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Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 106, No. 5 (Oct., 1991), pp. 1094-1105

Published by: Modern Language Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/462682>

Accessed: 14-01-2016 12:29 UTC

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The Counterdiscourse of the Feminine in Three Texts by Wilde, Huysmans, and Sacher-Masoch

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AN IMAGINARY identification with the feminine permeates much of the writing of the male European avant-garde in the late nineteenth century, a period in which gender norms were being protested and redefined from a variety of standpoints. This “feminization” of literature, exemplified in a destabilization of traditional models of male bourgeois identity, was linked to an emerging self-conscious aestheticism that set itself in opposition to realist and naturalist conventions.¹ Seeking to expose the seemingly natural features of the dominant culture as simulacra, the male artist drew upon stylistic and thematic motifs codified as feminine, thereby challenging both sexual and textual norms. Thus a complex array of alignments and contradictions among the structures of gender, class, and commodity culture both shaped and constrained the contestatory “textual politics” of the fin de siècle cult of art and artifice.

The feminization of male avant-garde texts was, of course, only one of the ways in which gender identities were being reconstituted during the period. Most obviously, feminist movements in various European countries were becoming increasingly vocal in their organized demands that women be allowed access to the public sphere. Indeed, late-nineteenth-century discourses often linked the feminized aesthete and the New Woman, twin symbols of the “decadence” of the age and focal points of contemporary anxiety about changing gender roles. Yet one can debate the assumption—shared by a number of present-day critics—that this early-modernist appropriation of metaphors of femininity was aligned with the feminist project. I hope to show, to the contrary, that the parodic subversion of gender norms reinscribes more insistently the divisions that the text ostensibly calls into question, revealing deep-seated anxieties about both gender and class in the strenuous repudiation of a vulgar and sentimental aesthetic.

I explore this logic through an analysis of three prose texts: *Against the Grain (A rebours)*, by J. K. Huysmans (1884); *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde (1890); and *Venus in Furs (Venus im Pelz)*, by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1870). The first two are often yoked together as exemplary illustrations of decadent and aestheticist trends in the French and English fin de siècle, while Sacher-Masoch's work, although widely translated and known in Europe in the 1870s and 1880s, has been largely ignored by literary historians and read primarily for its clinical interest as one of the first detailed representations of male masochistic fantasy. All three texts, however, share a number of distinctive stylistic and thematic motifs that can be drawn out through comparative analysis. Each bears witness to the artist's sense of alienation from dominant social structures and his own class identity, an alienation that in turn affects his literary representation of gender. Yet the preoccupation with femininity in late-nineteenth-century writing should not therefore be seen as epiphenomenal, deflecting attention from latent but fundamental antagonisms of class. On the contrary, a feminist reading casts another light on recent leftist interpretations of the nineteenth-century avant-garde as the self-critique of modernity, as the articulation of a counterdiscourse of symbolic resistance to the commodification and technical rationality of modern capitalism (see, e.g., Terdiman, my source for the term *counterdiscourse*). Without denying the contradictions and tensions in the artistic expressions of a patriarchal culture, such a reading qualifies the adversarial status of early-modernist texts by revealing that their models of male subjectivity are intimately connected to, rather than at odds with, the espousal of a self-reflexive and parodistic aesthetic.

Naomi Schor has pointed out the long-standing and often pejorative association of femininity with ornamentation and detail in Western culture. Further elaboration is required, however, to explain the specific late-nineteenth-century nexus among femininity, decadence, and a self-consciously decorative and antirealist aesthetic. Such an association is by no means self-evident, since the equation of women with the natural and the organic is well established in bourgeois ideology.

In Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, for instance, woman is nostalgically identified with a harmonious plenitude, exemplifying a sphere of organic community that compensates man for the alienating experience of modernity (Brenkman 214). There is a clear difference between this set of symbolic configurations, which remains influential throughout the nineteenth century, and the later identification of femininity with artifice, exhaustion, and decadence. Whereas in sentimental and early Romantic literature the feminine is linked with an expressive aesthetic, providing a vehicle for the cultivation and articulation of feeling, in the late nineteenth century it also becomes associated with aestheticism, parody, and the preoccupation with surface and style. Femininity is now appropriated by the male artist as emblematic of the modern, rather than as standing in opposition to it.

In the three novels under discussion, this motif is exemplified most obviously in the explicitly feminized male protagonists, who are identified with love of artifice, excess, and everything unnatural. Significantly, each is an aristocrat and thus a figure outside the cycle of production and the male bourgeois ethos of individual achievement; in *Venus in Furs*, for example, the hero, Severin, defines himself as "nothing but a dilettante . . . an amateur in life" 'nichts weiter, als ein Dilettant . . . ein Dilettant im Leben' (152; 14). Renouncing the struggle for active self-realization in the world, the aesthete displays traits the dominant ideologies of his day identified with women: passivity, languidness, vanity, hypersensitivity, a love of fashion and ornamentation. Spending much of his time in an interior, private space codified as feminine rather than in the public sphere of work and politics, he devotes himself to the cultivation of style and to the appreciation of life as an aesthetic phenomenon. None of these men considers himself an artist; the Romantic myth of the creative genius has become exhausted, and aesthetic pleasure is now located in consumption, in the exercise of taste through the collection and enjoyment of beautiful objects. Given the bourgeois encoding of production as masculine and consumption as feminine, this inclination accentuates the aesthete's feminized status. So too does his fascination with

the decorative as well as the “high” arts: the exercise of style manifests itself in his delight in the details of decor and costume, and the evocation of elaborately furnished interiors and glamorous fashions plays an important part in all three texts. Such concerns were of course more usually associated with the middle-class woman, who, while denied the possibility of creating great art, was encouraged to exercise her aesthetic sense in decorating herself and the interior of the bourgeois household (Saisselin).

