A Thousand Words

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Picturing Yourself:

PORTRAITS, SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS, AND MODERNIST STYLE

It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.
—Oscar Wilde, Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray

Cleverly framed as a story about a portrait within a portrait, Oscar Wilde’s 1890 The Picture of Dorian Gray is mainly concerned with how visual culture offers homosexual men the possibility of a group identity. As the novel opens an artist, Basil Hallward, works on a “full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty” while the aesthete Lord Henry Wotton watches him. Both men are ostensibly admiring the painting that sits between them: “As the painter looked at the gracious and comely form he had so skillfully mirrored in his art, a smile of pleasure passed across his face, and seemed about to linger there. . . . ‘It is your best work, Basil, the best thing you have ever done,’ said Lord Henry, languidly.”

The two men are interested not only in each other but also in the portrait’s sitter, whose painted representation allows them to triangulate their desire, as well as the art that enables the expression of admiration and longing between men. Unfortunately, the circulation of these feelings is limited by conventional notions of artistic impersonality, as well as by the fear of social censure, both of which collapse the group dynamic of a visually expressed and expressive desire into an individual attribute. For Basil, such extraordinary individuality is risky:

“Your rank and wealth, Harry; my brains, such as they are—my art, whatever it may be worth; Dorian Gray’s good looks—we shall all suf-
fer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly.”

“Dorian Gray? Is that his name?” asked Lord Henry, walking across the studio towards Basil Hallward. (19)

Like the forged portrait that becomes the locus of literary and biographical theorizing in Wilde’s 1889 “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” a short story about Shakespeare’s boy-love Willie Hughes, the portrait in The Picture of Dorian Gray seems to be about a “real” person men use to organize their looking, their appreciation of masculine beauty, and their theories about desire and art. Not coincidentally, Dorian assumes a solid identity as the focus of their conversational attention at the exact moment that his likeness is assuming solidity under Basil’s brush. This real and concrete person who seems to be the focus of both the painted picture and the novel who bears his name gives an individual form and figure to homoerotic desire, as well as to the larger circulations of desire and looking in both the room and in the novel.

In this classic example of what Eve Sedgwick has characterized as the epistemology of the closet, Lord Henry’s homoerotic feelings are kept hidden by a determined unknowing, or at least, a pretense of guilelessness. What is especially instructive about Lord Henry’s unknowing here is the way it helps render homosexuality less threatening by reducing it from something that defines the erotic desires and practices of a group to a story about individuals, or a feature of individual characters. Thus Lord Henry’s—and the narrator’s—rapturous praise of Dorian’s particular beauty and personality helps the novel transform Basil’s suspicion that they “all” are, as a group, extraordinary, talented, and attractive, and thus they “all” will be punished for being other than normal, into a story where only one of them—Dorian—is desired, and therefore only one of them will seem to be peculiar, extraordinary, and dangerous.

Homosexuality may describe the shared erotics of a social group as well as the sexual identity of various individuals, but it is more often used to particularize individuals. Wilde’s Dorian Gray performs this collapse, and has in turn been viewed as a book with its own sexually and socially perverse “personality” ever since its author was stamped as one of the first publicly verified homosexuals in modern history in the 1895 trials that led to his imprisonment and notoriety. Indeed, the novel and Wilde himself have come to seem interchangeable, and like its author, the text has a particularized—if public—identity. It is a closeted text, a perverse text, a camp text. The novel is its homosexual subtext, a portrait—like Radclyffe Hall’s 1928 The Well of Loneliness—of sexually perverse types, but one that, unlike Hall’s sentimental manifesto, celebrates its
own perverse aesthetics. For more than a century, homosexual male readers have turned its pages looking for an explanation of “their” sexual tastes, and for a way of being that combines aesthetic and moral resistance in order to refuse normative heterosexuality and respectability. Neil Bartlett writes of the aphorisms that open the novel: “The first method of interpretation is one of attack. For instance, I can find ‘homo- sexuality’ hidden in the most innocent or random of details, if my gaze is sufficiently obsessive or well-informed. All I need do is apply a characteristically gay skill—the gaze that catches the dropped hint, the note of excess.” In the novel, this “note” of excess is something Basil Hallward thinks he perceives in his portrait of Dorian: Basil thinks the portrait has “too much” of his feelings for Dorian in it, while Dorian later sees what he believes are his own excesses in the portrait’s changes.

Modern readers who locate in the novel’s pages the beginnings of modern gay sensibility have a sense of the subcultural work performed by its public circulation, its ability to solicit a perverse community of readers and bring them into being through its addresses, but readers also sense this movement in the novel where the social is reduced to mere individuality. Eve Sedgwick describes Dorian Gray as a novel that “condenses” its homoeroticism: “The novel takes a plot that is distinctively one of male-male desire, the competition between Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton for Dorian Gray’s love, and condenses it into the plot of the mysterious bond of figural likeness and figural expiation between Dorian Gray and his own portrait.” Moe Meyer similarly uses the language of “collapse” to interpret Dorian’s murder of Basil as “a success that frees Basil from dependence upon the Other by literally enacting the collapse of subject and object.” This sense that many readers have of the novel’s distillation of a circulating aestheticized desire into an individual life or figure can be found even in Wilde’s best and most respected biographer, Richard Ellmann, who conflates art and life when he argues that Wilde’s homosexuality determines the character of The Picture of Dorian Gray, and that the character of that novel, though not yet in existence, shapes the events in Wilde’s life that precede it. Ellmann cannot resist reading Oscar’s pivotal 1886 homosexual seduction of Robert Ross as one that prefigures—by four years—Dorian Gray’s own lawless behavior in Wilde’s novel: “For Wilde, homosexual love roused him from pasteboard conformity to the expression of latent desires. After 1886 he was able to think of himself as a criminal, moving guiltily among the innocent.”

As the long and continuing battle to declassify homosexuality as an illness suggests, normative culture has a stake in reducing homosexuality from a dynamic social desire among and between men to an individual
As Jeffrey Weeks argues, disapproval of male sexuality in general and male homosexuality in particular continued to inform public attitudes in the late Victorian era, where social purity campaigns focused on the linked issues of prostitution and male homosexuality as personal, if gendered, excess, “as products of undifferentiated male desire.” Wilde’s treatment of male-male desire in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” drew more negative attention to him than did his comportment, remarks, or behavior, emphasizing the perversity of looking—cruising, narcissism, voyeurism—but also, and most importantly, gesturing to this perversity as a shared social practice. Ellmann’s language suggests Dorian Gray’s outlaw anonymity, one where inner, “latent” desires isolate a man and make him lead a secret life, different from that of those around him—a life inspired, we are told, by the lonely, predatory life of Wilde himself. Yet Wilde hardly sought the individualized invisibility Ellmann’s description suggests, and Ellmann himself concedes that while Wilde’s marriage afforded him a certain measure of social respectability, he did his best to undermine it with his writing. Unlike the dynamic likeness of Dorian Gray that is taken out of circulation by its sitter and hidden away in an attic room, the 1890 *Picture of Dorian Gray* and 1889 “Portrait of Mr. W. H.”—both works with “too much” of their author in them—circulated publicly. Insisting on the presence of a public and communal perversity between and among the respectable male denizens of English life, Wilde could hardly be said to resemble the skulking, alienated individual criminal Ellmann imagines. Flaunting becomes a kind of hiding, while remaining a sort of flaunting—a resistant style not unlike the subcultural display Dick Hebdige terms “hiding in the light.”

