

IN SUSPENSE:  
SUSPENSE FICTION AND SENSATIONAL PUBLICITY IN THE BRITISH FIN DE SIÈCLE

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This thesis, and myself, are dedicated to my partner Liz. Her patience with me, and impatience with the Oxford comma, know no bounds.

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## Chapter 1 – Extensible Suspense

“It is a sensation not experienced by many mortals,” said he, “to be looking into a churchyard on a wild windy night, and to feel that I no more hold a place among the living than the dead do, and even to know that I lie buried somewhere else, as they lie buried here. Nothing uses me to it.”

– Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*

The first piece of fiction that appeared in the first issue of the first volume of *The Strand Magazine*, George Newnes's immensely popular “Illustrated Monthly” that spanned the British fin de siècle, reads much like a simple morality tale. “A Deadly Dilemma,” by Grant Allen, is the story of a young couple whose spat during a countryside gambol nearly results in catastrophe. Having followed his lover secretly after being sent from her side, the unfortunately named Ughtred Carnegie is only a short distance away when Netta Mayne faints across the railroad tracks. Ughtred, to his horror, becomes aware of the “unmistakable, unthinkable, the fierce whirr [sic] of the express rushing madly down upon” them (17) and realizes that there is no time to reach Netta before it does. Making a snap decision, he heaves a “dismantled telegraph post” across the line, seeking to derail the train. Belatedly he realizes that “[t]here were people on that train – innocent human beings, men and women like himself, who would next minute be wrecked and mangled corpses, or writhing forms, on the track before him!” (18). He thus finds himself faced with the titular “dread dilemma [...] deadly decision” (19): should he remove the pole or leave it in place? “What on earth was he to do?” he wonders, “Which of the two was he to sacrifice? Should it be murder or treachery?” (19). As the narrator tells us, it is “an awful question for any man to solve” (19), and, as Ughtred “temporise[s]” (19) in “a frenzy of suspense” (17), the sweat standing still “upon his brow in great clammy drops” (19), the reader

likewise sweats, held rapt in search of an impossible answer.

It is not surprising that Ughtred's dilemma is ultimately resolved or that the impossibly mutual salvation of both the passengers and Netta are effected. What is rather shocking, however, is that credit for this happy ending apparently is due to the caprices of “[b]lind fate” (21) and not any moral or human agency. In the ultimate moment, Ughtred, “[f]or good or evil” (20) makes the decision to throw the pole clear, knowing, the train being so close, that he is sacrificing Netta, and likely himself, in the process. Fate intervenes, however, and after Ughtred hurls “the huge balk back with a terrible effort to the side of the railway,” it partly “rebound[s] onto the line,” derailing the train but inflicting only “very inconsiderable damage” and sparing the passengers harm (20). Ughtred and Netta also are spared, and the final page of the story has an inset depicting him lugging her inert form protectively down the line (see Illustration 1).

The fact that Ughtred is spared the guilt he foresees of having “murdered Netta” (21) only by happenstance amid an otherwise realistic plot is a symptom of the epistemological failure of moral fixity in this piece. It is also one small example of the way that that crisis in late



*Illustration 1: Ughtred and Netta reunited.*

Victorian culture more generally was expressed through, and caught up in, the artistic traditions of narrative suspense. In what follows, I explore the complicated ways that narrative suspense

and suspenseful self-narration, both public and personal, became embroiled in one another at the end of the nineteenth century.

In *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt*, Caroline Levine anatomizes the strategic use of narrative suspense by mid-Victorian Realists; her nuanced study establishes an excellent foundation for the present one. John Ruskin and “a startling array of nineteenth-century thinkers” (2), as Levine details, saw narrative suspense as providing “a rigorous political and epistemological training” that would “foster energetic skepticism and uncertainty rather than closure and complacency” (2) among the reading public. “Nineteenth-century scientists and philosophers,” she writes,

insisted that a doubtful pause was absolutely essential to the pursuit of knowledge. If we were not compelled to suspend judgment, they argued, we would simply rush to assume that our prejudices were true and right, and we would fail to open ourselves up to the possibility of unexpected truths and surprises. From this epistemological perspective, novelistic suspense performed a critical cultural role: narrative enigmas and delays could help to foster habits of hesitation and uncertainty. In the space between the mystery and its revelation, audiences were forced to wait and wonder, unable to say for sure whether their assumptions would fit the facts. (3)

Suspense in the mid-Victorian era was as much practical as it was philosophical; it was a technique for interacting with the “the surprising, unconventional otherness” that was recognized as characterizing reality (3). In this context, suspense became what Levine calls the “the realist strategy par excellence” and realism entailed a readerly “suspending of assumption and belief” (3). For these philosophical and scientific thinkers, the combination of suspenseful plotting and modern, realistic situations created an imaginative space in which the public could safely rehearse a skeptical and reasoned alertness, which would ideally become a habit of mind enacted

in the real world.

This line of thought conjoined an imperative for “a kind of cultural and ideological self-restraint” (3) with an understanding that such restraint could, paradoxically, enable radical social and political change. For many radical thinkers of the time, “the startling otherness of the real seemed capable of undermining entrenched habits of thought and conservative convictions” and this meant, very literally, that “The real itself was radical” (Levine 10). One's attunement to the shifting particulars of reality as it emerged against and disrupted the preconceptions of experience, philosophy, and science, was a precondition for the one's ability to better the world. It was in this context, Levine points out, that John Ruskin, “who was not only one of the first writers to use the term 'realism' in English but also one whose work inspired other early uses of the word” (11), adopted “scientific experiment as his paradigm” and offered “the vigilant suspension of judgment as the only fair and appropriate relationship between mind and the world” (12). For Ruskin and like-minded thinkers, the suspenseful plot served both as allegory for the mechanics of the real world (the real world confounds our ability to fully know it in advance) and as an argument for and portrait of a certain habitude responding to those mechanics. Mid-Victorian realism united the epistemological, the aesthetic, and the scientific under a common rubric: “in order to know the world we must learn to suspend ourselves” (Levine 85).

The mission of writers like Charles Dickens, John Ruskin, and Charlotte Brontë (2) was to “disseminate a skeptical epistemology” (85) using this potent new narrative technology. For example, Levine argues that with *Great Expectations* Charles Dickens “not only thrilled his contemporaries by producing and sustaining a fascinating suspense plot, but also [...] articulated

a clear ethical value for suspenseful plotting” (85). By withholding the identity of Pip's benefactor and repeatedly “signaling” its importance, “Dickens forces us to recognize our ignorance and so piques a desire for further knowledge” (86). “This withholding,” Levine argues, “has a twofold effect: it compels the recognition that the world is other to us, and it acts as a spur to pleasurable, keen inquisitiveness” (97).

The realist suspense plot also, through its generic fixation on high stakes questions like social expulsion and death, brought home to the reader that the real-world stakes of self-suspended readiness were likewise high. The realist suspense plot at the dawn of modern capitalism encrypted a sense that the cultural changes of its time were particularly momentous, and a nascent idea that the country's response over the next few decades could make the difference between an anarchic and a utopian future. Practitioners saw realist suspense as a vital bulwark for the British people against closed-minded traditionalism in a world that did not ask permission before it changed. Indeed, for them the choice seemed less between everyday conservatism and liberalism than in how to command the unassailable forces of cultural transformation that confronted the United Kingdom during the zenith of the Industrial Revolution.

By the *fin de siècle*, however, this sense of momentousness largely had been supplanted, among the intelligentsia and the public generally, by “anxieties concerning the collapse of culture, the weakening of national might” described by Stephen Arata in his excellent *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (1). Manifold and unprecedented changes, including the rapid pace of industrial development and technological innovation, the stalling of empire, and the implosion of traditional familial and gender roles, gave rise to a feeling that society was in a

pervasive state of perhaps irretrievable decline, of “possibly fatal decay – physical, moral, spiritual, creative” (1).

This feeling, combined with what Arata calls the period's “energizing fiction” that “a wide variety of seemingly disparate phenomena were, on some deep level, connected” (2), provided ample fuel for the period's energizing critical ideology, degeneration theory.

Degeneration theory fused the scientific, the social, the imperial, and the aesthetic in reactionary formations that largely inverted the type of enlightened progressivism that informed Ruskin and like-minded thinkers in the preceding decades. Where the enlightened progressivism of the mid-Victorians attested to the momentousness of the present in determining the course of the future, degeneration discourse pointed nostalgically back to perhaps that same moment as a time when action was more possible, or possible at all. What Arata appropriately terms the period's “fictions of loss” evoke, with their shared “eschatological impulse” (1), the supplantation of the vigilant and at times exultant temporality of momentousness with the anguished and often fatalistic temporality of belatedness.

But what of realist suspense? For Levine, the “serious pleasures of suspense” died a fairly quick death under the withering gaze of critics including Henry James and Oscar Wilde, who found realism in fact “unrealistic” in the sense that it was “unable to document the chaotic and inaccessible realities of lived experience” (198-9). They indicted the realists for hobbling the aesthetic possibilities of fiction in all its forms. As often as not, this criticism took the form of fictional works as much as essays or reviews. Thus, while “Henry James's characters are famous for engaging in acts of suspending – hesitating, deferring knowledge, 'hanging fire' [...] James's texts do not reward the suspension of judgment with shocking truths and unconventional

certainties” (Levine 161). Similarly, in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “we find all of the familiar ingredients of the realist experiment,” with Dorian receptively “reliant on the comparison between the representation and the 'real' and feeling something like a scientist” (193) as he examines his portrait for evidence of how he has changed. However, the novel's “repeated – even systematic – displacements” of this scientific point of view, from Dorian, to Lord Henry, and so on, radically confuse self and other, ultimately ambiguate “who is the subject and who the object of experimentation” (194) and in that way undermine the “the priority of the real in the relationship between reality and its representations” (177). Wilde, in other words, disidentifies with the realist epistemology of detached observation and “echoes its patterns [...] while questioning and destabilizing [its] claims” (192). He adopts the Ruskinian notion of detached scientific observation in order to demonstrate its limitations.

These were James's and Wilde's particular “end[s] of realism” (192), in each of which, for Levine, the anti-ideological project of realist skepticism “[i]ronically [...] could be said to have led to its own demise, turned back on itself by writers trained into skepticism by the very suspense of the realist experiment” (199). This argument is valuable for the way it charts the interplay between philosophical and aesthetic discourse in the mid- to late-Victorian era. But it is especially fascinating in that it implicitly suborns the former to the latter. If realist narrative suspense gave rise to new philosophical perspectives that thoroughly rejected the ones that had originally underlain it, it doesn't necessarily follow that a similarly complete aesthetic break also occurred. Being interested primarily in the philosophical project of realist suspense, Levine quietly resists conflating the end of that project with some actual terminus in the development of realistic narrative styles or suspenseful plotting. Her comment that “To James, [Walter] Pater,

and Wilde, realist narrative appeared remarkable, in retrospect, for a naïve ingenuousness, an uncritical struggle for transparency” registers a philosophical complaint on their part against the possibility and value of the unification of art and life. Her note that “[t]he realists seemed, looking backward, to have trusted innocently to marriage plots and detective fictions to render successful pictures of the world” (199) echoes a distrust of the use of those genres for mimetic purposes and of mimesis as artistically valuable, rather than a distrust of the genres themselves. As evoked by *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it would be the ways that art diverged from reality that the post-realists considered most valuable. Far from demanding an end to a particular art form or generic practice based on the faultiness of its philosophical underpinnings, therefore, the post-realists of the fin de siècle would insist on the autonomy of art from everything but art itself. As Wilde would argue in his essay “The Decay of Lying,” art “is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place” (9). His complaint against the marriage plot, then, was not that it failed to be realistic but that realist writers tried to make it so.

Any perspective that confused the epistemological failure of realist skepticism with a stylistic failure of suspense also would fail to explain the continuing popularity of narrative suspense contemporary with the efforts of James and Wilde and further neglect the very direct intrusion of suspense's pre-Ruskinian history into the popular literature of the fin de siècle, as exemplified by late Gothic works such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Such a perspective also would, as Ann Cvetkovich has demonstrated, have to ignore the popular dominance of sensation fiction – another nominally distinct body of suspense fiction – during the 1860s, concurrent with some of the realist works that Levine discusses (Cvetkovich 15). In short, to confuse suspense fiction with the

philosophical project of realist skepticism that for a time championed and significantly influenced it would be to ignore its long artistic pedigree, contemporary polyvocality, and popular legacy.

Indeed, in seeking to understand how the technology of suspense transformed from momentous to belated expression as it was carried forward into the *fin de siècle*, one must examine sensation fiction as a significant influence. Cvetkovich notes the “enormous popularity” of sensation fiction during the mid-Victorian era and convincingly recasts it as not merely the “fad genre of the 1860s” (14) but symptomatic of a more generalized and multifaceted expansion by the literature of the time into affects and the body. Appropriately, she situates the genre's emergence in context of the history of the novel itself, noting that,

From the moment of its appearance in England in the eighteenth century, the novel had to struggle to achieve respectability as a form of high culture, a process which was the subject of intense debate by the middle of the nineteenth century, and which ultimately culminated by the end of the century in the splitting of the novel into a high-culture form and a series of popular or mass-produced sub-genres that continue to exist today. (15)

The merits of sensation fiction, with its characteristic “capacity to shock, excite, and move audiences” (14), became fiercely contested. Its sheer popularity across class lines, if nothing else, begged the question of its artistic integrity, with the result that “sensation” emerged as a disdainful critical epithet used “to distinguish between popularity and literary value” (16) and thereby police class and aesthetic boundaries. Sensationalism, as Cvetkovich writes, is therefore both an apt label for the new narrative technology of the body that emerged during the 1860s and “a useful index” of the period's anxieties over the commodification of art under capitalism and concomitant intrusion of lower-class tropes (murder, adultery) into the reading materials of the

middle class. In a classically Foucauldian sense, both the increasing sensationalism of the novel and the disciplining of it as such speak to the discursive exigencies of the culture that authored them (25).

As cultural critique, the discourse around sensationalism also exhibited a similar sense of momentousness to that of Ruskinian progressivism, if with very different political intentions. The commodification of literature was seen as entailing a “cycle of production and consumption [which] requires new fads and fashions each season in order to ensure constant sales” – placing emphasis on the novelty of the work rather than its project – “whereas culture should aim for ‘immortality’” (Cvetkovich 18). The fear was that, in the changed market, there was no space for works, like those of the realists, that cultivated truth. In a fairly direct inversion of the empiricist didacticism of the realist project of suspense, critics of sensation fiction “feared the prospect of a reader reduced to a body reacting instinctively to a text” (20). This sense of impending calamity, as the result of which critics decried popular fiction with a discourse “perhaps unequaled in its vehemence” (Cvetkovich 14), marks a littoral zone between what I’ve called the temporalities of momentousness and belatedness: the championing of old-fashioned works over newer “sensational” ones characterized a critical perspective that saw the novel as, at least, still resuscitable, but, at the same time, set itself up for failure by conflating bad art with capitalism and failing to address that rather substantial wellspring on its own terms or propose viable alternatives. Cvetkovich’s note that “[o]ne concerned critic even suggested that only novels that are at least twenty years old and have thus stood the test of time should be allowed in the circulating libraries” (18-9) makes it clear that, as England moved toward the end of the nineteenth century, a sense of momentousness gave way to one of belatedness, and that “[t]he

success of the novel has to be told as a counternarrative to the Victorian belief in perpetual progress” (18-19).

This dichotomization between high art and popular art, so central to the momentous critical discourse on the novel, was strangely belated itself. As Cvetkovich notes, no clear generic dividing line existed between the sensational and the proper or between the popular and the high-minded, and this ambiguity predated even the 1860s. Charles Dickens (a favorite of Ruskin's [Landow 5]) is the most salient example of this confusion. His novels, beginning in 1836 with *The Pickwick Papers*, provided ample evidence “that cultural production could be a profitable endeavor” (Cvetkovich 16). They propelled Dickens to preeminence as a man of letters even as they synthesized genres from the Gothic to the Newgate novel, and garnering him considerable popularity with lower and middle class readership on both sides of the Atlantic in the process.

That Dickens would become the publisher of the eminent sensation writer Wilkie Collins is surpassed for relevance only by the highly sensational aspect of his last complete novel. *Our Mutual Friend*, written in 1864, opens with a famously suspenseful chapter that also functions as an apt analogy for the then-incipient cultural crisis. Dickens gives us a presciently cinematic wide-angle in which “a boat of dirty and disreputable appearance, with two figures in it, floated on the Thames, between Southwark Bridge, which is of iron, and London Bridge, which is of stone, as an autumn evening was closing in” (13). The physical position of the boat in suspension between these symbols of the old and new eras as well as their temporal position “in these times of ours” immediately piques readerly interest in these figures, as well as the nature of their activities, by rendering them specifically contemporary without revealing their specific

identities. Their histories are “withheld” in Levine's sense of the word, but, much as when Grant Allen asks us what “any man” would do in Ughtred Carnegie's position, Dickens's highly symbolic choice of location and his use of the possessive “our” cast these figures as directly relevant to the reader herself rather than merely figures for the otherness of the real. They are generalized denizens of their contemporary time and space, figuring both synecdochically for the culture and sympathetically as everymen. They promise the attuned reader equal insight into the “state of England” and her own state, equally.

Thus, when in the novel's second paragraph the two are revealed as “a strong man with ragged grizzled hair and a sun-browned face, and a dark girl of nineteen or twenty, sufficiently like him to be recognizable as his daughter,” the reader already has been prepared to interpret the characters' impressions and reactions as external to herself but nevertheless personally relevant. Dickens quickly clarifies that the daughter will function as the sympathetic center of the scene, moving from the wide-angle to a close up. “Always watching [her father's] face” and listening for his commands (14), Lizzie Hexam, and the reader with her, are held in watchful suspense. Lizzie's physical motions as she rows the boat and her watchful gaze kinesthetically mirror the reader, with “every turn of her wrist” strangely understating the movement of pulling an oar but accurate of a readerly page-turn, and with “her look of dread or horror” miming the reader's steady gaze on the page.

Lizzie Hexam is a necessarily imperfect portrait for the reader as well as an imperfect other, her motions and gaze being, unlike those of the reader, “things of usage.” She, unlike the first-time reader, has been through this before, and her horror arises not from a Ruskinian self-suspended readiness for the unexpected but from a practiced foreknowledge of what is to come.

The reader has at this point only a growing apprehension that the object Lizzie's father seeks in the Thames is a body. Lizzie, on the other hand, long participant in her father's business, has no doubts. Her motions and affect are both synchronized with and estranged from the reader's. Lizzie's horror, therefore, both amplifies and troubles her mimesis of the reader. This imperfect mimesis is similar to the reflexivity Levine sees Wilde employing in *Dorian Gray*. When Dorian kisses his own image, Levine asks us whether it is “himself Dorian kisses or an other” (194). Dorian's love of the self/other, she writes, “fragments and displaces the moments of the Ruskinian experiment.” In the process, “Wilde queers Ruskin” by exposing the “contrast between the 'real' and the representational” (195). Dorian's portrait is imperfect in the sense that it has become unfaithful to Dorian's actual appearance, but that imperfection is revelatory of truths. In both texts, it is the motions of reader and image relative to one another, as they drift into and out of mimesis with one another, that generates meaning.

As the first chapter of *Our Mutual Friend* moves toward its conclusion, it also glides smoothly through the revelation of its withheld information. Lizzie's father finds a body and lashes it, unidentified to the reader, to the stern of the boat. Lifelike, the thing seems to want its true nature revealed. What should be an inert payload is instead in constant, anthropomorphous motion: “[w]hat he had in tow, lunged itself at him sometimes in an awful manner when the boat was checked, and sometimes seemed to try to wrench itself away, though for the most part it followed submissively” (17). The body performs a carefully choreographed becoming-human that, ironically, evidences its true identity as a corpse. The fact that the section I've just cited is as explicit a statement as Dickens gives us of the thing's nature is notable; by chapter's end, the reader, like Lizzie, has no doubts, is “no neophyte” and has “no fancies” (17), without having

had to be explicitly told what is in tow. The induction of the reader from distant viewer of the scene to knowing initiate in its grimy realities is suspenseful, certainly, but its “twofold effect” has very little in common with that identified in *Great Expectations* by Levine. As the reader moves closer to a complete understanding of the situation, and therefore closer to Lizzie's perspective of informed horror, she also must move affectively away from Lizzie and the unpalatable specifics of her lived reality. Lizzie has been transformed, in the course of the chapter, from the mysteriously horrified rower of a boat between two symbolic bridges to the actually horrified daughter of a corpse-robber, denizen of the docks and member of the underclass. The tugging and submissiveness of the corpse, then, are resistant to and mnemonic of the chapter's opening allegory, in which the boat and its denizens stand in for the state of England. The body's submissiveness allows it to figure generally for the dreadful, the inescapable, and the ill-fated. But as it tugs against the pull of the boat, evincing its actual physical nature and willfully becoming-human, it gestures equally and incompatibly to the actual, lived particularity of the scene's participants – one far removed from that of a normative middle-class reader. Lizzie stands in for the reader, miming the reader's rhythmic hands and gaze, but cannot be the reader, after all, because the object of her gaze refuses to be displaced as a symbol for anything other than what it is – a corpse. Lizzie's eyes, unlike the reader's, belong to the sort of person who witnesses dead bodies being lashed to boats. Even as, perhaps on rereading, the reader joins Lizzie in her state of foreknowing horror, the particularities of that foreknowledge effect a new displacement in which Lizzie emerges as newly affectively synchronous with the reader – they feel the same sort of dread – but also divorced from her biographically – their real world experiences are mutually alien.

