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**“The Shadow of a White Rose in a Mirror of Silver”:**

**The Vicissitudes of the Fetish in the Writings of Oscar Wilde**

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By

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Abstract

*Life is Art’s best, Art’s only pupil – Wilde, “The Decay of Lying”* *(1083)*

Wilde’s relation to his art is an extraordinary case. His works seems to have engraved his destiny: not only his success and fame but also his eventual downfall. While the comedies of manners brought Wilde immense fame, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was used to prove in court that Wilde was a practicing homosexual and send him to Reading Gaol prison. Wilde’s three court trials, which he himself began when he sued his lover’s father, the Marquess of Queensberry, for libel, constituted a sharp turning point in Wilde’s life. In this trial, the attorney for the Marquess, E. H. Carson, offered the court an interpretation of Wilde’s novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He read to the court extensive excerpts from the novel to prove it idealizes homosexual acts. Interestingly, in this very same novel, Basil, the artist who created the picture of Dorian Gray, is stabbed before the portrait he himself painted. That is, in the novel, much like in Wilde’s own life, the artist is sacrificed on the altar of his art. After this first trial, Wilde was charged with the crime of “gross indecency”, and after two more trials, he was eventually sentenced to prison with hard labor for two years. Wilde’s works constituted a driving force behind his life, an almost exposed unconscious signifier that is invested with excess enjoyment. *Dorian Gray*, it would seem, exposed a piece of Wilde’s particular mode of enjoyment, which Victorian society deemed immoral. What, we may ask, do Wilde’s works reveal about the relation between the written word and life?

As I will show, Wilde’s works follow a logic of concealment and revealing, a logical construction that Freud called “the fetish”: In this dissertation, I trace Wilde’s rhetorical construction of the psychic mechanism of veiling and unveiling to find not only the markings of the veil but also what the veil can reveal. I believe that as a veil, Wilde’s works preserve an image of an archaic encounter with loss. This dissertation hence follows the vicissitudes of the fetish in Wilde’s works so as to extract knowledge about the earliest moments of the psychic apparatus and the archaic forms of libidinal investments otherwise known in psychoanalysis as primary narcissism and feminine sexuality. Each iteration of the fetish in a different work exposes a different form of enjoyment. By veiling and exposing his enjoyment, Wilde’s art presents a striking image of the relation between the signifier and jouissance.

The fetish may be formed, as Freud teaches, when the subject verifies sexual difference and chooses to preserve something of the fiction he once believed in (that all beings, most significantly the mother, possess a penis). The fetish, as Freud shows, is an artifice that preserves the fiction of the mother’s penis (“Fetishism”, 151). In the case of neurosis, when the subject registers the lack he finds in the world, or rather in the maternal body, he cedes a certain portion of narcissistic enjoyment. The registration of castration requires the subject to agree to connect two separate experiences: a threat that if the child does not stop touching themselves someone (usually the father) will do something to him, and the sight of a woman’s genitals (“Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex”, 317). This registration is then retroactively connected to the loss of the mother’s breast and the demand that the infant cede his feces. That is, the registration of castration involves a retroactive registration of libidinal losses.

However, in perversion as a clinical structure the registration of castration works differently than in neurosis. While the pervert does register the idea of castration, he refuses to relinquish a certain piece of his libidinal satisfaction. If in the case of neurosis castration is registered in the unconscious through an effect of loss, in the case of perversion it is retained in the unconscious as an idea. The pervert protects himself from this loss by erecting a substitute for the lack he encountered. A fetish is a construct that includes a fiction: the idea that the mother does not lack. This fictional text substitutes for the loss of multiple objects, rearranged in the wake of castration.