Instead, as Wilde’s writing and personal comportment shows, the conventional, socially normative reduction of “extraordinary” queer desire into a matter of individual taste and personal style, a reduction that neutralizes the social possibilities of homosexual community, is also resisted by the style that solicits looking with a vengeance, and emphasizes individuality to an extraordinary degree. This struggle to transform style-as-collapse into style-as-subversion is perhaps the foremost concern of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the reason for its emphasis on the dynamics of portraiture. Written by Wilde in part to demonstrate to his artistic nemesis James McNeil Whistler the superiority of writing to painting, *Dorian Gray* uses the spectatorial mirroring of both the painting and the viewing of the painting to examine how being looked at and paid attention to produces the desire to be looked at, as well as to control the ways in which one is seen. The circuit of pleasure that
looking sets in motion is suggested by the first scene in the novel and
taken to another level by the novel itself, whose title—its main conceit—
conflates painted portrait and literary portrait, producing the illusion of
a portrait within a portrait. In Wilde’s work, framing gestures such as
portraits within portraits draw relations between portraits, self-reflexive
perversity, and style. Someone who enjoys attention solicits the look by
adopting a style that will fascinate. This style, in calling attention to
itself, manages to invite and circulate the pleasures of looking and yet
divert, distract, and parody the scarier aspects of the look, such as social
scrutiny, judgment, and castration. The man who solicits attention
cruises other men in the safety of like-minded friends and peers, per-
versely keeping the look in the field of the same while inviting those in
the know to join that field, that looking, and that pleasurable perversity.

However, as Basil’s comments over Dorian Gray’s portrait in *The
Picture of Dorian Gray* certainly suggest, the threat of retribution by the
gods for talent, beauty, and homosexual attraction and attractiveness
menaces men with homoerotic tastes. At various moments, both Dorian
and his friends experience a crisis when they feel themselves being
watched, a crisis that psychoanalytic conversations would later liken to
castration inasmuch as the look feels as if it contains the threat of pun-
ishment. In Wilde’s novel the protagonist, his friends, and even the nar-
rator respond to this normative demand, the demand that one be ordi-
nary in order to escape punishment, by turning the look back on itself,
by dramatizing it, distracting it, or soliciting it. In doing this, which may
involve the performance of an extraordinary individuality—making
speeches, striking poses, adopting and discarding disguises, or making
double entendres and shocking comparisons—characters behave per-
versely, attracting attention to themselves only to mock both the atten-
tion and the “self” at which such attention is ostensibly directed. This
tension between the fear of sexual surveillance, on the one hand, and the
flamboyant solicitation of the look, on the other, results in a literary por-
traiture that is dynamic, perverse, and queerly modern, one that refuses
the stigma of particularity by celebrating the group-constituting power
of extraordinary individual “personality.”

YOU’VE GOT THE LOOK

The specter of punishment that fuels Basil’s anxiety about himself and
his friends disappears when Lord Henry insists that their desire focus
on Dorian Gray’s portrait and then, as if by accidental extension, on
Dorian himself. Displacing the homoerotic desire that circulates between himself, Basil, and Dorian onto the portrait allows their erotic attraction to be manifested as mere aesthetic appreciation. However, Lord Henry also keeps that attraction moving, distracting his listeners with dramatic speeches where he airs subversively hedonistic views. Adopting the pose of peculiarity, affecting a character rather than seeming to speak sincerely, he is able to exhort Dorian—and the readers of the novel who listen to his speech along with Dorian—to live excessively: “Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations” (31). Circulating his hedonistic views in the most theatrical manner possible, he constructs an audience, one delighted and distracted by the spectacle of extraordinary individuality he seems to embody.

The ways in which looking in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* constitutes a public invitation to shared perversity at the scene of the portrait is especially evident when Dorian sees his likeness for the first time. Here the public and shared nature of the look functions as a mechanism of sexual identification. Dorian looks at the painting from the vantage of another, as Lord Henry directs him to do. “‘It is the finest portrait of modern times,’” Lord Henry congratulates Basil Hallward as the artist signs his name. Henry then invites the subject of the painting to see himself being seen: “‘Mr. Gray, come over and look at yourself’” (32). Lord Henry treats the painting as a beautiful object that solicits the admiration of all three men in the room, tactfully ignoring Basil’s earlier confession of the painting’s autobiographical elements, and inviting Dorian to view his likeness as if it was his real self. In doing this, Henry uses the painting to organize the looking between men going on in the room. The men participate in Lord Henry’s narcissistic invitation to “look at yourself,” ostensibly admiring the painting instead of themselves and each other, though Dorian’s doubled presence as both real-life person and representation makes Dorian—as well as those watching him look at his portrait—aware of the system of desiring gazes that produces first the portrait, then the occasion of its viewing, and then, finally, the group’s consciousness of the viewing as a version of homosexual cruising.

Even the narrator’s account of the scene emphasizes the pleasure of watching Dorian’s pleasure in seeing himself:

> When he saw it he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time. He stood there motionless and in wonder, dimly
conscious that Hallward was speaking to him, but not catching the meaning of his words. The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. (33)

Dorian’s flushed cheeks and look of joy register not only his arousal but also the arousal of those watching his arousal. Arousal works like that, through looking at the arousal of others, as consumers of pornography—like Wilde himself—knew. Not only does Dorian think he sees himself being seen in his portrait, which captures the gaze of the artist as an integral part of its rendition of him, but he is also (“dimly”) aware that Basil Hallward and Lord Henry are watching him awaken to the beauty of the painting, as if it were an accurate likeness of how he is regarded by others. Indeed, his sense of himself seems to come solely from this encounter with this circuit of erotic looking, “as if he had recognized himself for the first time.”

Yet everyone—especially Dorian—misrecognizes the relationship of the painting to Dorian’s own person. Rather than seeing how Basil’s vision creates a version of his person which acts as an eroticized image, like a centerfold, between all three men, Dorian attributes his sudden self-consciousness, his awareness of his own beauty and the beauty of young men, to the painted likeness he believes holds the key to the mysteries of his personality. The text never says why this happens, though the fact that it happens in response to the highly charged scene of three men panting around a painting suggests Dorian shares Basil’s discomfort with the free-floating quality of this circulating homoerotic admiration. Dorian collapses this admiration into a quality particular to his own individual person, seeing the desire he sees in the painting as a representation of his own attractive fabulousness, and—later—using it to justify his morbid self-obsession and self-loathing. He lets the painting be a picture of his “real” self, rather than reading it as Basil’s fantasy of him painted in the presence of Lord Henry (which it is). He fails to see how this desire is the product of a social dynamic, how it circulates and ramifies between and among men, and how it needs to stay in that world, both to feed itself and to inspire ever more beautiful feats of artistic creation.

