Narrative Theory Unbound

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Strange Influence

Queer Etiology in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

It is not made sufficiently clear that the writer does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health, and sanity.

—Review of *Dorian Gray* in *The Scots Observer*, July 5, 1890

In the 1928 trial of *The Well of Loneliness*, when the novel's British publisher was charged with violating the Obscene Publications Act of 1857, the chief magistrate’s argument rested not on the book’s content, but rather on its probable effect on its readers; it cited the legal definition of obscenity as any material that tended to “deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall” (Biron 41). That premise lies at the heart of a paranoid mythology about the causation of same-sex desire that continues to this day. Straight culture’s fear of queer increase—what I will call *homosexual reproduction*—impels the question of what causes homosexuality. Antigay voices assert that it results from seduction, recruitment, contagion, or bad influence. In their response, queer communities have increasingly claimed homosexuality as immutable and essential, citing theories of biological determinism based on studies of genetics or prenatal hormones, or more colloquially, maintaining that we are “born gay.” But why should etiology—the science of causes—dominate arguments about gay and lesbian equity?

1. See, for example, Wilson and Rahman.
The problem is not how we answer the etiological question but the fact that we continue to ask it. Etiology is burdened by literary and scientific conventions: chronological sequence, the implication of pathology, focus on the deviant individual, presupposition of scientific rationality, and the putative closure of meaning. Only by seeing the etiology of homosexuality as a narrative form—as in the origin myth, the case study, the detective plot—can we denaturalize it and think causality differently. Take, for example, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, an early narrative of queer etiology in which something called “influence” causes something not called, but fully legible as, homosexuality. Published in *Lippincott’s Magazine* in 1890 and as a book in 1891, the novel foregrounds metonymic effects of proximity, persuasion, example, and imitation as the probable causes of Dorian’s corruption. As Lord Henry explains, “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” (40). Influence implies intimacy: as Stephen Guy-Bray notes, the term, “in Latin, literally, ‘flowing in(to)’—could have literal and sexual connotations as well as metaphorical and mental ones” (xi). Influence informs one of two divergent theories in *Dorian Gray*: one, a notion of innately homosexual persons consonant with the sexological notion of “congenital inversion,” and two, a vocabulary of acquired perversion. Both were available to Wilde. The concept of homosexuality predated *Dorian Gray* by two decades; coined in 1869 by Karl-Maria Benkert, it informed Victorian sexologists such as Karl Ulrichs. Noting the deployment of sexological theories of innate homosexuality in *Teleny*, written concurrently with *Dorian Gray*, Ed Cohen argues that Wilde would have been familiar with such models by 1890 (“Writing” 805).

Yet Wilde would also have known a quite different etiology, in which homosexual tendencies were suspected to be both acquired and acquisitive. Shortly before *Dorian Gray*, the notion of queer influence was prefigured in Henry James’s *The Bostonians*, whose Verena Tarrant responds to the persuasion of Olive Chancellor: “The girl was now completely under her influence . . . the touch of Olive’s tone worked a spell” (120). Remaking Verena as a feminist, Olive makes them both embodiments of a particular, recognizable pathology, whose morbidity, Basil reflects, defines “such a type as that.” The homosexual legibility of such relationships in the 1890s was evident at Wilde’s first trial: prosecuting Counsel Charles Gill wrote that Lord Alfred Douglas should not be tried because Wilde’s “strong influence” had made Douglas one of his “victims,” and Director of Public Prosecution Hamilton

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2. On seduction as influence, see also Hanson 268.
3. See Terry 44.
4. While James attributes strenuous persuasion to Basil Ransom as well, the notion of influence is primarily feminine in *The Bostonians*. 
Cuffe asserted that Wilde’s “great influence” over Douglas had “induced him to enter on these evil practices” (Holland 294, 296). Queensberry’s attorney Edward Carson explained that his client “was trying to free his son from the influence of this man,” an influence that amounted to “the domination by Mr Wilde of this unfortunate Lord Alfred Douglas” (Holland 262). Readily available for paranoid reading, influence is, according to the OED, “the exertion of action of which the operation is unseen or insensible (or perceptible only in its effects), by one person or thing upon another.” But the juxtaposition of visible effects with invisible causes is precisely what Wilde’s notion of influence does not entail; on the contrary, Dorian Gray gives us visible causes and invisible effects. While its rhetoric of influence recalls anxieties about homosexual reproduction, the text’s reticence around the meaning of Dorian’s deviance makes it impossible to specify—though speculation is rife—the effect of which Lord Henry, Basil Hallward, or the yellow book is the cause.

