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Dorian Gray, Tom Ripley, and the Queer Closet

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Jonathan Alexander and Deborah Meem,
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Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5.4 (2003)
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Abstract: In their paper, "Dorian Gray, Tom Ripley, and the Queer Closet," Jonathan Alexander and Deborah Meem present and portray an imaginary conversation among an impossible but intriguing group of writers, critics, and fictional characters. These individuals speak in their own (published) voices, which are moderated by the author-facilitators and shaped into an extended rumination on art, the *Doppelgänger*, queerness, and literary influence. Through their dialogue, the actors reveal a tradition of the queer novel, running in this case from Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to Patricia Highsmith's five Tom Ripley books, whereby the closet functions simultaneously as refuge from a homophobic world and creative crucible for a queer aesthetics.

Jonathan ALEXANDER and Deborah MEEM

Dorian Gray, Tom Ripley, and the Queer Closet

Deb: We have convened today a number of individuals for an afternoon roundtable. Before we get started with today's topic, let me introduce the dramatis personae whom we will be "playing with" this afternoon: This is Oscar Wilde (1854-1900): known in his day as an aesthete, a maker of epigrams, a dramatist, a flamboyant dandy found guilty in a sensational indecency trial and the author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Since his death, he has become a gay martyr and an icon of gay sensibility. This is Patricia Highsmith (1921-95): writer of suspense novels, an American who lived most of her adult life in Europe. Her first book *Strangers on a Train* (1950) became a hit Hollywood movie, but she is perhaps best known for her five novels featuring Tom Ripley. A closeted lesbian, she also wrote the lesbian novel *The Price of Salt* (1952) under a pseudonym. This is Dorian Gray: a beautiful young man adored by both men and women. Dorian's infatuation with the portrait of himself painted by his admirer and friend Basil Hallward leads him to wish that he might remain young and beautiful while the portrait ages in his place. It is also worth noting that "Dorian" was a late-Victorian code word for "homosexual" and it has long been considered commonplace that part of Dorian's pursuit of pleasure through "multiplying his personality" (and subsequent corruption of his portrait) has to do with his interest in young men. This is Tom Ripley: In *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) he murders his idol Dickie Greenleaf and adopts his identity. Tom is a master of disguises and frequently (and easily) adopts others' identities in the pursuit of his own ends. In the four later novels about him, we learn that Tom has married, but he remains "attracted" to men, often becoming intimately involved with them in various shady dealings. In *Ripley Under Ground* (1970) he commits murder as part of an international art forgery scheme. In *Ripley's Game* (1974) he "recruits" a terminally ill man into a murderous anti-Mafia plot. In *The Boy Who Followed Ripley* (1980) he becomes attached to a teenager who seems to want to learn how Ripley deals with his conscience. Finally, in *Ripley Under Water* (1991) Ripley is harassed and persecuted by quirky neighbors who seem to know all about him. Much of the action of these novels takes place at Belle Ombre, the expatriate Ripley's genteel home in France. Jonathan Alexander and Deb Meem, the controlling consciousnesses of this unlikely drama, are professors at the University of Cincinnati. Other characters will be introduced as they appear. Finally, before we begin we would like to point out that all characters -- fictional and nonfictional, quick and dead -- are (for the most part) speaking in their own words throughout.

Jonathan: At this point, you are probably wondering what all of these varied personages are doing at the same table. Well, both Highsmith's and Wilde's novels describe how their heroes attempt to, in Dorian's words, "multiply their personalities." They are characters who want to be other than what they are. Dorian sees his portrait and almost immediately desires to be, to possess in his own body, its static quality of beauty; he wants to be other than he is -- not the human who will age, grow old, and die, but the lifeless, beautiful portrait. Later, Dorian will experiment in other ways that suggest he is willing to explore the many varied possibilities of being and becoming. Similarly, Tom Ripley falls in love with the charming, rich, and spoiled Dickie Greenleaf, and finds himself slowly mimicking Dickie; eventually, after killing Dickie, he becomes Dickie. As a master of disguises, Tom often takes on the persona of others in the later Ripley novels, and he too, like Dorian, can multiply his personality to great advantage. But the effect begs for interpretation -- even more so when we find that Highsmith has laced her Ripley novels with little Wildean moments, allusions, and even direct references. Are Highmith's novels somehow, then, "Wildean"? If so, what might that mean? And why pursue it? The answer lies partly in our perception that here may lie a "variant" tradition of the novel. But also, as a gay man....