Basil Hallward, who thinks the painting is about him, comes closer than Dorian to the “real” subject of the painting. Earlier in the novel, in a conversation with Lord Henry, Basil condemns his “best work” as somehow too personally revealing: “‘An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his life into them’” (24). Whatever the painting reveals about Basil is far less important than the fact that the
painting organizes the desires of the men in the room around it, and yet Basil feels he has to deflect attention away from this. This is because the painting reveals the fascination men have for each other’s beauty—a homoerotic fascination, if not an outright expression of homosexual longing, that Basil clearly shares with Lord Henry, yet takes great pains to insist is his, and his alone. Lord Henry claims to find Basil Hallward’s work so fascinating that he demands to know everything about the beautiful boy whose likeness it is, while Basil, despite his friend’s encouragement, insists that he will never show his painting publicly: “I really can’t exhibit it. I have put too much of myself into it” (19).

Basil’s ambivalence about the place of desire in the object of the painting, and Dorian’s participation—however unconscious—in Basil’s discomfort, sets up a larger ambivalence that structures the novel, an ambivalence about the subject-constituting function of homoerotic looking more generally. “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors,” Wilde writes in the Preface to the novel. Basil’s discomfort registers his consciousness of the demand by “the gods” that one be normal and ordinary. He personalizes and privatizes his discomfort, internalizing the scrutiny he fears, refusing to entertain the possibility that the painting might operate in a social field as something that might call out and circulate male homoeroticism in a way that cannot harm him. He rationalizes and perpetuates his culture’s homosexual shame by reducing his homosexuality into something that is his only. Grasping the transformative impact of a dynamic homoerotic desire on both art itself and on his perception as an artist, he mistakenly reads the artistic results of his desire as nothing more than the effects of his own failed artistic sublimation.

Basil’s position masks an elaborate defense of the closeted artist as a defense of artistic impersonality. On the one hand, he admits that his desire for Dorian has completely transformed his view of art, as well as his creative abilities: “In some curious way—I wonder will you understand me?—his personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style” (23). In the next breath, however, he justifies the repression of his feelings by rejecting the personal component of artistic expression: “We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty. Some day I will show the world what it is, and for that reason the world shall never see my portrait of Dorian Gray” (24). By insisting on sublimation and impersonality, that private desire—here equated with too much personality—has no place in art, he denies others the opportunity to be changed by his art and by the
impulses behind it. He takes the homoerotic longing he invests in the painting out of circulation and thus takes the aesthetically transformative aspects of those desires out of circulation as well. Ironically, his insistence on a more universal idealism actually particularizes the larger, more universal implications of his art. His equation of personality with the particular homosexual and impersonality with the absence of such feelings eliminates the possibility of a larger community that is not heterosexual.

**THE SHADOW OF YOUR STYLE**

Style, then, can address the crisis of homosexual surveillance by putting an individual, eccentric spin on group identity. As an interface between individual self-expression and subcultural social constitution, style becomes another vehicle where a dangerous homosociality can be reduced into a manifestation of the merely particular (and vice versa). The comportment of the dandified aesthete, of which Oscar Wilde—along with Whistler, Beardsley, and Beerbohm, most famously—serves as one of the best modern examples, illustrates how individual style solicits attention in order to circulate the erotics of looking while subverting its normative demands. Wilde made his name in a culture that celebrated individuality by creating a buzz of publicity around his person before he became famous as a writer. “The attention he drew with his cello coat he was able to hold with his wit and enthusiasm,” Richard Ellmann recounts of the astonishing coat Wilde wore to the Grosvenor Gallery opening in 1877 that changed colors when he moved. It is no coincidence that Wilde first expressed rhetorical style, theatrical manners, homosexuality, and artistic signature through his dandyism. The dandy’s mode of theatrical self-presentation provided a semiotic model of style in visual culture that could be put to subversive ends, one that had successfully negotiated the divide between tradition and individual talent for hundreds of years. To be turned out in proper attire is to uphold the strictest kind of social convention; to be so well turned out as to become a kind of individual spectacle without drawing down reproach is one of the most extraordinary kinds of social and artistic balancing acts.

Whether Wilde’s “dandiacal send-up” continued or subverted the tradition of the dandy matters less than his adoption of dandyism’s emphasis on the self as spectacle, where style and visibility become a mark of value in a culture that itself values looking and being looked at
above all things. Of Beau Brummell, the archetypal Regency dandy whose style of dress inspired the decadents and aesthetes a century later, Ellen Moers writes: “To the question—What is a gentleman?—which was to obsess poets and philosophers, novelists and divines, radicals and conservatives, the dandy made the most frivolous answer conceivable. He was a gentleman—it was a visible fact—by virtue of a ‘certain something,’ a ‘je-ne-sais-quoi’ which could not be defined—or denied” (original italics).17 Brummell’s courtly style both affirmed and undercut the aristocracy he seemed to emulate by emphasizing his individual transcendence of convention: “His arrogant superiority was an affirmation of the aristocratic principle, his way of life an exaltation of aristocratic society; but his terrible independence proclaimed a subversive disregard for the essentials of aristocracy” such as family and ancestry, class, national and social service, or money.18 Rather than reducing particularizing behaviors, such as homosexuality, to individuality, dandyism theatricalizes individuality and individual taste, opening these out into the realm of public performance. Dandyism calls attention to the individual solicitation of the look, confounding public and private by making excessive individuality a public spectacle.

We see this solicitation of the look in the novel most obviously in the rhetoric, comportment, and individual style of Lord Henry, but The Picture of Dorian Gray also solicits the look in other ways, functioning as a portrait itself by exploring the relationship between the particularizing and social aspects of looking, as well as the particularizing and social aspects of an artistic “style” that also solicits and deflects various kinds of scrutiny. In this the portrait and its dynamics functions as something akin to the cotton-reel in psychoanalysis, as a subject-constituting object—or at least, as the object around which subject constitution takes place. Jacques Lacan recognized the importance of such an object to the “I” when, in revisiting Sigmund Freud’s grandson’s “fort-da” throw-away game with the cotton-reel, he surmised “that it is in the object to which the opposition is applied in act, the reel, that we must designate the subject.”19 Lacan’s analysis of the relationship between the eye and the Gaze, the work for which he is perhaps best known, was a product of his historical moment—a moment where visual artists and writers were keenly interested in the relationship between desire and aesthetics, and where many of them incorporated desire into aesthetics by exploring the ways in which art operates as a site of circulating desires, looks, and personas.

Unlike the cotton-reel, however, a painting has several spectators, and thus its constitutive effects are not limited to one individual. The
portrait’s perceived ability to alternately destabilize and consolidate the subjectivities of its viewers in Dorian Gray anticipates Lacan’s theory of the Gaze, formulated as part of his reconsideration of the modernist-era case studies of Sigmund Freud (which remain fascinating portraits in their own right), as well as his consideration of modernist literature itself. One of the more important insights Lacan contributes in an effort to tease out the implications of Freud’s observations about the effect of unconscious processes on the everyday life of individuals and cultures is the idea of consciousness as self-consciousness, as something that becomes possible only within the dynamic relationship of self and other. Lacan’s theory of looking (gaze capitalized as Gaze), which gives an account of social relationships as a visual web of seeing and being seen, shows how the awareness of being looked at destabilizes the subject’s sense of his position as unified and powerful. The look situated in space, while locating the subject as particular and personal by limiting the subject’s perspective, also makes the subject aware of perspectives outside of his or her own body. These perspectives—what Lacan characterizes as the field of the Other—make the subject feel inadequate and fill her with the impossible-to-realize desire to be what the Other desires her to be.