Thus the nature of suspense in Dickens's writing shifted importantly, if subtly, between *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend* – published only three years apart. We might contrast Lizzie's foreknowledge of her father's profession with the young Pip's misidentification of Miss Havisham as his benefactor. This mistake on Pip's part, as Levine argues, is symptomatic of his failure to remain self-suspended and open to the emergent possibilities of reality (88). Indeed, his self-assurance during his rise to gentility is predicated on his certainty that his funds come from a socially acceptable source; to the extent that the reader has joined in Pip's certitude, the reader must also share in his horror at Abel Magwitch's revelation and the didactic corrective it administers. Reader and Pip alike experience this revelation as a shattering and a reordering of the plot as we have understood it, instructing us in readiness for future such surprises. Lizzie's horror presents precisely the opposite configuration. Indeed, it is in the second paragraph of *Our Mutual Friend* that we already are forewarned of a coming revelation. Dickens's remark that “She watched his face as earnestly as he watched the river” could be interpreted as modeling a state of self-suspended receptivity not inappropriate for a successful character in a Ruskinian suspense plot. However, Dickens qualifies it in the next moment, adding that “in the intensity of her look there was a touch of dread or horror” (13), and so-doing forewarns us that the thing that is coming is, specifically, dreadful. Unlike Pip, whose expectations are certain but mistaken, we (and Lizzie) are certain there is no mistake here – and that certitude bears out. The eventual revelation of the corpse as such, therefore, may come as a surprise to the reader, but only in its specifics, not in its timing or affective import. Its specificity as a corpse merely amplifies the tone of horror already dominating the chapter. Suspense in *Our Mutual Friend* no longer implies a readied awareness that anything is possible but an accurate

certitude that things will worsen, or, we might say, degenerate. The movement of the reader from dreadful presentiment to a knowledgeable state of dread, in which Lizzie also is transformed from allegorical figure into a specific biographical individual, therefore, performs a “twofold effect” equivalent to, but importantly different from, that typical of realist suspense. It retrospectively confirms the reader's anticipation of worsening circumstances and provides further fodder for the feeling identified by Arata of widespread phenomenological cohesion by establishing a shared affect of horror and belatedness between a girl from the docks, the middle-class reader, and the state of England. One blurs one's eyes on this newly pointillized London, in which Lizzie is a bleak speck, to perceive its unified and bleak landscape.

This twofold effect, given its dependence on the reader's identification with and expectations of the text, entails, like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a “self-reflexive relation to narrative mysteries” (Levine 162), in which the text “doubles back, implicating the [protagonist], suddenly bringing in the self where it had seemed to be about the other” (Levine 193). The ability of Lizzie to stand for both the state of England generally and her biographically specific self depends on the strength of the reader's identification with her despite her irreconcilability with his own personal biography and his willingness to take those points of divergence as yet revelatory of the self.

Establishing this reflexivity, therefore, also entails a concomitant movement out of the self-suspended/skeptical register of realist suspense and into something much more like the affective/bodily register that for Cvetkovich is characteristic of sensation fiction. Thus, the identity of the corpse pulled from the Thames in *Our Mutual Friend* seems curiously unimportant, despite its eventual centrality to the plot. We are much more concerned with the

ebb and flow of Lizzie's terror, watching with fascination as she “shiver[s],” grows “very pale,” and “seem[s] to turn deadly faint” (14-15), by turns. The serial shifts in point of view in “A Deadly Dilemma,” from Netta, to Ughtred, to the train conductor, effect a similar privileging of the affective over the rational by keeping the affective register of the piece constant at the expense of narrative continuity; we are presented a pastiche of terrified and suspenseful perspectives, unified as abstractions of a single readerly affect, rather than a single, affectively dynamic perspective designed to guide the reader through the proper responses to a scenario.

As Levine points out, and as we have seen with Lizzie Hexam, this reflexivity not only “implicates the reader” but “our experience of reading” as well. The point she makes (in this case, with specific reference to Henry James's experimental short story “Travelling Companions”) is that this move can effect a sort of metatextual criticism that “suggests that even Ruskin's own experiments might end up producing a confirmation of conventional texts and images, generating not unsettling doubt but political and ethical complacency.” By “foregrounding the act of interpretation, which then doubles back on the reader” she writes, reflexive narrative prompts introspection on the desire for the kinds of easy answers modeled by narrative resolution (162).

But narrative reflexivity also creates a space in which the reader can simply self-reflect. The portrait-gazing Dorian, is held rapt in contemplation of himself, his feelings, and his affect, rather than the world. Narrative reflexivity triggers an equivalent interpretive turning-inward on the part of the reader, even as it entails the construction of a self-outside-the-self from which the gaze emanates. The difference between self-examination and exploring one's feelings is, after all, largely semantic. Thus, the reflexive suspense literature of the fin de siècle replaced the

willful self-suspension of the realist project with a self for whom self-suspension was a sensation rather than a deliberate or rational practice. This belated reader turned to the text for evidence of her own nature in preference to that of the other or the real and – this is critical – in doing so operated in a largely affective interpretive register. The text-as-self testifies to readerly experience even as it may trouble it; it maps and expands the subjective and the personal by admixing and conflating them with the objective and public.

Cvetkovich, exploring “the politics of affect” through the focusing medium of sensation fiction, argues that “we must trace how affective experience is made meaningful” (23). For her, “[s]ensationalism works by virtue of the link that is constructed between the concreteness or the 'sensation-al' event and the tangibility of the 'sensational' feelings it produces” (23).

Sensationalism, as a narrative technology, in other words, creates meaning by troubling the boundary between the objective and subjective. But her account of sensationalism also depends on the expansion of the subjective itself into the body, into “bodily responses” and that which is “physically felt” (23), a borderland between the world and the Ruskinian detached mind. Thus the increasingly affective function of suspense, emerging from both the diffusion of sensationalism and the ideological implosion of Realism in the late nineteenth century, also entailed an increasing fascination with – and indeed, dependence on – the body and embodiment. *Our Mutual Friend*, as the preceding reading demonstrates, concerns itself heavily from the very outset with the articulation and kinesthetics of Lizzie and the plot's other bodies. “A Deadly Dilemma” similarly fixates on the physical positions and relative momentums of bodies, with Netta lying “along up the line” from Ughtred and with the train and its passengers “dashing madly down upon him” and about to sweep “past him resistlessly” and bear “down upon her like

lightning” (17). This configuration effects a sort of becoming-corpse-like in Netta, much as the tugging, dragging kinesthetics of Hexam's cargo do for it. But, more generally, “A Deadly Dilemma” is similar to the opening of *Our Mutual Friend* in that it makes a mutually constituted assemblage of the scene's bodies, its character of suspense depending on their coordinated movements and mutually watchful embroilment. Both Ughtred and Lizzie are held physically and mentally rapt as their respective horrifyingly morbid futures bear down upon them. In both cases, the reader's understanding of that future is affectively rendered in the “thrilled” and “pressing terror” (Allen 17) of its conscious and overwhelmed protagonists.

Unlike the pioneering writers of the 1860s, the writers of the 1880s and 1890s generally encountered this sensational/affective technology of suspense not as shocking or politically threatening but as familiar and diffuse within the cultural zeitgeist. The referents of suspense now extended from the private sensations of the body to the public practices of social critique and speculation, admixing and conflating each; suspense took on a character of *extensibility* in which it emerged as an extremely versatile narrative technology capable of allying and recombining these normally disparate spheres of experience in strange new ways. “A Deadly Dilemma,” culminates in a summary of the publicity of the train derailment, in which “[n]ext day the papers were full of the accident to the Great Southern Express; equally divided between denunciation of the miscreant who had placed the obstruction in the way of the train, and admiration for the heroic, but unrecognisable stranger who had rescued from death so many helpless passengers at so imminent a risk to his own life or safety” (21). This coverage, which publicly exonerates Ughtred, importantly also fails to report the facts of Ughtred's “infatuated act – an act he felt he could never possibly explain in its true light to any other person” (21);

Ughtred is, after all, both the miscreant and the hero of the story, and also not either of them, exactly. This disjunction between public truth and personal experience “denies the priority of the real in the relationship between reality and its representations” not only in the sense that it marks the real as representationally mediated, as in Levine's argument (177), but in the sense that it marks affective reality – lived, embodied experience – as potentially incommunicable. This, in a piece ostensibly concerned with the personal import of public morality (“Has not any man the right to save the lives of those he loves best, no matter what the risk or peril to others? He asked himself this question” [19]), effects both an affective portraiture of the lived reality of *The Strand's* readership and a critique of the culture in which individuals of that readership found themselves. The individual *Strand* reader, in other words, relates to “A Deadly Dilemma” as what Michael Warner terms “the public subject,” who imagines, “if imperfectly, indifference to [his] particularity,” to himself, an experience describable variously as “a universalizing transcendence, as ideological repression, as utopian wish, as schizocapitalist vertigo” (160), and, I would add, affective self-suspension, albeit of a definitively non-individualist kind. But it simultaneously and incompatibly registers meaning for what Warner calls the “private person” (164), that exigent and individual bundle of nerves whose feelings, far from being merely “prosthetic” or “parallel” (164) to the public self, are tangled up with it in complex and disruptive ways. The instability of the bifurcation of Ughtred's character into public and private person, objective and affective actant, indeed the instability of “A Deadly Dilemma”'s concomitant interpretive split, is a simple example of what I'll call, following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the *schizophrenia* of the text.

For Deleuze and Guattari, schizophrenia and capitalism are characterized by their mutual

affinity. They write that “schizophrenia is the exterior limit of capitalism itself or the conclusion of its deepest tendency,” meaning its tendency to decode competing sign-systems, facilitating their commodification. This process of decoding entails a movement away from the objectivities and self-consistencies that characterize systematic thought and ideology and toward dissociation and linguistic free-play; schizophrenia entails something very like a becoming-unrealistic, a movement away not from the phenomenological but from any attempt to impose any unifying theory on it. But, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, capitalism requires a certain degree of unity to function, a common tongue of exchange if nothing else. It therefore also “only functions on condition that it inhibit this tendency, or that it push back or displace this limit.” Capitalism must resist schizophrenia even as it causes it to proliferate. Hence, we can best understand schizophrenia not as “the identity of capitalism, but on the contrary its difference, its divergence, and its death” (Anti-Oedipus 246). Schizophrenia is capitalism's dangerously explosive combustion engine.

Under capitalism, then, culture and reality itself exhibit a becoming-schizophrenic, a tendency to dissociate, which must always subsequently be countermanded by the generation of new systems of meaning and significations that take account of those dissociations, which subsequently are dissociated themselves. If capitalism engages in a single-minded process of decoding, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, in which all systems of signification and consistencies eventually are decoded and relegated to “an archaic, folkloric, or residual function” (245), that process also must undergo constant reversal if it is to continue. New knowledge and new styles of knowing constantly and unpredictably emerge from different points in the social fabric in response to the “schizocapitalist vertigo” referenced by Warner, resisting and feeding the

superstructure that must eventually decode them. Schizophrenia, for Deleuze and Guattari, therefore becomes the uniquely characteristic state of culture and the individual under capitalism; it represents the simultaneous and rapidly fluctuating failure and reconstitution of meaning. As both the logical culmination and the constantly forestalled death of capitalism, schizophrenic culture is characterized by multiform, self-incompatible and transient expression.

As in the popular misapplication of the word “schizophrenia” to split personality disorder, expression in the schizophrenic public sphere code-switches or speaks in many incompatible code systems at once. In terms of the text, schizophrenia is reminiscent, perhaps, of Bakhtin's *heteroglossia* or Genette's *palimpsest*, but it disregards the former's continuity of discourse and the latter's causal structuralism. It is even more in the spirit of Barthes's second-order *myth*, in which the ostensible signification of the word masks another, more potent signification, in that both provide for strange relationships between the text's various strata of signification, as well as their interpretive simultaneity. Unlike Barthes's scenario, however, schizophrenia complicates the hierarchal arrangement of those strata. A Barthean reading of “A Deadly Dilemma” might argue that its discourse on the relationship between the personal rights and public responsibility – whether, as quoted above, “any man [has not] the right to save the lives of those he loves best, no matter what the risk or peril to others” – serves as an alibi for the text's reinstatement of normative gender roles, in which the petulant and capricious – and therefore masculinely self-expressive – Netta is disciplined and converted into an ideally supplicant female. A schizophrenic reading would assent to this reading but ask in addition what other ways the text signifies and in what ways it also resists this interpretation – asking how else it variously speaks. Thus, the emphasis with this type of interpretation is on the ways that these strata interact – the

ways that they mask and expose one another, the ways that they decode and recode one another. The question is not whether “A Deadly Dilemma” is ultimately about affect or publicity, gender or morality. It is not whether *Our Mutual Friend* is about the reader, poverty, or the state of England. Rather, the question is rather how these tropes are in/consistent with one another and what new meanings the text produces through their interplay.

Extensibility, then, is a term meant to encompass these ways of relating and refer to their proliferation. Like degeneration theory, suspense modeled the affectively rooted sense among fin de siècle Victorians that otherwise disparate phenomena were causally related. Unlike degeneration theory, it did not insist on recoding the affective into the rational in any specific way or, indeed, at all. Suspense enabled the expression of a shared national affect while avoiding alliance with any single political perspective; it allowed writers and the public generally to forge links between different aspects of their experience without, as degeneration theory implicitly did, insisting that those links were generalizable across *all* fields of experience. The extensibility of suspense was a direct result of the decoding of the ideological underpinnings of the realist project of suspense under capitalism and refers to the newly schizophrenic guise of suspense as a narrative technology during the fin de siècle. Newly unconstrained and commodified, suspense became, on an unprecedented scale, not only expressive of certain new themes, but more capable of decoding, encoding, and interconnecting logically unrelated themes, feelings, and discourses generally. Extensible, suspense became a shared syntax of communication, a common framework for the expression of an extremely diverse (although always historically contingent) field of sentiments and ideas.

The extensibility of suspense is detectable in the popularization and proliferation of

suspenseful sub-genres that began with the rise of capitalism and continues today (Cvetkovich 15). But in addition to and inseparable from this extension at the level of genre or the meta-text, we also detect the extension of suspense within a given novel, as suspense appears to gaze on itself, moving into the bodies that fill its plots. The thematic extensibility of suspense – its ability to affix to nearly any subject matter, for nearly any purpose, resulted in a proliferation *within* suspenseful plots of *types* of suspense and suspension; if, as mid-Victorian critics feared, “the cycle of production and consumption requires new fads and fashions each season in order to ensure constant sales” (Cvetkovich 18), this same mechanism was productive of an ever-growing stockpile of up-to-date anxieties that found apt expression in new and up-to-date types of suspense. Thus, in the fin de siècle novel, we find an incredible panoply of suspended states. In *Dracula*, for example, we experience: “doors, doors, doors everywhere, and all locked and bolted” (57), the “quiet [...] agony of delightful anticipation” (69), being “overcome” by “horror” and “[sinking] down unconscious” (71), “dreadful thrall” (78), “narcotic sleep” (164), sick-bed vigils (195 and elsewhere), a “lethargic state, with [...] stertorous breathing” (196), the “trance” of the “Un-Dead” (239), and, last but not least, the psychic enthrallment of Dracula over his victims (328). Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, which is explored at length in the next chapter, provides an equally lengthy, if less fantastical, list of such states: “swollen legs [which] render [one] inactive” (6), “motionless being” (7), “stutter[ing] to the point of suffocation” (9), “inert fanaticism, or perhaps rather a fanatical inertness” (12), “Five years' rigorous confinement in a fortress” (20), “a queer sensation of faintness in [one's] stout legs” (26), “a stillness of dread which resembled the immobility of profound attention” (30), being “rooted suddenly to the spot by [...] morbid horror and dread of physical pain [and] sunk in hebetude” (49), feeling

“hopelessly inert” in the face of insomnia (60), feeling “Chained to a desk in the thick of four millions of men ... victim of an ironic fate” (113), feeling “like a tight-rope artist” on a “shake[n] rope” (116), feeling “enveloped, oppressed, penetrated, choked and suffocated by the blackness of a wet London night” (150), keeping “still, perfectly still” (178), “arrested [...] attention” (191), and “the anguish of a baffled expression” (246), to name a few. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* describes the “shuddering and weeping [...] fearstruck ecstasy of listening” that attends the foreknowledge of the “doom that is closing on [Jekyll and Hyde] both” (62). Netta Mayne of *A Deadly Dilemma*, “gr[ows] fainter and fainter” as she walks herself home, only to trip on the railway track and “[fall] with her body right across the line. Faint and terrified already, with such a thousand vague alarms, the sudden shock stun[s] and disable[s] her” (16-17). We've already seen how suspensefully her paramour fares.

It is no coincidence that many of these suspenseful and suspended states also evoked or were realistic consequences of specifically modern sciences and technologies. The realist concern with a scientifically-minded “suspension of judgment as the only fair and appropriate relationship between mind and the world” was carried along with the rest of their experiment as it transmuted from the rational to the affective, the didactic to the extensible. If Bram Stoker's “up-to-date with a vengeance” vampire story, pervaded as it is by shorthand, telegraphs, recordable phonographs, railways, steam ships and the like, is an extreme example of this, it is certainly not the only one. *The Secret Agent* and its suspenseful states have dynamite as their locus, as does Stevenson's *The Dynamiter*. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Wells's *The Invisible Man* (the latter of which is also explored in the following chapter) both have chemistry as the mechanism for the transformation of their protagonists. Arthur Conan Doyle likewise was

interested in new technologies and their suspenseful possibilities. His “The El Dorado Fiasco” frets over electrocution, first restraining a criminal to an electric chair, then, when the man grows superhumanly strong as a result of his trials, shifts to the perspective of the horrified onlookers, who find themselves, as the man was a moment before, paralyzed in the face of an entirely overwhelming force. Likewise, in his “The Great Keinplatz Experiment,” in which the eponymous scientist uses the nascent sciences of mesmerism and hypnosis first to suspend his young assistant then to swap bodies with him – a transference that casts the assistant out of his proper social place and renders his ability to speak and gain justice for himself.

Many of these texts also thematize degeneracy, with the Count Dracula exhibiting hairy palms, The Invisible Man, even prior to his transformation, being an albino, *The Secret Agent's* mentally handicapped character Stevie being referred to as “the degenerate” (46). All share insistently modern settings, something new particularly for the Gothic. This character of up-to-dateness is one of the particular (although not inviolable) constraints of the affect of belatedness, in which the present already seems to have passed and the future is unimaginable or threatening. The present, as in Pamela Thurschwell's concept of “magical thinking,” is a troubled space constantly emerging out of asignifying futurity and as quickly retreating into failed logics, and the affects and states of suspension often seem the only appropriate or possible response.

We arrive at a strange point then, at which, for all the failures of the realist project of suspense, despite it seeming to have been abolished critically and supplanted popularly by sensation fiction, the extensive suspense of the fin de siècle is revealed as fundamentally *realistic*. Extensibility, as a capitalist and affective formation, characterizes not only a state of decodedness, in which a thing is capable of standing, temporarily, for almost anything else, but

also a resemblance – allegorical, mimetic, and sensational – to the lived realities of its public. Suspense, in other words, was highly popular with the writers and readers of the fin de siècle not only because it was free of ideological baggage but because this up-to-date suspense had high utility for describing what was common in what everyone was going through and how everyone felt going through it.