The peculiar status of queer desire in the novel has everything to do with the etiological questions set in motion by Wilde’s extended meditation on influence and the eventual collapse of its narrative logic. Homosexuality first appears in the text as the missing second term of a causal sequence, the presumed but unproven effect of so much bad influence, but it also functions as the absent cause of the novel, its invisible motive. In Dorian Gray, that is, homosexuality operates much like Lacan’s unconventional forms of causality, the absent and retroactive causes capable of impossible effects. For Lacan, the Real is both a byproduct of the Symbolic order and its retroactive cause, much as queerness is the constitutive outside and the internal resistance of the heteronormative Symbolic order, the externalized fantasy of what is in fact an internal failure. As a positive term, homosexuality could not normally be compared to the Real, whose essential impossibility aligns it with the negativity of queerness; yet in Dorian Gray it is the paradoxical absent presence of gay desire that allows it to constitute, like the Real, a retroactive or “lost” cause. As such, the text’s causality is profoundly recursive, lacking a point of origin and vacating sequential temporality. Indeed, the novel’s homosexuality “returns from the future” when Dorian Gray is read through the lens of Wilde’s fate and subsequent forms of gay identity (Žižek, Sublime 57); the text determines the future that only later will make it decidedly queer.

“Strange Rumours”

While Dorian Gray alludes to homosexual reproduction, that is only one of the many causal narratives that Wilde sets in motion. From one perspective, it is unclear whether Dorian changes at all. True, at their first meeting Lord
Henry sees him as immaculate—“All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth’s passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world” (39). Accordingly, the novel’s first chapter sets the scene for a fall from Eden, its garden rich with “tremulous branches” of laburnum (23), but tautologically, to inhabit this scene one must already have fallen from grace. The garden always contains the cause of its own annihilation, much as Dorian already manifests the weakness that will motivate his terrible wish. At the same time, the text insists that Dorian responds to some obscure external force. Awash in superfluous causes, Dorian is doomed by his family legacy, trapped by a Faustian wish, tempted by Lord Henry’s bad influence, and lured by reckless reading. Dorian, we are told, “loved to stroll through the gaunt cold picture-gallery of his country house and look at the various portraits of those whose blood flowed in his veins” (175). Acknowledging the possibility of “strange legacies of thought and passion,” Dorian wonders whether a “strange poisonous germ” in his family line has made him “so suddenly, and almost without cause” utter “the mad prayer that had so changed his life” (175).

Yet having entertained that idea, Wilde is quick to turn away, evoking a queerer form of inheritance: “one had ancestors in literature, as well as in one’s own race, nearer perhaps in type and temperament, many of them, and certainly with an influence of which one was more absolutely conscious” (176). After the drama of Sibyl Vane’s death and his banishment of the portrait to the schoolroom, Dorian idly picks up a “yellow book” that Lord Henry has given him, “a novel without a plot” whose fascination lies instead in its “curious jewelled style” and its character study of a man very like Dorian. The book seems capable of a mesmeric influence on its reader, for the “reverie” and “malady of dreaming” it inspires in Dorian last far beyond its final pages (156). What does it mean to say that “Dorian Gray had been poisoned by a book” (179) in a book about perilous exposures, a book that returns obsessively to questions of influence? What we might call an epidemiological theory of reading posits immoral suasion as endlessly contagious, replicating its effects on characters, the text itself, and finally Wilde’s own readers. When Lord Henry recalls “a book that he had read when he was sixteen, a book which had revealed to him much that he had not known before” (43), he evokes a textual genealogy that extends from his own reading to Dorian’s reading, and in turn to our reading.

5. Stephen Kern initially criticizes Wilde’s “heavy-handed ancestral explanations for his murderer,” but goes on to acknowledge a more complex causality at work in the novel (39, 317–18). Kern’s conclusions follow from his choice to read the novel as a murder plot; a rather different causal system would emerge from Dorian Gray as a narrative of secret sexual identity.
of Wilde. Wilde himself seems caught in the chain of abyssal reading: when six years later, in De Profundis, he calls Pater’s Studies in the History of the Renaissance the “book which has had such a strange influence over my life,” we cannot say whether he recognizes himself in the book or remakes himself in its image (Novak 72). Similarly, the yellow book fails to explain Dorian’s fall. We are told that “for years, Dorian Gray could not free himself from the influence of this book. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he never sought to free himself from it” (158). Upon that “or” turns the problem of causality. After all, the influence one seeks out and embraces is not an influence at all, but a reflection of one’s extant leanings. As the portrait’s degeneration confirms, Dorian is already corrupt before he opens the yellow book, well toward the end of the novel. Perhaps, as Wilde suggests, it is not that the book makes Dorian like its protagonist, but that Dorian’s likeness to its protagonist makes him love the book, taking its hero as “a kind of prefiguring type of himself,” so much so that “the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it” (158).