Like Dorian Gray, Lacan’s subject becomes aware of the Gaze from everywhere and attempts to escape its castrating and nullifying effects by appropriating it in a delusive attempt at self-empowerment. Lacan explains it thus: “The privilege of the subject seems to be established here from that bipolar reflexive relation by which, as soon as I perceive, my representations belong to me” (81). Avoiding inadequacy, the subject instead misrecognizes the Gaze when she imagines that she is the one doing the looking, that she is the one looking at herself being seen by others. For Lacan the split between seeing and being looked at is an important one to recognize, since it functions as a limitation or circumscription that signifies castration. This suggests that subjects who insist that they see themselves seeing themselves are using self-consciousness to refuse sexual difference, to ward off the look that demands sexual conformity, and to fashion alternative styles of self-presentation that resist and pervert normative forms of sexuality and gender.

The look that defines a person as someone who is seen comes from both inside and outside of them, splitting them into two different spectators: the one who seems to be doing all the looking, and the one who knows she can only see herself because she is seen from elsewhere. Lacan notes the tendency of subjects to repress the knowledge of this split by assuming that they are the authors of their own self-consciousness: “That
in which the consciousness may turn back upon itself—grasp itself, like Valéry’s Young Parque, as seeing oneself seeing oneself—represents mere sleight of hand,” he notes in Seminar XI. “An avoidance of the function of the gaze is at work there” (74; original italics). Desire is not sparked by the Other, but by the self. Narcissistic self-desire, Lacan notes, is present in all kinds of love; however, its degree of excess marks the difference between normal and perverse forms of sexuality.

Narcissism in psychoanalysis is an important site where homosexuality becomes legible as a collapse into the self, or into self-involvement. Here we see once again the repetition—or more likely the modern origin of the repetition—of the tendency to collapse homosexuality into individuality, into the individuated self epitomized by narcissistic self-absorption. Freud defines narcissism as “the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way as otherwise the body of a sexual object is treated; that is to say, he experiences sexual pleasure in gazing at, caressing and fondling his body, till complete gratification ensues upon these activities.” Freud immediately links narcissism to homosexuality as an “aberration” that is often found among aberrant types—a connection that allows narcissism to “claim a place in the regular sexual development of human beings.” Like Lacan, Freud characterizes narcissism as a perversion in some cases, such as when it “has absorbed the whole sexual life of the subject,” but as healthy in other instances, such as when it functions as “the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation.” The queer aesthetics of narcissism have their roots in sexological and psychoanalytic constructions of both femininity and male homosexuality as narcissistic, constructions that, as Steven Bruhm points out, use narcissism and the figure of Narcissus to “stabilize a range of binarisms upon which gender in Western culture is founded.”

In contrast to this psychoanalytic version of homosexual narcissism, the self-conscious embrace of the strategic meta-narcissism of Wilde and the moderns solicits the look rather than refuses it, signifying the opposite of narcissism even as it performs it. Seeing one’s self seeing one’s self in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” adopts narcissism as a strategic pose, one that both embraces a deviant position in relation to the gaze and dramatizes that position. Enjoying one’s self enjoying self-consciousness aestheticizes, theatricalizes, and celebrates the excessiveness, queerness, and perversity that narcissism signifies. Unlike the private self-absorption of narcissism, the theatrical self-consciousness of *Dorian Gray* and “W. H.” is a social invitation to perversity and participation in a shared aesthetic. Consciousness of one’s con-
consciousness in these works leads to exaggeration, the production of the self as a pose. Pleasure in posing, in theatrical self-production, allows Wilde’s various characters and narrators the sense of being able to control how they are perceived. Self-consciousness deployed as a kind of personal style distracts, diverts, mocks, and resists the look—the Gaze—that is everywhere. It allows the safe reading of the queer man as peculiar and idiosyncratic by those who are not other to it, who share his idiosyncrasies, and who participate socially in the spectacle of his style by emulating it, serving as its audience, and appreciating it.

Lacan’s subject’s struggle to negotiate the consciousness of its own limits is signified through that subject’s own styles of self-presentation. Style appears as a symptomatic response to the moment where the gaze becomes visible, throwing subjects into crisis by showing them how their sense of self depends so entirely on the look of the other. Lacan insists that one cannot actually elude the Gaze, though the effort to distract it can produce an extraordinary variety of masks, personalities, and doubles to deflect its scrutiny. In subjects undergoing extreme moments of self-dissolution, “in sexual union and in the struggle to the death,” Lacan saw where “the being breaks up, in an extraordinary way, between its being and its semblance, between itself and the paper tiger it shows to the other” (107). This “paper tiger” of personal style Lacan found in the subject’s moment of crisis performs two seemingly oppositional moves at once. At the same time style acknowledges the censuring and particularizing gaze, it dramatizes the attempt to ward it off, fashioning its resistance to sexual difference as an aesthetic gesture.

SMILE, PLEASE

One of the most striking things about the scene of sexual desire around the painting that awakens Dorian Gray to self-consciousness is that it is happening to a grown man rather than a boy, and thus suggests Dorian’s sudden break with some kind of repression or sublimation, a repression or sublimation that requires amnesia. Dorian is supposed to be just entering his twenties, yet his naïveté suggests a child ten years younger. Like a child, Dorian lacks both self-consciousness and self-awareness. He lacks any notion, it seems, of his sexual appeal for other men, or his attraction to their attraction to him. This blankness is part of his appeal and marks him as guileless and sincere, but such complete ignorance seems a bit unbelievable in a man his age, even if that man is a product of late Victorian codes of silence and sexual respectability.
This blankness allows Dorian to enter the novel as an adult without a psychosexual history, an overgrown man-boy gifted, like a prince in one of the fairy tales of which Wilde was so fond, with magical powers of attraction and charm that the men who love him attribute to his remarkable “personality.”

In Dorian Gray, “personality” is a euphemism for Dorian’s homosexual attractiveness, an attractiveness that gets displaced onto the painting, one that calls out subjects as desiring and desired by setting in motion a cruisy, appraising, admiring, narcissistic gaze. Basil’s desire is attributed to Dorian as an element of personality, the individual ability to fascinate others. This ability to incite desire extends to women as well as men, but seems to attract men primarily. Basil Hallward uses this idea of extraordinary individual personality to deny his own homoerotic attraction to Dorian by making attractiveness an attribute of Dorian himself: “I suddenly became conscious that someone was looking at me,” he tells Lord Henry Wotton, recounting his first meeting with Dorian. “I turned half-way round, and saw Dorian Gray for the first time. When our eyes met, I felt that I was growing pale. A curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself” (21). Dorian’s look calls Basil into an awareness of himself being looked at, and this awareness makes him conscious of his own look as well.