Extensible suspense both emerged with capitalist culture and reflexively gazed back on its lived, affective experiences. It schizophrenically admixed fact and fiction, ideology and affect, public and author. Thus “A Deadly Dilemma,” a work of highly generic fiction, is structured around an antagonistic “express,” which throws the story's various characters into states of suspense and suspension over its inexorable progress, while in the real world a new category of “railway trauma” was emerging from the wreck experiences of a new class of railway commuters, even as publications like *The Strand* were marketed at railway bookstalls to help those same commuters pass the time (Cvetkovich 15). The points of contact between real life and fiction in the fin de siècle were manifold; suspense served as an extensible framework that could be used to understand either and which simultaneously enabled that interpretive fluidity. Dickens's afterward to *Our Mutual Friend* recounts Dickens's own railway trauma; the novel's complete manuscript, and indeed, Dickens himself, were nearly destroyed when his train derailed and was left suspended “nearly turned over a viaduct” (800) near the village of Staplehurst. As Michael Slater recounts the incident in his knowledgeable biography of Dickens,

The flagman who was supposed always to signal any obstruction 1,000 yards in front of it had failed to do this so when the driver saw what was happening he was unable to stop the train in time. It reached the bridge at a speed of between 20 and 30 m.p.h. The engine jumped the rails and the train broke into two parts. The part that included Dickens's carriage stayed on the bridge though his

carriage came to rest hanging over the side with its rear end resting on the field below. Had its rear coupling not broken it would have been dragged down into the water by the carriages behind it. (534-5)

Slater, additionally, notes the presence of Dickens's mistress, Nelly Ternan, on the train and Dickens's anxiousness to keep her name out of the papers. The parallels between this real-life near catastrophe and that of Ughtred Carnegie and Netta Mayne largely speak for themselves: these more-than-coincidences signal to us that in the fin de siècle “a wide variety of seemingly disparate phenomena,” from self-hood to science, were, indeed, deeply connected via the schizophrenic, up-to-date, embodied, in short, *extensible*, technology of narrative suspense.

Unlike degeneration theory, which, with its phrenology, taxidermy, and taxonomies, provided a new ideology and vocabulary of the body – new sciences and logics as knowable structures underlying the problem of cultural decline – extensible suspense largely spoke with and to the body, appealing to emotions and sensations that existed at the limits of capitalist ideology and signification itself. These discursive strata often coexisted in the same work schizophrenically, and Cvetkovich, while tempted to celebrate affect for its seemingly liberatory “political dimension” (23), is ambivalent on this point, noting, “for example,” that “sensationalism might work in a conservative way as a means of naturalizing ideology” (24-5). Thus, the ability of a story like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* to seem at once a morality tale of the degenerating possibilities of science gone awry and a moving portrait equivalent to, say, Irvine Walsh's *Trainspotting* of the belated affective landscape of drug addiction. Ultimately, the revelation of Jekyll and Hyde's history – of their mutual identity – depends on a hastily scribbled testament written by the former and hidden away just before he winks out of existence. Reading this text belatedly, as we must, the task as we find it is not to resolve the two men into one or to

split them finally apart. Those possibilities are closed to us, and unproductive besides. The questions we must ask, rather, are “Who else did they speak to?” and “What did they extend?”

## Chapter 2 – Outrageous Suspense

[...] the more I experience the specialty of my desire, the less I can give it a name; to the precision of the target corresponds a wavering of the name; what is characteristic of desire, proper to desire can produce only an impropriety of the utterance.

– Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*

Given the extensibility of suspense in the fin de siècle – its newfound sensational and expressive power – and the collapse in authorial didacticism that that extensibility entailed, one question we must face is that of authorial agency. Given the evidently meta-textual operation of suspense and its position at the boundaries of language and conscious experience during the fin de siècle, how are we to evaluate the role of the author of suspense during that time with regard to the meaning, publicity, and political ramifications, of his work? Given the collapse of momentousness as a didactic tool entailed in the failure of the realist project of suspense, was the radical author of the fin de siècle constrained to the portrayal of belated affects and abstract feelings of disenchantment to try to effect some sort of political or cultural change?

The late-Victorian debate over the proper role and ideal character of the British novel played itself out in microcosm in the degenerating but always earnest relationship between two of the era's most prominent and politically conscious authors: H.G. Wells and Joseph Conrad. As detailed by Martin Ray, the two men met in 1896 a short while after Wells published a “very mixed” but ultimately “resounding” review of Conrad's second novel, *An Outcast of Islands* (562). “Conrad,” as Ray tells us, “wrote to the anonymous reviewer two days after the review appeared, revealing his deep gratitude for this early recognition. The tone of the letter, which is rather gushing in places, is very much that of the respectful novice addressing the established

man of letters, and this is invariably the tone of the early letters in the friendship” (562). Over the next ten years, the friendship would continue to reflect this younger- and elder-statesman dynamic, with Conrad at times offended by Wells's criticism (Ray 564) but generally ready (as Frederick R. Karl puts it) “to sit at the feet of the master” (1051) and with Wells acting as “self-appointed guardian of Conrad's style” (Ray 565).

However, as both Ray and Karl point out, Conrad and Wells's relationship would be complicated by their increasingly divergent aesthetic, philosophical, and political sensibilities. Karl repeatedly underscores the point that “The paths of the two writers [...] could not be more divided” (1062) as Wells increasingly became concerned with his sociological and political theories and Conrad with the practice of literature for its own sake, with style and aesthetics. Both authors were clearly products of their time, engaged with the pressing cultural questions of the day, but they employed increasingly divergent approaches. As Karl puts it, “Wells was still seeking resolutions, whether through Fabians now, or later through Labor Party and League of Nations, while Conrad was dramatizing his [socio-political] pessimism in fiction which countenanced no resolutions, no improvements, and mocked both idealism and realism” (1062). Their respective world views were increasingly polarized examples of the momentous and the belated, and that polarization was reflected directly in their respective writing practices.

Both Karl and Ray admirably chart the growing tension this divergence created in the authors' relationship. Conrad, in particular, was conflicted; his growing unease with Wells's political (anti-)aesthetics constantly tested his feelings of personal and literary bonhomie with his mentor. Ray remarks that it was likely only Conrad's “genuine admiration for Wells's fictional writing, together with the sense of debt, which made [him] stay his hand when attacking

his non-fiction” (568) and which led him to criticize, when he did, only “tentatively, and usually [...] on tactical or aesthetic grounds rather than political ones” (562). Even more telling on this point are the repeated admissions to Wells by Conrad of being “puzzled,” of “fe[eling] confusedly,” and “see[ing] rather dimly” (Ray 563) his objections, both against Wells's philosophy and Wells's criticisms of Conrad's work. Together, these admissions speak, for an author who “recognized that nerve endings are also a source of knowledge” (Karl 1056) to the restive state of dilemma in which Conrad's incompatible personal and literary relationships with Wells placed him. Very much like Ughtred Carnegie of “A Deadly Dilemma,” standing caught between his personal responsibility to protect his fiancée and his social responsibility not to derail a train full of strangers, Conrad found himself prevaricating between “murder or treachery” (Allen 19), with his own artistic integrity being the “life” at stake. His befuddlement in trying to resolve this dilemma by privately expressing his criticisms to Wells mirror the way that Ughtred “asked himself [...] vaguely, instinctively” (19) the right way out of his predicament. These are affects that accompany the stayed hand of suspense. Ughtred places the telegraph pole on the railway line and removes it again; Conrad, vacillating between loyalty and critique, “gave with one hand and took away with the other” in his public and private responses to Wells (Ray 568).

As much as this dilemma privately stopped Conrad's pen, preventing the overt expression of his differences with Wells, however, it is evident that its attendant feelings of suspense also served him as a creative dynamo. While it isn't historically clear exactly when the two stopped corresponding, both Ray and Karl point to Conrad's dedication of his 1907 novel *The Secret Agent* to Wells as likely to have precipitated the break. The dedication, which seems on the

surface unlikely to offend, reads:

TO  
H. G. WELLS

THE CHRONICLER OF MR. LEWISHAM'S LOVE  
THE BIOGRAPHER OF KIPPS AND THE  
HISTORIAN OF AGES TO COME  
THIS SIMPLE TALE OF THE XIX CENTURY  
IS AFFECTIONATELY OFFERED. (Conrad v)

As Ray points out, Wells had, by 1907, “outlined his vision of a technological and socialist future” (561) and substantially shifted from the writing of fiction to sociological and political non-fiction (562). It is therefore notable that Conrad addresses the “fulsome dedication” of *The Secret Agent* “to the novelist Wells” (568), the writer of *Kipps* and *Love and Mr. Lewisham*, rather than the Wells of *Mankind in the Making* (1903) or *The Future in America* (1906). The dedication elides Wells's nonfictional work and, praising his fiction, implicitly devalues work that, beginning with the hybrid philosophical tract and novel *A Modern Utopia* (1905), would increasingly define Wells as a writer.

Conrad strategically differentiates, in his dedication, between Wells the novelist and “the political Wells” (Ray 568), a differentiation that (as we'll see) is dubious at best. In the process he proposes a third, middling term in his dilemma between adulation and approbation of Wells's complete oeuvre. As with Carnegie's dubious escape from dilemma, in which only “*part* of the pole in falling [rebounds] onto the line” (20; my italics), the reader is left with the sense that some rhetorical sleight of hand has been substituted for a solution; the generic hybridity of *A Modern Utopia*, if nothing else, attests to the difficulty in effecting any simple split between the political and the novelistic in Wells's work. Each seems rather an outgrowth or coefficient of the other.

Unlike Ughtred Carnegie's story, however, which only briefly outlasts its “partial” resolution, Conrad's dedication to Wells precedes an entire novel. As Ray demonstrates, the elision of the political Wells in the dedication of *The Secret Agent* anticipates “implicit criticism [...] within the novel” itself (568), which mounts an attack on “two of Wells's central beliefs: namely, the advancement of science and the socialist utopian future which it would bring about” (568). This attack, in Ray's analysis, is thematic rather than schematic and demonstrative rather than overtly argumentative. He writes at one point that “Conrad's portrayal of his scientific anarchists in *The Secret Agent* parodies Wells's optimism about the merits of disseminating knowledge and research,” and makes a compelling case that Conrad's anarchist scientist The Professor, who is “perfectly willing to share his dynamite and detonators” with anyone who asks, may figure – and quietly satirize – Wells himself (569).

*The Secret Agent* is in this sense the artistic culmination of the dilemmatic and (for Conrad, at least) suspenseful relationship between its author and Wells. For both Karl and Ray, the interpretive key to *The Secret Agent* is, therefore, its contraposition of the novelistic with the political, its substitution of the knowledge of “nerve endings” for that of Wellsian “political enlightenment” (Karl 1056), and its thematic belief that “the unregenerate folly of mankind [...] would frustrate Wells's aggressively optimistic visions of the future” (Ray 567). The question remains, however, given the dubiousness of Conrad's dissociation of these aspects of Wells's work, whether *The Secret Agent*, in turn, can be read as purely novelistic, purely sensational, purely belated. For Ray, *The Secret Agent* was the culmination of Conrad's personal divergence from Wells, and in that sense both “[paid] old debts and settl[ed] old scores” (Ray 560). This argument, which is persuasive, nonetheless only addresses one dyad of the personal and public

dilemma Conrad found himself faced with. Left to consider is the political/public function of *The Secret Agent* and, by extension, its discursive relationship to the politics of Wells's novels. As we will see, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* is anything but what its subtitle makes it out to be.

The eponymous secret agent of Conrad's novel, Adolf Verloc, poses as an anarchist agitator, but is actually employed by an unspecified foreign embassy and mixed up with the police, to boot. A weak man, Verloc wants nothing more than to live in some semblance of middle-class domestic quietude with his wife, Winnie, her invalid mother, and his mentally handicapped brother-in-law, Stevie. An ultimatum from the embassy drives the plot: Verloc will arrange for a dynamite bombing at Greenwich Observatory, with the goal of spurring reactionary legal reform that will deny the political radicals he associates with the safe harbor they have so far enjoyed in England. After years of being left to his own devices, Verloc belatedly realizes that everything he holds dear is dependent on the embassy's good graces; he listens in suspense, with a "stillness of dread which resembled the immobility of profound attention" (30) as the command, one he finds repulsive for both its immorality and its danger, is issued.

When the explosion takes place, it goes terribly awry, as the reader and Verloc both sensed it might. An officer makes inquiries at the Verlocs' shop. Mrs. Verloc, until now worried simply over her missing brother's whereabouts, overhears the officer's account of the crime scene:

They had to gather him up with a shovel. Trembling all over with irrepressible shudders, she saw before her the very implement with its ghastly load scraped up from the ground. Mrs. Verloc closed her eyes desperately, throwing upon that vision the night of her eyelids, where after a rainlike fall of mangled limbs the decapitated head of Stevie lingered, suspended alone, and fading out slowly

like the last star of a pyrotechnic display. (260)

Mr. Verloc, needing a delivery mechanism for his bomb, and desirous of remaining unsuspected himself, chooses Stevie to drop it off at Greenwich. Stevie, confused and distracted as always, trips over a tree root, prematurely detonating the bomb, and destroying himself. An evidentiary scrap of his coat, his name written on it, is all that identifies him.

This early and perverse suicide bombing, eloquently de-sequenced in Winnie Verloc's memory, leaves Stevie's head suspended in mid-air, an icon of the affective and the impossible that, like the "typical [...] degeneracy" (46) of Stevie's compulsive drawings of circles, suggests "cosmic chaos, the symbolism of mad art attempting the inconceivable" (45). Stevie has been thrown into a purely embodied, and cruelly senseless, state of suspension as Mrs. Verloc, in turn, stares on in a suspended state of shock. Adolf Verloc likewise is thrown into a state of suspension by Stevie's death; he dwells in belated horror, anxiety, and guilt at the consequences of his actions. He faces, like Conrad in his disloyally critical feelings towards Wells, the necessity and impossibility of self-revelation; he must, but also cannot, confess himself to his wife.

For the reader, there is likewise no easy way out of this scene. He sympathizes with each of the characters but finds no one of them purely sympathetic. Mr. Verloc is, of course, as sympathetically ambivalent a figure as they come; his pathetic anxiety and inescapable feeling of being "surrounded by pitfalls" (18) are contextualized by the reader's inability to forget what he has, in his weakness and ineptitude, done. Mrs. Verloc, while perhaps negligently oblivious of her husband's profession and that of his associates, is a largely sympathetic figure until, a short time after Verloc finally confesses his role in Stevie's death, she goes "raving mad – murdering

mad” and stabs him (262-3). She stares at “the handle of the domestic carving knife” standing in his chest and notices “the fact that something dripped from it [...] a trickle, dark, swift, thin ... Blood!” (264-5). The reader draws back in repulsion from the violent realism of the murder, which freshly evokes Stevie's gory end, and also from Mrs. Verloc's cool remorselessness. Stevie, otherwise the most likely candidate for the reader's sympathy, is importantly framed by his history of pyromania; Conrad creates a clear symmetry between an incident in which Stevie “was discovered one foggy afternoon, in his chief's absence, busy letting off fireworks on the staircase” of his place of employment, spreading “an awful panic [...] through the whole building” (9) and his bombastic death pictured by Mrs. Verloc as “smashed branches, torn leaves, gravel, bits of brotherly flesh and bone, all spouting up together in the manner of a firework” (260). While Stevie is not directly implicated in his own death, he might, as Verloc at one point contemplates, be “suspected of hiding a fund of reckless naughtiness” (9) very much in the spirit of the bombing, which is constrained only by his limited faculties. Where, then, can the reader's suspended sympathies rest? The reader's dilemma here is not merely bivalent, like that of Ughtred Carnegie in “A Deadly Dilemma,” who must chose between “murder or treachery” (19) but hopelessly layered, conflicted, and anarchic.

As the reader tries to make sense of the text, tries to intuit its moral, *The Secret Agent* schizophrenically decodes his various decision-making frameworks, from nationalism – the government is paying Verloc for his misdeed – to radicalism – Verloc's anarchist colleagues are ineffectual ideologues, adverse to risk of any kind – to, fundamentally, a faith that the events of the public sphere have anything like their purported – or any – meaning. Even the desire to dismiss terrorism or anarchism as simply evil here is thrown radically into doubt: Stevie has no

idea of his mission, and Verloc's desire to protect his domestic space is only too sympathetic to the normative middle-class reader. *The Secret Agent* in fact insists on being contextualized in terms of these ideologies even as it throws them into crisis. As a result, the reader is thrown into a state of interpretive suspension that, like the opening chapter of *Our Mutual Friend*, promises no revelations and foretells no resolution.

*The Secret Agent* is up-to-date in the sense that a newspaper is up-to-date; like a modern True Crime novel, it is based on a true story. Beginning in the 1880s, and continuing through most of the next decade, political radicals used bombs to attack metropolitan targets and public figures in England and Europe with various political goals. Known as “dynamite outrages” or simply “outrages” in the popular press, these attacks, to middle- and upper-class observers, seemed to strike against the very fabric of society. Dynamite, invented by Alfred Nobel in 1863, soon afterward unleashed on the world what Barbara Melchiori has described as a “new and hitherto unprecedented destructive force” which could “be transported with relative ease, though at considerable personal risk” by, in effect, anyone (2). The result, in a London already beset by mass demonstrations for social reform, was a very real fear of “a reversal of the situation” (10) on the part of middle- and upper-class observers. The balance of power was, it seemed, now with the masses, whether as a class or as individuals, rather than with the state, and revolution or even anarchy seemed very real possibilities. Suspenseful, anxious watchfulness seemed the only available response. Ample journalistic coverage in that vein soon gave rise to a new genre of dynamite or terrorism fiction, traced admirably by Melchiori. As she details it, the dynamite genre was notably fluid – we would say extensible – in its boundaries, seeming at times to confuse the distinction between trope and genre, between art and exploitation. Notable works

identified by Melchiori in the dynamite canon include James's *Princes Casamassima* and Robert Louis Stevenson and Fanny Van de Grift's *The Dynamiter*.

The most self-aware, commercially successful, and famous, example of the dynamite genre, however, certainly is *The Secret Agent*, which was published about a decade after the last of the explosions (Melchiori 74). As Melchiori details, *The Secret Agent* realistically adopts the real-life attempted bombing of Greenwich Observatory in 1894 in many of its particulars (52). For Conrad, the significance of Greenwich bombing was its inscrutability as a political act. As he says in his 1920 author's note, “the attempt to blow up Greenwich Observatory [was] a blood-stained inanity of so fatuous a kind that it was impossible to fathom its origin by any reasonable process of thought. For perverse unreason has its own logical processes. But that outrage could not be laid hold of mentally in any sort of way” (x). Thus, we see that Conrad's professed feelings about the actual bombing and the structures of suspense he employed in writing his novel about it mirror one another; suspense in *The Secret Agent* is a cognitive map, in that sense, of its author's and its public's ambivalence to the event. Its suspensefulness is doubly significant in that that ambivalence seems unresolved – in a state of suspension – so long after the dust must have settled at the real-life blast site. Even a decade later, Stevie's head had not hit the ground.

*The Secret Agent*, then, in addition to playing out the dilemmatic personal relationship between Conrad and Wells, is also a profoundly public book; it is enmeshed deeply in the calls and responses of the public sphere. But, as Ann Cvetkovich asks of sensationalism (also implicated in the novel's gory scenes), what is the “political dimension” (23) of this type of epistemological suspense and “what political possibilities are overlooked” (24) when it is contained as merely generic or stylistic? Or, to put it another way, how did *The Secret Agent's*

suspenseful affect impact the public sphere? If it is responding to some prior call, what kind of response is it giving? And if it in turn voices some call, what does it call for? Martin Ray remarks, in passing, on the similarity between the “abuse[s] of science” carried out by the real-life Greenwich Observatory dynamitard, by Conrad's Professor, and by Wells's Invisible Man (570). Following his lead, I'll turn now to Wells and his sensational-realist novel of 1897 in order to illuminate both the publicly discursive function of *The Secret Agent* and its author's dilemmatic relationship to Wells.

There is a strange disjunction between Wells's expressed revolutionary intent in writing *The Invisible Man* and its critical and popular reception; something essential about Wells's work seems to be left unsaid, in suspension. While, as Russell Stover demonstrates, Wells's fiction was constitutionally antagonistic to the dominant social order (including capitalism, democracy, and the state generally), it met with a rather genial reception in the popular press and was often treated as exemplary of the British production of authorial prowess rather than as a provocation. Coinciding with the strangeness of this disjunction is the strangeness of *The Invisible Man* in particular. First, it is strange that, given Wells's apparently didactic artistic intent, he crafted such an ambivalent narrative for his protagonist. While Stover has convincingly and thoroughly demonstrated that the invisible Griffin is not merely a criminal but a “holy terror” and a revolutionary (25), the specifics of his presumably Wellsian political platform remain well hidden. Second, we encounter the text as strangely schizo-generic, that is, as oscillating between romance/satire and realism/tragedy, and in the process becoming both and also neither of them. Here, I investigate these two fissures, that between Wells's politics and the reception of his work and that between the novel's generic strata, as zones of asignifying rupture in the text. I draw

them into proximity with the political terrorism of the 1880s and 1890s in order to propose a complex, generative circuit of commodified literary publicity and socio-political transformation in the Victorian fin de siècle.