However, the influence with which the novel is most concerned is not literary but personal. Basil Hallward credits Dorian with changing his aesthetic perception when “some subtle influence passed from him to me” (33) but warns Lord Henry: “Don’t try to influence him” (36). His interest piqued, Dorian asks Lord Henry “Have you really a very bad influence?” and is told “There is no such things as a good influence, Mr Gray . . . all influence is immoral” (40). Moments later, Dorian “was dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him. Yet they seemed to him to have come really from himself”—a paradox that will echo in Dorian’s assessment of the yellow book. Later in their acquaintance, Henry reflects that “there was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence” (60), planning to extend his reach: “He would seek to dominate him—had already, indeed half done so” (61). Dorian freely confirms that power, telling Henry “You have a curious influence over me” (77). While this rhetoric opens Dorian Gray to a familiar anxiety about homosexual reproduction—the supposed ability of queers to make more queers—the text cannot name the effect of which bad influence is the cause. Wilde takes Lord Henry’s seduction of Dorian to the utmost verge of plausible deniability: Dorian feels that Henry’s words “had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses” (42). The altered portrait attests to his “cruelty” (119), “sin,” “ruin” (125), “evil” (159), and “foulness” (173), and he is the subject of “strange rumours” hinting of “dishonour” (159), which cause men to “whisper to each other in corners, or pass him with a sneer” (173). Basil and Dorian both acknowledge that they have secrets;
Dorian knows “the terrible pleasure of a double life” (210). And the designation of Basil’s love for Dorian—the source of his own “double life”—as “such love as Michael Angelo had known, and Montaigne, and Winckelmann, and Shakespeare himself” (149) shows an effort to imagine a male homosexual tradition. It is Basil, appropriately, who calls Dorian “fatal to young men,” reminding him of “that wretched boy in the Guards who committed suicide,” another man “who had to leave England, with a tarnished name,” and yet another who met a “dreadful end” (183), suggesting Dorian’s ability to communicate to others the influences that have worked on him.

From the novel’s first publication to the present day, readers have seen in it the possibility of a homosexuality that remains ineffable, at once present and absent, not only as a function of semantic delicacy but, as we shall see, through the very structure of the novel’s causality. As Paul Morrison writes, “Homosexuality is presumed to be at the root of all Dorian’s actions, but how do we know what we all think we know, even if that knowledge characteristically goes under the gentlemanly decorum of ‘it goes without saying?’” (18). Joseph Bristow notes “the notorious invisibility—and yet unwavering implication” of homosexuality in *Dorian Gray* (“Complex” 204); and Ellis Hanson finds that Dorian’s misdeeds “are apparent without being certain” (210). Wilde’s contemporaries felt much the same, to judge by a series of hostile reviews, one of which prompted retailer W. H. Smith to withdraw its copies of the book. Samuel Jeyes’s 1890 review in the *St James’s Gazette*, as well as his later published dialogue with Wilde, identified the text and its topic as perverse; noting its “esoteric prurience,” Jeyes observed that *Dorian Gray* “constantly hints, not obscurely, at disgusting sins and abominable crimes” (Beckson 68).6 A review in the *Daily Chronicle* charged that the novel indulges in “every form of secret and unspeakable vice,” and should we wonder how many forms of vice were deemed unspeakable, *Punch* identifies Dorian as a “Ganymede-like” figure (Beckson 73, 75). On the text’s 1891 publication as a book, a review in the *Athenaeum* called it “unmanly, sickening, vicious (though not exactly what is called ‘improper’), and tedious” (Beckson 82). Each reader attempts to register his recognition of sexual impropriety while unable to declare, and thus decisively to condemn, the nature of that transgression. In 1964, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously asserted that even if he could not define “hard-core” pornography, “I know it when I see it,” and much the same logic is at work in readers’ responses to *Dorian Gray*, whether past or present, appalled or approving.7