“Personality,” then, is also a mechanism of displacement and sublimation. The notion of fascinating “mere personality” suggests the blank subject whose desires appear as his own but are really the projected desires of others, a function of the self-awareness of looking, being looked at, and being looked at looking. Dorian has no personality of his own at the beginning of the novel, where he impresses Lord Henry as a “gracious form” who might be “fashioned into a marvelous type,” so malleable as to be “made a Titan or a toy” (40). Basil blames Dorian’s gaze for his own homosexual attraction to Dorian, a gaze Basil evades by capturing it with his own on a canvas, turning the residue of his desire into art. Basil and Lord Henry displace their desire onto Dorian and reduce its social implications, but the insistence on the relationship of personality to the look also appropriates the look—Basil’s, Lord Henry’s, Dorian’s—and makes cruisiness a function of art. This strategy of appropriating the look in Dorian Gray is important because it functions as the opposite of sublimation, the mechanism Freud and others used to define sexuality as the origin of aesthetics. In this theory,
repressing sexual desire by transforming (sublimating) it leads to art. However, the intense presence of the look in Wilde’s art insists that art can only take its power from untransubstantiated, unsublimated desire.

The concept of sexual sublimation arises in psychoanalysis in Wilde’s era in order to help render opposite-sex sexual desire as socially productive and universal, characterizing homosexuality as an individual problem, one requiring disguise and transformation. While the concept of sublimation had existed from the eighteenth century, and was later taken up by moral philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in the nineteenth century, Freud made it a central feature of his analysis of the drives and of civilized instincts, and it crops up over and over again in his theories linking the organization of sexuality to civilization and cultural achievement. Freud defines sublimation as the unconscious transformation of sexuality into other forms of creativity. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud argues that sexual impulses are present in infants and children, but that a “progressive process of suppression” interrupts the development of these impulses, creating an “infantile amnesia” that “turns everyone’s childhood into something like a prehistoric epoch and conceals from him the beginnings of his own sexual life.” At this point the child acquires the attitudes that will help suppress and redirect his sexual impulses, “mental forces which are later to impede the course of the sexual instinct and, like dams, restrict its flow—disgust, feelings of shame and the claims of aesthetic and moral ideals” (43). What concerns us here is that Freud’s story begins with knowledge, knowledge that comes from the body through its sexual experience of the world, but that this knowledge is interrupted and suppressed at the same time that the child internalizes the aesthetic and moral ideals of its society. Freud is careful not to attribute cause to the effects he describes; in the story he tells, forgetting, repression, and moral consciousness all occur only in proximity to one another. However, in naming this process and arguing for its central role in the greatest achievements of every society, he makes what will become an extraordinarily influential claim about the relationship of sexuality to art: “Historians of civilization appear to be at one in assuming that powerful components are acquired for every kind of cultural achievement by this diversion of sexual instinctual forces from sexual aims and their direction to new ones—a process which deserves the name of ‘sublimation’” (44). Sublimation here is a loss of self-consciousness, or repression of self-consciousness, that nevertheless seems to depend on self-consciousness in order to work. How does one know to redirect one’s unacceptable desires into more acceptable channels?
Sublimation seems to require the kind of consciousness that erases its tracks after it has become something—or someone—else.

One of the most important modernist-era theories of sublimation—important because it directly links the concept of sublimation to both homosexuality and artistic endeavor—is Freud’s 1910 essay *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*. Here Freud develops the theory of sublimation advanced in *Three Essays* through the example of the Renaissance master who seems to him to have “represented the cool repudiation of sexuality.” What is important for our purposes about Freud’s theory of sublimation and Leonardo’s work is Freud’s notion of sublimation as something that leaves its mark on the artist’s work, a process that operates as artistic signature and style as well as a point of libidinal transformation. Here sublimation’s transformative disappearing act, where sexuality magically becomes art, is signified through a distinctly individual kind of stylistic marker—in this case, the Mona Lisa’s smile.

Freud makes his case by beginning with the grown Leonardo, deducing that Leonardo’s sublimated homosexuality masked a childhood attachment to his phallic mother. The impossibility of this libidinal attachment, combined with the absence of a father figure in his early childhood, results—Freud concludes—in Leonardo’s “overpowerful instinct for research” combining with the “atrophy of his sexual life” in order to take the form of an “ideal [sublimated] homosexuality.” This homosexuality expresses its energies through the pursuit of beauty and knowledge, a curiosity that manifests itself as “an intense desire to look,” which Freud links to the child’s longing for the mother’s imagined penis. This exchange, repression, or sublimation is marked in the visual field of Leonardo’s paintings as a smile that unsettles the spectator with its mysterious interiority and complacent self-sufficiency.

The Mona Lisa, conscious of being looked at, gazes back with a veiled, ambiguous expression, an insolent and dreamy smile that taunts spectators with what they cannot know about her inner thoughts and desires. Her smile teases viewers with the paradoxical nature of human sexuality, discrepancies Freud attributes to “the contrasts which dominate the erotic life of women” (58), but which are clearly contrasting cultural stereotypes about women. In these, women symbolize ambivalent attitudes about sexuality present in the culture itself, “the contrast between reserve and seduction,” Freud writes, “and between the most devoted tenderness and a sensuality that is ruthlessly demanding—consuming men as if they were alien beings” (58). Note that his characterization of women as embodiments of sexual menace helps Freud make
his case that the Mona Lisa’s smile marks, in the same place, Leonardo’s originary heterosexual attraction to his mother and his homosexual disavowal of that attraction. The menace of femininity, the mystery of gender and sexuality, and the veiled, even repressed, relationship of those qualities and drives to creation, reproduction, love, and art—all these are both buried and signaled in the smile that would become Leonardo’s stylistic signature expression. From this disavowal, Freud argues, comes Leonardo’s passion for art and science. Heterosexuality, homosexuality, all of culture’s ambivalence about sexuality and sexual difference, and the origins of art and science as the highest achievements of culture, all are signified together in the mystery of a smile painted on a woman’s face.

But the smile of the Mona Lisa is a self-conscious smile that nevertheless, for Freud, represents the paradoxical loss of self-consciousness on the part of the artist: Leonardo’s forgotten disavowal of heterosexuality and transformation of homosexual impulses into art. The smile of La Giaconda, which is to say the style of Leonardo, signifies for Freud what has been lost to Leonardo, marking a point of sexual ambivalence and sexual disavowal signified in the visual field of the portrait. Freud concludes that “Leonardo was fascinated by Mona Lisa’s smile for the reason that it awoke something in him which had for long lain dormant in his mind—probably an old memory” (60). Although this smile belongs to an individual immortalized in a painting, Freud notes that this smile comes to be associated with Leonardo’s art and personality; “it has become a mark of his style and the name ‘Leonardesque’ has been chosen for it” (57). It is a mark of his style and its product, a distillation and a signifier of the sexual past he has forgotten. It is self-consciousness and the repression of self-awareness. Her smile represents her personality in the portrait of her known as the Mona Lisa, but that smile appears again on the face of Leonardo’s John the Baptist, and in both women’s faces in the Madonna and Child with St. Anne, the painting that alerted Freud to the meaning for Leonardo of Mona Lisa’s smile, and which he analyzed as containing “the synthesis of the history of his childhood” (62).