Stover places particular emphasis on Wells's credentials as a socialist and by extension on his uniquely anti-humanist brand of politics. In the Saint-Simonian mold, Wells espoused a totalitarian socialism, whose “idolized state comprises a 'directive elite' who will deliver necessary 'coercive services’” (Stover 4; quoting Wells) if, as Wells put it, “society is to be saved” (Stover 5). In championing this coming world-state, “he stood up for a rival [anti-Marxist] doctrine undemocratic and non-communal, one that asserted, 'The corner-stone of socialism is the great principle of the merging of the individual in the State’” (Stover 4; quoting Wells). Wells described himself as, literally, a propagandist for this coming socialist unification, and intended, therefore, for his “scientific romances,” among them *The Invisible Man*, *The War of the Worlds*, and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, to be read as “more serious means 'to discuss sociology in fable’” (Stover 2; quoting Wells) rather than as purely fantastical or speculative.

Given Wells's own categorization of his work as revolutionary propaganda, one expects to encounter a reactionary sentiment to it in the popular press of the day. Intriguingly, one finds instead that, at every turn, the politics of *The Invisible Man* were rendered invisible. A review in *The Athenaeum* opined that “As a literary *tour de force* the book has considerable merit; but it does not become interesting or attractive at any point” (416). A reviewer for *The Academy* compared the novel favorably to the lighthearted “The Perils of Invisibility” in W. S. Gilbert's *Bab Ballads*, going on to remark that “Given such an accomplishment as invisibility, there is no one capable of working it out with more ingenuity and humour than Mr. Wells” (219). In both

cases, the political potency of *The Invisible Man* was contained through the application of politically neutral terms like “interesting,” “ingenuity and humour,” and “clever.” The even more telling review in *The Bookman* briefly considers Wells's views on science, only to conclude that “to write all this is perhaps to treat the matter too seriously. The story, which is bound to be popular, has not a suspicion of preaching about it, and in a quite unpretentious way will help to pass an amusing hour or so. I have not been so fascinated by a new book for many a day” (19-20). These pieces consistently frame *The Invisible Man* as merely fantastical, as merely romantic. They elide its realism and therefore, given Wells's remarks, its import to reality.

In order to properly understand these comments, however, we must understand who is writing them: namely, the professional constituents of an exploding print industry. As Margaret D. Stetz documents, the professionalization of the author corresponded, during the mid- to late-Victorian era, with the rise of mechanized mass publication (113-114). The professionalization of authorship was contemporaneous with both an increase in demand for its services, as the rate of publication increased exponentially, and its reformulation as publicity. Michael Warner elucidates this latter claim when he writes that “As the subjects of publicity – its hearers, speakers, viewers, and doers – we have a different relation to ourselves, a different affect, from that which we have in other contexts. We adopt the attitude of the public subject, marking to ourselves its nonidentity with ourselves” (160). The rapid expansion of the print industry necessitated the induction of authorship as a nationally legible rôle into the public sphere, expanding the potential work force. In consequence, many writers no longer wrote as “themselves,” as Dickens did, for instance, using his very personalized “Bozian” public persona. They wrote, rather, as “authors,” performing an industrially standardized and, therefore,

universally accessible role. This newfound accessibility of authorship in turn made it, furthermore, marketable as a commodity. Authorship was retailed on the mass market in “countless” publications such as *The Bookman*, “which gave both encouragement and practical advice to those seeking a foothold in the literary world” (Stetz 123).

The rapid growth and fresh commercial extensibility of print and authorship in turn, as Stetz observes, “both generated and bolstered other industries, particularly advertising and public relations, in order to reach a mass market with its goods” (128). In the interface between authorship and the mass market existed a circuit of exchange in which authorship exhibited a becoming-commercial and the commercial, in its advertising and other texts, a becoming-literary. As Jürgen Habermas describes it, this process was not only commercial but cultural, a transformation of the public sphere constituted by “the transition from the literary journalism of private individuals to the public services of the mass media” (53).

Consequentially, Stetz notes, “At the end of the century, the overlap between so-called serious writers, including those who considered themselves Aesthetes and Decadents, and the contributors to the 'popular weekly' form whose work appeared in mass-market periodicals that relied upon mass production was enormous” (117). The expanding mass market constructed the print industry by decoding individualist authorship and leaving as its remnants (often anonymous) mass authorship.

A similar and complexly interrelated circuit was established at the level of the text, between commercial and literary genres of expression. Advertisements for *The Invisible Man* appeared, among other places, in *The Athenaeum* and *The Academy*, in September 1897 (cf. Illustration 2). Run by publisher C. Arthur Pearson, the advertisements supported the release of

the novel as a single volume, following its two-installment publication in *Pearson's Weekly* the preceding summer (Stover 1). Both versions of the advertisement include an identical teaser blurb, and the *Athenaeum* version, in a formula familiar from the back of today's mass market paperback, also includes excerpts of reviews that had appeared in other publications.

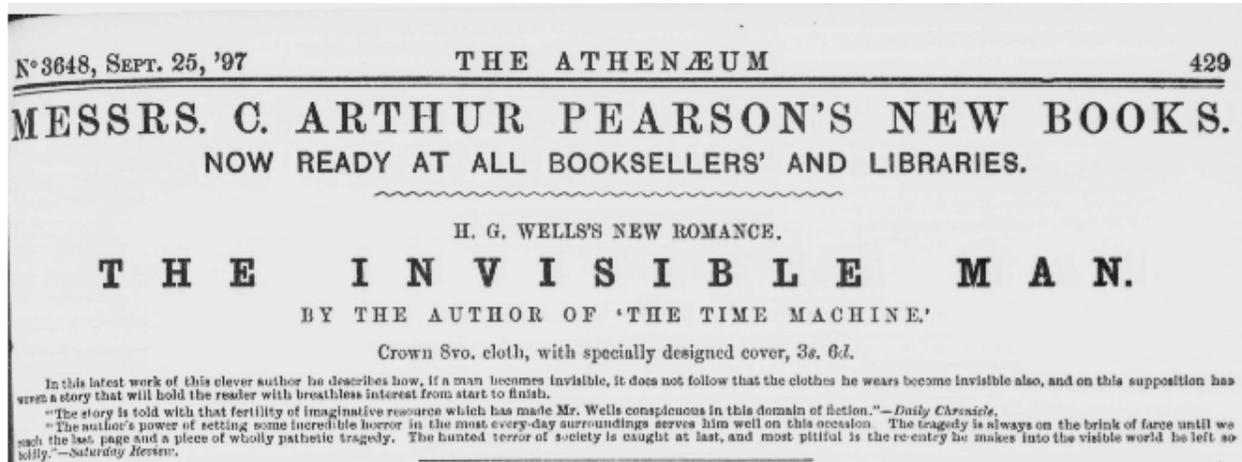


Illustration 2: The Pearson's advertisement as it appeared in the *Athenaeum*.

The advertisement constructs a tripartite assemblage of authorial celebrity, promised bodily/affective reader response, and societal relevance. The *Pearson's* blurb and *Daily Chronicle* and *Saturday Review* excerpts which it includes each emphasize Wells's prowess as an author, hailing his cleverness (*Pearson's*), “fertility of imaginative resource” (*Daily Chronicle*) and “power” (*Saturday Review*), in turn. Indeed, the sub-heading that appears immediately after the book's title, “BY THE AUTHOR OF THE TIME MACHINE,” clarifies from the start that this is a discussion as much of the author's credentials and star power as of the novel itself. Wells is commodified here as much as his work.

The *Pearson's* blurb and *Saturday Review* excerpt both deploy equivalent strategies in their juxtaposition of authorial credentials with a promised affective response by the reader.

*Pearson's* straightforwardly promises that Wells “has woven a story that will hold the reader with breathless interest from start to finish.” The *Saturday Review* excerpt disperses credential and response throughout its description, alternating between “the author's power,” “incredible horror,” “serves him well” and “wholly pathetic tragedy,” to similar effect. Each constructs the novel as a vehicle for a universally accessible suite of affective responses inscribed by the author-as-producer on the reader-as-consumer. This character of universality is further hailed in the *Saturday Review* and *Daily Chronicle* excerpts through their concern with the relation between *The Invisible Man* as an artistic work and society at large. *The Daily Chronicle's* description of Wells as “conspicuous in this domain of fiction” and *The Saturday Review's* references to “every-day surroundings” and most explicitly to the Invisible Man as “The hunted terror of society” place novel, review, and readership within a shared national discourse. There is apparently no disjunction here and no suspension: to have written, published, or read Wells's novel is of a piece with nationalistic and artistic propriety both, and speaks to a certain well-adjusted civic engagement. What titillation or excitement the advertisement promises amounts only to good, clean fun.

Habermas situates the genesis of the public sphere in a reformation of state power on the foundation of the “permanence of the relationships which with the stock exchange and press had developed with the exchange of commodities and information” (51). In light of his account, we see C. Arthur Pearson's advertisement as a pastiche bringing together both the generic mode of literary review and literary reviews themselves to engage a commodified and nationalized publicity of the novel. This publicity is echoed rather than resisted by literary reviews of *The Invisible Man* that were not drawn on for advertising purposes. In the *Athenaeum* review

referenced above, which appeared in the same issue as the Pearson advertisement, the nationalized rhetoric and preoccupations of the latter are reiterated:

Mr. Wells correctly speaks of this volume as a grotesque romance. Halfway through the book we are told that the invisible man is Mr. Griffin, a medical student of University College, who by strictly scientific methods has succeeded in rendering himself invisible. His clothes he cannot deal with in the same manner, and the story tells how many and various are the complications that follow. As a literary *tour de force* the book has considerable merit; but it does not become interesting or attractive at any point. The writer's skill in depicting the conduct of the inhabitants of a village in which the invisible man endeavors to reside in peace is hardly equal to the occasion.

The reviewer's criticism of Wells's depiction of the villagers and consideration of the novel's "merit" as "a literary *tour de force*" function equivalently (if less positively) to the references from *The Saturday Review* to "every-day surroundings" and from *The Daily Chronicle* to "this domain of fiction." The structural movement from plot summary to qualitative evaluation is shared by both review and advertisement, as the advertisement summarizes the novel and then draws on external sources for adjudication. These similarities are symptomatic of the fact that advertisements and literary reviews, as well as those who wrote them, operated within the greater economy of the print industry. As genres, advertisements and reviews tended to be in that regard ideologically consilient, being formulated to maximize audience for mass market media from the weekly magazine itself to the novel.

For Warner "the contexts for commodities and politics share the same media and, at least in part, the same metalanguage for constructing our notion of what a public or a people is. [They form] a common discourse of the subject's relation to the nation and its markets" (170). It's in this manner that, without any conscious consideration or deliberate elision of any supposed

political agenda, these reviews and advertisements can effect a strategic political neutralization of Wells's novel. The commodification of the work entails its political curtailment in the public sphere. To illustrate this point, it will be helpful to examine the preoccupation of the texts with the Invisible Man's nudity. Griffin, in order to remain undetected after his transformation, spends the majority of the novel unclothed, and each review and advertisement adopts its own strategy for dealing with the question. The Pearson advertisement, perhaps seeking to defuse from the outset any chance of moral outrage at a book centered on a nude criminal, frames the nudity as only a logical consequence of the author's postulation of invisibility, using the rationalist idiom "it does not follow" to divorce the author of agency on the question of clothing for his protagonist, and by extension of the text of obscenity. The *Athenaeum* review adopts an equivalent strategy, first appending the oddly extraneous modifier "strictly" to "scientific" when describing the Invisible Man's methods of becoming so, and then stating bluntly that "His clothes he cannot deal with in the same manner." By implication, Wells would have loved to have put trousers on Griffin, but it was simply scientifically out of the question. For the *Academy* reviewer, the nudity is more a matter of good fun than necessity; it is part of a known literary tradition, and therefore harmless. Given that Griffin, unlike Gilbert's jolly and corpulent protagonist Old Peter, suffers constantly from exposure, hunger, and ostracism, as a result of his invisibility, bemusement does not seem to be Wells's goal.

Likewise, the practical consequences of Griffin's change vary extremely from Old Peter's. Peter, whose problems amount to the theft of "His only pair of – never mind!" – his pants – by Old Mrs. Peter, in consequence must "pace the mortal earth,/to bring himself to decent girth" and fit into the stock commonly available. Griffin, on the other hand, suffers a total expulsion from

society that leads in the end to his violent death. Indeed, in charting the consequences of Griffin's transformation, Wells is not merely scientific, as the reviews seem to imply, but often grotesquely so, describing Griffin's difficulties with a precision that often seems cruel. In doing so Wells belies the sense of constrained authorial agency on which *The Athenaeum* and other depoliticizing reviews rely. This precision is in full force from the moment Griffin first leaves the scene of his transformation: "In going downstairs for the first time I found an unexpected difficulty because I could not see my feet; indeed I stumbled twice, and there was an unaccustomed clumsiness in gripping the bolt," Griffin recounts, continuing, "By not looking down, however, I managed to walk on the level passably well." This triumph is short lived, however, as "hardly had I emerged upon Great Portland Street [...] when I heard a clashing concussion and was hit violently behind, and turning saw a man carrying a basket" (151-2). This pattern of realistic bodily discomfort/violence intermediated by disarming and fleeting moments of triumph is to be repeated throughout the novel. Fleeing a mob a short passage later, Griffin becomes aware of the fundamental vulnerability that burdens him in exchange for his newfound anonymity: he is cold. He is trembling with fear of his vulnerability to the mob, but

not only trembling, shivering. It was a bright day in January and I was stark naked and the thin slime of mud that covered the road was freezing. [...] And so, shivering, scared, and sniffing with the first intimations of a cold[, my] mood was as different from that in which I had sallied forth ten minutes ago as it is possible to imagine. *This* invisibility indeed! The one thought that possessed me was – how I was to get out of the scrape I was in. (152-3)

Griffin has gone through quite a come-down after only a page and a half, and it is precisely this come-down, with its dual action of expulsion from romantic invulnerability into realistic exposure and from social impunity into dilemmatic criminality that was so often elided in the

popular press.

To understand why, we need to examine the defining aspect of Griffin's character: his antisocial affect. Notably, Griffin first becomes invisible as an exigency to avoid arrest. He has been performing invisibility experiments on a pet cat, whose cries have led the authorities to mistake Griffin for a vivisectionist – that most up-to-date of criminals. After being served a “notice of ejection” from his living quarters as a result of the suspicion, Griffin, in a fit of strichnine-induced rage (“a grand tonic [...] to take the flabbiness out of a man,” he terms it), takes the invisibility treatment himself and then burns the building to the ground (142-3). These actions demonstrate that it is his anti-societal affect that leads Griffin toward invisibility, rather than the other way around. Moreover, while Griffin is perhaps unjustly expelled from society (he is not in fact a vivisectionist), the primary cause of the mob's antagonism toward him is not fundamentally baseless. That the invisible cat “miaowed dismally” (142) is, after all, a consequence of Griffin's medical experimentation and a testament to its cruelty; Griffin, who at one point boasts of his “loss of sympathy” (140), solves the problem of the cat's noise expediently, by chloroforming it and turning it out on the street (142-3). The specific cause, but not the significance of the cat's cries, is mistaken by society. Thus, Griffin's invisibility, within the context of the novel, rather than being rooted in a purely scientific “supposition,” as *The Academy* would have it, is inextricable from his failures of conformity and empathy – and their attendant emotional states. Wells's novel is clearly interested in more than the purely speculative project described in the reviews.

To that end, Wells tries to inspire conflicting sympathies in his reader; he encrypts his antagonistic politics as affective suspension. Throughout the text, Griffin's first person narrative

and realistic physical vulnerability draw readerly sympathy to him while his increasingly sociopathic violence draws it instead to his victims. Griffin's violent collision with the basket-carrying man is typical:

Although the blow had really hurt me, I found something so irresistible in his astonishment that I laughed aloud. 'The devil's in the basket,' I said, and suddenly twisted it out of his hand. He let go incontinently, and I swung the whole weight into the air. But a fool of a cabman, standing outside a public house, made a sudden rush for this, and his extending fingers took me with excruciating violence under the ear. (152)

The phrases “the blow had really hurt me” and “his extending fingers took me with excruciating violence under the ear” might well, in their matter-of-fact and first-person portrayal of pain, have been registered on the reader's own body; they are both sensational and realistic despite their fantastical circumstances. In a related oscillation to that between romance and realism in the work, however, the reader's identification with Griffin is undercut by and in turn undercuts his cruelty. Griffin's anecdote moves smoothly from his being “really hurt” to his toying with the hapless pedestrian and unpleasant bitterness towards the cabman to his being, in turn, subject to disproportionate “excruciating violence.” In this passage, as in the whole novel, the reader is drawn into a plot in which who one is meant to root for is far from clear: does one prefer the violent criminal or the cruel society that hunts him?

For Stover, this question has broader implications for our understanding of novel. “*The Invisible Man*,” he writes, “may be regarded as a 'condition of England novel,' a genre that got started in the 1840s [...] it focused mainly on laissez-faire policies that 'were driving the ranks of society further apart and could easily foment revolution'” (Stover 32; quoting Jan Ousby). Thus, the society that Griffin is expelled from stands for actual British society, and Griffin conversely

comes to represent an anti-societal element or idea. As Stover points out, “Wells also plays on the Victorian novel of terrorism [...] whose focus is on the fear of revolution intimated in the condition-of-England genre.” *The Invisible Man*, in other words, is certainly social criticism, and, like that enacted by Stevie's destruction in *The Secret Agent*, it is of a specifically visceral sort. Although obfuscated slightly by its fantastical specifics, the scientific threat to society posed by Griffin is, both generically and through its affective employment of extensible suspense, an up-to-date dramatization of outrageous and dilemmatic anxieties. The violence inflicted on the *Invisible Man*'s bodies is realistic because it dramatizes violence that was really feared.

Given the fears of social revolution contemporaneous with *The Invisible Man*'s publication, its popular reception begins to look even more inexplicable. As Melchiori notes, “the press of the Establishment did much to foster this fear” (10) in other contexts. Although various distinct groups, including socialists, anarchists, and especially Irish nationalists, were responsible for the outrages, there was widespread conflation of these groups in the popular press. More often than not the perpetrators were glossed merely as anarchists, motivated by nothing less than the destruction of society (9). The result was that every new blast, regardless of its intended message, reinforced the feeling among the Victorian public “that they were being plotted against, that their lives were at risk, their values at stake and their property in imminent danger of confiscation or destruction” (9). This was certainly a reactionary publicity in the sense that it reified the existing class-based power structures and provided political will and justification for greater surveillance (Melchiori 1), including of unrelated mass demonstrations for social equality. “Much of the press attempted to establish links between terrorism and these

movements of spontaneous social protest against unemployment and decreasing wages,” Melchiori writes, “and the stones thrown through the windows of London clubs” came to be seen “as so many dynamite bombs *in nuce*” (52). Thus even civic-minded socialism was dismissed as unreasoning anarchism and barred as legitimate political expression from the public forum.

However, even as the press enabled the containment of myriad political threats to the state by consolidating them, it ensured broader distribution of their political sentiments, if not their specific positions, and in that way vastly increased their political potency. By divesting the individual attacks of their ideological specificity, the late Victorian press created the affective non-categories of the “dynamitard” and the “outrage” which recast the bombing as a totally irrational, and therefore anti-ideological, expression. Socialist, anarchist, and Irish nationalist bombings alike were decoded into commercially viable textual expression in the shared genre of outrage. The outrage industry provided guaranteed coverage and readership, if at the cost of ideological and political nuance.