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In Wilde’s case, however, we know homosexuality when we do not see it; the very occlusion of Dorian’s actions in the novel opens them to modern sexual epistemologies. Hanson suggests that during the trials, “despite Wilde’s vagueness, his circumlocution, his intentional obscurity, the novel was thought to be ... sufficient evidence of very specific sexual crimes” (290). Regarding this collocation of secrecy and specificity, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that by the close of the nineteenth century, when “knowledge meant sexual knowledge, and secrets sexual secrets, there had in fact developed one particular sexuality that was distinctively constituted as secrecy” (Epistemology 73). Striving to articulate the structure of this open secret, other readers invoke absence and lack. In Jeffrey Nunokawa’s words, homosexuality constitutes a “desire whose subject is finally nowhere and thus everywhere at once” (“Disappearance” 189). Bristow concurs: due to “the notorious invisibility—and yet unwavering implication” of homosexuality in Dorian Gray, “the modern notion of ‘homosexuality is nowhere proved and yet everywhere suspected” (“A Complex” 204, 210). Similarly, Richard Ellman writes, it is “not that all Wilde’s principals are homosexuals, but they are scarcely anything else” (319).

Because the text cannot specify what effects follow from Dorian’s many influences, that elision becomes a site of readerly projection. In a published reply to the negative review in the Scots Observer, a document later cited at his trial, Wilde described his attempt “to surround Dorian Gray with an atmosphere of moral corruption ... To keep this atmosphere vague and indeterminate and wonderful was the aim” (Sinfield 101). So strongly does this strategy resemble James’s account of the indeterminacy in his 1898 novella The Turn of the Screw that one may suspect an influence of another kind. In his preface to the New York edition of Turn, James writes:

Only make the reader’s general vision of evil intense enough, I said to myself—and that is already a charming job—and his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy ... will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars. Make him think the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications. (128)

There is no evil in the text, James implies, except what the reader brings with him, the projected stuff of his and his culture’s particular terrors. As a result, Shoshana Felman observes, “we are forced to participate in the scandal ... the

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8. Sedgwick calls Dorian Gray “the perfect rhetorical distillation of the open secret, the glass closet, shaped by the conjunction of an extravagance of deniability and an extravagance of flamboyant display” (Epistemology 165).
scandal is not simply *in* the text, it resides in our *relation* to the text” (97). I will return to the reader’s part shortly, but first it is worth noting Wilde’s articulation of this idea. Recalling an axiom spoken by Lord Henry, “The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame” (257), in his reply to the *Scots Observer*, Wilde insists that “each man sees his own sin in *Dorian Gray*. What Dorian Gray’s sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them” (Bristow, “Wilde” 53). He reiterated this point in the courtroom: asked whether Dorian Gray’s sins may include sodomy, Wilde responded: “That is according to the temper of each one who reads the book; he who has found the sin has brought it” (Holland 78). Though James was not known for his support of Wilde, he grasped Wilde’s narrative strategy only too well. In an 1892 letter to a friend, he discusses *Lady Windermere’s Fan* in terms that might well describe *Dorian Gray*: “Everything Oscar does,” he writes, “is a deliberate trap for the literalist, and to see the literalist walk straight up to it, look straight at it, and step straight into it makes one freshly avert a discouraged gaze from this unspeakable animal” (Donoghue 235). When in *The Turn of the Screw* James echoes his remark on Wilde, insisting that “The story won’t tell . . . not in any literal, vulgar way,” he has truly inherited the position of his rival (3).

**Just Cause**

Lingering in the mode of perpetual beginning and concluding only with arbitrary violence, *Dorian Gray* charges its reader with the impossible task of deriving effect from cause, contrary to the normal sequence. As we know, the narrative form of a conventional etiological study resembles that of a mystery novel with the doctor in the role of detective; Philip Rieff compares Freud, the “master of detection,” to Sherlock Holmes (viii, xii). Whether scientific, psychoanalytic, or literary, such investigations are fundamentally linear: given a phenomenon—say, the hysteria of Freud’s Dora or the plumage of Darwin’s male bird of paradise—they work backward to determine the cause. In such origin narratives, Freud will identify sexual dysfunction at the root of hysteria and Darwin will name sexual selection as the reason for the bird’s display. But as Freud explains in an 1896 essay,

> The area of occurrence of an aetiological factor may be freely allowed to be wider than of its effect, but it must not be narrower. Not everyone who

9. Wilde admits that for the book publication he altered a passage that “would convey the impression that the sin of Dorian Gray was sodomy” (Holland 78–79).
touches or comes near a smallpox patient develops smallpox; nevertheless infection from a smallpox patient is almost the only known aetiology of the disease. (3:192)

Etiological narrative can find the earlier cause of a given effect, but it cannot know the eventual effects of a specific cause; it can explain the present by looking to the past, but it cannot predict what is to come.