Against the Grain, for example, details the aesthetic experiments of the jaded aristocrat des Esseintes, the last scion of a family marked by a progressive “effemination” of its male members. Huysmans’s protagonist abandons Parisian society to pursue the isolated cultivation of refined and artificial pleasures: almost the entire text is committed to descriptions of his collections of esoteric and exotic objects d’art; his fastidious discriminations among colors, fabrics, and styles of furnishings; and his elaborate experiments with liqueurs and perfumes. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde depicts the aesthete of English high society, for whom “[l]ife itself [is] the first, the greatest, of the arts” and who share des Esseintes’s contempt for vulgar bourgeois social norms. The dandy, the prototype of both des Esseintes and Dorian Gray, devotes himself to the production of the self as an aesthetic artifact; he is the ultimate representative of fashion, the embodiment of what Wilde, following Baudelaire, calls the “absolute modernity of beauty” (160). Like woman and like the work of art, the dandy can be perceived in aestheticist doctrine as quite useless; exalting appearance over essence, decoration over function, he voices a protest against prevailing bourgeois values that associate masculinity with rationality, industry, utility, and thrift. The dandy’s transformation of the self into a work of art is symbolized by Dorian, who assumes the qualities of his own portrait; enclosed within an invisible frame that separates him from the continuum of history, he presents an image of static and unchanging physical perfection. An “excessively developed aestheticism” ‘auf das Höchste getriebener Schönheitssinn’ also characterizes the hero of *Venus in Furs* (175; 39), causing him to flee modern society in order to worship the ideal,

embodied in the imperious Countess Wanda. Severin is both feminized and infantilized in his role as slave; whipped and humiliated by his mistress, he must listen to her taunt: “you are not a man” ‘du bist kein Mann’ (192; 57). Sacher-Masoch’s text depicts the ritualistic enactment of an elaborately staged and costumed erotic drama; life is made art through a highly stylized and deliberately anachronistic relationship between mistress and masochistic slave that constantly comments on its own status as performance.

The narcissistic dimension of the feminized male is epitomized most clearly in *Dorian Gray*, whose androgynous qualities are evoked in descriptions of his scarlet lips, golden hair, and eternal youth. If, as Rachel Bowlby points out, his yearning to retain the flawless and ageless qualities of his own portrait uncannily preempts the narcissistic fantasies inspired by the dreamworld of contemporary advertising (“*Dorian Gray*” 152), this trait also accentuates his feminized status, since it is, above all, images of women that circulate in commodity culture as objects of identification and desire. Moreover, Dorian’s preoccupation with the portrait carries broader resonances in symbolizing the construction of identity through representation. He only begins to develop a sense of self-consciousness after viewing his idealized image in the painting by his friend, the artist Basil Hallward: “A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time. . . . The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation” (48). As Ed Cohen argues in a reading that draws implicitly on the Lacanian theory of the mirror stage: “Looking on his completed portrait for the first time, Dorian encounters himself as reflected in the ‘magical mirror’ of Basil’s desire. This image organizes the disparate perceptions of his body into an apparently self-contained whole and reorients Dorian in relation both to his own identity and to his social context” (808).

The point here, then, is that Dorian’s narcissism, as exemplified in his fascination with a self-image generated by another’s desire, relates to the novel’s more general emphasis on the textual mediation of identity. The figure of *Dorian Gray* is in fact explicitly defined as a product of various textual influences—Hallward’s painting, the “evil

book,” Wotton’s aphorisms—and Wilde’s text constantly calls into question the distinction between original and copy, the real Dorian Gray and the imitation. With identity revealed as artifice and rendered indeterminate and unstable, Romantic notions of the organic subject are undermined: “Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities” (174). Similarly, des Esseintes in *Against the Grain* aspires to a completely artificial existence, where experience can be translated into style. In his secluded retreat, he can simulate the austere severity of a monastery cell through a skillful combination of fabrics and furnishings, without the necessity for either physical hardship or religious conviction. A judicious selection of images, smells, and objects replicates in his own dining room the sensations of a maritime voyage, precluding any need for actual travel. For Huysmans’s hero, techniques of illusion and artifice, made possible through a combination of aesthetic sophistication and technological expertise, have conspired to make nature itself anachronistic.