Jasbir Puar traces an equivalent, and perhaps descendant, mechanism in the publicity of modern suicide bombing. For Puar, the exploding body transcends the political in that it attacks the ideological at its foundation: the subject. Both in the physical expression of the bombing (bodies, explosives, and surroundings commingled) and its transcendence of ideologically imposed boundaries on the nature of speech, the suicide bombing draws political potency from its refusal to “transcend or claim the rational nor accept the demarcation of the irrational” (Puar 218). “I rearticulate terrorist bodies,” Puar writes, “in particular the suicide bomber, as an assemblage [...]. This foregrounding of assemblage enables attention to ontology in tandem with epistemology, affect in conjunction with representational economies, within which bodies

interpenetrate, swirl together, and transmit affects and effects to each other” (205). Puar names this quality queerness, but in doing so refers to a queerness “that resists queerness-as-sexual-identity [...]. Queerness as an assemblage moves away from excavation work, deprivileges a binary between queer and not-queer subjects, and, instead of retaining queerness exclusively as dissenting, resistant, and alternative (all of which queerness importantly is and does), it underscores contingency and complicity with dominant formations” (205). Thus, the suicide bombing, in its anti-ideological apoliticality and mass publicity, is a genre of speech-act that gives voice to a generalized “queerness coming forth at us from all directions, screaming its defiance” (211) even as it likely is embedded in various reactionary nationalistic discourses; the terroristic or fundamentalist intention that often lies behind the suicide bombing coexists schizophrenically with the asignification of the explosion itself. Crucially, as indicated by the pronoun “us” in Puar's formulation, that defiance is not to be understood as somehow exterior to the public sphere. By virtue of its induction into the mass media, the modern suicide bombing must be understood as already having been brought past the gates. The explosive body in this sense is not a personal one but a mass public “prosthetic” that “takes abuse for the private person” (Warner 164). As a publicity, then, the suicide bombing always already is commodified (U.S. newscasts do not show dismembered bodies), but its anti-ideological defiance remains intact: its defiance pushes the capitalistic public sphere dangerously close to its schizophrenic limit.

My argument is that the dynamite outrages of the British *fin de siècle*, as predecessors of the modern suicide bombings Puar refers to, functioned in more or less the same way. As a queer assemblage, the outrage bombarded the Victorian bourgeois public sphere with the

schizophrenically anti-ideological. The dual action of containment and mass distribution that entailed the outrage wrapped up each dynamite bombing as a signifying rupture waiting to explode in the public's face.

From another vantage point, the textualization of the political bombing was enabled by and exemplary of the professionalization of authorship. The newfound legibility of the bombing enabled its transcription into literary/commercial circuit of exchange described earlier. Melchiori traces the heavy dependence of the emergent terrorism novel on journalistic sources for the details that would create its mimetic effect. The “journalists [...] were the medium through which the findings of the police investigators were filtered [...] to the novelists” although Victorian journalists' ability or willingness to stay faithful to their sources often seems questionable in retrospect (15).

Thus, while Conrad certainly is interested in exploring, in *The Secret Agent*, the “perverse unreason” of the Greenwich bombing, his novel is not, in any simple way, merely mimetic of a real-world event. The Greenwich bombing, aside from having been, like any other outrage, mediated by its coverage in the press, was also itself mimetic of the journalistic collapse of radical political act into unintelligible outrage. This was not merely a case of the press divesting an action of its political message but an act being committed apparently without a discernible political message in the first place. Its selection of an apolitical target (time?) at least strongly indicates the fluency of its author in the apolitical publicity of the outrage. When this point is paired with the thematically ironic conflation of politics and terrorism in Conrad's novel we see that another circuit had been established in which the bombing underwent a becoming-literary and the dynamite novel a becoming-outrageous. As with the much fretted-over publicity

of contemporary reality television, lived reality and its commercialized portrayal had become inextricably mixed up in one another.

If, at a distance of two decades from “the year of the dynamitards, 1884-5” (Melchiori 12), Conrad's work represented to some degree the culmination of this becoming-outrageous of the novel, Wells's work, sitting at the periphery of the genre, represent it at its most ingenuous. Unlike *The Secret Agent's* network of bumbling ideologues, spies, and diplomats, Wells's anti-hero passes beyond the merely criminal and into the revolutionary. His crimes, along with his derision toward society and his physical suffering, escalate rapidly through the novel, as the oscillation between romantic impunity and realistic cruelty becomes ever more extreme and threatens to shake itself apart. By the time we reach what Stover calls the novel's “tragic” (79) and “bloody-minded” (102) second half, Griffin has moved from petty theft and expeditious murder to a full fledged plan for revolutionary insurrection. In fact, Wells goes to some effort to establish the movement as a steady, rational continuum. “[W]eary, cold, wretched, and still but half convinced of my invisible quality,” recounts Griffin, midway through this conversion, “I began this new life to which I am committed” (158). As Stover notes, this is the moment he takes his first step as consciously outside of society and against it; it immediately precedes his cold-blooded murder of a (notably, capitalist) emporium owner. Here, again, the reader is carried along by sympathy for Griffin's physical plight (“with the beginnings of a snowstorm in the air about me – and if it settled on me it would betray me!”), to accompany him in his repugnantly antisocial adventures.

Before long, Griffin lays out before the horrified reader the ultimate expression of this escalation. He has been discovered, his existence and crimes publicized, and he is now

universally reviled and hunted. Trying to enlist Dr. Kemp, his suspensefully captive/captivated former schoolmate, he says,

“And it is killing we must do, Kemp.”

“It is killing we must do,” repeated Kemp. “I’m listening to your plan, Griffin, but I’m not agreeing, mind. *Why* killing?”

“Not wanton killing, but a judicious slaying. The point is, they know there is an Invisible Man. And that Invisible Man, Kemp, must now establish a Reign of Terror. Yes – no doubt it’s startling. But I mean it. A Reign of Terror. He must take some town like your Burdock and terrify and dominate it. He must issue orders. He can do that in a thousand ways – scraps of paper thrust under doors would suffice. And all who disobey his orders he must kill, and kill all who would defend them.” (176)

The Victorian reader, if he has followed Griffin this far, is now likely to experience abrupt disidentification. In any case, this passage and its fallout over the remainder of the novel clearly invoke middle- and upper-class fears of terrorism and revolution and, to that end, also directly reference the horrors of the French Revolution a century earlier. But Wells has constructed a much more up-to-date bogeyman than that. The sudden visibility of Griffin’s becoming-terrorist simultaneously makes visible a circuit of exchange between *The Invisible Man* as a commercial and literary work and what I’ve termed the outrage industry. In doing so, it places the reader in much the same position as Conrad with regard to Wells’s politics: he, and Kemp also, are suspended intolerably between “murder and treachery.”

Griffin’s instability and “loss of sympathy” as well as his acute intelligence, are suddenly recast in this scene as the traits of a terrorist, much akin to Conrad’s cerebral dynamitard The Professor or even Stevenson and Van de Grift’s ineffectual Zero. But more important to the current discussion is the concomitant reordering of his invisibility as such a terroristic trait. The Invisible Man’s bold plan for a single-handed revolution seems suddenly more viable when one

considers the (unwanted) publicity he has already garnered. Mid-way through his adventures, Griffin has taken the hapless Mr. Marvel as a sort of servant, holding him (suspensefully) captive through fear. Griffin and Marvel arrive in the small town of Port Stowe following a vengeful raid on another town, and encounter a mariner reading a newspaper. “There's some extraordinary things in books,” the mariner tells Marvel, “And some extra-ordinary things out of 'em [...]. There's some extraordinary things in newspapers, for example [sic]” (107). As it happens, the newspaper the mariner holds has “a story about an Invisible Man, for instance,” which recounts fairly accurately the pair's exploits. This is, for a Griffin who still hopes to remain unknown, an unnerving turn of events. But it is for the mariner also: “It makes me regular uncomfortable, the bare thought of that chap running about the country! He's at present At Large.” That characteristic of at-largeness, of the Invisible Man's potential to crop up anywhere at any time, is reminiscent of the seeming omnipresence of the anarchist threat proliferated through the publicity of the outrage, not only in character, but in mechanism. Griffin is corporeally invisible, but omnipresent only textually, that is, in his publicity. His non-registration on the senses and the mass publicity of that characteristic combine to form a technology of omnipresence reminiscent of Foucault's panopticon. Thus, the “scraps of paper thrust under doors” that Griffin suggests using in his Reign of Terror represent his conscious appropriation of that technology as a means to power.

Notably, although Griffin's plan apparently includes being able to issue explicit directives at will directly to the public, the nature of those directives remains unstated in the text. Rather, his will to power remains abstract and his ideology totally unformulated. For all of Stover's hard work, demonstrating ways in which Wells's story is *not* about a mad scientist (51), *not* merely a

portrait of evil or insanity (42), and *not* a cautionary morality tale (48), the very need of making those points explicit, given Wells's very pointed political goals, initially seems very strange. But in context of the becoming-outrage of the dynamite novel and the mass publicity of the outrage, all becomes clear.

In an equivalent way to the publicity of the dynamite outrages themselves, *The Invisible Man's* efficacy as a mass media event is predicated precisely on its commercial extensibility and, therefore, its public divestment of ideological particulars. Beginning with the raw material of the political bombing, the popular press collapsed multiple radical political goals under the single heading of anarchism and, thereby, enabled their manifold proliferation as the asignifying outrage, giving rise to a particular paranoid belief in the potency of the anti-ideological and the anti-state. Investigators prepared their findings for the consumption of journalists, who in turn made that content suitable for the market. Simultaneously, enabled by the circuit of exchange between the literary and the newsworthy, the mass media technology of the dynamite fiction genre provided a forum for fictional expression of anti-state scenarios and sentiments, albeit devoid of ideological particulars, reinforcing the omnipresence of the outrage and even allowing the reader vicarious participation. Writers of fiction used the genre to prepare their ideas for the reviewers and advertisers, who in turn performed an equivalent role to the press. “[R]eading novels of the 1880s and 1890s,” Melchiori notes, “we get the impression of a whole network of anarchist activity in England and particularly in London” (74). That impression constituted the becoming-outrageous of the novel.

Griffin's plan for a reign of terror, in turn, is not a consequence of his invisibility, nor is his invisibility merely a “supposition” on the part of Wells. Rather, both merge as a portrait and

performance of the publicity of the outrage. In consequence, the political effacements performed by *The Invisible Man's* advertisements and reviewers begin to look substantially more nefarious. Indeed, Wells's position as an eminent writer in his own time and, therefore, his ability to reach millions as a revolutionary propagandist, seem to have been predicated precisely on the political neutralization of his work by the mass media. Like the publicity of the dynamite outrage, that neutralization performed a double movement: it at once publicly neutralized the threat of Wells's work to the state, thereby making it appropriate for mass consumption, and made the mass distribution of the materially unamended text and its message commercially viable. The political neutralization performed by the reviews and advertisements for *The Invisible Man* was both reactionary against and an alibi for its radicalism.

While the public sphere understands itself as a forum of rational discussion, as Warner demonstrates, it is not, in fact, comprised “simply [of] people making public use of their reason” (143). “What disappears in this view of the politics of prose,” he writes, “is the mediation of publics; genres; modes of address; the circulation of cultural forms; ways of reading, including affect; and the social imaginaries that are the background of literate practice” (142). Or, as Deleuze and Guattari might say it, the public sphere is an assemblage, with one side facing the ideological, territorializing strata and the other, appropriately enough, the asignifying rupture of the Body without Organs. In this rubric, *The Invisible Man* is an assemblage, its self-imposed generic apoliticism working with the public sphere and its oscillating generic schizophrenia deterritorializing the world, “if it is capable, if it can” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 10).

As with the 1894 bombing at Greenwich Observatory, which appropriated the established

genre of outrage so successfully (although its explosive failed), *The Invisible Man* seems to have required only mass distribution for induction into the public consciousness. *Pearson's Weekly*, in which *The Invisible Man* first appeared in two volumes, seems to have been the ideal forum. It was “characterized by its aim of allowing readers 'to keep their eyes busy while their brains took a rest',” during their twice-daily commute by rail (Stover 117, quoting Richard Altick). It seems that with the new ascendancy of print as industry, and its coefficient roles of professional author and dynamitard, there emerged as well a particular performance of readership. Given the publication of a book like Wells's, readership must have involved a rendering-invisible of the anti-ideological, perhaps as active as that performed by the reviewers. However, as indicated by Altick's image of the resting brain, this rendering took place through a performance of receptivity to the anti-political ministrations of the print industry. The reader was the true central exchange through which each of the circuits and becomings outlined in this essay played, and, as a reading passenger does, he had only to remain attentive, and still. These, then, were the politics of fin de siècle suspense. In the undercurrents of the schizophrenic text lurked an ideological limbo where “motionless being” (Conrad 7) and “the abyss of meditation” (Conrad 53) became political, dissolution of the body became radical, and the commodity became a weapon.

Returning to Conrad and Wells's dilemmatic relationship, there are two important observations left to make. The first, simply enough, is that if *The Secret Agent* and its dedication were the culmination of the personal divergence between the two authors, they were at least equally the latest installment in a much larger public discourse on science, dynamite, and anarchy (among other things), to which both men were important contributors and which

extensibly boundary-crossed between the real and the fictive, the novelistic and the political. In that sense, *The Secret Agent* owed a debt to *The Invisible Man* equivalent to, but also distinct from, that owed by Conrad to Wells. Second, and even more important, though, is the implication that the two dyads in the dilemma Conrad experienced in relation to Wells – the personal and the public – were not dyadic at all, but deeply enmeshed in one another, in precisely the same sense that the outrage industry enmeshed the real, the journalistic and the fictional. If the ambivalence and suspensefulness of *The Secret Agent* are cognitive maps of the ambivalent and suspenseful late-Victorian relationship to science, politics, and the “foundation of the *status quo*” generally (Ray 570), they are equally and simultaneously maps of the suspenseful personal relationship between its writer, his mentor, and the world. That relationship, as with the relationship between the explosion of a dynamite outrage and the outrageous publicity of a dynamite novel, is not merely metonymic. Rather, the ability of the Verlocs and their tragedy to simultaneously figure both Conrad's conflicted emotions toward the past, present, and future of his relationship with Wells and the public's conflicted feelings towards its past, present, and future capitalizes brilliantly on the expressive extensibility of suspense during the fin de siècle.

Conrad, writing to Wells in response to one of the latter's works of social criticism, evoked perfectly this irresolvable cocktail of fatalism and restlessness: “Every feeling of admiration being exhausted I won't try to find words just now. Not that I am tired (the stress is too inspiring in a sense to tire one) but because I am as if silenced by the multiplicity of responsive strains within me” (Karl 1063). Reading these words, we see that the late Victorian feeling that “a wide variety of seemingly disparate phenomena were, on some deep level, connected” (Arata 2), must have been an overwhelming burden to bear; its insistence on

consistency must have brought its adherents into constant collision with the unspeakable, the outrageous, the dilemmatic, and the paradoxical, stopping them, over and over again, in their tracks.

## Chapter 3 – Poisonous Suspense

Scientifically speaking, the basis of life – the energy of life, as Aristotle would call it – is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms through which this expression can be attained. Life seizes on them and uses them, even if they be to her own hurt. Young men have committed suicide because Rolla did so, have died by their own hand because by his own hand Werther died. Think of what we owe to the imitation of Christ, of what we owe to the imitation of Caesar.

– Oscar Wilde, *Intentions*

In each of the suspenseful texts explored over the previous two chapters, the protagonist holds commerce with death. Lizzie Hexam and her father, antecedent as they are of the fin de siècle, merely gaze on death, merely feel its insistent tug. But the movement of suspense into sensation and the body seems to have carried with it a putrescent stowaway. The culmination of the suspenseful fin de siècle dilemma is often some form of suicide or self-immolation, and we see in this Stephen Arata's "eschatological impulse" (1) dramatized in the senses, and played out on the body, of the protagonist. The Invisible Man's self-administered tonic and self-destructive malevolence lead to his violent death at the hands of an angry mob. Stevie Verloc of *The Secret Agent* has strange complicity in his own death. His sister, Mrs. Verloc, throws herself overboard a steamship for having murdered her husband. Even Ughtred Carnegie, that bastion of mental health, makes the decision "For good or evil [...] to risk his own life" (2), rushes onto the rail line "just as the train burst upon him" (19), and survives only miraculously. In the ultimate moment, Ughtred, in the spirit of so many fin de siècle characters, "pray[s] with all his heart that the train might kill him" (20). This rehearsal of suicide and death, especially when it involves outrageous scenarios like those presented in Wells's and Conrad's novels, raises important

political questions. Jasbir Puar quotes Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" on this point, and I'll follow suit: "Suicidal resistance is a message inscribed on the body when no other means will get through. It is both execution and mourning, for both self and other. For you die with me for the same cause, no matter who you are, there are no designated killees in suicide bombing" (Puar 218). Certainly Stevie's death in *The Secret Agent* plays this scenario out schematically, with the death not only of himself but, indirectly, of his entire family serving as collateral loss to his bomb blast. But what of the suicidal text, of the shared, public, *imagined* experience of suicide? If fantasies of self destruction, and self destruction itself, were expressions of dilemma and a feeling of belatedness at the end of the nineteenth century, what poisonous sort of future could they promise? In what follows, I explore the poisonous publicity and public provenance of one of the period's most sensational and, as has been argued, self-destructive deaths – that of Oscar Wilde.

When, in 1895, Wilde prepared to bring his fatal suit for libel against the Marquess of Queensberry, the majority of his friends counseled against it. Queensberry objected to Wilde's romantic relationship with his son, Alfred Douglas, and the culmination of their increasingly public feud was a card left by Queensberry at Wilde's club which he addressed to "Oscar Wilde, posing somdomite [sic]" (Holland xix). "The reaction of any sensible man to the note," as John Mortimer writes, "would have been to take the advice of the majority of Wilde's friends, which was to tear it up and forget it" (xi). Wilde's friends, like *fin de siècle* suspense readers, knew that things would end badly. A suit for libel would require Queensberry to present a "defense of justification" – a thorough and public proof of the allegation he had made in addressing the card. This defense would necessarily prove disastrous for Wilde because it would, in effect, place *him*

on trial, subjecting his artistic work and personal habits to very public scrutiny. Wilde's decision to proceed with the action anyway amounted, paradoxically, to a renunciation of his agency in the dispute, and, as Mortimer notes, “from then on it was Wilde, and not his enemy [...] who was on trial, and he had laid himself open to every form of attack” (xi). Queensberry would make the most of the opportunity; his defense and acquittal would lead directly to Wilde's subsequent prosecution by the Crown.

Wilde's often poetic, always rhetorically brilliant self-defense during this first trial came, in that sense, strangely too late; it seemed predicated on the hope of a redemption Wilde had already signed away. As Mortimer writes, “We can [...] watch Oscar, the great dramatist, elegant in black frock coat, leaning across the rail of the witness box, uttering wonderful but occasionally fatal answers: even as he is earning the audience's applause for his greatest flights of fancy, he is being led inexorably by the dogged persistence of his cross-examiner, Edward Carson, towards the prison gates” (xii). Wilde on the witness stand figures brilliantly for his age; he is, like Ughtred Carnegie, the ill-fated protagonist held physically and psychically rapt, suspended in the face of impending disaster. Like Carnegie he seems to “temporise” (Allen 19); his answers under examination nimbly fend, only for a time, his inevitable exposure.

Unlike Ughtred, however, there is with Wilde the additional question of his complicity, of intention, in bringing this fate on himself. Responses to Wilde's trials, from those of his contemporaries to those of recent scholarship, have been sharply divided on the question. Are we to credit Wilde's assertion, in *De Profundis*, that he simply lost control of himself, ceasing to be, for various reasons, “the captain of my soul, and did not know it” (78)? Or does that explanation paper over a more affectively complex one? Does one read Wilde's prosecution,

subsequent to his failed prosecution of Queensberry for libel, as part of a brilliant protest or merely as a disciplinary reckoning? As a sensational production was it staged by Wilde or the state? Was Wilde acting up or being clamped down on? Was his suit an act of queer “defiance,” in Jasbir Puar's sense of the term (211), or merely a personal tragedy?

Wilde's grandson Merlin Holland begins, in a recent introduction to the transcript of Wilde's first trial, with a family anecdote. He describes the experience of stumbling, when he was fifteen, upon “what was clearly intended to be a secret file full of press clippings” maintained by his father (xv). Vyvyan Holland had labeled the file in Cyrillic characters, “a quirky habit he had, especially to prevent people from reading notes he made in public.” The encrypted labeling, in this instance, predictably “had quite the opposite effect to what was intended.” Young Merlin, his curiosity piqued, “went through the contents and discovered that the clippings all had a common theme – homosexuality” (xv). In retrospect, Merlin Holland sees the Cyrillic labeling as having been “less a feeble attempt at concealment and more Vyvyan's denial to himself that he was interested in the subject,” that is, as having been intended to keep that secret as much from himself as from his son or the public (xv). Holland understands this interest on his father's part as having been representative “more of a melancholy fascination with something which had” turned his father's childhood “upside down” (xv), as more a form of self-address and affective exploration than political or academic fixation on homosexuality itself. Wilde's prosecution for gross indecency reshaped entirely the course of Vyvyan Holland's young life, and Merlin Holland, reasonably enough, sees his father's file as a way of expressing and coping with his unresolved feelings on the subject.