Deb: ... and as a lesbian....

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Jonathan: ... we acknowledge that we have a stake in this project. It is important to us -- personally, politically, and professionally -- to complicate assumptions about the development of literary forms and ideas that elide queer experience. And we see this queer sensibility evolving from Wilde to Highsmith. The dramatic form we have chosen to employ here highlights the juxtaposition of ideas, and also serves to "queer" the discussion generally. With these thoughts in mind, we have convened today our esteemed guests. So, Oscar, Patricia, what attracted you to the idea of a person wanting to be someone else?

Wilde: Obviously, "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth" ("Decay" 164). Indeed, "A mask tells us more than a face" ("Pen" 76).

Highsmith: The only way I can write is to "try to pretend I am not me, that I have no problems, that the past hour or more has not really happened, because I have to think myself into a state of innocence and the absence of worries of any kind in order to work" (*Plotting* 51). Does that make me insincere?

Wilde: Well, I've been accused of insincerity, but "Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities" (*Dorian Gray* 111).

Deb: Both of your characters seem intent on doing just that.

Tom: Being Dickie Greenleaf, "gave [my] existence a peculiar, delicious atmosphere of purity, like that ... which a fine actor probably feels when he plays an important role on a stage with the conviction that the role he is playing could not be played better by anyone else. [I am myself] and yet not [myself.] [I feel] blameless and free" (*Talented* 137).

Dorian: Yes! That's how I felt about Sybil Vane ? at first. "She [was] all the great heroines of the world in one. She [was] more than an individual" (*Dorian Gray* 47).

Jonathan: But we all know that that story ended badly.

Dorian: Ultimately, "She was less real than [the characters she played]" (*Dorian Gray* 82). As I told her, "Without your art, you are nothing" (70).

Tom: At first, I wanted to make Dickie like me "more than anything else in the world" (*Talented* 53). I would try his clothing on in front of a mirror; "It surprised [me] how much [I] looked like Dickie" (79). So I had to become him.

Deb: Yes, and that story ended badly too....

Tom: Not so badly. For me at least. After all it was simply "*wonderful* to sit in a famous café and to think of tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow being Dickie Greenleaf!" (126).

Wilde: Hmm. "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow." Does this mean your story is merely "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"?

Jonathan: Now, now, let's not be too testy with our Shakespeare. After all, Oscar, aren't you famous for saying that "All art is quite useless?" (*Dorian Gray* 4). That doesn't seem too far from "signifying

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nothing." With that in mind, then, what *do* you see as the function of art?

Wilde: "Art [breaks] from the prison-house of realism" ("Decay" 52). "Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms?and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style" (47). I'll tell you a secret: "Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style" (53).

Jonathan: But why, Oscar, would one have to use style to create an "impenetrable barrier"? What are, or were, you trying to hide?

Wilde: Perhaps the truth "that dare not speak its name" (Douglas). That is how "my dear Bosie" put it (*Letters* 131).

Deb: And you, Patricia, what do you think about this? Do you also require an "impenetrable barrier" when writing?

Highsmith: "Writers ... have by nature little in the way of protective shells and try all their lives to remove what they have, since various buffetings and impressions are the material they need to work from. This receptivity, this awareness of life, is an artist's ideal, and takes precedence over all [her] activities and attitudes" (*Plotting* 26).

Wilde: Easy for you to say....

Jonathan: Yes, because you, Patricia, lived and wrote at a time when the traditionally received values were being increasingly called into question. But was it not your choice to remain closeted as a lesbian in a "protective shell" you never removed?