The fetishized object, then, is a substitute for lack the subject discovers on his mother’s body (“Fetishism”, 152). Yet the pervert’s relation to the mother’s castration is not univocal; he registers it and disavows it *at the same time*. The fetish states at one and the same time that the mother has a penis and that she does not have a penis. The fetish is hence both a protection against the registration of castration and a “memorial” for the painful discovery of castration. As Lacan states, the fetish is “the penis in so far as the woman has it, that it to say, in so far as she does not have it” (*Seminar IV*, 144). By offering a substitute for the lack the pervert encounters, the fetish also preserves the encounter as an image. As Lacan shows in his theorization of the fetish, the veil turns the absence it hides into an image, and thus takes on the value of what lies beyond it. Such is indeed the status of Wilde’s art: it is a veil not only for absence but also for forbidden archaic enjoyment.

The fetish, then, is a construct that does one thing (register castration)  
and its opposite (veil castration). This structure, as Freud shows in “The Splitting of the Ego”, splits the subject, who now holds two contradictory positions (that the mother does and does not have a penis). Of the two contradictory positions, one veils the other. Wilde’s conception of his art is similarly predicated on a logic of contradiction and veiling endemic to perversion: it both “veils the artist and reveals art” (*Works*, 17).[[1]](#footnote-1) Paradigmatic to the connection between fetishism and veiling structuring Wilde’s art is Karl Abraham’s observation in a clinical case of foot and corset fetishism in which the focal point of the fetish was not the body itself but rather what covers the body (128). The fetish as a cover or veil has a structural affinity to clothes. And indeed, garments, as Freud notes, often function as a fetishistic object (“Fetishism”, 154). A fetish is formed from a memory of what the subject saw a moment before encountering the sight that affirms the threat he has heard. The garment is usually chosen as a double cover: it is a literal cover for the body and a cover for the lack the subject finds on the body.

The fetish makes use of the garment’s dual function, signalling at once the object and its lack. Wilde’s art reveals that this garment does not have to be a literal piece of clothing. Rather, art can function *as* such as garment. This garment can be made from fabric that is linguistic. In *The Art* *of English Poesy*, Renaissance rhetorician George Puttenham introduces the rhetorical category of figure by comparing it to physical ornaments, including garments (222). Figure (for instance, anaphora and all other figures of repetition) is the rhetorical device that does not change sense but serves style alone. In his essays and lectures, Wilde writes about the importance of supporting the decorative arts, and he dedicates another essay to the important question of a “Woman’s Dress”. Garments, it would seem, are the very essence of his art, as he gives them a vital place not only in his art but also in his theory of art. Wilde draws on the ancient and rich tradition of elocution to construct his fictional garment from rhetorical devices. As I will show in Chapter II, Wilde also uses rhetorical and narratological forms to paint his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; and in *Salome*, Wilde uses various figures of anaphora to create the play’s uncanny musicality. This uncanny sensuality that Wilde weaves into his textual garment carries with it an archaic form of jouissance.

In “The Truth of Masks”, Wilde underscores the importance of costumes in Shakespeare’s plays, and analyzes the role of the costumes in each and every play. The importance of the costumes, and “the pleasure they give the eye” stems from the history they carry. Wilde connects these costumes with archeology, or rather the use of excavated ancient objects that for him can be presented on stage (*Works*, 1162). Costumes, for Wilde, are historical or archeological works of art, enacting history before an audience for the sake of beauty and pleasure. What history exactly does Wilde’s masqueraded art present us with? Can we not, in fact, conclude that the history that Wilde makes into a mask in his art is the history of his own libidinal investments, that is, of the vicissitudes of an archaic form of jouissance?

Wilde’s literary works demonstrate how, in accordance with the grammar of contradiction, the fetish is both a cover or veil for castration and a leftover of an unconscious memory of the encounter with castration, or what Lacan calls a “snapshot” of this memory trace (*Seminar IV*, 62). This snapshot is an unconscious signifier. That is, the fetish is a linguistic construction, a signifier, that retains pieces of enjoyment that existed a moment before the registration of castration. Wilde’s art shows that this construction is a trace of an archaic form of enjoyment, of an ancient mark. The absence that Lacan refers to in his fourth seminar is not without its physical consequences, it leaves its mark, which Lacan calls elsewhere a hieroglyph, an encrypted signifier that is also a picture (“The Youth of Gide”, 636).