Merlin Holland's own fascination is also, of course, more than merely academic, and,

having found his father's file, he “kept [it] going through the next thirty years.” He personalized it, adding to it “cuttings that dealt with prejudice rather than imprisonment, as well as another element which seemed just as relevant – high-profile libel cases” rather than only pieces on homosexuality (xv). Merlin Holland became, in this way, the co-author of his father's file as much as its custodian and interrogator.

By introducing a transcript of his grandfather's first trial this way, Holland intertwines insightfully the public and personal legacies of Wilde's confusedly public and personal fall. For today's reader, he writes, the file unsurprisingly demonstrates “how little has changed over a century whenever fame, sex, pride and libel are shaken up into their intoxicating cocktail of human weakness” (xv-xvi). This conclusion, along with the wistful tone he adopts throughout much of the introduction, as in his references to “poor Oscar” and to Vyvyan's “melancholic fascination,” constructs Wilde's downfall as not only public but in some sense natural – not to say moral – and as having occurred outside of the reach of individual intervention or agency. When Holland writes of such situations that “The outcome is predictably fascinating for the onlookers, as it is invariably disastrous for the participants” (xv), he makes it clear that, in this account, the public is all too capable of appropriating (and devastating) the personal. It is not at all clear that the opposite is true. Holland's remark on “how little has changed,” with its attendant implication that little is *likely* to change, evokes the ongoing personal tragedies of those caught up in the sensationalized public trial even as it strongly indicates that resignation to this phenomenon is the only viable response. It speaks to the continuing personal and public tragedies lives out by queers globally while seeming to indicate that avoiding fame – cordoning off the personal from the public – may be the most sober course, if not politically, then

personally. Certainly this point of view is understandable, not only coming from Holland but from any student of Wilde's or similar trials. As Wilde himself would write from prison in *De Profundis*, "The gods are strange. It is not our vices only they make instruments to scourge us. They bring us to ruin through what in us is good, gentle, humane, loving. But for my pity and affection for [Douglas and his family], I would not now be weeping in this terrible place" (39).

Yet there is another strand of thought that evinces itself in Holland's introduction as well as in Wilde's performance of public defiance leading up to and during his trials. In addition to expressing a certain amount of wistfulness and resignation, Holland uses the story of his father's file to better understand the mediation of his relationship with his grandfather by press clippings and the ability of his father to speak to him on the subject most candidly in the form of pastiche and encryption. When Holland writes with justified pride that "When they sent my grandfather to prison for breaking the law, they rid society of [...] not just any old political rebel" (xlii), we see that, even if personal experience is encroached on and mediated by publicity and public forms of speech, there also exists an opportunity for public speech to speak about personal experience. Holland's possessive "my" is a public expression of personal, filial allegiance that draws its affective power from, and indeed, is made possible at all by, his grandfather's public life and the public artifacts surrounding it. Even more telling on this point is the struggle of Vyvyan Holland to speak personally about his father at all: it was through the public artifacts of the sensationalism surrounding Wilde's trials that Vyvyan Holland seems to have been able to communicate his most personal feelings about their impact on him – to either his son or himself. Vyvyan's "feeble attempt at concealment," his Cyrillic encryption, seems to indicate that the words were too sensitive, too sensational, to be spoken publicly or plainly, but also to evidence

an irrepressible desire to communicate them nonetheless. His file is the paradoxically private and public expression of a painful dilemma. It is the speech act of a suspended tongue.

Moreover, it cannot be escaped that this family anecdote, having been published and therefore entered into public discourse, not only fulfills the role of a personal reflection, a cathartic final sublimation of the public into the personal on Merlin Holland's part, but also completes a circuit of exchange between the two spheres, drawing the liminally public/private text of Vyvyan and Merlin Holland's file back into the public sphere, and insisting that it be plainly spoken about. As Vyvyan Holland's original file demonstrates quite literally, publicly mediated personal experience tends to speak in public terms; its lexicon is publicly financed and strategically subsumed. Vyvyan Holland's attempt to make sense of his father's downfall unsurprisingly took the form of investigation into the workings of publicity rather than of Wilde's personal papers and the like; the loss that Vyvyan Holland suffered was publicly inflicted and therefore required public reconciliation. The unbounded growth of Vyvyan Holland's archive reflects, however, the ultimate failure of public discourse to resolve or assuage his personal experience of loss. Indeed, Merlin Holland's wistful tone when discussing the subject and his own expansion of the archive mark the trans-generational continuation of that failure.

Yet, importantly, that failure was a characteristically creative *process*: Vyvyan Holland's "melancholic fascination" yielded his archive, which in turn yielded Merlin Holland's analysis, which in turn yielded the present one. If the archive ultimately failed as a complete, cathartic expression of Vyvyan Holland's affective engagement with his father, it was also productive of new possibilities of public address. Personal speech, under such circumstances of what Roland Barthes might have called the failure of public language, must appropriate, recombine, and

encrypt the public lexicon. It must deliberately and searchingly misuse it, and in the process creatively disrupt it. Merlin Holland's introduction to his grandfather's trial serves, therefore, not only as a personal testament to the tragedies that the public sphere can inflict on the private lives of individuals and families, but, queerly, the way that those types of tragedies can take shape specifically as border-crossings between those two increasingly inseparable spaces. These crossings, as Holland implies at the end of his essay, create special opportunities for pushing “subversive ideas” and “subversive behaviour to the limits of what [the public] can tolerate – and then just that little bit further,” though they may also seem, as often as not, “insanely quixotic” (xlii-xliii).

The circuit of exchange between the private and public embodied in the Hollands' file and by Merlin Holland's anecdote, to the extent that it is extricable from the larger body of public and personal speech at all, is certainly inextricable from that of Oscar Wilde's personal and public fall. Clearly Vyvyan Holland's queer archive would not have existed were it not for his father's public prosecution for acts of gross indecency, and that prosecution itself, given its perverse admixture of defiance and victimization, of public aesthetic/political intervention and personal ruination, raises a variety of important questions.

Wilde's sensational and highly publicized prosecution certainly began as a personal affair. Wilde and Douglas's “rapid” infatuation and inseparability, not to mention their “little concern for public discretion” displeased the Marquess from the start. Queensberry made repeated and increasingly shrill demands, written and verbal, that the two quit contact with one another; Douglas was equally dedicated in his defiance. Wilde increasingly became the proxy in the escalating conflict between the famously hot-blooded father and son (Holland xvii-xviii). In *De*

*Profundis*, Wilde recounts the long series of letters, telegrams, and private exchanges that at first characterized the dispute. In due time, however, Queensberry's patience had run out, and "At the end of June [1893] Queensberry turned up at Wilde's Tite Street house, bringing with him a prizefighter, and although he did not accuse Wilde directly of engaging in improper conduct with his son, he said, 'You look it and you pose as it, which is just as bad', and swore that he would thrash Wilde if ever he found him again in a public restaurant with his son" (Holland xviii-xix). Although Wilde apparently didn't "betray the slightest fear" in the face of this physical intimidation (xix), the increasingly public nature of Queensberry's offensive against him was having its effect. As Wilde recounts it,

...the next time he attacks me no longer in a private letter and as your private friend, but in public and as a public man. I have to expel him from my house. He goes from restaurant to restaurant looking for me, in order to insult me before the whole world, and in such a manner that if I retaliated I would be ruined, and if I did not retaliate I would be ruined also. (*De Profundis* 48-9)

The mounting suspense and dilemma that Wilde conveys in this passage had come, for him, to characterize the dispute: he was caught, in an increasingly intolerable way, between the demands of father and son, both of whom seemed to be "spoiling for a fight" (Holland xx) and neither of whom, it seems, Wilde felt he had any sway over.

As Wilde describes it, the escalating conflict actually went beyond threatening a collapse of the public and private. At the height of his program of harassment, Queensberry was only narrowly foiled in an attempt to disrupt an opening night performance of "*The Important of Being Earnest*" using a "grotesque bouquet of vegetables." Wilde was luckily "Tipped off by a friend, alerted the police and Queensberry was denied entry" (Holland xix). Wilde identifies this provocation, despite its sophomoric quality, as surpassing the others in that it not only denied

him the partition between his public and private lives, but attacked a third and more important sphere: his art. He writes: "Having assailed me as a private gentleman and in private, as a public man and in public, he ultimately determines to make his final and great attack on me as an artist, and in the place where my art is being represented" (*De Profundis* 50). This is an essential differentiation for both Wilde and our discussion here. For Wilde, artistic expression is categorically distinct from other forms of public expression, like politics, law, or journalism (*Intentions* 12). Art is anterior to life and must, therefore, be protected from its sordid and its mundane realities. Although to call Queensberry a philistine is something of an understatement, then, one nevertheless credits him with a certain artistic instinct in striking Wilde at his core. As Wilde puts it in *De Profundis*, "You knew what my art was to me, the great primal note by which I had revealed, first myself to myself, and then myself to the world; the great passion of my life; the love to which all other loves were as marsh water to red wine; or the glowworm of the marsh to the magic mirror of the moon" (50). Queensberry sought to embroil Wilde's personal problems and his art in one another. Showing up at the theater that night, he threatened the integrity not only of that particular performance but of Wilde's art as such; he threatened to reduce it to, merely, a public extension of a sensational private life.

Queensberry's next scheme, that of the offensively addressed card, would, despite the respectful distance it seemed to keep from the theater, be much more effective on this score. Queensberry would later describe the card he left for Wilde as a "booby-trap" (Holland xx), and indeed, it would ensnare not only Wilde the private person but Wilde the artist, with astounding efficacy. As noted above, by bringing his suit for libel against Queensberry, Wilde put himself in the position of proving a negative, namely, that he was *not* a "posing sodomite." Queensberry's

defense, then, provided him a very public pulpit from which to decry Wilde's sexuality, and when he did so, Wilde's carefully constructed rhetorical gap between “posing” and “being” quickly dissolved. The effect of Wilde's public ex-posure was the collapse of his private, public, and artistic selves into one public and realistic sodomite. The vitriol of the judge who eventually passed sentence on Wilde itself attests to the thoroughness of this conversion in the public mind.

Mortimer writes that,

Passing the ridiculous sentence of two years' hard labour, Mr Justice Wells said that men who could do as Oscar Wilde did were 'dead to all sense of shame.' This judge, who had presided over cases of murder and rape, seriously maintained that Wilde's offense was 'the worst I have ever tried.'

When the verdict and sentence were announced the prostitutes danced in the streets round the Old Bailey, celebrating this triumph for heterosexuality. The truth had been exposed, but it was still a shameful day for British justice. (xii)

By hailing Wilde as a “posing sodomite,” Queensberry was successful in inciting a disciplinary reaction from the state that publicized his personal homosexuality and denied him the ability to pose, aesthetically, as anything other than that personal self. Wilde's “impassioned and eloquent defense of 'the love that dare not speak its name' under cross-examination” (Holland xxxvi) during the course of his second and third trials (and the brief remainder of his life) is also telling; this directly, merely, political mode of speech would be all that was left available to him.<sup>1</sup>

Mortimer's conception of Wilde's trials as processes that “exposed” truth (rather than, say, disciplining bodies) is actually rather telling, given the strange format of Wilde's first trial. It was divided by Queensberry's defense into two sections, the first concerning the “sodomitical

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<sup>1</sup> “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” published in 1898, the year following Wilde's release from that prison, is the notable exception. An aging Douglas would celebrate the piece for its “grim realism” (132); as we'll see, this is a telling point, albeit one more bittersweet than Douglas seems to realize.

tendencies” of his public, literary work, particularly *Dorian Gray*, and the second (“Act Two,” as Holland terms it [xxix]), concerning his private relationships with a number of young working-class men. Wilde, until the trial had nearly begun, did not know that “Act Two” was being prepared for him, being unaware that Queensberry had been conducting investigations into his personal life. When he finally received Queensberry's plea of justification, he found himself accused in it not only of “immorality and sodomitical tendencies” in his art but also of “fourteen counts of gross indecency with young men, which, if proved, would not only lead to Queensberry's acquittal but, almost inevitably, to his own arrest” (Holland xxvi). Queensberry's evident intent was not merely Wilde's public mortification, but, in equal measure, his artistic and personal destruction. In short, Queensberry's defense of justification would go his note one further, demonstrating not merely that Wilde “posed” as a sodomite but that that posture was in fact *true*. Wilde's art would be exposed as not merely decadent but degenerate, the amoral aesthetics of his public self as merely symptomatic of his personal immorality. Queensberry's booby-trap would “expose” Wilde in the sense that it would refuse him the differentiation between the aesthetic, public, and personal. It would refuse him the precious luxury of posing.

It must be admitted that Queensberry's plan, as far as Wilde's public and personal downfall went, was an unqualified success. Shortly before his conviction, Wilde's wife Constance, who, as Holland puts it, had behaved for as long as possible with “courageous and touching loyalty” (xxxiv), departed, following their sons, for Switzerland, and there reverted to her maiden name (xxxiii). Wilde never saw his sons again (xxxiii). He was left in mounting debt, was in due time sentenced to two years of hard labor at Reading Gaol, and died, destitute and largely friendless, only three years after his release. But, with specific regard to the “real

trial,” we must return to the question of Wilde's agency in the whole affair. For although Wilde, for clear reasons of survival, had carefully shielded his taste in lovers from public view, he had maintained no such clear distinction between his public persona and his art. Provocations against everything “ugly and sensible” (Wilde, *Intentions* 62) characterized not only Wilde's art and criticism, but his entire posture toward society; the artfulness of his public persona seems to have been his all-encompassing project prior to his conviction. As Douglas would later reflect, “Wilde's crusade on behalf of beauty and his victory in the intellectual field over his half-witted detractors [i.e the editors of *Punch*], who could not see an inch beyond the end of their noses, were so complete that the present generation has no idea at all of the immense debt it owes to him” (75). In this light, as Holland aptly notes, it's clear that “There is little Wilde would have relished more than to stand in the witness box and defend his art” (xxxvi).

Holland therefore pointedly asks whether Wilde was, “as some modern writers have ventured to suggest, a conscious and willing early martyr to the homosexual cause” (xxxvi). His answer is immediate and notably terse: “Not initially, at least. He loved life too much to throw all away on some absurd squabble with an irascible aristocrat” (xxxvi). This assessment, steeped as it is in a deeply personal relationship to Wilde the man, finds Holland in agreement with Douglas. The aging Douglas, having converted to Catholicism and renounced homosexuality, seeks, in *Oscar Wilde: A Summing Up*, to neutralize the question of Wilde's own sexuality, in order to create a context for compassion without becoming an apologist. He writes that “those afflicted with beams in their eyes should moderate their holy transports on the question of motes” (9) and, reworking one of Wilde's own epigrams, that “I know all about Oscar Wilde and I still go on liking him” (8). The problem with these remarks is not so much their condescension. It is

rather the conflict they evoke in the mind of their author as he tries, in a strange inversion of his father's attacks, to divorce Wilde from his sexuality and his artistry, and each of those from the other. As he puts it,

I have used much time and much expense of spirit in preliminary wrestling with my thoughts over this book. From the first moment of its inception I have been confronted with a painful dilemma. On the one hand I have naturally wished to avoid any appearance of holding a brief for Oscar Wilde's vices, and on the other hand I have prayed to be delivered from censorious moralisings which would come very ill from my lips or pen. (3)

Like Ughtred Carnegie, Douglas here seems to be asking himself whether is it to be “murder or treachery.” His solution of disavowal without condemnation and to praise without acceptance, doesn't, in the end, resolve anything; the great irony of *A Summing Up* is that it is pervaded by subtractions. Douglas writes of “defending [Wilde's] character apart from his vices” (13) and, in the same spirit, claims that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not “poisonous book” (105) but on the contrary “conveys a great and august moral lesson” (104) – which remains jarringly unspecified.

Both Holland's and Douglas's accounts fall short as explanations of the affair. We cannot, with Wilde, resort simply to differentiating between private tragedy and public farce without failing to understand both aspects of his story. Rather, it is precisely Wilde's ability to solicit such incompatible and dilemmatic responses that makes his case interesting. In order to expand our understanding of Wilde's performance during his trials we must explore their joint provenance in both Wilde's aestheticism and sensational public sphere.

Subsequent to his failed suit for libel against the Marquess of Queensberry, Wilde's prosecution took place under the auspices of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. The Act, as Antony E. Simpson writes, “is widely perceived as the piece of nineteenth century

British legislation most effectively designed to protect women, and particularly young girls, from sexual exploitation, and to penalize those profiting from prostitution as an organized business” (9). In this regard, it should have borne no relevance to Wilde's case. It also, however, included the non sequitur “Labouchère Amendment,” which made “Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person” guilty of a misdemeanor (Simpson 37). In effect, the Labouchère Amendment criminalized non-penetrative homosexual acts, actual or merely imputed, for the first time. The Amendment quickly became known as the “blackmailer's clause” because of the threat it posed of public airing of ruinous private secrets (Simpson 40; Holland xi).

The ultimate passage of the Act was due, in large part, to the advocacy of *Pall Mall Gazette* editor W. T. Stead (Simpson 26). Stead's advocacy took the form of a serial piece of what today would be known as investigative journalism. “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” was Stead's sensational investigation into child prostitution in London, which included, variously, interviews with current and reformed madams, prostitutes, police, and accounts of Stead's own salacious adventures “undercover” as a john. It also included a large amount of coverage of the public debate over the Criminal Law Amendment Act, including editorial submissions from his readership.

As John Stokes points out in his entry in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, the temptation is certainly to “look for a connection between these events, and expect Wilde's journalism” – and I would add, his later work – “in some way to reflect the circumstances of its production, the public and private spheres that were now for a homosexual man inextricably

involved one with the other” (73). The most pressing difficulty with any such project is that “The Maiden Tribute” is consistently silent on the topic of homosexuality, restricting its discussion to the sale of girls and young women to men specifically. The Criminal Law Amendment Act proper also lacked any interest in the subject. Rather, Henry Labouchère “appears to have single-handedly brought about its enactment,” for motivations that remain unclear (Simpson 39). Labouchère introduced his amendment “at the last minute” and it “was apparently not the subject of debate on the floor of either House” (39). The Labouchère Amendment, despite its terrible consequences, remains a historical oddity. As Simpson summarizes,

The 1885 Amendment did not reflect earlier debate on different versions of the bill. Neither were homosexual concerns addressed in any context in the furore over *The Maiden Tribute* and its related scandals. As has been pointed out [...], in the Greek legend invoked by Stead, the annual “maiden tribute” Athens was obliged to offer to Crete for the undefined pleasure of the Minotaur included seven boys as well as seven girls. [...] Although Stead explicitly acknowledges this early in his narrative, the parallel notion of boys as victims was something he never pursued. (38)

Furthermore, Stead disapproved of the Labouchère Amendment, though “how he felt about the subject [of homosexuality] in general is not entirely clear” (Stokes 79). He “was one of the few to defend Wilde publicly” during his trials, “and did so in the *Pall Mall Gazette*” (Simpson 40). In this light, the idea that “The Maiden Tribute” led, in any direct way, to Wilde's prosecution is insupportable; one hesitates to hold a journalist responsible for the vagaries of the legislative process or the caprices of a conservative M.P.

Stokes, however, identifies another possible tack on the problem. He points out the tantalizing coincidence that in the spring of 1885 Oscar Wilde began work at the *Pall Mall*

*Gazette* – almost the same moment that editor W. T. Stead began publishing his series. It is surely, he argues, in his role as a young and generally anonymous journalist that Wilde honed his rhetorical skills, practicing and refining what would later become his artistic persona, and while “the hidden pattern” relating the two periods “can sometimes look like a maze” (69) it must certainly be a less perilous one than the Minotaur's. Therefore, rather than looking for a causal relationship between Stead's writing and Wilde's imprisonment, we must illuminate the debt owed by Wilde to the sensational publicity of “The Maiden Tribute” and the complex ways that Wilde's public persona and writings extended it. Holland notes in passing that “the *Pall Mall Gazette* printed a review of a newly published book on the very afternoon that [prosecutor for the defense Edward] Carson was examining Wilde on *Dorian Gray*” entitled “Books Fatal to their Authors” (xxxii). Mortimer, in turn, notes that, some time after the publication of “The Maiden Tribute,” “Stead and several of his supporters were ultimately prosecuted for indecent assault and abduction” (27) as a result of the investigatory actions Stead had documented in its pages. If, as John Mortimer argues, Wilde's conviction was tragic specifically in that he somehow didn't see it coming (xiii), we can recast “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” and the transcripts of the Wilde trials as sister texts in tragedy; neither of their authors fully anticipated the mixed results of their liberational performances.