Highsmith: Are you accusing me of sexual deviation? "Where was the sex? Where was the deviation?"

Jonathan: "You're a victim of your own dirty mind" (*Talented* 147).

Tom: I seem to recall using those exact same words when someone once tried to "out" me. But I always kept this in mind: "A sense of security might be a fantasy of sorts, but [isn't] it as real as anything else while it last[s]? What else [is] there? What else [is] happiness but a mental attitude?" (*Game* 748). I always thought, "If you wanted to be cheerful, or melancholic, or wistful, or thoughtful, or courteous, you simply had to *act* those things with every gesture" (*Talented* 193).

Dorian: I agree. "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" (*Dorian Gray* 85).

Deb: You raise issues of fantasy, imagination, and control here -- of using fantasy to control ... what?

Tom: I remember clearly becoming Dickie Greenleaf. When I "began to invent, [my] mind steadied" (*Talented* 254). I was in control. I really felt *out* of control when I had to become myself again; I "hated being nobody, hated putting on [my] old set of habits again, and feeling that people looked down on [me] and were bored with [me] unless [I] put on an act for them like a clown" (192). In fact, having to become Tom Ripley again was "one of the saddest things [I] had ever done in [my] life" (200).

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Dorian: "Perhaps one never seems so much at one's ease as when one has to play a part" (*Dorian Gray* 135). For me, the portrait "had to bear the burden that should have been [my] own" (109). And "there [was] a real pleasure in watching it. ... The portrait [was to me] the most magical of mirrors" (84), because I was immune to the corruption. After all, as my friend, Lord Harry, says, "To become the spectator of one's own life ... is to escape the suffering of life" (87).

Tom: But that's not as easy as you think. "Every strong emotion, such as love, hatred, or jealousy eventually show[s] itself in some gesture, and not always in the form of a clear illustration of that emotion, not always what the person himself, or the public, might have expected" (*Boy* 59). For instance, the last time Mme Annette cooked lobster, I imagined that I "heard them screaming, wailing at least, as they were boiled to death" (*Under Water* 227). I had to leave the room.

Dorian: "Don't talk about horrid subjects. If one doesn't talk about a thing, it has never happened. It is simply expression ... that gives reality to things" (*Dorian Gray* 85)

Jonathan: Interesting. You both maintain that expression creates reality, but you, Tom, suggest that there are some emotions -- some *hidden* emotions? -- that betray what you are feeling, and that are beyond your ability to control.

Tom: Sure. When my young friend, Frank, told me about how he had murdered his father, I "had an instant's sickish feeling, imagining it" (*Boy* 55). But as I advised him on more than one occasion, "Don't confess to anyone -- ever" (53). You have to keep some things secret; you have to have "a cynical attitude toward justice and veracity" (*Under Water* 40).

Deb: Ah, for both of you, secrets are so important. Both of you keep secrets in order to cover up your various crimes. But there's more to it than this. Both of you raise the keeping of secrets to an "art form" -- quite literally with Dorian's portrait and with Tom's various "talents" of impersonation and invention.

Wilde: Indeed, Deb, "Lying and poetry are arts ... and they require the most careful study, the most disinterested devotion" ("Decay" 37).

Jonathan: It seems, then, that both of you enjoy playing with the supple, flexible line between truth and lying. In particular, Ripley seems a character who delights in his various deceptions.

Highsmith: Keep in mind, though, that "Sometimes Tom's imagination was as clear as a remembered experience" (*Under Water* 120).

Deb: But we all know that the connection between "remembered experience" and "truth" is a tenuous one.

Highsmith: "There [is] indeed a screen between fact and memory" (120).

Tom: ... and I call it "self-preservation" (120).

Jonathan: Well, let's query that. You, Tom, and Dorian to a lesser extent, are fairly skilled at "self-preservation," but this skill is a little hard on others.