Reflecting this failed etiology, *Dorian Gray* withholds, in several senses, the satisfaction of narrative closure. Unable to name the nature of Dorian’s change, the broken narrative offers cause after unending cause. Most of the 1891 text’s twenty chapters detail the formation or deformation of his character, offering a protracted prologue for a plot that effectively begins with Dorian’s murder of Basil in chapter 13. Between two unrelated acts of arbitrary violence, Basil’s murder and Dorian’s suicide, the last portion of the narrative provides a generous wadding of irrelevant scenes. Surely the refusal of narrative progress has its own meaning, but no reader, I wager, savors Lady Naborough’s “tedious party” or tea-time with the Duchess of Monmouth (211). Nor is there much reason for James Vane’s sudden return, or much satisfaction in his accidental death, a third act of arbitrary violence. Appropriately, a narrative set in motion by Dorian’s wish to avoid his own end finds itself equally averse to conclusion. Narrative conventions, of course, align closely with sexual conventions, in the marriage plot and beyond. As Judith Roof explains, “while healthy heterosexuality produces the proper reproductive narrative—like reproducing like and increasing (similar to well-invested capital)—perversions produce the wrong story: decrease, degenerescence, death” (35). No wonder, then, that readers have found in *Dorian Gray* a maddening perversion of novelistic form. John Paul Riquelme observes that “in this narrative garden of forking paths, there appears to be a virus that replicates itself in double, antithetical forms within a maze that leads us not to an exit but to an impasse” (616). Kevin Ohi notes that “while not, perhaps, ‘a novel without a plot,’ it does move in circles, rushing toward where it has already preemptively been” (81). Nunokawa is more blunt, declaring: “the book is boring . . . long stretches of the story are almost unbearably uninteresting” (“Importance” 151).” And if it is dull or circular, *Dorian Gray* owes that narrative dysfunction to its reversal of etiological conventions.

If homosexuality is an absent effect in *Dorian Gray*, it is also an absent cause. Presenting an absence that *is* homosexuality, rather than a mere absence *of* homosexuality, the novel evokes Lacan’s impossible causality: a

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10. For his part, Ellman calls portions of the novel “wooden, padded, self-indulgent” (314).
cause that both does and does not exist, with a capacity for retroactive effects. If in scientific etiology events are “understood as leading smoothly, in accordance with well-known 'laws,' to other events,” Bruce Fink writes, “Lacan understands cause in a more radical sense, as that which disrupts the smooth functioning of lawlike interactions” (31). Refusing teleology and closure, he divorces causality from scientific logic and evacuates its accustomed clinical function. Unlike Freud, who sees symptoms as effects of unconscious repression, Lacan argues that “the cause of the unconscious . . . must be conceived as, fundamentally, a lost cause” (128). Something in the unconscious produces symptoms, but that cause remains opaque and inaccessible. What Lacan calls the Real is a stubborn node of unsymbolizable matter in the Symbolic order—in Slavoj Žižek’s words, “a cause which in itself does not exist—which is present only in a series of effects, but always in a distorted, displaced way” (Sublime 163). As such, “the Real is the absent cause of the Symbolic” because it determines by opposition what the Symbolic order will privilege as presence, meaning, and the Law (Metastases 30). The Real perversely defines the Symbolic order within which it appears absent. Žižek explains: “Although it does not exist (in the sense of ‘really existing,’ taking place in reality), [the Real] has a series of properties—it exercises a certain structural causality, it can produce a series of effects in the symbolic reality of subjects” (Sublime 163). That is precisely the ontological status of homosexuality in Dorian Gray; it cannot be proven to exist and yet it produces effects. Morrison offers a similar reading of that paradox, calling the place of homosexuality in Dorian Gray “an impossible epistemological quandary” that is “meant to underwrite the ontological incoherence, the essential nonbeing, of its object” (44).

When traditional etiology puts effects before causes, it fails to describe the backward narrative of Dorian Gray, to which homosexuality arrives belatedly as a retroactive cause. Renata Salecl argues that in Seminars XI and XX, Lacanian causality entails a temporal reversal: “the ‘primary’ element becomes delineated retroactively through the operation of the ‘secondary’ element, in which the primary is included, albeit as a foreign body” (133). As a retroactive cause, the Real is both the prerequisite for and the result of the Symbolic, and homosexuality is the retroactive cause of Dorian Gray. Here time runs backward, and not only because the portrait, as if to literalize Freud’s theory of deferred action, suspends the effects of time on its subject.