Freud is able to make the connection between the smile and Leonardo’s polymorphous infancy because of the dynamic relationship the smile sets in motion between artist, subject, viewer, and painting. The style of the smile captures the gaze of spectators and rivets them to the paradox of its public privateness, its self-conscious disavowal of consciousness, to the mystery it shows it is hiding, but one that is not hers alone, or particular to her. Mona Lisa’s personality fascinates

because that smile marks something at the threshold of memory and knowledge common to all who see it; Freud called it “indisputable” that “her smile exercised no less powerful a fascination on the artist than on all who have looked at it for the last four hundred years” (59). Here
style—the mysterious Leonardesque smile—suggests a hidden interiority that exercises fascination on the viewers; at the same time, however, “style” is surface, signature, the hallmark of Leonardo himself, who uses it to solicit the Gaze and resist it. Finally, style—if we are to believe Freud—marks the site of sexual perversity and is created by that perversity as a kind of memorial or marker, in this case, Freud argues, for the heterosexual attraction to his mother Leonardo represses. Style, the smile of the Mona Lisa, is homosexual, gay, queer, and perverse. It displays itself even as it looks back, solicits, refuses, and remembers.

While Freud’s reading of the smile as a dynamic signifier marking the secret to Leonardo’s sexual past explains why it may have been significant to Leonardo, it also explains its fascination to others by suggesting that something about its mystery gestures to the lost maternal phallus that Freud equates with the playfulness and happiness of infancy. Writing of Leonardo’s penchant for toys and mechanical inventions, Freud concludes that eventually this pleasure, too, likely gave way to sublimation and adult pursuits: “It is probable that Leonardo’s play-instinct vanished in his maturer years, and that it too found its way into the activity of research which represented the latest and highest expansion of its personality.” It is enough for Freud, perhaps, that this repression distilled into a smile remains as a mark of style, a product and indicator of the powerful psychosexual forces that go into the making of art. Yet even Freud is forced to cast a wistful glance backward, concluding his story not with a sense of the beneficial inevitability of sublimation and the repression of childhood sexuality, but with an air of melancholic sadness for the much wider world from which sublimation cuts us off forever. “But its long duration,” he continues, “can teach us how slowly anyone tears himself from his childhood if in his childhood days he has enjoyed the highest erotic bliss, which is never again attained” (79).

STYLE, AND THE WORLD STYLES WITH YOU

Dorian’s sexual awakening appears at first to be different from the one outlined in Freud’s Leonardo essay, mostly because there is no narrator to insist, as Freud does, on the presence of the protagonist’s forgotten childhood sexual history. Instead, Dorian’s character is introduced by Wilde’s narrator through conventions that resemble the “popular view of the sexual instinct” Freud describes at the beginning of his chapter in Three Essays on infantile sexuality, one “that is absent in childhood and
only awakens in the period of life described as puberty” (39). To read Dorian’s consciousness as one presented through this popular ideology of sexual development—that is, as a consciousness that believes it has no knowledge of the things it suddenly experiences—is also to see the ways in which the truth of this formulation is contested in the text, anticipating or perhaps even helping to formulate Freud’s suspicion that sexuality precedes puberty. For nothing seems to account for the shattering impact of Dorian’s sudden self-consciousness on his own personality, for his swift awakening to the visual dynamics of desire he apprehends in his portrait, and for his instantaneous apprenticeship to Lord Henry’s brand of hedonist self-realization, so much as the existence of a prior self-knowledge Dorian has suppressed and forgotten. Dorian will spend the rest of his life trying to recover the lost bliss seductively invoked in the rhetoric of Lord Henry: “To realise one’s nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for. People are afraid of themselves, nowadays. . . . 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 it has forbidden itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful” (28–29).

Lord Henry’s voice is the paint with which he models Dorian’s likeness, and Dorian, sure that Henry is addressing him and none other, responds to the seduction of seeing himself being seen first with shock, then with pleasure. Almost immediately, however, he forgets that the words that have awakened him to self-consciousness are not his own. In Dorian’s appropriation of Lord Henry’s words lies his recognition of the desires he has repressed—desires, it is now apparent, that have a long history with him:

For nearly ten minutes he stood there, motionless, with parted lips, and eyes strangely bright. He was dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him. Yet they seemed to him to have come really from himself. The few words that Basil’s friend had said to him—words spoken by chance, no doubt, and with wilful paradox in them—had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating to curious pulses. . . . Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! (29)

Dorian’s incorporation of the narrator’s outside gaze, corresponding to his reduction of the scene of desire into “mere words,” allows him to aestheticize transgressive desires that are legally “unlawful,” but it also allows him to both dismiss and emphasize the
social world within which those desires are condemned. He mistakes Lord Henry’s ideas, which also come from a world where dangerous books help circulate dangerous ideas, tastes, and identities, for his own, and thus fails to recognize the existence of a social world of like beings. Lord Henry’s rhetoric both identifies and channels the sexual impulses Dorian has forgotten, but in doing so it also participates in the sublimation of those desires into words. Yet “mere words” marks a moment of recognition of the realness of artificial style for Dorian as well. There is nothing so real as artifice. With a sly wink to his readers, Wilde gestures to his own virtuosity, then, at the next moment, allows his protagonist to misunderstand the very insight that he seems to have been on the verge of apprehending. “Mere words” touch secrets that seem new, yet they clearly possess some kind of history, or they would not be secrets at all. “Mere words,” and the voices that speak them, give precise articulation to hidden desires.

The production of style in the moment of self-conscious enjoyment in *Dorian Gray* suggests what psychoanalytic texts such as Freud’s “Leonardo” essay also conclude: that is, that certain refusals produce style as a kind of supplement, residue, excess, and signature that marks the act of refusal. Leonardo’s famous smile marks his refusal of heterosexuality, just as Lord Henry’s rhetoric—and that of Wilde’s narrators generally—marks the refusal of conventional morality. Dorian’s smile marks his refusal to see himself as part of a group of men with like tastes, though the rhetorical performances that allow the narrator, or Lord Henry, or Dorian to snap their fingers at the self-important values of respectable society allow these characters to blend into each other as if they were the same character in the text, sometimes in the same moment: “Society, civilized society at least, is never very ready to believe anything to the detriment of those who are both rich and fascinating. It feels instinctively that manners are of more importance than morals, and, in its opinion, the highest respectability is of much less value than the possession of a good chef” (107).

The novel’s narrative voice becomes a character in a play, one that enjoys itself enjoying itself as it says ever more daring and unconventional—if true—things. Having destabilized the normative sentiment that holds that morals should be valued above taste, the narrator goes on to celebrate artifice and insincerity as the true basis of social value: “Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities. Such, at any rate, was Dorian Gray’s opinion” (107). If we understand style as a performance of individual virtuosity that both invites scrutiny and wards it off, then this
narrative voice embodies style. The narrator’s transformation into a stage character cites theatrical looking relations that depend on a notion of style for their effectiveness, if by style we mean the affectations of voice, gesture, and carriage that work with speech to help actors become their character for audiences, and help audiences believe that well-known actors are the characters they play. It is as if the narrator, like Dorian himself (whose opinion, we recognize, is not his alone, despite the text’s insistence), is forgetting himself and trying on Lord Henry’s character. Doing this, the narrator undercuts his own reliability while insisting on an “I” that is clearly not Lord Henry or Dorian: “Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not.” The insincerity that allows authors to make narrators, narrators to go in and out of the heads of characters, and characters to “multiply . . . personalities” is the artifice here of rhetorical style, which interrupts the plot with digression until it is folded back into Dorian’s character, allowing the story to proceed, actually performing its own insincere proliferation of character before giving way to the sincerity of a very moral plot.