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Tom: I've heard that before. One of my accusers once told me, "it is odd, you must agree, that three men disappear or die around you -- Murchison, Derwatt, and Bernard Tufts" (*Under Ground* 587).

Dorian: I've heard it too. Basil, who painted my portrait for me, once asked, "Why is your friendship so fatal to young men?" (*Dorian Gray* 117).

Deb: Let's take up that question, Dorian. Why do Tom and you (at least until the end of your book) escape punishment for your crimes? And what is your seeming fascination with young men?

Tom: Perhaps we were always looking for someone who could be "one of us" (*Game* 690).

Jonathan: Meaning what? A fellow criminal? A hedonist? A lover?

Tom: Are you calling me a pansy? Actually, "I can't make up my mind whether I like men or women, so I'm thinking of giving them *both* up" (*Talented* 81).

Highsmith: Funny you should say that. "I *tried* to like men. I like most men better than I like women, but not in bed" (Meaker 25).

Jonathan: But you actually lived as a lesbian, Patricia. As for you, Tom, in the second, third, and fourth books, you seem to pursue men -- Bernard Tufts, Jonathan Trevanny, and the teenaged Frank Pierson.

Highsmith: I'm afraid you've found me out. "The theme I have used over and over again in my novels is the relationship between two men, usually quite different in make-up, sometimes an obvious contrast in good and evil, sometimes merely ill-matched friends" (*Plotting* 138).

Deb: But who is "good" and who is "evil"? Don't all of your characters represent aspects of your own psyche?

Highsmith: "Maybe I do use a lot of myself. But I'd rather not think about it, for the same reason I don't think writers should be psychoanalyzed. Leave the unconscious mind unconscious" (Meaker 119).

Deb: Let's keep the focus on your characters, then. It's clear that you favor the amoral Tom Ripley.

Highsmith: My sympathies were certainly with Tom. When I was writing the novel, "I often had the feeling Ripley was writing it and I was merely typing" (*Plotting* 76).

Wilde: It seems that we both see ourselves in our characters, or see our characters in ourselves. While "Basil Hallward is what I think I am.... Dorian [is] what I would like to be" (*More Letters* 352).

Jonathan: Maybe this is a good time to recap some striking similarities in your work. In your novels, you both seem to enjoy experimenting with "multiplying personalities" -- but multiplying them in such a way as to obfuscate meaning, to create secrets, and to indulge fantasies. Perhaps the obfuscation allows you to protect your fantasies. And perhaps they needed some protection, because both Tom and Dorian seem more than a little *queer* and *criminal*. We're going to have to figure out how all of this hangs together, and it strikes me that your emphasis on "multiplying personalities" isn't a bad place to start -- especially since the image of the "double" has often been used in literature to

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demarcate the tenuous boundary between reality and the imaginary, the real and the fantastic, even the sacred and the profane and the licit and the illicit. Early critics of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* saw it as a story of a Doppelgänger, in the tradition of Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* or Edgar Allen Poe's "William Wilson."

Pater: Yes. "Its interest turns on that very old theme, old because based on some inherent experience or fancy of the human brain, of a double life: of Doppelgänger -- not of two *persons*, in this case, but of the man and his portrait" (354).

Deb: And we know what *that's* all about.... or, at least, the critics of this tradition seem to think they do.

Keppler: "The double has appeared with greatest frequency during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whether because during this period writers of creative literature have been influenced by psychologists or (as seems more probable) because both writers and psychologists have been giving expression to a greatly increased sense of the complexity of the human mind" (xii).

Coates: "As the doctrines of Freud became more widely known ... the dividedness of the self becomes a truism. Hence its representation becomes trivial ... and ceases to carry any literary information" (34-35).

Roditi: I'm not sure I think Freudian readings are trivial, Paul. "It might ... be argued psychoanalytically that Dorian, Wilde's Id, is driven to self-inflicted death by his misinterpreting, in too selfishly literal a manner, the doctrines of beauty and pleasure which are preached by Lord Henry, Wilde's Ego; and that Basil, the author's Super-Ego, is killed when his warnings and reproaches might frustrate Dorian in his unbridled pursuit of sensual satisfactions" (124).