In the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* Freud implies that besides being a clinical structure that is the inverse of neurosis, perversion underlies all human sexuality, since sexuality involves using an organ for something other than its designated anatomical function—for satisfaction alone. Freud famously gives the example of a kiss that is given a place of dignity in culture, even though it involves using a part of the body that is designated for eating and not for sexual intercourse. Freud goes on to define perversions as “sexual activities which either (a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designated for sexual union, or (b) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim” (150). Perversion, then, constitutes enjoying an organ or an object beyond its actual biological use. This is sexuality in its Freudian definition: a deviation from use value.

Wilde’s work too deviates, in this case from the standard of Victorian morality. For Wilde, art cannot be moral, it must be useless, and it does not serve any moral ideal, nor mimic any external reality. Wilde deviates from the moral or even communicative functions of art, and turns it into a pure object of enjoyment. Art turned to a fetishistic object, then, underscores not only the moment in which castration is registered but also the libidinal enjoyment that is entangled in that registration.

Freud too turned to a work of art to follow the logic of the fetish and particularly explore the manner in which art can may to function in the encounter with loss. In his essay “Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood”, Freud analyses da Vinci’s artworks in light of Leonardo’s childhood memory, from when he was an infant, of a vulture repeatedly opening da Vinci’s mouth with its tail. This memory according to Freud constitutes the center of da Vinci’s lifelong fascination with the flight of birds. Freud indicates the affinity of the Italian signifier *coda* (tail) to a signifier for the male sexual organ. As Freud states, the vulture’s tail functioned, for da Vinci, as a substitute for his mother’s penis. However, Freud also compares the *coda* to the mother’s breast, stating that the fantasy veils a memory of being suckled (87). Freud does not explicitly state that the belief in the mother’s penis, or what I will show in Wilde’s terms, the intangible “moonbeam theory” (*Works*, 348), stems from a refusal to relinquish the breast. Yet, Lacan, following Freud, states that the registration of castration retroactively signifies and organizes all other losses on the libidinal plane (*Seminar XI*, 64).

Freud’s analysis of Leonardo’s fantasy implies that the fetish preserves the plenitude of the mother’s body, the plenitude not only of the supposed penis but also of the fantasy of being suckled at her breast. That is, if the registration of castration retroactively registers and organizes other libidinal losses, then the fetish as a construct that both registers castration and preserves enjoyment, both organizes the losses and preserves the enjoyment that is invested in them in a distilled manner. Da Vinci’s fantasy of the vulture’s tale (*coda*) being inserted into his mouth as an infant condenses the substitution of the mother’s penis with the breast. Leonardo’s art thence demonstrates that the fetish as a work of art which fictionalizes the mother’s penis can also veil archaic forms of enjoyment, such as suckling at the mother’s breast.

What, then, can Wilde’s art teach us about the way in which enjoyment is implicated in the fetish? In a letter to the editor of the *Scots Observer*, Wilde testifies to what an object of pleasure is for him: “the pleasure that one has in creating a work of art is a purely personal pleasure, and it is for the sake of this pleasure that one creates … I write because it gives me the greatest possible artistic pleasure to write” (*Letters*, 438-439). Yet, this pleasure functions differently in each and every literary work by Wilde. That is, Wilde’s fetish takes on different forms of enjoyment and concealment in different works.

As this dissertation will show, Wilde makes use of irony as a rhetorical device for veiling, and only pretends to be earnest. As the name of his most famous and successful comedy of manners *The Importance of Being Earnest* indicates, he is able through his use of irony, to smuggle his enjoyment and avoid the judgment of Victorian society . However, as his other works show, Wilde was caught in the dialectic of concealing and revealing and was driven to reveal the enjoyment that his use of irony concealed. Wilde’s other works disclose the real enjoyment at stake behind the veil of irony: a masochistic insistence to turn himself into a martyr for his art. Thus, Wilde moves along the lines of pleasure beyond its limits. For instance, in *De Profundis*, Wilde would argue that Christ is the ultimate artist: “I see a far more intimate and immediate connection between the true life of Christ and the true life of the artist” (*Letters*, 740).