11. Žižek’s language differs from Lacan’s: while Žižek repeatedly refers to the “absent cause” of the unconscious, for Lacan causality occupies an impossible position between existence and nonexistence (Four 128). Nonetheless, Lacan’s terms for unconscious causality consistently involve negativity and lack: “hole,” “split,” and “gap” (Four 22).
Where sexuality is concerned the novel’s causality becomes tautological, as Wilde himself becomes an effect of the text. Having read *Dorian Gray*, Alfred Douglas was eager to meet its author in July 1891, and at their next visit Wilde gave Douglas a special copy (Holland xvi). As a token of erotic exchange, the book became a cause or impetus for Wilde’s eventual fate, which would in turn alter the text itself. When in the courtroom Carson asked whether the passage describing Dorian Gray as “fatal to young men” referred to sodomy, Wilde replied, “The passage you have read describes Dorian Gray as a man of very corrupt influence. There is no statement about what the nature of his bad influence was, nor do I think there is such a thing as bad influence in the world”—presumably as opposed to its role in fiction (Holland 102). 12 That evasion notwithstanding, the trial was all about influence and its relation to sodomy, if in a circular fashion: *Dorian Gray* showed Wilde to be a sodomite, whereas Wilde’s crime remade Dorian in its own image. Bad influence, it seems, proliferates: a novel whose protagonist is famously malleable is itself blamed for ruining Douglas and other readers, betraying its author’s power within and beyond the text. Historical exigencies have made *Dorian Gray* both a product and a precursor of Wilde’s downfall. Sedgwick is right to note Wilde’s “hyper-indicativeness as a figure of his age,” but that representative function in no way obviates his role as a figure of ages to come (*Tendencies* 151). For modern readers, the cause of Dorian’s desire has come not from the text but from its future, reflecting Wilde’s 1895 trials and twentieth-century models of gay male identity.

To say, as Wilde did, that “each man sees his own sin in *Dorian Gray*” is to say that each man sees his own desire, and a century of readers have done just that. The text’s backward causality includes both the ways in which later readers’ identificatory energies become the belated cause of Dorian’s homosexuality and the role of the Wilde trials in producing a public discourse of gay identity through which *Dorian Gray* would then be read. The most careful reader of *Dorian Gray* cannot help but bring to the novel her knowledge of what will follow, what has already followed. Christopher Craft suggests that the narcissistic doubling of Dorian and his portrait is reflected once again in readers’ relation to “the uncanny looking glass we call *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” (132). Audrey Jaffe argues that readings of *Dorian Gray* which link the text to modern gay identity make Dorian’s beauty “a kind of projection into the future” (301). But to see any part of the novel as a “projection into the future” requires a projection into the past: the novel has been subject, in Nunkiwa’s words, to an “après coup canonization as an Old Testament version

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12. See also Bristow, “Wilde” 52.
of the exodus from the closet” (“Disappearance” 185). Alan Sinfield too associates *Dorian Gray* with anachronistic reading effects, noting that Wilde’s “typicality is after the fact” (103, 3). In this circular causality, Wilde’s life and works cause—that is, enable a way to articulate—the modern notions of gay identity that cause his life and works to “be” homosexual in the first place. By 1913 the eponymous hero of E. M. Forster’s *Maurice* could confess that he is “an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort,” speaking his unspeakability in a language Wilde had authorized (Sinfield 3). Such temporally distorted reading-effects do not merely reflect the inevitable retrospection of a later reader’s relation to a historically distant text, nor are they wholly driven by the desire of twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers for figures of gay experience. Instead, the strange narrative causality of *Dorian Gray* conscripts the reader to the impossible task of a backward etiology and informs twentieth-century projections of modern gay identity into a text that precedes them. Wilde’s homosexuality both causes the gay male identity of the future and is caused by it; *Dorian Gray* both presages that role and is transformed by it.

**Postscript**

If the post card is a kind of open letter (like all letters), one can always, in a time of peace and under certain regimes, attempt to make it indecipherable without compromising its making its way.

—Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card*

Wilde’s libel trial not only adduced *Dorian Gray* as evidence but also introduced a second queer inscription, the brief text that precipitated Wilde’s suit against Alfred Douglas’s irascible father and began the series of events leading to his destruction. On February 18, 1895, the Marquis of Queensberry came to the Albemarle Club in London, of which Wilde was a member. When he was refused entry, he wrote a message to Wilde on one of his calling cards and gave it to the hall porter.¹³ The porter noted the time and date of its arrival on its back and put it in an envelope for Wilde, who received it on his visit to the club ten days later (Holland 4). The substance of that all but illegible text has been the subject of some debate. Queensberry may have written “For Oscar Wilde, posing as a somdomite,” or perhaps “Poseur and Somdomite,” or as the porter believed, “ponce and Somdomite.” So contested is this question

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¹³. For accounts of this incident, see Ellman 438; Bristow, “Complex” 200; and Donoghue 229, 241–42.
that not all scholars accept Queensberry’s interpretation, during the first trial, of his own note as reading “posing as sodomite” (Holland 4). The card is an “ambiguous” document in Queensberry’s “scribbled,” “scrawled,” “none-too-legible hand” (Donoghue 241; Bronski 62; Cohen, “Wilde” 35). A perfunctory survey of Wilde scholarship turns up ten variant readings, distinguished by their form of address (For? To?), diction (Ponce? Posing? Poseur?), punctuation, capitalization, even the location of the message. During the trial Willie Mathews, an attorney for the prosecution, mistakenly described the card as reading on one side “For Oscar Wilde, posing as sodomite,’ whilst upon the other side of the card is either printed or lithographed the name and title of the Marquess of Queensberry.” In fact, as the clerk of the court reminded him, the message to Wilde appears above Queensberry’s name on the front of the card. Several scholars repeat the error, as if to restage the sodomite’s supposed confusion of recto and verso (Holland 43).

Even considering its fateful role, the hermeneutic effort expended on this text is extraordinary: everyone agrees that the note is unreadable, everyone tries to read it, and everyone already knows what it means. But despite so many readings of Queensberry’s unreadable message, in fact it has not been read closely enough. Consider the word “somdomite,” which some critics regard as an “aristocratic misspelling” and others call “a moment of notorious illiteracy” (Ellman 438; Bristow, “Complex” 200). In court, Wilde’s arch understatement—“The Marquess’s spelling is somewhat unusual”—anticipated generations of queer scholars by whom superior literacy, not to say attitude, would be claimed as the privilege of the dispossessed. A century later, readers agree only that “somdomite” signifies “sodomite” (Kaufman 23). One effect of the calling card, then, is a disjunction between signifier and signified. Everyone knows, or thinks they know, what this text means, but they cannot tell how it means. Ellman anticipates a century of subsequent readers when he describes the porter at the Albemarle Club, who “had not deciphered the words—no one was to do so accurately—but he understood that an insult was intended” (438). How does one understand the indecipherable? What does illegibility itself mean? In an insightful reading, David Jays links the scribbled note to the historical questions haunting Dorian Gray: “Queensberry’s blunder usefully reminds us that Wilde cannot easily be considered a modern homosexual. He is less a sod than a ‘somd,’ his own category of unique slippage that straddles the borders between Victorian paterfamilias and contemporary queer” (n.p.).

14. This is the statement recorded in the transcript of the trial, although Ellman says Queensberry read the written message as “posing as a Somdomite” (438).
from the modern gay man recalls the commonplace understanding of the alterity of the past, Jays avoids the repressive hypothesis; instead of a Victorian silence, Queensberry’s “sodm” signals a surplus of meaning, a site of productive incoherence. For the card’s brief message, ambiguity and error are significant in their own right.

The same vexed interpretation and radical undecidability describe the place of homosexuality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Everyone says that it cannot be specified, and everyone attempts to read it nonetheless, confident that they know what the novel means even when they cannot say how it means. As texts whose meaning is, in Derrida’s words for the postcard, both “open” and “indecipherable” at once, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Queensberry’s calling card also share the dubious honor of their evidentiary appearance in Wilde’s trial, where court proceedings extensively considered the relation between sodomy and interpretation (35). Defending Queensberry, Carson’s opening speech assumed both the transparent legibility of homosexuality and the legitimacy of fiction as evidence: *Dorian Gray*, he said, “was designed and intended by Mr Wilde, and was understood by the readers thereof, to describe the relations, intimacies, and passions of certain persons of sodomitical and unnatural habits, tastes and practices” (Holland 39). In contrast, Wilde’s attorney, Sir Edward Clarke, treated homosexuality as an open secret: *Dorian Gray*, he said, “describes—I will not say describes—it hints at and suggests, for it does not describe, vices and weaknesses of which Dorian Gray is guilty” (Holland 42). The difference between describing and hinting is the difference between certainty and doubt, clarity and ambiguity, the literal and the figural. Clarke’s statement performs the same evasion it attributes to the novel, hinting at “sodomitical . . . habits” with “vices and weaknesses.”