Jonathan: That interpretation does seem to tidily explain the story, although it is pretty tough on Wilde's doctrine of the pursuit of pleasure.

Rogers: Doubles are "unstable psychological entities" (84), a man's psychosexual "reaction-formation against ? overwhelming libidinal impulses" (66). They involve "narcissistic gratification" like "that obtained by the homosexual in seeking out objects ? like himself" (19). "With respect to the dangers of narcissism, [*The Picture of Dorian Gray*] speaks for itself" -- it is a "hopeless race with memory, heart, and moral self ... which implies that the worship of one's own physical beauty is more hazardous for men than for women" (22).

Deb: Now wait a minute; that is *very* harsh.

Miller: Well, at the very least, "The double life and the suffering or excluded single life are said ... to steal, in the figurative sense of the word; to soar; and to be strange, in the sense of different, foreign or uncommon, and in the sense, too, of fey, 'fated,' soon to die" (23).

Jonathan: Strange? *Fey?*

Deb: I wonder why they just don't come out and say it: *queer*.

Keppler, Coates, Roditi, Rogers, and Miller: Whatever. The history of the novel's interpretation reveals that many have seen the doubling in *Dorian Gray* as the need to articulate, even isolate, a "shameful

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sexual desire."

Ellmann: As Wilde's foremost biographer, I would say that "The ending of *Dorian Gray* executes a Ruskinesque repudiation of a Pateresque career of self-gratifying sensations" (413).

Oates: As a famous novelist, I assure you that "Wilde's novel must be seen as a highly serious meditation upon the moral role of the artist -- an interior challenge, in fact, to the insouciance of the famous pronouncements that would assure us that there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book ... or that all art is ?quite useless'" (423).

Lawler: I agree, Joyce. In my essay on "allegorical performance" in *Dorian Gray*, I point out that the "morality of influence" is a key issue raised by the novel (439). In addition, "the author, like his eponymous hero, felt the compulsive need for both masking and unmasking. Moreover, Wilde's quest for an ideal represented in Dorian carried with it a psychological need for punishment, most likely through exposure" (451).

Belford: And, as Wilde's most recent critical biographer, I maintain that "*Dorian Gray* darkly exploits death as the punishment for sexuality" (34). As such, "Fear of disclosure through implications of homosexual behavior drives the novel, often occurring when subterfuge involves some other guilt or crime" (173). At the very least, "The idée fixe of Wilde's work was a pattern of secret and revelation, guilt and forgiveness" (211).

Wilde: Hmm. I've been through this before. As I once wrote to the editor of *The Daily Chronicle*, in response to his paper's misreading of my novel, "The real moral of the story is that all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment, and this moral is so far artistically and deliberately suppressed that it does not enunciate its law as a general principle, but realises itself purely in the lives of individuals, and so becomes simply a dramatic element in a work of art, and not the object of the work of art itself" (*Daily* 345).

Highsmith: I understand, Oscar. You're not the only one subject to such interpretations. More critics than I care to contemplate have focused on Tom Ripley's behavior as both psychological and social.

Tom: Can you imagine?!? Anthony Lane called me a "murderous Europhiliac snob" (128)! Worse yet, Tom Cunneff brushes me off as a mere "psychopathic imposter" (49)! Personally, I prefer Michael Bronski's more flattering description of me as a "charming gay killer," a "seductive sociopath" (13).

Highsmith: But don't you see, Tom, that the critics persist in imposing a psychological -- specifically a homosexual -- interpretation of your character. Why, Susan Adams even saw you as a killer queer directly descended from Dorian Gray: "With every successive murder ... Tom Ripley ... becomes more cultured, more urbane, more eerily likeable. It's like Dorian Gray without guilt" ("A Dark View" <http://www.forbes.com/forbes/1998/0615/6112304a.html>).