Thus the blurring of gender roles evident in the texts under discussion forms part of a larger destabilization of conceptions of authenticity within a society whose cultural expressions are increasingly shaped by commodity aesthetics and the logic of technological reproduction. The fin de siècle preoccupation with style and appearance underlines the aestheticization of everyday life, the mediation of experience and identity through the consumption of mass-produced images, texts, and commodities that renders any appeal to a true self merely another fiction. “Being natural is simply a pose” (Wilde 26). This insistence on the artificiality of the real can thus be read as a critical response to the presentation of bourgeois values and beliefs as rooted in an organic and unchanging reality. The authority of nature is exposed as nothing but art, reality as simulation—an insight that contains an emancipatory moment in its recognition that identity is constructed and hence changeable. At the same time, the aesthete’s preference for art over nature carries with it, as I hope to show, another, more problematic meaning in relation to gender politics.

One of the most common ways to signal gender ambiguity is in the sphere of sexuality, and these texts explore a variety of sexual roles and options: male masochism, homosexuality, transvestism, voyeurism, and fetishism. Des Esseintes, for example, reminisces about his own infatuation with a sturdy athletic American acrobat called Miss Urania, an erotic attraction linked to his perception of her latent masculinity. In the grips of this desire, “he presently arrived at the conclusion that, on his side, he was himself getting nearer and nearer the female type” ‘il en vint à éprouver, de son côté, l’impression que lui-même se féminisait,’ that he was “craving for her as an anaemic young girl will for some great, rough Hercules whose arms can crush her to a jelly in their embrace” ‘aspirant ainsi qu’une fillette chlorotique, après le grossier hercule dont les bras la peuvent broyer dans une étreinte’ (98; 211). This desire to be dominated by a woman is associated with the thrill of perversity, the defiant exploration of “unnatural” and artificial pleasures. The Romantic yearning for unmediated pleasure, beyond symbolization, is radically undermined in these late-nineteenth-century texts; desire, instead of being repressed by the constraints of the symbolic order, is constituted through it. The aestheticization of the erotic is particularly apparent in *Venus in Furs*, where sexual desire is generated and mediated through diverse forms of textuality: letters, contracts, books, paintings, statues, and elaborate theatrical rituals. As Gilles Deleuze observes, it is not the sexual act that is portrayed as exciting but the elaborately posed image of the fur-clad woman: “The woman torturer freezes into postures that identify her with a statue, a painting or a photograph. She suspends her gestures in the act of bringing down the whip or removing her furs; her movement is arrested as she turns to look at herself in a mirror” (33). In a suggestive reading of Sacher-Masoch’s work, Deleuze establishes a number of links between the formal logic of the texts and their defining theme of male passivity and masochism. In *Venus in Furs* the fetishistic fixation on costumes, the ritualized representation of static erotic tableaux, derives from the pleasures of suspense, waiting, and disavowal in the masochistic fantasy, which, as Deleuze convincingly argues, differs funda-

mentally from sadism in its self-conscious and contemplative aestheticism.

Deleuze's reading offers a psychoanalytic explanation of Sacher-Masoch's art, but it is also clear that the distinctive textual features of *Venus in Furs* are historically overdetermined and that the late nineteenth century saw a proliferation of works linking the realm of the aesthetic to passive, feminized male subjects. One of the most obvious factors contributing to this phenomenon was the symbolic polarization of science and art through gender dualisms drawn from the division of private and public spheres; in the social imaginary, the aesthetic became increasingly feminized in relation to the "objectivity" and "rationality" of a scientific worldview. Both art and women could be seen as decorative, functionless, linked to the world of appearance and illusion and divorced from the work ethic and the reality principle. As Saisselin notes, "The realm of art was the realm of women; it answers to the feminine principle while the battle of the streets exemplifies the male principle" (67). This feminization of the aesthetic ran parallel to the aestheticization of women, evident in the expansion of consumerism, the "democratization of luxury" resulting from the establishment of the department store and the increasing importance placed on women's fashion and display as conspicuous consumption (Bowlby, *Just Looking*). At the same time, health, nationalism, and masculinity became closely intertwined in the late-nineteenth-century imagination; the motif of the feminized male thus came to function as a symbol of decadence that could be counterposed against models of bourgeois optimism and progress. While contemporary reviewers criticized *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for its unmanliness and "effeminate frivolity" (Gagnier 59), self-identified decadents found "man . . . growing more refined, more feminine, more divine" (Mosse 44). Both acolytes and critics of decadence and aestheticism drew on a common vocabulary of such binary oppositions as normal/abnormal, natural/unnatural, masculine/feminine, healthy/diseased; though disdaining the rationalist claims of science, aestheticism was nevertheless deeply suffused by its organicist and pathological metaphors and by Darwinian notions of evolutionary development.

Thus the distinctive features of late-nineteenth-century aestheticism—the decomposition of "organic" narrative into detail, the preference for exotic and perverse subject matter over social realism, the acute linguistic self-consciousness—could be condemned by writers like Max Nordau as a cultural symptom of a pervasive degeneration and hysteria. For supporters, however, the very modernity of aestheticism lay, paradoxically, in proclaiming the exhaustion of the modern, in rejecting middle-class ideals of reason, progress, and industrious masculinity and defiantly celebrating perversity.