In his insistence to sacrifice himself on the altar of his written word, Wilde reveals to us the enjoyment at stake behind the veil of the fetish and the manner in which it is implicated in the first registration of castration. Thus, a close reading of his texts can teach us about the most archaic forms of libidinal investment. The chapters of this dissertation follow the logic of Wilde’s libidinal investment and try to sketch the relation between the vicissitudes of these forms of investment and Wilde’s eventual downfall. Indeed, the vicissitudes of the fetish in Wilde’s works sketch the very trajectory of this downfall. I will follow three main forms of enjoyment that are manifest in Wilde’s works: veiling (in the rhetorical form of irony), narcissism, and feminine jouissance.

The first chapter focuses on the comedies of manners and Wilde’s use of the rhetorical form of irony. In this chapter I argue that irony in its rhetorical definition, as saying one thing and its opposite, follows the same logic as the fetish. Wilde makes use of this irony so as to smuggle his enjoyment from the eyes of his earnest audience by disguising his enjoyment as trivial. This is the form of the fetish that most complies with the type Freud identified in the case of the fetishist who found a hidden, or “smuggled”, satisfaction from a shine on the nose: “the meaning of the fetish is not known to other people, so the fetish is not withheld from him: it is easily accessible and he can readily obtain the sexual satisfaction attached to it” (“Fetishism”, 154). Wilde’s use of irony turns to the ignorance of the neurotic so as to conceal his own enjoyment. As Lady Bracknell states in *The Importance of Being Earnes*t: “ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone” (*Works*, 368). Irony, as I will show, made it possible for Wilde to craft his art without sacrificing himself. Of the many genres in which Wilde wrote, the comedies of manners were the most successful. I will show that one reason for this success is that the comedies of manners function as an ironic veil and make it possible for Wilde to smuggle his enjoyment. Moreover, Wilde’s comedies teach us about the close affinity between the psychic mechanism of the fetish and the rhetorical definition of irony. And yet, eventually Wilde could not help but touch the “delicate exotic fruit” that his comedies of manners had kept safely veiled, bringing his own downfall upon himself.

The second chapter offers a meta-psychological analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. I argue that since in this novel Wilde cedes on irony, the veil of the fetish becomes thinner, revealing a more archaic form of enjoyment. In this novel, the archaic form of jouissance that is unveiled is primary narcissism in its Freudian definition. Wilde made Dorian Gray into an eternal sun that refuses to set. The opening pages of the novel describing how “the sunlight seeped over the polished leaves” (*Works*, 20), expose this sun in all of its glory. And when Basil, who paints the picture of Dorian, speaks about his fascination with Dorian Gray, his friend Lord Henry tries to console him that “Days in summer…are apt to linger” (24). Lord Henry’s words echo Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 in the line, “summer’s lease hath all too short a date” (line 4). However, while Shakespeare underscores the brevity of summer, in this novel Wilde seems to have insisted on prolonging this “all too short … date”. And indeed, Dorian Gray manifests summer’s “gold complexion” that refuses to go dim (as in the sonnet’s line 6: “his gold complexion dimmed”). I claim that this novel is not just about a painting, it is in itself a painting, and more specifically a picture of narcissism. Wilde paints his novel with the libidinal substance of narcissism. Through a reading of the novel in conjunction with a reading of the beginning of Freud’s “Project for a Scientific Psychology”and “Narcissism: An Introduction”, I argue that primary narcissism is a wound in the psychic apparatus. In the “Project”, Freud shows that since the infant is unable to carry out the specific action that would alleviate his pain (he cannot go out and get food when he is hungry), the psychic apparatus does not discharge libido in the external world, but rather keeps it as a libidinal store that eventually makes it possible for him to cry out for external help. However, this libidinal store is in itself unbearable for the subject. In *Dorian Gray*, Wilde exposes this wound. And in the end, this exposed wound became his undoing. Wilde turned it into an altar on which he sacrificed himself.