Deb: So, are you both saying that the psychology of your subjects -- Dorian and Ripley -- does not interest you?

Highsmith: Not quite. I am principally "interested in the effect of guilt on my heroes" (Foreword to *Deep Water*).

Wilde: Yes, guilt. *Dorian Gray* is about conscience, which is both psychological and moral. "It is finally

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to get rid of the conscience that had dogged his steps from year to year that he destroys the picture; and thus in his attempt to kill conscience Dorian Gray kills himself" (*Daily* 345). I believe that "The mere existence of conscience ... is a sign of our imperfect development" ("Critic" 126).

Jonathan: "Kill conscience"? Perhaps your critics, are correct, Oscar: maybe your novel *is* evil....

Wilde: "An artist, sir, has no ethical sympathies at all" ("To the Editor of the *Scots Observer*" 347).

Highsmith: Oscar is right. "Creative people do not pass moral judgments -- at least not at once -- on what meets their eye. There is time for that later in what they create, if they are so inclined, but art essentially has nothing to do with morality, convention or moralizing" (*Plotting* 25).

Wilde: I agree, "the sphere of Art and the sphere of Ethics are absolutely distinct and separate" ("Critic" 169).

Deb: But you and Patricia don't just separate the artistic and ethical spheres; you seem to privilege the *un*-ethical, the criminal.

Greene: Certainly one of Highsmith's notable qualities as a novelist is her ability to create "world[s] without moral endings" (x).

Highsmith: But I also "rather like criminals and find them extremely interesting, unless they are monotonously and stupidly brutal" (*Plotting* 55).

Wilde: Yes. Crime is "simply a method of producing extraordinary sensations" (*Dorian Gray* 162).

Jonathan: So both of you give us portraits, if you will, of lives -- of criminal lives, and of lives with more than a hint of "queerness" -- and you ask us to identify with them. But more than that, the characters of Dorian and Tom are powerful, even magnetic in their amorality. And they make that amorality seem like a game. How do you justify the creation of such worlds, such characters?

Wilde: "Aesthetics are higher than ethics" ("Critic" 186).

Jonathan and Deb: How so?

Wilde: "To arrive at what one really believes, one must speak through lips different from one's own. To know the truth one must imagine myriads of falsehoods" ("Critic" 166).

Highsmith: Yes, and "Sometimes the truth, dangerous as it [is, can] be turned to advantage to reveal something new, something more" (*Under Ground* 526).

Wilde: "I myself would sacrifice everything for a new experience, and I know there is no such thing as a new experience at all. I think I would more readily die for what I do not believe in than for what I hold to be true. I would go to the stake for a sensation and be a skeptic to the last!" (*Letters* 123).

Deb: It seems you would -- and perhaps did -- sacrifice quite a bit, Oscar, "for a new experience." Both Dorian and Tom risk quite a bit of criminality to pursue their new "experiences." Why is this so important? What is the draw of "speaking through lips different from one's own," of "revealing something new, something more"?

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Highsmith: I actually allude to this in my novel, *The Tremor of Forgery*, in which the protagonist, a novelist named Ingham, meditates on a book he's writing about a seemingly respectable banker, Dennison, who's embezzling funds. The process of writing about Dennison is very revealing to Ingham. "He was at these moments conscious ... of being alone, without friends, or a job, or any connection with anybody, unable to understand or to speak the main language of the country. Then, being more than half Dennison at these moments, he experienced something like the unconscious flash of a question: 'Who am I, anyway? Does one exist, or to what extent does one exist as an individual without friends, family, anybody to whom one can relate, to whom one's existence is of the least importance?' It was strangely like a religious experience. It was like becoming nothing and realizing that one was nothing anyway, ever. It was a basic truth" (*Tremor* 147).

Wilde: This sounds like Dorian, who "used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To [him,] man is a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bears within itself strange legacies of thought and passion" (*Dorian Gray* 111).

Jonathan: You both seem to anticipate social constructionism here in that your characters' identities are permeable, capable of shifting and changing depending on the circumstances they are in.