This refusal of history and of the concomitant mimetic claims and sociopolitical concerns of realist aesthetics manifests itself formally in a spatial and atemporal structure through which literature seeks to approach the condition of painting. Description takes precedence over narration; movement and action give way to an at times claustrophobic sense of immobility and ahistoricity; and the aestheticist text reveals a self-reflexive preoccupation with the surface of language, with the grain and texture of the word. *Against the Grain*, for example, can be seen as one of the first modernist novels, a text that is, notoriously, "without a plot" (Wilde 156) and that is structured around fetishistic, quasi-pornographic descriptions of works of art, bibelots, and interior furnishings. Huysmans's fascination with the materiality of language, which is at one point likened to a decaying carcass and at another to precious metals, enamels, and jewels, is reflected in a self-consciously decadent style of sinuous distortions and exotic references that aspires to material opacity. *Venus in Furs* follows a dreamlike logic of association—dreams in fact play a crucial role in the text—and imitates the qualities of the uncanny, fantastic, and ahistorical images it constantly evokes. As the text's geographical and temporal vagueness suggests, its true locus is the imagination of the fantasizing subject, resulting in the ritualistic and self-referential logic of constantly repeating the same images of the cruel woman. Sacher-Masoch's formulaic style, its reliance on cliché and stereotype, causes language to become solidified and unreal and hence to undermine any putative ref-

erential dimension (Lenzer 295). *Dorian Gray* remains closest to the conventions of realistic narrative and Victorian melodrama; yet here too an acute linguistic self-consciousness manifests itself in elaborate descriptions, in parodies and borrowings from such texts as *Against the Grain* and Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, and above all in the aphorisms and paradoxes that implicitly subvert the novel's ostensible moral ending (for more extensive discussion, see Bowlby, "Dorian Gray"). Thus all three texts replicate in various ways the feminine preference for form over function, for style over history, that characterizes their languid heroes.

Accordingly, it can be argued, the topos of the feminine serves a specific function in the counterdiscourse of late-nineteenth-century literature, signaling a formal as well as a thematic refusal of an entire cluster of values associated with bourgeois masculinity: the narrative of history as progress, the valorization of function over form, the sovereignty of the reality principle. From an antinaturalist standpoint, gender, as one of the central categories of social and symbolic organization, provides a key terrain on which to challenge dominant definitions of the real. Feminine traits, when adopted by a man, are defamiliarized, placed in quotation marks, recognized as free-floating signifiers rather than as natural, God-given, and immutable attributes. Defamiliarization through quotation in an incongruous context is of course the defining characteristic of parody, and the relation between parody and male femininity here assumes the form of a dialectic. If the hero's preoccupation with style, quotation, and linguistic play testifies to his femininity, so in turn his mimicry of femininity confirms the authority of a parodistic worldview. The feminized male deconstructs conventional oppositions between the "modern" bourgeois man and the "natural" domestic woman; he is male, yet disassociated from masculine rationality, utility, and progress; feminine, yet profoundly unnatural. Whether hailed as subversive or condemned as pathological, his femininity signifies an unsettling of automatized perceptions of gender, whereas feminine qualities in a woman merely confirm her incapacity to escape her natural condition. Krafft-Ebing, for example, claims that maso-

chism can only be seen as a true perversion in men, for nature has given women "an instinctive inclination to voluntary subordination" (Dijkstra 101). The semiotic significance of feminine characteristics is, in other words, fundamentally altered when appropriated by the male aesthete.

It is not surprising that some critics have related this antinaturalist strain in nineteenth-century aestheticism to the interests of contemporary poststructuralist theory. Deleuze, for instance, suggests that the masochistic fantasy functions as a form of demystification, revealing the absurdity of the law through techniques of exaggeration and humor (88). Jonathan Dollimore argues similarly that Wilde's "transgressive aesthetic" is intimately related to a transgressive sexuality, constituting a radical subversion of organicist ideals of the authentic and natural self.² Yet while the texts of Wilde, Huysmans, and Sacher-Masoch subvert established distinctions between art and life, nature and culture, masculinity and femininity, this very process can reveal an investment in the creation and maintenance of new boundaries. Just as class identity is not transcended by the counterdiscourse of the avant-garde, so too is gendered subjectivity implicated in, rather than dissolved by, the espousal of a self-reflexive and parodistic consciousness.

The logic of exclusion operative in an aestheticist or decadent work centers on the repudiation of vulgarity, which is defined as explicitly antithetical to the text's own literary project. Wilde's aristocrat Henry Wotton refers to "an age so limited and vulgar as our own" (60) and speaks dismissively of "vulgar realism in literature" (231). Severin describes his own disgust, "for everything base, common and ugly" 'gegen alles Niedere, Gemeine, Unschöne' (174; 38). Des Esseintes condemns "the vulgar reality of actual, prosaic facts" 'la vulgaire réalité des faits' (20; 105) and defines his aesthetic preferences in explicit opposition to the coarseness of popular taste:

[T]he work of art that has appealed to the sham connoisseurs, that is admired by the uncritical, that is not content to rouse the enthusiasm of only a chosen few, becomes for this very reason, in the eyes of the elect, a thing polluted, commonplace, almost repulsive. (96)

[L]’oeuvre d’art qui ne demeure pas indifférente aux faux artistes, qui n’est point contestée par les sots, qui ne se contente pas de susciter l’enthousiasme de quelques-uns, devient, elle aussi, par cela même, pour les initiés, polluée, banale, presque repoussante. (207)