The third chapter follows the wreckage of the fetish through a close reading of *De Profundis*, Wilde’s famous letter to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas, which he wrote while imprisoned in Reading Gaol. In the letter, Wilde tells us that his “life has all the while been a real Symphony of Sorrow” (*Letters*, 696). In the chapter I argue that if in *Dorian Gray* the stylistic dominant was painting, in this letter, it is music. The epistle encodes Wilde’s scream whose echoes reverberate in almost each and every word. In this epistle, Wilde completely identifies with Christ. The wreckage of Wilde’s fetish, the broken pieces of his life, reveal the affinity between the scream and feminine sexuality. In the “Project”, Freud indicates that the infant’s cry is the first attempt to exit narcissism, that is, to discharge internal excitation (narcissism) into the external world so as of helplessness, the scream can only serve to alleviate the pain if an external person gives it the status of a demand and answers it with a specific action (for instance, if the infant screams, the mother who hears his cry and interprets it as hunger feeds him). Wilde’s letter captures the mythical moment of the scream, yet the scream remains unheard, thereby returning to him as all too real. I argue that Wilde’s letter, in itself a glimpse of a ripped veil, reveals an affinity between the mythical moment of the scream and female sexuality.

In following the logic of Wilde’s enjoyment, the dissertation rises with the gilded sun that is Dorian Gray and sets with Salome as moon. At the heels of the chapter on an epistle, the dissertation closes with a postscript and conclusion that offers a reading of *Salome* whom Wilde called a “worshiper of the moon” (qtd. in *Plays*, 360). In this tragedy, Wilde exposes the image of the altar that is imprinted into each and every one of his works. The play reveals that through his works Wilde constructs an altar in the name of a love that is fatal. The moon which Salome worships constitutes an imaginary reflection of the encounter with castration that Wilde insists on repeating. The object of fascination and adoration is hence turned into an altar on which Wilde sacrifices himself. The altar at the heart of the fetish is an altar of love.

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud argues that fetishism can be found in every love relation, and “especially in those stages in which the normal sexual aim seems unattainable” (153). Indeed, Wilde’s fetishistic art is part and parcel of his love life. It was no accident that his artworks were used in his trials to prove what was then considered sexual deviance that was a part of his romantic relationship with Alfred Douglas. Wilde’s works underscore a painful dimension that underlies love life as such.

Psychoanalysis, Lacan teaches, turns to literature “not to discover what it already knows” but to extract new knowledge regarding the enigmas which are its concern (*Seminar XVIII*, lesson of May 12th 1971). One of these enigmas has to do with the relation of the subject to the signifier and to enjoyment. Consequently, psychoanalysis poses a fundamental question with regard to the artwork: how does the work of art come to function for a particular subject, given his relation to language, that is, to the signifier and to enjoyment (what manifests itself in what Lacan in his later work calls the letter)? One could argue that Wilde creates works of art for the sake of love, yet he keeps this love unattainable to an extent that it produces what Lacan in his fourth seminar calls a “mesmerizing object inscribed upon the veil”, around which the fetishist’s “erotic life gravitates” (151). Wilde’s works, then, offer a unique possibility to study the specific relation between the signifier and enjoyment. They uncover the archaic dimensions of the signifier it its relation to the subject’s archaic and aching wound.

1. To distinguish between the two editions of the *Complete Works* of Wilde used in this dissertation, all references to *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (2003) will henceforth use the abbreviation *Works*. References to *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, Vol. 5, *Plays I* (2013) will use the abbreviation *Plays*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)