attempt to replace 'Dale Carnegie' with whatever happened to be there to begin with.

The attitude that Oscar Wilde was attempting to counter is similar to the 'manipulative' one that Perls mentions above only Wilde saw art and aesthetics rather than psychiatry as the means of accomplishing the 'actualization'. In a rather curious and ironic statement on the prerequisites of a stable and tranquil society Wilde feels compelled to say the

. . . security of society lies in custom and unconscious instinct, and the basis of stability in society, as a healthy organism, is the complete lack of any intelligence among its members. The great majority of people being fully aware of this, rank themselves naturally on the side of that splendid system that elevates them to the dignity of machines. . . .180

The solution to the above problem, in Wilde's eyes, is to move the people to contemplate--". . . the mission of the aesthetic movement is to lure people to contemplate. . . ."181--for in the act of contemplation it may be possible to force people to lift themselves above the level of machinery and realize one's self. This is possible because "Art is mind expressing itself under the conditions of matter, and thus, even in the lowliest of her manifestations, she speaks to both sense and soul alike."182 In the light of the above comments on the possible therapeutic nature of art and aesthetics, Wilde says something in The Portrait of Mr. W.H. which coalesces much that we have pointed out above:

Art, even art of the fullest scope and widest vision, can never really show us the external world. All that it shows us is our own soul, the one world of which we have any real cognizance. And the soul itself, the soul of each one of us, is to each one of us a mystery. It hides itself in the dark and broods, and consciousness cannot tell us of its workings. Consciousness, indeed, is quite inadequate to explain the contents of personality. It is Art, and Art only, that reveals us to ourselves.183

Contained in the above lines are the ways out of "single vision and Newton's sleep" through the realization that only through the imaginative expression of art can man hope to achieve any substantial realization of the self and the complex workings of the human soul, and only through this kind of achievement can man hope to elevate himself above the level of machine and puppet.

The above are expressions of what the aesthetes (and particularly Wilde) hoped to achieve through the pursuit of aestheticism. It is necessary to point out, however, that Wilde's attitude with respect to the ultimate success of such a technique seems to have concerned him almost as much as the promulgation of the theory itself. We have already noted his constant reference to art in a 'criminal', 'subversive', and immoral sense, and it becomes quite obvious that his attitude towards art and aesthetics tended to be very ambivalent. I think that I have already offered most of the defenses that can be offered for his pursuit of aestheticism, and I think that it would be quite feasible to offer substantial rationalizations for Wilde's constant references to aesthetics and art as being 'immoral'. Irony and satire would probably be the two most obvious justi-

fications of such an approach, yet even these two attitudes do not take into consideration the demonic imagery that Wilde uses so often in relation to art and aestheticism, particularly in Dorian Gray and the 'short stories'.

One cannot help but feel that a major part of the problem of aesthetics and ethics narrows down to a conflict between rational and imaginative thought in the sense that it is almost a by-product of the heavy stress on rational thought that man be wary of all forms of communication that deviate from that mode. McLuhan points out that "Schizophrenia may be a necessary consequence of literacy,"¹⁸⁴ and that the very pursuit of individualism involves being a "split man"^{185a} in the sense that it becomes a problem to indicate where the bounds between the individual ego and social morality are. McLuhan spends a great deal of time in the Gutenberg's Galaxy indicating that man's retreat from the irrational modes of an oral culture raises difficulties in the schizophrenia that it induces, but the real problem occurs when man attempts to move back through this heavy stress on rational thought and attempt to "resacralize"^{185b} his environment again. It is very well to say, as both Wilde and McLuhan seem to be saying, that

". . . what is meant by the irrational and non-logical in much modern discussion is merely the rediscovery of the ordinary transactions between the self and the world, or between subject and object,"¹⁸⁶ but we must keep in mind that the converse is also true in that in the midst of a psychic change to such a level of thought ". . . our most ordinary and conventional attitudes seem suddenly twisted into gargoyles and grotesques."¹⁸⁷ What McLuhan is attempting to point out here is that while the 'galaxy is being reconfigured' and man is attempting to adjust to his newly found consciousness (a case in which the unconscious has become conscious), there will inevitably be accompanying psychic doubts in the life of man. In Wilde, these problems, which happen to be related to the ethical validity of what he is proposing, lead to a perception of the self as Christ, as a man who is torn between conflicting moral codes and creates the vision of the self as both criminal and saint, subversive and savior. The inevitable result of attempting to make the unconscious a conscious part of one's life leads to a situation which forms a major part of Jung's theories, and which leads to a commentary which is quite informative:

The book of Genesis represents the act of becoming conscious as the breaking of a

taboo, as though the gaining of knowledge meant that a sacred barrier had been impiously overstepped. Genesis is surely right, inasmuch as each step to a greater consciousness is a kind of Promethean guilt. Through the realization, the gods are in a certain sense robbed of their fire. That is to say, something belonging to the unconscious powers has been torn out of its natural connections and has been subordinated to conscious choice. The man who has usurped the new knowledge suffers, however, a transformation or enlargement of consciousness, which no longer resembles that of his fellow men. He has certainly raised himself above the human level of his time ("ye will become like God"), but in doing so, he has alienated himself from humanity. The pain of this loneliness is the God's revenge, for he can never again return to man. He is, as the myth says, chained to the lonely cliffs of the Caucasus, forsaken of God and man.¹⁸⁸

The above is a succinct reminder of the courage necessary to move the consciousness beyond a certain point, and the dangers that must follow such a pursuit. One can also perceive within the statement some of the dynamics which lie behind Wilde's 'subversion', his illicit theory of the "truth of masks," the necessity of the 'veil', and why it was so necessary for Wilde to speak behind the shield of witticisms. A position such as Wilde's, which, through the pursuit of aestheticism, attempts to create the possibility whereby the unconscious of man will become conscious, inevitably leads to a Promethean guilt whereby the instru-

ments of such a conversion become embued with demonic symbolism and the vision of the self is perceived as subversive.

FOOTNOTES

- 172 Marshall McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy, p. 278.
- 173 Oscar Wilde, "De Profundis," Works, p. 954.
- 174 Ibid., p. 919.
- 175 Holbrook Jackson, "John Davidson," The Eighteen Nineties, p. 191.
- 176 Ibid.
- 177 Wilde, "De Profundis," Works, p. 919.
- 178 Wilde, "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young," Works, p. 1205.
- 179 Frederick S. Perls, "Foreword", Man, The Manipulator, Everett L. Shostrom, Bantam, Toronto, 1967, p. vii.
- 180 Wilde, "The Critic As Artist," Works, p. 1044.
- 181 Ibid., p. 1050.
- 182 Ibid., p. 1040.
- 183 Wilde, Works, p. 1194.
- 184 McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy, p. 22.
- 185a Ibid., p. 51.
- 185b Ibid., pp. 69-71.
- 186 Ibid., p. 278.
- 187 Ibid., p. 279.
- 188 Carl Jung, Psychological Reflections, p. 28.

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