Wilde: I once wrote that "the object of life was to get rid of self-consciousness, and to become the unconscious vehicle of a higher illumination" ("Chinese" 287).

Lane: Amazing, Oscar. I have observed something similar in Patricia's work: "That we could be as promiscuous with our souls as with our bodies was the guiding light of the Ripley books" (130).

Deb: "Promiscuous with our souls"? All of this smacks of extreme moral relativism.

Highsmith: Perhaps so. "Whatever was right and wrong, Ingham supposed, was what people around you said it was" (*Tremor* 147-48). My point here is that "one carried around a set of morals one had been brought up to believe in. But was it true? To what extent did they remain, to what extent could one act on them, if they were not the morals of the people by whom one was surrounded?" (148).

Jonathan: Despite your earlier claim that you are not talking about ethics, it seems you are asking a very ethically loaded question: how are ethics constructed?

Highsmith: I address this in *The Tremor of Forgery* as well. You see, this "theme [of the double] was an old one, via Raskolnikov, through Nietzsche's superman: had one the right to seize power under certain circumstances? That was all very interesting from a moral point of view." But my writer/hero Ingham -- and I myself -- were both "more interested in the state of Dennison's mind, in his existence during the period in which he led two lives. He was interested in the fact that the double life at last fooled Dennison: that was what made Dennison a nearly perfect embezzler. Dennison was morally unaware that he was committing a felony, but he was aware that society and the law, for reasons that he did not even attempt to comprehend, did not approve of what he was doing. For this reason only, he took some precautions" (*Tremor* 66).

Deb: So here the question of morality, or at least ethics, really does come into the picture. In order for Dennison to act ethically, as he sees it, he must break the law. And in doing so, perhaps even to enable his ethical self, he splits into two.

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Jonathan: I think I see what you're talking about. And I think I'm beginning to see the attraction to the figure of the double. For Dorian, the double "split off" the ethical "conscience," allowing him to pursue his pleasures, his multiplication of personalities, with little thought of the consequences.

Deb: And what about Ripley? He not only doubles himself; he takes on an entirely new identity! And it's not just the Dickie Greenleaf identity I mean. As himself, Dickie had no ethics -- and so, logically, neither did Tom-as-Dickie. But in the four later Ripley novels, Tom has developed a kind of personal ethics based on his relationships to his wife, to his friends, and especially to his French estate, Belle Ombre. As the name of his home suggests, these ethics are grounded in beauty and are somewhat "shady," but they are an ethics nevertheless. Like Dorian and Ingham, Ripley's new selves open him up to unforeseen new ethical -- or unethical -- experiences.

Ellmann: This relates to what I say about Wilde: "Art may also outrage the world by flouting its laws or by picturing indulgently their violation. Or art may seduce the world by making it follow an example which seems bad but is discovered to be better than it seems. In these various ways the artist forces the world towards self-recognition, with at least a tinge of self-redemption" (421).

Jonathan: You seem to want to recuperate the "outrageous" work of art by justifying its means with socially beneficial ends, in that the work, no matter how seductive, still prompts the world to recognize and redeem itself. I'm not so sure. Both Wilde and Highsmith seem a bit more -- how to say it -- anti-social....

Wilde: Perhaps. "Individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. Therein lies its immense value" (*Socialism* 36).

Highsmith: True. That is why "Criminals are dramatically interesting, because for a time at least they are active, free in spirit, and they do not knuckle down to anyone" (*Plotting* 54).

Deb: Interestingly, Patricia, "free spirit" is exactly what Frank, in *The Boy Who Followed Ripley*, calls Tom. But what is Tom "free" from?

Bronski: I see Tom as free from "the entire assumption upon which Western ethical systems are based, that humankind has the potential and the will to act morally" (14).

Jonathan: And of what, Oscar, is individualism a "disturbing and disintegrating force"? The received social order?

Wilde: Of course. Take governments, for instance. "All modes of government are wrong. ... They are immoral, because, by interfering with the individual, they produce the most aggressive forms of egotism" ("Chinese" 289).