“The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” was a project that evidently outgrew the bounds conceived for it. On July 4, 1885, *The Pall Mall Gazette* published “A Frank Warning” (51) to its readers that the following week it would “publish the report of a Special and Secret Commission of Inquiry which we have appointed to examine into the whole subject” (53) of child prostitution in London. The strategy that underlay the publication of this report was to

force passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act by sensationalizing the subject of child prostitution and fomenting popular support among the middle class. In his “Warning” Stead laid bare this strategy:

The public, it is said, is not interested in the subject, and the bill, therefore, may safely be abandoned. That we are told is the calculation in high quarters. But if Ministers think of allowing the bill to drop because the public is not keenly alive to its importance, it is necessary to open the eyes of the public, in order that a measure the urgency of which has been repeatedly admitted may pass into law this session. (51)

With “a full sense of the responsibility attaching such a decision,” *Pall Mall* would therefore publish “The Maiden Tribute” the coming “Monday and the three following days” (52), “de die in diem until the whole infernal narrative is complete” (52). It soon became clear, however, that the notions of narrative and completion would be difficult to apply in this case. On Friday July 8, the day after the planned final installment, Stead published another, entitled “A Flame Which Shall Never Be Extinguished.” He wrote in a tone of reflective wonder that “The report of our Secret Commission, it is now evident, has produced an effect unparalleled in the history of journalism. The excitement yesterday in London was intense. [...] We knew that we had forged a thunderbolt; but even we were hardly prepared for the overwhelming impression which it has produced on the public mind” (109).

“The Maiden Tribute,” as it continued, also abandoned traditional narrative, becoming extremely fragmentary and, in Gérard Genette's sense of the word, hypertextual. With his second installment, Stead began including “Occasional Notes,” and similar sections, addressing letters received in response to “The Maiden Tribute” and its coverage in the press. These sections, which often integrate large excerpts of third party editorial directly, became more and more

predominant as the series continued, creating a sense of growing public engagement with the debate around the Criminal Law Amendment Act generally, but also around the beneficial or harmful effects of “The Maiden Tribute” specifically. “The Maiden Tribute,” as a public spectacle, had become extensible; it had become the focusing medium in a discourse on topics ranging from power, to sex and social propriety, to the public role of journalism. Thus, what began as “a thunderbolt,” as Stead describes it, discrete in its cause and intended effect, became a conflagration: self-perpetuating, intense, and outrageous.

Stead, for his part, seems to have been cannily aware of the public, discursive nature of this “flame.” On July 8, he reflected that “We have been most fortunate, not only in our supporters, but even more so in our assailants. The evil seems to unite with the good in order to increase to the uttermost the dynamic effect of our revelation” (110). It is perhaps this awareness that explains his increasing willingness to let the letters and editorials of his laudators refute those of his detractors. He employs an increasingly light editorial hand as the series continues, and there is a strong sense that he has learned that “no publicity is bad publicity” in his regular taunts of George Cavendish-Bentinck and other ill-wishers, celebrating the good they were doing his cause. For instance, on July 7, in his “Occasional Notes,” Stead writes that

Last night, in the House of Commons, Mr. Cavendish Bentinck, M.P. for Whitehaven, gave notice of the following question for today:—

“To ask the Home Secretary whether his attention has been directed to certain publications relating to objectionable subjects which have been printed and circulated throughout the metropolis by the proprietors of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and whether any means exist of subjecting the authors and publishers of these objectionable publications to criminal proceedings.”

Excellent! Mr. Bentinck has done us the best service it [is] in his power to render. It is just like Mr. Cavendish Bentinck to think that the true morality is to leave criminals alone and attack

those who expose their crimes. (107)

As the series continued, Stead published a large number of “Letters of Protest,” often without substantive editorial interjection. One, from a private citizen, was particularly damning, its implication being that “The Maiden Tribute” harmed a very similar population to that it purported to champion:

I am connected with a large printing office, where a variety of small boys are employed. For the past two days these juveniles have been seen eagerly perusing the columns of your paper, which once had the reputation of being written by gentlemen for gentlemen. Much, of course, they failed to understand. Their infantile minds could not comprehend the classical allusions. But when they did light upon a passage whose meaning was glaring and palpable, a beam of intelligence over spread their youthful countenances, and they speedily hastened to invite their companions to partake of the fair feast provided by your generous enterprise. In these days, of advance we have witnessed strange sights; but perhaps none have equalled the spectacle presented of small boys travelling on their errands intent on a paper they never perused before, delaying their master's business and informing their own underdeveloped minds by striving to spell through column after column of what old-fashioned folk might foolishly term the vilest of vile brothel literature. (159)

Another, included in a section of press excerpts, was more ambivalent but seems, *prima facie*, similarly dangerous to Stead's project. *The Western Daily Mercury* wrote that,

We fear the revelations made are not so exaggerated as to be entirely denied. The protest against the sensational revelations indicated in Mr. Cavendish Bentinck's question would have been better made against the evils they exposed. [...] But what about the means adopted? Does the end justify the means? Probably not. While righteous indignation might be awakened, morbid tastes are gratified, and an immediate stimulus is thus given to evil that a subsequent good may come. (157-8)

The inclusion of these letters in disproportionate mixture with laudatory ones, such as that of activist Josephine Butler (“thank God for the light!” [150]), seems calculated to stir up further

controversy and generate more letters yet. They effect an editorial suspension in context of the inexorable forward momentum of the serial's publication that, like the mechanistic train faced by Ughtred Carnegie, creates a state of intolerable but irresolvable dilemma for Stead's reading public.

Importantly, both sets of letters also represented a shift in the subject of the debate from the veracity or obscenity of the investigation itself to the consideration of the project's real-world consequences. As the boys of “these days, of advance” browse news that genre-bends with pornography, the subject of dispute becomes not the news's veracity but its ramifications: the writers of these letters are concerned with what the news makes rather than what makes the news. *The Western Daily Mercury* exemplifies this shift when it weighs the costs and benefits of the series's “immediate stimulus” of evil against the supposed “subsequent good” of social reform. The strange temporality of these concerns, belated in their response to these “strange sights” and “sensational revelations,” and yet momentous in their desire to intervene in the public debate, bears striking resemblance to that deliberately constructed by Stead for his project.

In the opening installment of “The Maiden Tribute,” Stead most clearly lays bear his rhetorical strategy in two temporally expansive and affectively tumultuous paragraphs:

Yet, so far from this great city being convulsed with woe, London cares for none of these things, and the cultured man of the world, the heir of all the ages, the ultimate product of a long series of civilizations and religions, will shrug his shoulders in scorn at the folly of any one who ventures in public print to raise even the mildest protest against a horror a thousand times more horrible than that which, in the youth of the world, haunted like a nightmare the imagination of mankind.

Nevertheless, I have not yet lost faith in the heart and conscience of the English folk, the sturdy innate chivalry and right thinking of our common people; and although I am no vain dreamer of Utopias peopled soley [sic] by Sir Galahads and vestal

virgins, I am not without hope that there may be some check placed upon this vast tribute of maidens, unwitting or unwilling, which is nightly levied in London by the vices of the rich upon the necessities of the poor. (58-9)

This passage is fascinating not only for its juxtaposition of belated “woe” in the first paragraph with momentous “hope” in the second, but for the paradoxical inseparability of the two by the passage's end. The “vain” and apparently commonplace fantasy of “Utopias peopled solely by Sir Galahads” perfectly encapsulates the belated affect of the age. Yet the expression of hope that follows, buried as it is in qualifications and indirection, from the double-negative of “not without” to the dueling qualification and expansion of “some” and “vast,” strikes a contrary note, however muted, in the face of that despair, founded precisely on the revival of that “sturdy innate chivalry.” Thus, these two paragraphs, which at one level contrapose belatedness and momentousness, at another rhetorically imbricate those two temporalities. Together, belatedness and momentousness in this passage exhibit a becoming-paradoxical in which the former comes to subtend the latter. The reader is encouraged to imagine possibilities for the re-emergence of aristocratic chivalry, despite the apparently inexpiable corruption of the modern aristocracy.

“The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” is of course a historically situated text, and its concerns are more contemporary to its time than the above appeal for a return to chivalry might seem to indicate. “The Maiden Tribute” must be read, therefore, as a response to, rather than merely an example of, contemporary attitudes toward prostitution during its its time. From the late eighteenth to the late-nineteenth centuries, as Simpson observes,

There were temporal differences in popular opinion on the career and probable fate of the prostitute. Pre-Victorians were likely to view early and unpleasant death, hastened by drink, disease, and the violent ambiance of the street, as the usual outcome. In the second half of the century, this view began to change and observers

such as William Acton were much more willing to accept that prostitution was an economic phenomenon and represented but a single and temporary stage in the lives of many working-class women. (15-16)

In this context, “The Maiden Tribute” seems curiously out of step with its times, and Stead seems something like “old-fashioned folk.” The series is replete with images of the brothel door closing irrevocably on its victims, including young girls “beguiled into the chamber of death before they are of an age to read the inscription above the portal, 'All hope abandon ye who enter here.'” (59). Indeed, its central conceit, that of the Athenian girls “flung into the famous Labyrinth of Daedalus, there to wander about blindly until such time as they were devoured by the Minotaur, a frightful monster, half man, half bull, the foul product of unnatural lust” (56-7), makes palpable the impossibility of redemption for the fallen girl or woman. Yet Stead also includes a number of anecdotes, usually voiced in the first person, by reformed prostitutes and girls who have narrowly escaped rape and assimilation into the life of the brothel; the sections “A Girl Escapes After Being Sold” (73-4), “The Story of an Escape” (85-7), and “Delivered For Seduction” (104-7) are typical. These two incompatible yet interwoven accounts construct the prostitute as a sympathetic, fundamentally redeemable character while, in the most stilted terms, making the case for legal intervention in the recruiting process, rather than alternative agendas like rehabilitation or state licensing of prostitution (Simpson 30-1).

We see then that the paradox presented by the admixture of belatedness and momentousness could be, in one sense, resolved: its terms are best regarded as in dialog with each other and the public generally. They invited, first on the part of Stead and, increasingly, on the part of his readership, creative attempts at their reconciliation. It is precisely Stead's vacillation between these two accounts of prostitution – and between the two temporalities they

are associated with – that created the series's special dialogism, which became its suspenseful core and generative engine. But, crucially, to mark that dialogism is not to mistake “The Maiden Tribute” for a neutral forum, a public space for expression that somehow encouraged speech without shaping it. Rather, the series charted a dual path of becoming-realistic and becoming-outrageous that, in the same mode as the publicity of the dynamite bomber, threatened the public order from both within and without its pages. The sensational brinksmanship of Stead's writing – its becoming-outrageous – as the series progresses, as exemplified by his conclusory discussion of the “Unnatural Alliance” between the brothel owners and the police (171), verges on the type of anarchism attributed to politically motivated dynamitards. When he writes that “the majority of policemen, being only mortal, are no more to be trusted with arbitrary power than any other human beings, especially over the other sex. Its possession leads to corruption, and the more that power is increased the more mischief is done” (171), his project has extended its purview from the establishment of greater protection for girls thirteen to sixteen years old to something very near an anarchist critique of the state. He has quietly transitioned from a consideration of the troubling imbalance of power between aging aristocrat and infant proletarian to a critique of the foundations and tendencies of power generally.

At the same time, this outrageous sensationalism had given rise to a very real breakdown in the rule of law at the site of the printing press from which it emanated. The same day that Stead mounted this attack on the police he also described the riotous scene at the press:

In the mean time the demand for the authentic details of this terrible revelation continues unabated. Yesterday, although the series was interrupted for a day, the demand was as great as ever – so great indeed that, owing to the lack of a body of police sufficiently strong to secure access to our premises, the publication of the paper was practically suppressed for three hours. What will

be the case to-day we do not know, although we have reason to hope that the action energetically taken yesterday at the eleventh hour by Colonel PEARSON and Mr. Superintendent THOMPSON will be continued to-day, and thus we shall be able to issue the last of this momentous series without having our office taken by storm by those who yesterday were shot headlong through the windows with reckless disregard of the safety of life or limb. (167)

Here, Stead is at odds with his indictment of the “arbitrary power” of the police force – the paradox being that, if the police are implicated in the outrages he is exposing, they are also necessary to his ability to continue that exposure. In failing to prevent the shattering of the front window of the publishing house, they failed to provide an effective barrier between the becoming-outrageous of the words going to press and their becoming-realistic on the street; they (temporarily) failed to allow “The Maiden Tribute” to continue to push those becomings toward their mutual limit. We pause briefly to note the mindless violence that characterizes the approach of that limit: it is equivalently represented by the “reckless disregard of the safety of life or limb” (Stead 167) of the person smashing through the publishing house window, by the disciplinary beating of the transparent body of Wells's Griffin by the mob at the end of *The Invisible Man*, and the “blood-stained inanity” of the undetected dynamitard's bomb.

Moreover, the processes of becoming-realistic and becoming-outrageous on the part of “The Maiden Tribute” were deeply embroiled in the larger schizo-capitalist becomings of the print industry explored in the previous two chapters. While not meaning to concede the point to Stead's critics who often imputed “splendid pecuniary success” (Stead 159) as his primary motive for publishing his sensational series, it is essential to examine it as a capitalistic production. The process of schizophrenic decoding described in the first chapter is understood to take place at all levels of acculturation and expression, ranging from the larger becomings of the

commodity culture itself to those of its most particular sub-markets, individuals, and textual artifacts. It is therefore no coincidence that “The Maiden Tribute” has such a paradoxical core, which seems always to destabilize and contradict itself, breaking apart its own meanings in response to the demands of the public yet providing the public no final resolution or catharsis. We can understand both its extensible attack on the state and its approach of the self-shattering limit of outrageous realism as schizo-capitalist, as enacting the mass market oscillation between decoding and recoding, between the dissociation of old meanings (the lost or redeemable prostitute) and the creation of new ones (middle class political consciousness).

As Stead himself described it, “The Maiden Tribute” broke the “conspiracy of silence” (167) surrounding child prostitution in London. In doing so it enacted capitalism's antagonism to the taboo and, we might say, to trade barriers. By offering tales of child prostitution for sale as news in the public marketplace, Stead established a new circuit of exchange between the criminal/prurient and the public/realistic. “The Maiden Tribute” refused invisibility to the prostitution industry and in doing so ostensibly conducted an assault on immoral behavior under the banner of “sturdy innate chivalry and right thinking.” In doing so, however, it also conducted a defiant assault on the distinction between the romantic, the prurient, and the realistic. It decoded the distinction between the legal and illegal as well as the alliance between the industrial and the moral, drawing prostitution and its sister-industries into the public sphere. This process was the becoming-realistic of “The Maiden Tribute,” in which its romantic tales of vice and desperation became all the more readily “accepted as realistic” (Simpson 27) and relevant to everyday life, the longer it went on. But it also entailed the becoming-outrageous of the text, in which each new installment became more sensational, more prurient than the last.

These two becomings, in turn, comprised a becoming-schizophrenic in the public sphere, inciting in the readership of “The Maiden Tribute” an almost Gothic paranoia, a dissociative sense that anything might happen next, that any vice might realistically be attributable to anyone – especially anyone in power. The figure of the corrupt and insatiable aristocrat, his social privilege conferring an effective invisibility, completes Stead's portrait of a rapacious reign of terror on working-class children. Not unlike Wells's Griffin, whose invisibility is rendered into omnipresence by its appearance in newsprint, Stead's aristocrat exhibits a becoming-realistic in “The Maiden Tribute,” rendered all the more potent because it is accompanied by Stead's detailed portrait of a parallel outrage industry – in this case consisting of procurers of virgins, midwives and doctors to certify them and “repair” them, and corrupt parents. This outrage industry, moreover, is representative of an overall becoming-outrageous of visible London from bottom to top: the willingness of debased parents to sell their daughters is, more often than not, linked by Stead to alcoholism and other class-based afflictions, and he portrays the rapaciousness of the aristocrat as, specifically, a perversion of morality among those who are supposed to be its vanguards. Thus the process of rendering visible “the dark labyrinth” of the world of child prostitution in London was, in equal measure, a rendering outrageous of the already visible world of everyday class and capitalism. The outrageous publication of the prostitution of young girls in London from another perspective entailed the rendering public of the formerly private (and therefore un-real) confines of the brothel.

“The Maiden Tribute” created a dialogically suspenseful space by catching the reader between conflicting dyads of sensation/realism, prurience/necessity, and momentousness/belatedness. In doing so it was successful in getting the Criminal Law

Amendment Act passed, and the question has fairly been raised, from its own time forward, whether that should be regarded as an unambiguously positive achievement. But the series has a much greater legacy in the extensible prototype it presented of the dialogically combusive technology of the suspenseful paradox. In particular, the pervasive use of belated momentousness, a tool particularly apt for the time, provided for the moral suspension of the author in relation to his sensational text even as it posed a suspenseful dilemma to the readership, of whom it, momentarily, demanded a response. It was in this way that the outrageously prurient could, paradoxically, seem to serve the public interest and that its serialization not only completed but outlasted its planned run despite efforts in Parliament to prosecute Stead for obscenity; the prosecution he eventually underwent came too late to stop the conflagration of “The Maiden Tribute.”

Without meaning to imply a directly causal link, I want to suggest that it is precisely this use of paradox and morally suspended authorship that became so central to Oscar Wilde's decadent aesthetics later in his life. “The Maiden Tribute” and much of Wilde's work and public life share in common a strategic privileging of art and rhetoric over reality – be it for capitalistic, political, or purely aesthetic ends.

In his essay “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde prescribes exactly such a project. The essay takes the form of a Socratic dialog between Vivian – Wilde's stand-in – and Cyril, Vivian's quizzical auditor. Vivian unequivocally argues that, “Paradox though it may seem – and paradoxes are always dangerous things – it is none the less true that Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life” (30), and that, consequently, “Literature,” by definition, “always anticipates life” (32). From this seemingly simple principle, he extrapolates an entire aesthetic

program which devalues realism as lacking in “distinction, charm, beauty, and imaginative power” (17) – as not artful. Of Émile Zola, he says,

his work is entirely wrong from beginning to end, and not wrong on the ground of morals, but on the ground of art. From any ethical standpoint it is just what it should be. The author is perfectly truthful, and describes things exactly as they happen. What more can any moralist desire? We have no sympathy at all with the moral indignation of our time against Mr. Zola. It is simply the indignation of Tartuffe on being exposed. But from the standpoint of art, what can be said in favor of the author of *L'Assommoir*, *Nana*, and *Pot-Bouille*? Nothing. Mr. Ruskin once described the characters in George Eliot's novels as being like the sweepings of a Pentonville omnibus, but M. Zola's characters are much worse. They have their dreary vices, and their drearier virtues. The record of their lives is absolutely without interest. Who cares what happens to them? (17)

In exchange, he says, we must have lies. To lie, for Vivian, is a brave and defiantly creative act, and not to be mistaken for commonplace disingenuousness. Luckily for the reader, Cyril is at hand to ask for a clarification:

Cyril

Lying! I should have thought that our politicians kept up that habit.

Vivian

I assure you that they do not. They never rise beyond the level of misrepresentation, and actually condescend to prove, to discuss, to argue. How different from the temper of the true liar, with his frank, fearless statements, his superb irresponsibility, his healthy, natural disdain for proof of any kind! After all, what is a fine lie? Simply that which is its own evidence. If a man is sufficiently unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie, he might just as well speak the truth at once. (11)

For Vivian, the rhetorical position of the artist is definitively amoral, and the artist must dismiss out of hand the obligations to veracity and conventional morality often imposed on him.