We see this self-conscious style in Dorian’s temperamental outburst in response to Lord Henry’s admiration of the painting, an outburst that as it unfolds seems more and more aware of itself as a rhetorical and dramatic performance in front of an audience: “Oh, if it were only the other way! If the picture could change, and I could be always what I am now! Why did you paint it? It will mock me some day—mock me horribly!’ The hot tears welled into his eyes; he tore his hand away, and, flinging himself on the divan, he buried his face in the cushions, as though he were praying” (34).

Watching his dramatic outburst, complete with tears, one is aware that Dorian is watching himself being watched. He asks rhetorical questions, makes grand gestures, bursts into tears, and flings himself down. This stylized, self-fashioned Dorian is the one Lord Henry sees as the truest Dorian; Basil blames Lord Henry for corrupting Dorian, and Lord Henry retorts: “‘It is the real Dorian Gray—that is all!’” (34). Henry’s response to Dorian’s performance foregrounds the very issues of authenticity and self-consciousness that portraits dramatize. Which is “the real Dorian Gray”—the innocent Dorian Basil thinks he sees, and renders in his portrait, the newly self-conscious Dorian who responds to the portrait, and to his friends looking at the portrait, or the portrait itself? For the last of these—and the seemingly most easily dismissed—is precisely the one version the novel takes most seriously. As Dorian remains ageless, his portrait grows ever more hideous, suggesting not only that the dynamism of portraiture, its multiply-intersecting subjec-
tive visual and desiring fields, is its purpose and effect, but that it is precisely in the dynamism of the portrait where the truth of subjects resides. The problem of this truth is that the slide between the individualizing and narcissistic aspects of personality and its theatrical imperatives—the slide Basil makes in characterizing the desires expressed in his art as private and shameful rather than socially meaningful—is easy to make in the context of a culture that equates beauty with both femininity and narcissism, and reads homosexuality as the product and symptom of these.

Because his portrait ages and is punished for his sins while his body remains young, Dorian’s person comes to really embody the mask of self-conscious personality that stands as a screen between him and the censorious gaze of the world. The picture of Dorian Gray, on the other hand, allows Dorian to move between the grandiose illusion that he has escaped the gaze of the world, which would otherwise read the physical toll of his excesses on his face and body, and the abject recognition that his own gaze is part of a larger gaze he cannot elude, as he obsessively, repetitively surveys the toll his life takes on his changing portrait. Even the secret self requires an audience, if only to love it, and Dorian is no exception, taking perverse pleasure in watching his sins being visited on the portrait, much as the censuring gaze of the world might observe the spectacle of retribution being visited upon his transgressive body: “On his return he would sit in front of the picture, sometimes loathing it and himself, but filled, at other times, with that pride of individualism that is half the fascination of sin, and smiling with secret pleasure, at the misshapen shadow that had to bear the burden that should have been his own” (XX: 106).

Reading entails watching Dorian caught in the ambivalent web of identification and disidentification with the image of himself he has made, as he struggles to live up to the image of himself seen by others. Just as personality is produced in the careless, brave affectation of his, and Henry’s, and the narrator’s voice, reading is the consciousness of self-consciousness that circles from the visual to the literary field, and back, weaving the two together, insisting on the psychovisual components of reading as a vocabulary for and explanation of dynamic subjectivity in the visual world. The painting allows Dorian a unique impersonality, the pleasures of impersonation where the posing and posturing persona that wards off the judgment of the world takes on the status of a true self. Dorian’s mistake is to attempt a break with his past by destroying the painting that signifies the self-consciousness he has embraced, formed as part of the social dynamic of being looked at as
well as looking. And in the modern world, there is no self without this self-consciousness, and Dorian ceases to exist, except in art—in his portrait, and in the novel that bears his name as his portrait.

PICTURING LITERATURE

Written the year before *Dorian Gray* as a preliminary sketch of some of its major themes, Oscar Wilde’s 1889 short story “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” with its greater emphasis on intellectual improvisation and its heightened skepticism of the relevance of individual interiority, does what *Dorian Gray* cannot: imagine a world where the invention of personalities as part of a homoerotic libidinal economy can forge real social bonds between men. Like *Dorian Gray*, “Mr. W. H.” uses the conceit of portraits and portraiture to explore how queer subjects come into being as part of a dynamic field of desire, though this story more obviously foregrounds discourse as its chief creative medium, and it uses a painted portrait to illustrate its theories celebrating discursive invention. “Mr. W. H.” argues that talking, performing, and desiring other men all produce the kind of queer subject symbolized by the forged portrait of Willie Hughes, and by the literary “Portrait of Mr. W. H.” of the story’s title. The tragedy of the theory of Willie Hughes that the story explores, which is also the tragedy of the characters in the story who become seduced by the theory and by each other, is that all this talking, hypothesizing, theorizing, and performing never enjoys the status of historical truth. The “very thing that needs to be proved”—that is, the existence of a homoerotic intellectual dramatic tradition stretching back to Shakespeare and personified by the Mr. W. H. addressed in his sonnets—cannot be proven by reason, or passion, or intuition. Still, “W. H.” succeeds as a “portrait” in its title and in its framed circulation of homoerotic desire in a way that the “picture” of *Dorian Gray* cannot, because “W. H.” more fully participates in the dynamics of desire, invention, and looking that helps create queer subjects who recognize each other, subjects in process who generate homoerotic aesthetics, traditions, and culture out of their love of beautiful boys. For this reason it is useful to consider it, however briefly.

Forgery helps one realize one’s personality in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” just as insincerity helps one multiply one’s personalities in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. “‘You talk books away,’” a man named Erskine flatters Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “‘why don’t you write one?’” (44). This character also appears in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” as
the man who owns the forged portrait of Willie Hughes. Erskine first
tells the narrator the theory of Shakespeare’s boy-love, but he eventually
dies in despair because he believes that the narrator does not believe in
the theory or understand it. Erskine’s presence as the skeptical narrator
of an idealistic theory—a role later taken up by the narrator—makes his
the voice that awakens the narrator to homoerotic intellectual desire,
much as Lord Henry’s voice awakens the young Dorian Gray. Like Lord
Henry, Erskine helps convince the narrator that the “forging” of per-
sonality—the celebration of invention and performance over authen-
ticity—is the best expression of both the pleasure of homoerotic bonds
between men and the truest source of art.

As Erskine recounts to the narrator how a man named Cyril
Graham once produced the portrait for him, he produces portraits
within portraits: of friendship, of the characters in the friendship, and of
the desire between them that gets transferred to a desire to discover the
truth about Shakespeare’s sexual and aesthetic passionate object. Mean-
time he unveils a painting for the narrator, watching his response to it as
he tells his story:

> It was a full-length portrait of a young man in late sixteenth-century cos-
tume, standing by a table, with his right hand resting on an open book.
He seemed about seventeen years of age, and was of quite extraordinary
personal beauty, though evidently somewhat effeminate. Indeed, had it
not been for the dress and the closely cropped hair, one would have said
that the face, with its dreamy, wistful eyes and its delicate scarlet lips,
was the face of a girl.  