The parodistic consciousness freely subverts a number of oppositions, including, as I have shown, traditional distinctions between masculinity and femininity; this act of subversion, however, both presumes and reinforces a primary division between the refined and the vulgar, a division that separates the self-conscious aesthete from the common and sentimental herd, which is by definition incapable of this kind of irony. This metadistinction is, in other words, simultaneously aesthetic and political; it affirms the superiority of a particular interpretative mode (self-conscious, antiutilitarian, ironic) that is in turn inflected by class and gender interests. In holding vulgarity in contempt, the aesthete voices a protest against the materialism, hypocrisy, and conventionality of bourgeois culture; viewed from another angle, however (the two readings are not of course mutually exclusive), this act of negation expresses an elitist disdain for the non-intellectual majority, who are perceived to adhere unthinkingly to a naive and nonparodic aesthetic. In this context, women and the masses are often blurred together as symbols of the democratizing vulgarity of modern life, embodying a murky and ill-defined contaminating influence that threatens the precarious superiority of the artist. As Andreas Huyssen has shown, the vanguard consciousness of male modernism has historically grounded itself in a gendering of mass culture as feminine and inferior, exemplifying a kitsch and sentimental aesthetic antithetical to the self-conscious and ironic experimentalism of high art (44–64).

Thus the male aesthete’s playful subversion of gender norms, his adoption of feminine traits, paradoxically reinforces his distance from and elevation above women, who are by nature incapable of such intellectual mobility and aesthetic sophistication. This hierarchization is apparent in the texts under discussion. On the one hand, Rachel Bowlby suggests the late-nineteenth-cen-

tury aesthete foreshadows the replacement of the ascetic bourgeois of early capitalism by a “feminized” and narcissistic subject engendered by a mass-culture society of image consumption (*Just Looking*). Yet, on the other hand, this feminized aesthete takes great pains to define himself in explicit opposition to the prototype of the vulgar female consumer. Des Esseintes, for example, is no longer able to gain pleasure from certain objects, like specific kinds of flowers and jewels, that have become sullied by their association with feminine middle-class taste. In his consumption of literature, Huysmans’s hero, “whose mind was naturally sophisticated and unsentimental” ‘qui avait l’âme peu fraîche et qui était peu sentimental de sa nature’ (137; 266), is unable to tolerate the works of women writers, whose “wretched prattlings” ‘misérables bavardages’ (137; 265) are couched in a style of nauseating triviality. If the aesthete and dandy shares with women an identity as consumer, it becomes imperative for him to signal the superior taste and the qualitative difference of his own aesthetic response. As A. E. Carter has pointed out, decadence differs most significantly from the Romantic tradition in enacting a dual negation, condemning not only a tawdry modern urban culture but also the nostalgic yearning for an idyll of unmediated nature. In this pessimistic vision, women stand for the most despised aspects of both culture and nature, exemplifying the crass vulgarity and emptiness of modern bourgeois society (woman as archetypal consumer) as well as a natural sentimentality coded as specific to women, an inclination to outpourings of uncontrolled feeling that threaten the disengaged stance of the male aesthete.

Thus the dandy, in pursuit of uniqueness through the narcissistic cult of self, sees women as exemplifying the uniformity and standardization of modern life that he most abhors. Des Esseintes reflects on these qualities in the prostitutes he has known: “all, like so many automata wound up at the same time with the same key, uttered in the same tone the same invitations, lavished the same smiles, talked in the same silly phrases, indulged in the same absurd reflexions” ‘toutes, pareilles à des automates remontés à la fois par la même clef, lançaient du même ton les

mêmes invites, débitaient avec le même sourire les mêmes propos biscornus, les mêmes réflexions baroques' (162; 299). Similarly, Dorian Gray explains his passion for Sybil Vane by contrasting the glamour of the actress with the mundaneness of ordinary women: "They are limited to their century. No glamour ever transfigures them. One knows their minds as easily as one knows their bonnets. One can always find them. There is no mystery in any of them. . . . They have their stereotyped smile, and their fashionable manner. They are quite obvious" (76). In both examples, the superficiality and interchangeability of women symbolize an abstract identity and an economy of sameness, an all-pervasive disenchantment of the world in which sexuality, like art, has been deprived of its aura, contaminated by the rationalization of everyday life.

Yet while such descriptions emphasize the mechanical, depersonalized, and ultimately soulless quality of modern femininity, women are simultaneously seen to embody the "innate folly" 'bêtise innée' of their sex (7; 86), a natural and excessive emotionality antithetical to the controlled consciousness of the aesthete. *Dorian Gray*, for example, includes frequent jibes about women's tiresome sentimentality, their subjection to feelings beyond their control. "Women . . . lived on their emotions. They only thought of their emotions" (120). The point is echoed by Wanda in *Venus in Furs*: "In spite of all the advances of civilization, woman has remained as she was the day Nature's hands shaped her. . . . Man, even when he is selfish or wicked, lives by principles; woman only obeys her feelings" 'Das Weib ist eben, trotz allen Fortschritten der Zivilisation, so geblieben, wie es aus der Hand der Natur hervorgegangen ist . . . so folgt der Mann, auch wenn selbstsüchtig, wenn er böswillig ist, stets Prinzipien, das Weib aber folgt immer nur Regungen' (192; 57). Severin's memories of his youth reveal a clearly established chain of associations linking vulgarity, women, and the fear of sexual and emotional intimacy: "When I first began to think about love, it seemed to my raw adolescent's eyes particularly crude and vulgar; I avoided all contact with the fair sex" 'Als etwas ganze besonders Niederes and Unschönes erschien jedoch dem reifenden Jüngling die Liebe

zum Weibe, so wie sie sich ihm zuerst in ihrer vollen Gewöhnlichkeit zeigte. Ich mied jede Berührung mit dem schönen Geschlechte' (174; 38).