The liar/artist in this conception takes on somewhat ubermenschian proportions, but Vivian's interest is as much cultural as ontological: the individual lie or liar is part of a greater historical struggle of the Mind against Nature (10). "Art," as he says early on, "is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place" (9). Later, he clarifies this remark:

The popular cry of our time is 'Let us return to Life and Nature; they will recreate Art for us, and send the red blood coursing through her veins; they will shoe her feet with swiftness and made her hand strong.' But, alas! we are mistaken in our amiable and well-meaning efforts. Nature is always behind the age. And as for Life, she is the solvent that breaks up Art, the enemy that lays waste her house. (22)

Nature and Art, it seems, are differentiable primarily on the basis of their temporalities. The mistake that espousers of the natural, such as the realists, make, he implies, is the substitution of the historical for the contemporary. Being oriented to something "behind the age," naturalistic perspectives are in essence affectively belated; truth and the practice of truthfulness are belated. Lying, conversely, anticipates, expands, and creates. "If we take Nature to mean natural simple instinct as opposed to self-conscious culture," Vivian explains to Cyril, "the work produced under this influence is always old-fashioned, antiquated, and out of date. One touch of Nature may make the whole world kin, but two touches of Nature will destroy any work of Art. If, on the other hand, we regard Nature as the collection of phenomena external to man, people only discover in her what they bring to her" (22). Positioning himself in the Sophistic tradition (11), Vivian identifies lying and artfulness as those qualities of expression which enable reality to keep pace with perception, relation, and affect.

There are clear parallels between this conception of a struggle between nature and mind and the delezoguattarian struggle between the production of meaning and schizophrenia under

capitalism that make Vivian's perspective – issued during the blooming of capitalistic culture – no historical accident. We can, at least provisionally, equate Wilde's “nature” with Deleuze and Guattari's decoded systems of “archaic, folkloric, or residual function” (*Anti-Oedipus* 245) and Wilde's conceptions of “mind” and “lying” with schizophrenia. The only substantial difference between the two models, in fact, is the substitution of the autotelic emergence of schizophrenia from within capitalism for the “self-conscious” struggle of the Mind against Nature. Where Wilde's Vivian engages in polemical defense against the “decay” of lying and thereby casts Mind as vulnerable to subsumption into Nature, for Deleuze becoming-schizophrenic is the process of capitalism's struggle with itself. Under capitalism, we might say, Nature is not merely Mind's antithesis, it is also its precondition, its seedbed.

The two accounts, after all, differ really only in their programs. Vivian, in an especially abstract passage, sketches out a very Deleuzian process of mutual becoming between art and life in which

Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent. This is the first stage. Then Life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle. Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment. The third stage is when Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness. This is the true decadence, and it is from this that we are now suffering. (23)

The quiet implication of this passage is that after Art's expulsion the process must begin again. The omission of this part of the process, as well as Wilde's casting of the process as struggle, are rhetorically central to his project, both in this essay and his career as a whole: it is through this

portal that the artist must enter. The artist has a paradoxically moral obligation to be amoral, an always already suspended position between obligation and total freedom, from which he must speak if culture is not to decay.

“The Decay of Lying,” had it been published six or seven years earlier, might have been the rhetorical inspiration for “The Maiden Tribute.” Wilde's argument against “our amiable and well-meaning efforts” to put Life and Nature into Art, as well as the urgency of his call to “revive the old art of Lying” (43) in their rebuttal of realist belatedness and construction of a curiously belated momentousness, parallel and bolster Stead's rejection of “Utopias peopled solely by Sir Galahads and vestal virgins” in favor of the “the heart and conscience of the English folk, the sturdy innate chivalry and right thinking of our common people.” Both Wilde and Stead dismiss a return to the past as a model for the future even as they embrace qualities *evinced* in the past as resources for effective intervention in the present. The becoming-realistic of “The Maiden Tribute” provides an important example of Wilde's theory in action: the transmogrification of Stead's series from obscenity to outrage charts the decay of his sensational lies into nature. In turn, Wilde's theory provides an important justification for Stead's privileging of rhetoric and sensation over fact: as the boys of “these days, of advance” also could have told us, it makes for better reading.

Stead's sensationalism does differ from Wilde's pure aestheticism in that it is guided by specific political and social goals, and this distinction is instructive. While it is tempting to equate “Nature” in “The Decay of Lying” to something like conservatism and “Art” to something like progressivism, that comparison does not go far enough. Rather, Wilde's ideal artist would reject even the limited programmatic coherence of the term “progress,” preferring instead to get

out as far in front of the present and its systems of thought as possible; he rejects incremental progress on the grounds of its investment in some current set of facts. “Life,” it seems, “goes faster than Realism, but Romanticism is always in front of Life” (46), and the implication is that the more fanciful something is, the more anticipatory – and the better – it is. Thus, the truly great work of art “entirely anticipates its age, and produces, in one century work that it takes another century to understand, to appreciate, and to enjoy” (46). The limit that great art approaches, in other words, looks very much like schizophrenia. Vivian describes the day when the “solid stolid British intellect” will awake to the “false, fluted-toned voice” (44) of fantasy, as a day of total, desirable dissociation:

And when that day dawns, or sunset reddens how joyous we shall all be! Facts will be regarded as discreditable, Truth will be found mourning over her fetters, and Romance, with her temper of wonder, will return to the land. The very aspect of the world will change before our startled eyes. Out of the sea will rise Behemoth and Leviathan, and sail round the high-pooped galleys, as they do on the delightful maps of those ages when books on geography were actually readable. Dragons will wander about the waste places, and the phoenix will soar from her nest of fire into the air. We shall lay our hands upon the basilisk, and see the jewel in the toad's head. Champing his gilded oats, the Hippogriff will stand in our stalls, and over our heads will float the Blue Bird singing of beautiful and impossible things, of things that are lovely and that never happen, of things that are not and that should be. But before this comes to pass we must cultivate the lost art of Lying. (45)

Lying, as described here, is a technology of schizophrenia, which spurs progress towards that limit but which rejects even the coherence of progressivism in favor of romance, paradox, and impossibility. Each lie, each artwork, is to be measured on its own merits, on its own proximity to the ideal of “express[ing] nothing but itself” (45).

Like Conrad's monstrously amoral connoisseur of explosives, The Professor, Wilde's

Vivian is an espouser of art for art's sake. The Professor sums himself up nicely at one point when he is confronting the political ideologue Ossipon:

“[...] you all have no character whatever.”  
Ossipon could not restrain a start of indignation.  
“But what do you want from us?” he exclaimed in a deadened voice. “What is it you are after yourself?”  
“A perfect detonator,” was the peremptory answer.  
[...]  
“You revolutionists,” [The Professor] continued, with a leisurely self-confidence, “are the slaves of the social convention, which is afraid of you; slaves of it as much as the very police that stands up in the defence of that convention.” (68-9)

Artfulness, for both Vivian and the Professor, involves a total renunciation of politics. It is in this sense that Wilde's avowedly apolitical aestheticism is political; the essay-within-an-essay from which he reads at length to Cyril is less a political manifesto than an Anarchist's Cookbook. His remarks that politicians “never rise beyond the level of misrepresentation,” and that lawyers “are not ashamed to appeal to precedent” position the lie *above* the political and *in front of* the realistic. He advocates a type of meta-politics which starts, necessarily, by not recognizing itself as such. The lie, in this conception, is an extensible technology of apolitical defiance. In its characteristic embracing of paradox, sensation, and un-reality, it is the self-conscious culmination of extensible suspense.

Returning to “The Maiden Tribute,” we see, now, the possibility of a meta-politics encrypted in its paradoxical sensationalism. Its credentials as a poisonous text rest not only on its sensational coupling of the pornographic and the public but its schizophrenic privileging of art over life. They rest not on its production of the Criminal Law Amendment Act but its extensible Molotov cocktail, as Merlin Holland might put it, of the sensational, the perverse, the belated, and the momentous. As in Jasbir Puar's presentation of the suicide bombing, it registers publicly

at two levels: nominal political message and asignifying rupture.

Also in his volume of essays *Intentions*, which includes “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde gives us “Pen, Pencil, and Poison: A study in green.” Posing as a “brief memoir” (51) of Thomas Griffiths Wainwright, minor poet and prolific poisoner, “Pen, Pencil, and Poison” almost succeeds in disguising its author's subversive intent in writing it. Wilde invites us to consider Wainwright in the former capacity not only despite but because of the latter. “His life-work falls naturally under the three heads [Pen, Pencil, and Poison] suggested by Mr. Swinburne,” he tells us, “and it may be partly admitted that, if we set aside his achievements in the sphere of poison, what he has actually left to us hardly justifies his reputation” (55).

Implicitly then, Wilde is, and we should be, interested in Wainwright's poetic work specifically because it is rendered interesting by his crimes, because of his sensational status as “one of the most subtle and secret poisoners of this or any age” (65). This idea is provocative enough, but Wilde goes further. In his analysis, rather than suborning Wainwright's art to his criminality, looking in his poems for signs of his degeneracy, as might be expected of a critic of his time, he seeks to understand the ways that his crimes created new possibilities for his art; he grants that Wainwright's murders and forgeries were “sins” (65) but states with comedic insouciance that “The fact of a man being poisoner is nothing against his prose” (72). Rather, following his own prescription from “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde privileges Wainwright's art over his life, valuing his lies over his (eventually exposed) truth. “His crimes,” he writes, “seem to have had an important effect upon his art. They gave a strong personality to his style, a quality that his early work certainly lacked” (71).

When Wilde muses that “One can fancy an intense personality being created out of sin”

(72), “sin” is itself recast as something potentially – if not intrinsically – valuable, and with that, Wilde makes a move, however obfuscated, that is far more radical than any included in “The Decay of Lying.” It seems that the amorality that is proper of authorship expands well beyond the bounds of formal art, to encompass all of one's biography, public and personal, fictional and, if we can still make the distinction, real. The very title of the essay, it will be noted, refuses any more distinction between “pencil” and “poison” than between “pen” and “pencil,” though it grants the more traditional artistic tools a slight precedence. “There is no essential incongruity between crime and culture,” Wilde argues late in the essay; “We cannot re-write the whole of history for the purpose of gratifying our moral sense of what should be” (72). The operative word in this provocative statement is “culture,” because it effects two slippages. The first, which is provocative enough in and of itself, is that between the criminal and the artistic. The implication, in modern critical terms, is that the public sphere is amoral and that the distinction between art and sin should be discarded in favor of the question of whether something is “interesting” (70), “fascinating,” “strange” (72), “fascinating” (72) or expressively “powerful” (73). Second, and even more subversively, “culture” in this use also encrypts a collapse of the public into the private. Sin exhibits a becoming-public in this text despite Wilde's argument that it, aesthetically, “should be solitary, and have no accomplices” (67). Accepting Wilde's argument that Wainwright's art was made stronger by the influence of his crimes entails excusing his crimes on the virtue of his art. Wilde, here, constructs a notion of artistry as a self-complete, completely amoral identity even as he conflates artistry with culture and expands culture to include, potentially, all human endeavor.

This is especially interesting given that Wilde locates Wainwright's artistic credentials –

his qualification for aesthetic rather than moral consideration – in his “extremely artistic temperament” (51), rather than the strength of his works. It is Wainwright's “rich curly hair, fine eyes, and exquisite white hands,” rather than his versifications that “gave him the dangerous and delightful distinction of being different from others” (54). This description is tellingly similar to that of Dorian Gray's “finely-curved scarlet lips, [...] frank blue eyes, [...] crisp gold hair,” of the “something in his face that made one trust him at once” and the impression of his “having kept himself unspotted from the world” (17). There is, moreover, a strange resemblance between these characterizations and the impression that Wilde himself left on the public, and those closest to him, alike. Douglas writes that

I think he was never more than a minor poet – largely because of his derivativeness which occasionally verges on plagiarism – till he achieved the right to be called a major poet by writing *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* directly after he came out of prison in 1897. [...] Although he was and remained a poet, with a poet's outlook on life all his days, he gave up writing poetry for many years and only took to it again right at the end of his life. (55-6)

Shaw's impression of Wilde's impervious “gaiety of soul,” cited antagonistically by Douglas, nevertheless resembles this perspective in that it, too, posits an essentially artful Wilde irrespective of his actual artistic output (Douglas 5). This hall of mirrors, in which Wilde repeatedly writes himself into fictional and nonfictional works even as those works converge on each other and his own biography thematically, of course has important ramifications for our understanding of Wilde's aesthetics, as explored by Levine under the rubric of “self-reflexivity.” But it also makes it rather difficult to maintain the distinction between his own art and his life. As “Pen, Pencil, and Poison” itself begins to look a lot like a poisonous text, its amoral payload flavorless and its victims “more than were ever made known judicially” (66) like those of

Wainwright's strychnine, Wilde begins to look a lot like “a subtle and secret poisoner” (51).

In this light, the decision of Queensberry's defense to open with an attack on *Dorian Gray*, as well as Wilde's rhetorically circuitous response to their attacks, which otherwise seem a bit superfluous, begin to make much more sense. Much like Stead's own eventual conviction, which clearly served up a reactionary punishment for the poisonous becoming-realistic of “The Maiden Tribute,” Wilde's eventual conviction for *being* a sodomite started with an attempt to decrypt a poisonous text and expose it as outrageous. In its way then, the “literary” phase of Wilde's first trial was truest to his offenses: his danger to the public was never to be found in his “sodomitical tendencies” but in his poisonous artistic posing.

Returning, then, to Merlin Holland's conclusion that Oscar Wilde was “Not initially, at least” a “conscious and willing early martyr to the homosexual cause” (xxxvi), we see that the qualification that he offers, “not initially,” is tantalizing. It raises the question of Wilde becoming conscious of the artistic possibilities of his new public role as defendant. Did Wilde choose to don his suicidal air of defiance during the first half of his trial only belatedly, after realizing the trap he'd sprung on himself? As Holland writes, it was only “A day or two before the trial” that “the reality of the situation was forcibly brought home to Wilde when he was confronted with Queensberry's plea of justification” (xxvi). This timing is essential because it not only means that Wilde may not have realized the true danger he had placed himself in by bringing his suit against Queensberry, but that he had a chance to resolve himself to the dangers of the trial's second, non-literary portion before deciding to proceed.

During those two days and during the trial's “literary” first half, then, Wilde was a figure for his age, the larger-than-life protagonist caught in a state of foreknowing and belated suspense

like his own Dorian Gray and, indeed, the whole panoply of suspended characters that dominated the popular fiction of the day. Barbara Melchiori, writing of dynamite fiction, notes the prevalence of the trope of the anguished and morally upright dynamitard. She writes of an episode in Robert Louis Stevenson and Fanny Van de Grift's *The Dynamiter*, that

The interview with the repentant terrorist stresses the oath that had been taken at the outset, and the impossibility of leaving the organisation after a change of heart – that is to say exactly the situation which Henry James was later to develop in the character of Hyacinth in *Princess Casamassima*. Stevenson's young man knows too much, he cannot be allowed to leave the group of conspirators. [...] He complains: 'That oath is all my history. To give freedom to posterity, I had forsworn my own. (64)

She continues to note that “This dismal young man is almost a stereotype in the dynamite novels,” his popular appeal being, perhaps, exactly that Wainwright held for Wilde. Wilde includes a vivid dramatization in “Pen, Pencil, Poison” of Wainwright's final capture, which might as well have been written of a tragic young dynamiter: “It was by a mere accident that he was discovered. A noise in the street attracted his attention, and, in his artistic interest in modern life, he pushed aside the blind for a moment” and he was seen and apprehended (68). To the rather striking extent, then, that the figure Melchiori identifies and Wilde, during those fatal two days, resemble one another, they are further evidence of the becomings-realistic and -romantic of fiction and fact during the fin de siècle. Wilde's decision to move forward with the suit, as Holland has it, acted out “a perverse element of wanting to play out in court a theatrical piece whose prologue he felt he had 'written’” (xxxiv). It equally, however, acted out a prologue he – and his public – had already read.

The trope of the belated dynamitard raises another important question, one which Melchiori lets rest, but will be essential for our understanding of Wilde's first trial and his

conviction. How do we explain the fundamental inclination of the anguished dynamitard, and the anguished Wilde, to go through with the act? An oath, given without foreknowledge of its consequences, hardly seems like sufficient counterweight against considerations of criminality, death, and anarchy. Wilde clearly faced a similar calculus. Yet, as Melchiori notes, it is often precisely that dilemma that the dynamitard faces: his belatedness is comprised of the ill-considered oath, his dilemma is between oath-breaking and criminality, and his suspense the dreadful foreknowledge that he is going to choose the latter. Other ballast might be added in a given plot to the scales in favor of criminality – love, finances, a certain youthful liberalism – but these only beg the question: how can the text logically justify the ends that its public affectively yearns for? To what extent is that yearning mixed up with an anguish like the anguished protagonist? To what extent are the author, text, and public conscious of these mechanics?

All three, of course, are complex and open questions, dependent for their answers as much on the imagined individual respondent as on the specific work in question. But, as Stephen Arata notes, the late-Victorian reader could discover in the figure of the criminal, the alien, or the lower class Other, the embodiment of class-based anxieties and the “distorted but recognizable” picture of “his own face” equally (109). The question of a “moral to the story,” in fin de siècle fiction remains characteristically elusive, and the affective import of any given character or plot anguished, suspenseful, and schizoid. The trope of the belated and anguished middle class dynamitard became prevalent, perhaps, specifically because of his power to figure paradoxically in this way; he provided an extensible medium of exchange between fear and desire, figuring the irresolvable disjunction between systematic morality and the affectively amoral.

Likewise with Wilde. Holland writes of Wilde's decision to move forward with the

prosecution of Queensberry (in a passage I've already quoted, in part) that

there is no simple explanation for his conduct. Arrogance born of social and literary success, and the belief that he was in some way immune from the law unquestionably played a part, as did a desire to please young Douglas. I am certain, too, that there was a perverse element of wanting to play out in court a theatrical piece whose prologue he felt he had 'written,' but whose outcome was known only to the Fates: 'The danger,' as he later said of his *demi-monde* life, 'the danger was half the excitement.' (xxxiv-xxxv)

This explanation, while both well grounded in Wilde's own self-ruminations (e.g. *De Profundis*), and psychologically insightful in its own right, also subverts Holland's own prior skepticism of Wilde's "conscious and willing" martyrdom. Much as with the disequilibrium between oath-breaking and criminality faced by the anguished dynamitard, the question of consciousness, with its attendant connotation of contemporaneous self-conscious rationality, has very little relevance within such a complex affective cocktail.

In exchange, it points the way to another, much more Wildean analysis: Holland's understanding of Wilde's fictional works as "prologue" to his performance during his trials positions the trial as a draft artwork that Wilde had it in his power to bring to press or leave in manuscript. If Wilde's action against Queensberry had something of Arata's "eschatological impulse" about it, his decision to do so was perverse not only in that it fetishized "danger" but in that it rendered the belated momentous, recasting, in advance, the pure belatedness of John Mortimer's "sickening inevitability" as defiant self-suspension. The impulse of recent critics to identify Wilde as a martyr rather than merely a victim of repression is at root, perhaps, a recognition of the perverse agency he exercised in bringing about his own death. It is equivalent to differentiating between the burning death of a wartime civilian and the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk; both figures are recognizable as victims, but only the latter encrypts defiance in

his death.

In turn, the difficulty with identifying Wilde as a martyr “to the homosexual cause” specifically is that it seems to contain his art, much as Queensberry's defense sought to, within the confines of his sexuality. His “queer” defiance is better understood as exemplary of the program of poisonousness and lying he advocated; his rebellion against Queensberry's public attack was not simply an objection to the public humiliation of being labeled a sodomite but the containment of his art and affect as merely “sodomitical,” as imitating *anything* real, and therefore as being inartistic. Going to trial, Wilde sought to defend the extensibility and paradoxical suspensefulness of his work, to insist on its inexplicability in any terms but its own. He sought to defend his art against becoming-realistic, or, alternately, to extend its artfulness ahead of an encroaching realism, rather than to render his “real” self in some way rhetorically or artfully palatable.

The question of his success on this point, with regards to his family at least, can easily be answered. When Merlin Holland writes that he continued, for decades, to expand his father's archive on the public trials and humiliations of homosexuals, we are moved by the depths of the family's tragedy, by the impact of Wilde's exposure even on grandchildren who never knew him. When he notes that he also extended the archive's scope, “adding cuttings that dealt with prejudice rather than imprisonment, as well as another element which seemed just as relevant – high-profile libel cases” (xv), it is hard not to hear Wilde's voice, muted and encrypted, asking to hear a new spin on his own story. Merlin Holland's modification of his father's archive placed him in dialog with not only his father but his grandfather, and attests, alongside all of the continued critical and aesthetic interest in Wilde's art and life, to the continued ability of Oscar

Wilde to pose new questions and tell outrageous new lies.

Oscar Wilde's death was real, personal, and tragic. It was also, like the deaths of so many fictional and non-fictional characters in the fin de siècle, a public and suicidal blast with “no designated killees.” It refused to make sense, and it sensationally dramatized the widespread public feeling that nothing else seemed to, either. In doing so, it suggested, outrageously, that neither the future nor the past was the way forward.

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