The first story, then, is that of the effect of the painting, measured by
the narrator/spectator’s admiration of a boy who looks like a girl. The
painting evokes desire, which in turn leads to theorizing, and to history.
What is it exactly about the portrait that exerts its fascination on the nar-
rator and on the readers of this story? At first, it is merely the boy’s
ephemeral and effeminate physical beauty. However, as its history
unfolds, it begins to assert a deeper hold on the narrator’s emotions. The
form of the narrative becomes a series of frames, spiraling down toward
the mystery at the center of the painting, the mystery of the existence of
homosexual desire between Shakespeare and a boy actor, and the mys-
tery of the desire on the part of all the narrators that such a boy exist, in
order to prove something about their own existences they need desper-
ately to know is true. “Mr. W. H.” contains stories within stories, theo-
ries within theories, and personalities within personalities, framing
complex interrelationships between men of different eras linked together by the compulsion to find, through personal intuition and emotion, literary scholarship, and deductive reasoning, the homoerotic object that inspired Shakespeare’s sonnets to “Mr. W. H.” For Erskine, who initially introduces the narrator to the portrait and theory, the theory and the portrait serve as an emotional link that binds men together, one that ties him to Graham, who originally formulated the theory, and stretches all the way back to Shakespeare. “He felt, as indeed I think we all must feel,” Erskine tells the narrator, “that the Sonnets are addressed to an individual,—to a particular young man whose personality for some reason seems to have filled the soul of Shakespeare with terrible joy and no less terrible despair” (307).

However, what Erskine’s search for Willie Hughes reveals to him is himself. The narrator, considering this story and then making it his own, makes Erskine’s story his own as well: “A book of Sonnets,” the narrator exclaims, “published nearly three hundred years ago, written by a dead hand and in honor of a dead youth, had suddenly explained to me the whole story of my soul’s romance” (344). The past he really finds is not a material literary or historical past, but a felt, intuited, and imagined one whose repression is mirrored in the forgotten perversity of childhood, one that speaks to him precisely because he knows what he has forgotten. Putting himself in Shakespeare’s place, he experiences the sonnets as a drama of living passions and living personalities, one that makes him conscious of his true self for the first time and changes him forever. “Strange, that we knew so little about ourselves,” he marvels, “and that our most intimate personality was concealed from us! Were we to look in tombs for our real life, and in Art for the legend of our days?” (345).

The answer, of course, is yes, and the narrator concludes that “It was we who were unreal, and our conscious life was the least important part of our development. The soul, the secret soul, was the only reality” (344). In defining personality as “the secret soul,” and self-consciousness as self-knowledge and the highest end of Art, the narrator seems to be advocating an extinction of the individual within a larger, more universal artistic tradition that therapeutically reveals the universal unconscious that all men share. Here the narrator is basing his conclusion on a new reading of Shakespeare, not the “tradition” that argues the sonnets were written to the Earl of Pembroke, or to Lord Southampton, to Shakespeare himself, or to “philosophical allegory.” Instead, this new reading, a reading passed from friend to friend in passionate discussions that last throughout the night, stresses personality, particularity,
and the type of queer temperament that sympathizes with the homoerotic attraction between the playwright and the beautiful boy who dressed for the stage as a girl, a boy whose queerly effeminate grace, beauty, and voice caused men and women to fall madly in love with him, and rival theatrical companies to vie for his services. The personality of Willie Hughes that his “creator” Cyril Graham senses in the sonnets, whether real or invented, illuminates the personality of Shakespeare to him, and to readers like Cyril Graham and Erskine, causing them to recognize themselves as lovers of beautiful boys, moving them to acts of brilliant creation, despair, and suicide. On fire with what he has discovered about himself, the narrator writes a letter to Erskine, convinced of the theory at last.

Having done so, however, the narrator inexplicably loses all faith in the theory.

Why does the narrator lose interest in the theory as soon as he has expounded it most completely? “Had I touched upon some secret that my soul desired to conceal?” he wonders (345). Meanwhile, Erskine decides to sacrifice himself to prove the theory to the narrator just as Erskine’s friend Cyril Graham once did to prove the theory to him. Erskine dies of consumption, and at the end of the story the narrator ponders the truth of the theory, ready to take Erskine’s place and sacrifice himself. In turn, readers of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” take his place as enthusiast, scholar, and martyr, if only they become excited enough about the theory to recognize in their own “secret soul[s]” sympathy with Shakespeare’s queer passion.

The story’s title suggests both the forged painting, the hypothetical person sketched out in the theory by the narrator, and the larger frame of the story itself, encompassing all the other characters, theories, and narrators within its parameters. The author of the story must always die in order for the truth of Willie Hughes to exist as history, and in order to make room for the invention of other authors, and the revelation of other “secret soul[s].” Just as the narrator realizes that “the art of which Shakespeare talks is not the art of the Sonnets themselves” but “the art of the dramatist” (307), so he insists that “it is to the qualities inherent in each material, and special to it, that we owe the sensuous element in Art, and with it all that in Art is essentially artistic” (323). Emphasizing the framing and compositional aspects of portraiture, the personality of the artist and the gaze of the artist, as well as the subject of portraiture, the fascinating personality that looks back at readers, spectators, and the artist or writer, “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” emphasizes the reader as inventor, the inventor as critic, the critic as artist, the artist as reader, and
so on in an endless and delightful interplay of the imagined and the social.

If Willie Hughes teaches us anything about the relationship of art and style to castration, sexual difference, sexual amnesia, and the recovery of lost or forgotten erotic energy, it is that authenticity has little bearing on what we know to be true. Having fashioned a literary portrait of Willie Hughes, sent off in the letter to Erskine, instead of a painted one, and thus committing a forgery similar to Cyril Graham’s commissioned painting, the narrator realizes both the imperative and the inauthenticity of personality. “Whatever romance may have to say about the Willie Hughes theory,” the narrator concludes, “reason is dead against it” (346). But this is precisely why the theory is valid. What Willie Hughes offers is a model for passionate creativity and thought that might come into existence in the field of desire, a model whose truth lies not in its historical accuracy but, like all art, in its ability to inspire. It is this that the narrator rejects, when, rejecting the theory, he also loses touch with what his heart had told him was real about himself, and claims to refuse to pass the theory on to the friends of his who admire the portrait. What he does pass on, of course, is the larger portrait of how homoerotic desire and the longing of subjects for a history and a culture create intellectual and aesthetic passion, and this in turn creates subjects and worlds for those subjects to inhabit. The “marriage of true minds” he imagines between Willie Hughes and Shakespeare, a marriage perpetuated between the readers of the sonnets and Shakespeare, and the readers of the sonnets and each other, goes on, immortalized in the short story whose title suggests a dynamic fascination between men as the source of an individually and socially generative queer aesthetics.
Jackie (Al Jolson) sings “Blue Skies” to his mother (Eugenie Besserer), their bodies oriented to face out toward the larger film audience, in the 1927 Warner Bros. film *The Jazz Singer.*