The male aesthete thus explicitly defines his identity in opposition to all womanly inclinations to sentimental excess. Dorian Gray, for example, articulates his desire for mastery over feeling: "A man who is master of himself can end a sorrow as easily as he can invent a pleasure. I don't want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them" (138). In this yearning for self-sufficiency and control, the aestheticist standpoint demonstrates its underlying identity with the rationalist, scientific worldview against which it defines itself. Thus Henry Wotton's purely aesthetic appreciation of life is compared, in its disinterestedness and detachment, to the experimental method of science and the dissecting gaze of the surgeon:

He had been always enthralled by the methods of natural science, but the ordinary subject-matter of that science had seemed to him trivial and of no import. And so he had begun by vivisectioning himself, as he had ended by vivisectioning others. . . . What matter what the cost was? One could never pay too high a price for any sensation. (82–83)

In a similar fashion, des Esseintes positions himself as an ironic and detached observer, not only of his own inner psychological processes but of the lives of others, which under his weary scrutiny seem nothing more than badly plotted and cliché-ridden works of art.

In this context Baudelaire's assertion that the artist "stems only from himself" (Berman 156) can be read as symptomatic of a general repression of infantile dependency and emotional connectedness, a repression implicit in the ideology of the self-sufficient male bourgeois subject and echoed essentially unchanged in the disengaged sensibility of the detached aesthete. This fear of emotional ties as a potential threat to autonomous subjectivity suggests deeper anxieties about sexuality and the body; a sublimating impulse is apparent in the fantasy of transcending a sexual and mortal body associated with putrefaction and decay. The theme is evident in *Against the Grain*, where, as Rodolphe Gasché notes, des Esseintes

lives against nature as a means of transcending nature, “to achieve a purity independent from the senses, and, thus, a life of spirituality exclusively concerned with simulacra of nature in the shape of artefacts, memories or essences” (195). A similar desire to escape the limitations of the body reveals itself in the aestheticization of Dorian Gray, his transformation into an unblemished icon that defies—if only temporarily—the “hideousness of age” and the reality of his own mortal condition (153). Sacher-Masoch’s apparently erotic texts are also paradoxically preoccupied with asceticism, embodying an aspiration to the ideal by spiritualizing the senses and transcending the flesh. In all three novels the fascination with the trappings of religious ritual reflects a deeper allegiance to a Christian conception of nature as fundamentally base and corrupt, with art now taking on the sublimating function previously ascribed to religion.³

Such anxieties about sexuality, of course, are frequently projected onto women, so that the female body functions as a primary symbolic site for confronting and controlling the threat of an unruly nature. If the dandy and the aesthete aspire to the ideal, then women, according to the dualisms of nineteenth-century thought, represent materiality and corporeality, the “triumph of matter over mind” (Wilde 72). In the same way that the “objectivity” of scientific discourse relies, as feminist theorists have shown, on metaphors of subjugating and dominating a feminized nature, so too the disinterested contemplation of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon conceals a subtext of anxiety and repressed violence. Calinescu’s description of des Esseintes’s aestheticism as a “violation of nature,” a consuming desire to “thwart, chastise and finally *humiliate* nature” (172), hints at the psychosexual aggression underlying the persistent association of women and nature in late-nineteenth-century writing. Charles Bernheimer identifies obsessive fear of the female body as an insistent subtext in Huysmans’s work and detects castration anxiety in the association of female sexuality with pervasive corruption and decay. Huysmans’s preoccupation with artifice in both the style and the content of his writing, Bernheimer argues, is intimately related to this concern; the creation and

manipulation of simulacra offer the illusion of control, operating as a form of sublimation by denying the organic, that is, the female body (“Huysmans”).⁴