In Carson’s view, interpretation is easy—the author’s intent coincides exactly with the reader’s understanding—but for Clarke the text forever evades the closure of meaning. Later in the proceedings, the issue returns:

**Carson:** I will suggest to you *Dorian Gray*. Is that open to the interpretation of being a sodomitical book?

**Wilde:** Only to brutes—only to the illiterate.

**Carson:** An illiterate person reading *Dorian Gray* might consider it a sodomitical book? (Holland 81)

Aligning sodomy with misinterpretation, Wilde disavows responsibility for what others may find in *Dorian Gray*, echoing his reply to the *Scots Observer*: “each man sees his own sin.” But “an illiterate person reading” is at best par-
adoxical: the notion of illiterate reading as a figure for misinterpretation implies that some people read so badly that they are essentially not reading at all. This odd locution recalls the problem of Queensberry’s calling card: here the illiterate and the illegible join in an unlikely hermeneutic project. It is not that the calling card’s inscription is simply illegible; rather, like homosexuality in *Dorian Gray* it is both legible and illegible at once, easy enough to grasp but fundamentally resistant to meaning. Both are ambiguous, but the nature of their ambiguity is different: *Dorian Gray* does everything but name homosexuality, while Queensberry’s message is all too easily reduced to “Wilde . . . sodomite.” The calling card, accordingly, functions as a supplement, providing the signifier of homosexuality that the novel lacks; it is a postscript to *Dorian Gray*, a final chapter, which, though inscribed by another hand, works to rewrite the meaning of the text.

If the plot of the novel centers on the deferred action of Dorian’s aging, this narrative device is repeated by temporal disturbances around the novel. Queensberry’s calling card takes its place alongside the trials themselves and twentieth-century gay male identity as a site from which homosexuality “returns from the future” to *Dorian Gray*. The meaning of the 1890 novel comes to include, indeed cannot exclude, the narrative of Wilde’s 1895 trials, and with it Queensberry’s brief text. In the latter, the word “sodomite” purports to describe an existing person, but in fact it creates Wilde as that person, and it is Wilde’s failed refusal of that interpellation that ensures its historical durability. Perversely, the card is also what causes Dorian Gray to “be” homosexual, for its insulting charge is the lens through which Wilde’s previous writings will be read: some five years after the fact, it makes *Dorian Gray* and its eponymous protagonist the queer figures they will then have been all along. The chain of events set in motion by Queensberry’s message causes the trials, which cause the exposure of Wilde’s homosexuality, which belatedly causes the confirmation of the homosexuality of Dorian Gray, which is then returned as evidence against Wilde.

How then might this “lost,” retroactive causality speak to more recent questions of queer etiology? If conventional etiology takes causality as its end, both antigay and “born gay” theories make causality a means to an end, a way to promote an ideological cause. But the fixation on the lost biological cause of homosexuality—“gay genes,” “born gay”—is itself a lost cause, useless to advance queer equity. *Dorian Gray* invites us to imagine the relation between queerness and etiology differently, replacing the question of what causes homosexuality with that of what homosexuality causes. What then does homosexuality cause? Wilde offers two answers. *Dorian Gray* suggests that homosexuality causes itself, as if to elaborate, without apology, the myth of
queer parthenogenesis. Perversion causes more perversion, recursively and perpetually circling back on itself, spreading its bad influence among characters, readers, the courtroom, Wilde himself, and later gay culture. Beyond Wilde’s text as well, homosexuality perpetuates itself asexually, horizontally, promiscuously, in gay and lesbian cultures and identities. Yet Dorian Gray also insists that something more accurately called queerness proliferates in all its negativity, absence, impossibility. In heteronormative culture homosexuality may be “unspeakable,” as Forster put it, but it also functions to stabilize a network of intelligible sexual identities, not least its own, whereas queerness is called to account for the inadequacy of the order within which it remains a “foreign body.” This “lost cause,” then, exerts its own—as Wilde might say—strange influence, pitting the closure of etiological narratives against the queerness of sexuality as such.

Works Cited