This insight is confirmed in the texts under discussion, where a self-conscious aestheticism reifies the female body. The overt fetishism evident in *Venus in Furs*, bearing witness to the “sex-appeal of the inorganic” (Benjamin 166), erases the materiality of the naked female body to relocate erotic excitement in an exotic apparatus of whips, furs, and elaborate costumes. The idealization of the “cold, cruel beloved” requires her decorporealization, since she symbolizes the divine law in relation to the male aspiration to transcendence through martyrdom (a function underlined by the biblical epigraph to *Venus in Furs*: “The Lord hath smitten him by the hand of a woman” ‘Gott hat ihn gestraft und hat ihn in eines Weibes Hände gegeben’ [143; 5]). In the dreamlike structure of the novel, the body of the cruel mistress frequently merges into the image of a white statue made of marble or stone, offering a clear example of what Buci-Glucksmann describes as “the masculine desire to immobilize, to *petrify* the feminine body” (“Utopia” 224). Thus a symptomatic double strategy of projection and denial manifests itself with particular clarity in Sacher-Masoch’s narrative. Woman is identified with the primitive, uncontrollable forces of nature—“She is like a wild animal, faithful or faithless, kindly or cruel, depending on the impulse that rules her” ‘es hat den Charakter des *Wilden*, welcher sich treu und treulos, großmütig und grausam zeigt, je nach der Regung, die ihn gerade beherrscht’ (192; 57)—yet at the same time she is aestheticized, so that the threat of the natural is negated by being turned into art; the female body is transformed into a visually pleasing play of surfaces and textures under the scrutiny of the male gaze. Whereas in *Venus in Furs* woman is frozen into a painting or statue, Dorian Gray and Henry Wotton prefer to reduce the actress Sybil Vane to a collection of dramatic performances, a collection of texts acknowledged to be more real than the performer herself: “The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died” (133).

Against the Grain also offers numerous examples of such reification techniques. In one notorious passage, des Esseintes reflects on man's creation of the locomotive as an achievement superior to nature's creation of woman, describing one railroad engine as "an adorable blonde, shrill-voiced, slender-waisted, with her glittering corset of polished brass, her supple catlike grace" "une adorable blonde, à la voix aiguë, à la grande taille frêle, emprisonnée dans un étincelant corset de cuivre, au souple et nerveux allongement de chatte" (22–23; 108), and another as "a massively built, dark-browed brunette, of harsh, hoarse-toned utterance, with thick-set loins" "une monumentale et sombre brune aux cris sourds et rauques, aux reins trapus" (23; 109). This blurring of the distinction between machine and woman is a recurring motif in nineteenth-century writing; as Huyssen suggests, in the image of the woman as machine the bourgeois desire for control over nature through technological invention meshes with the male libidinal fantasy of creating and hence controlling woman, thus depriving her of her otherness (70–72). At this juncture, *Against the Grain* establishes a clear link between des Esseintes's love of artifice, as "the distinctive mark of human genius" 'la marque distinctive du génie de l'homme' (22; 107), and his contempt for a nature explicitly identified with and represented by woman.

From this perspective, it becomes possible to understand the emblematic significance of certain "deviant" female figures in the literature of the nineteenth-century European avant-garde. The prostitute has fascinated numerous male writers, from Büchner to Baudelaire to the German naturalists, because as a blatant embodiment of the commercialization of sexuality she can symbolize the commodification of the artist in the marketplace. Her extensive use of fashion and cosmetics underscores the artificiality of conventional gender roles, exaggerating femininity to the level of parody, and in her dual role as seller and commodity she is seen to expose and subvert the hypocrisy of the bourgeois ideology of romantic love. For similar reasons, the actress can represent the modern; "a creature of show, an object of public pleasure" (Baudelaire 36), she owes her allure to the distance between her and the spec-

tator, attesting the power of image, illusion, and publicity to generate desire. The figure of the cosmetic, artificial woman is easily appropriated to the cause of a textualist philosophy, confirming a perception of existence as performance and parody, as an acting of multiple roles, while her ambiguous social position makes her attractive to artists in revolt against bourgeois mores. In the Baudelairean text this identification extends to the lesbian and the androgyne, "heroines of modernity" who, in their rejection of feminine roles closely identified with reproduction, can be linked to the decadent's cause in a common refusal of nature and bourgeois respectability (Buci-Glucksmann, *Raison* 129–34).

Unlike the dandy, however, women themselves lack the ironic self-consciousness that their presence inspires in others. They embody artifice naively, as it were, without being able to raise it to the level of philosophical reflection: women "are charmingly artificial, but they have no sense of art" (Wilde 131). Wotton's aperçu is emphatically vindicated in the Sybil Vane episode of *Dorian Gray*. Having become infatuated with the actress after seeing her in a variety of roles, Dorian Gray is half aware that his passion is inspired by the multiple identities of her performances rather than by any interest in the history and identity of the performer. In contrast, Sybil Vane herself, on learning of his adulation, loses all interest in her acting, which she now decries as false and illusory, and reverts to a sentimental aesthetic of romantic love grounded in an ingenuous belief in the authentic subject. As a result, of course, her erotic appeal is eradicated, and Dorian's abandonment of her and her subsequent suicide provide an appropriately melodramatic conclusion. So too, des Esseintes's hopes of experiments in erotic perversity with the athletic Miss Urania end in disappointment when, unlike the male aesthete, she proves unable to transgress the limits of her own gender:

He had pictured the pretty American athlete to be as stolid and brutal as the strong man at a fair, but her stupidity, alas! was purely feminine in its nature . . . all the childish weaknesses of a woman were there in full force; she had all the love of chatter and finery that marks the sex specially given up to triv-

ialities; any such thing as a transmutation of masculine ideas into her feminine person was a pure figment of the imagination. (99)

Il s'était imaginé l'Américaine, stupide et bestiale comme un lutteur de foire, et sa bêtise était malheureusement toute féminine . . . tous les sentiments enfantins de la femme subsistaient en elle; elle possédait le caquet et la coquetterie des filles entichées de balivernes; les transmutations des idées masculines dans son corps de femme n'existait pas. (212)

Women's association with performance thus does not signal any deeper commitment to or comprehension of a parodistic vision; women are "sphinxes without secrets" (Wilde 235), their enigmatic aura purely superficial, exemplifying conventionality without aesthetic self-consciousness. The female character who comes closest to attaining the ironic detachment of the aesthete is Wanda in *Venus in Furs* when she acts the part of the cruel mistress whom Severin yearns to have dominate him "in a serene and fully conscious manner" 'ruhig und selbstbewußt' (163; 26). Yet she, too, continually lapses out of her role and needs his guidance and instruction to fulfill its requirements. Thus, while the text ostensibly places the man in the role of victim, it is his desire that in fact controls the fantasy: the tormenting woman functions as his double or reflection, speaking the words he wishes to hear (Deleuze 22). The demonic femme fatale of the late-nineteenth-century cultural imagination is revealed as a projection of male fantasy; the writer's identification with the "deviant" woman denies her identity and agency in the very process of idealizing her. The narcissistic vision of the aesthete negates the possibility of female self-consciousness; women can only function as the other of a male subject, a stimulus to his pursuit of the ideal. The representations of despotic, phallic women that permeate the literature and art of the period (Salomé, Judith, Delilah) can be seen in this context as yet another facet of the anxiety with which the male European intelligentsia responded to contemporary debates about the "woman question" and the increasing urgency of feminist demands.

The appeal to the feminine in late-nineteenth-century writing entails a fundamental ambiguity; underlying the apparent subversion of gender norms is a persistent identification of women with vulgarity, corporeality, and the tyranny of nature, allowing the male aesthete to define his own identity in explicit opposition to these attributes. Such an analysis in turn throws light on the contradictory and many-sided relation between symbolic and political transgressions: while the cult of aestheticism challenges repressive norms of bourgeois masculinity, it contains a misogynistic dimension that is closely related to, rather than dissolved by, an antirepresentationalism and antinaturalism. The appropriation of femininity as sign through the parodistic citation of gender codes is inextricably intertwined with the denial and repression of woman. In the context of our own "postmodern" fin de siècle, which reveals some striking parallels with its nineteenth-century predecessor, it may be pertinent to consider the potential relevance that aspects of this discussion have for current theoretical and political debates. Is it possible to detect any similarity between the topos of the feminine in late-nineteenth-century modernism and the recent French poststructuralist fascination with woman as a metaphor for subversion—a fascination that is, in at least some instances, accompanied by an explicit disavowal of the vulgar essentialism of feminist thought? My analysis suggests that to dematerialize the natural by insisting on the totalizing claims of the textual may be to echo rather than challenge a long-standing aesthetic tradition that has sought transcendence through a denial and repression of the (female) body.⁵

Notes

⁵To circumvent the need for quotation marks around every occurrence of *feminine* or *femininity*, I should stress from the outset that I use these terms exclusively to refer to a set of ideological configurations, that is, to a cluster of nineteenth-century symbolic associations between the female gender and a specific, though often contradictory, range of psychological and cultural attributes. In this essay, then, they do *not* carry any normative weight in relation to the interests of feminist criticism.

²Dollimore's endorsement of Wilde's "transgressive" aesthetics is related to an interest in theorizing elements of opposition and resistance in the construction of homosexual identities. For obvious reasons, readings of decadent and aestheticist literature that are concerned with the cultural politics of male homosexuality tend to offer a more sympathetic analysis than I do here, although they usually do not deny the misogynistic dimensions of the writings of the period. For further discussion see both Cohen and Mosse.

³This motif is of course already explicit in Baudelaire's celebration of the artificiality of fashion and cosmetics as exemplifying a pursuit of the ideal through the transcendence of nature (see *The Painter of Modern Life*, esp. 31–34).

⁴While Bernheimer's reading is suggestive and persuasive, his concluding comments tend toward a "pathologization" of modernism not essentially dissimilar to Lukács's. Bernheimer, however, appears to identify the female sexual body with the real, as an underlying truth that the male modernist text must work to repress and deny. A more dialectical move, perhaps, might argue that if feminist psychoanalytic theory can illuminate the misogynistic aspects of male modernism, so the linguistic self-consciousness generated by the modernist text can complicate the notion of an underlying source of truth, an organic female body that has been fetishized by the text but that can in principle be represented in its immediacy.

In *Figures of Ill Repute* Bernheimer extends and develops his thesis that the birth of modernism is intimately connected to the fragmentation and disfiguring of the female sexual body (266). He concludes by voicing doubts, not unlike those expressed in my own conclusion, about the political implications of recent theoretical attempts to explain gender difference as "an arbitrary, unstable construction of signs and codes." While appearing to offer "a liberating release from the reductive biologism of the essentialist plot" (273), these attempts may merely reiterate the same displacement of the sexed female body that Bernheimer traces in the texts of early modernism.

⁵I would like to thank Jonathan Culler for bringing Terdiman's *Discourse/Counter-discourse* to my attention. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Society for the Humanities at Cornell University for a fellowship during which I wrote this article. Finally, my thanks go to Ed Cohen, whose critical suggestions helped me clarify some aspects of my argument.

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