Jonathan: Strong words, Oscar.

Deb: More than this, I wonder if both Wilde and Highsmith were interested in creating a *separate* space where their characters could live, could experience themselves, perhaps could experience pleasures and possibilities otherwise denied to them? Opening up such spaces would inevitably be "against the grain...."

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Jonathan: A space like Belle Ombre, for instance? I think I see what you are getting at, Deb.

Hubly: I have noted that it is significant that much of Highsmith's fiction takes place *away* from the U.S., in places "Non-Puritan, seemingly indifferent to questions of morality, thousands of miles from the United States, [which] can offer the American there -- cut off from family and social ties and thus from moral accountability -- liberation, release from inhibitions" (125).

Deb: Sure. Both Tom and Dorian, in their doubling, open up spaces in which they can be queer -- a significant, perhaps even necessary use of the Doppelgänger in worlds otherwise inimical to homo-eroticism.

Tom: I never admitted that -- never! I only dressed in drag as a *disguise* , not because I was inherently homosexual. Disguise was enough for me: "One could feel free, and in a sense like *oneself* in a disguise" (*Boy* 183).

Jonathan: But it was drag nevertheless.

Butler: And drag "subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (*Trouble* 137).

Jonathan: So on some level you are what you perform? What do you think about that, Tom?

Tom: I just said, "I'm not queer ... and I don't want anybody thinking I am" (*Talented* 80).

Butler: But "it is precisely the pleasure produced by the instability of those categories which sustains the various erotic practices that make [you] a candidate for the category to begin with" (Butler, "Imitation" 1514).

Deb: So Tom is right in worrying.

Bronski: "It does make sense to see [Highsmith's] sustained attack on conventional morality as finding its embodiment in homosexuals, particularly gay men" (14).

Jonathan: And Wilde too, as a "gay martyr," can be seen as someone whose questioning of "conventional morality" is intimately wound together with his sexuality.

Deb: It is as though each character has to step outside of himself, to become other than what he is (in the eyes of his society) even just to experiment with a queer identity or existence.

Highsmith: "Wouldn't it be nice if our truths didn't have to be disguised?" (Meaker 119).

Kundera: Moreover, "A novel that does not discover a hitherto unknown segment of existence is immoral. Knowledge is the novel's morality" (5).

Tom: Are you implying that exploring my "hitherto unknown" self was a moral endeavor? You redeem me, Mr. Kundera.

Foucault: "The transformation of one's self by one's own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience" (131).

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Wilde: "Sometimes I think that the artistic life is a long and lovely suicide, and am not sorry that it is so" (*Letters* 123).

Dorian: I suppose my story was your rendering of a "long and lovely suicide," then.

Jonathan: One cannot help but notice that you don't survive your novel, Dorian, but Tom Ripley is still prosperously alive after five books. Your conscience doomed you, Dorian. For you, Tom, lack of conscience confers immunity from retribution, whether imposed externally or internally.

Wilde: Why Tom, I see you in a new light. I admitted earlier that Dorian's conscience was a sign of his "imperfect development" ("Critic" 126). You, Tom, are the ideal evolutionary outgrowth of my poor Dorian. You're a true individualist; "Evolution is the law of life, and there is no evolution except towards Individualism" (*Socialism* 265). "What is termed Sin is an essential element of progress" ("Critic" 125).

Tom: Maybe you're right, Oscar. I have been conscious of "a promise of unending, unobstructable forward movement that would sweep aside anything in its way" (*Talented* 282).

Deb: It is even more than this, I think, Tom. Your novels reveal that the critics wrote off the Doppelgänger tradition too soon. John Herdman may feel that "the theme tails off into comparative marginality" (151) at the *fin-de-siècle*, but Patricia resurrects the double motif nearly a century later.

Anzaldúa: Marginality is not such a bad thing, you know. "Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien' element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind" (Preface).

Jonathan: You are implying that the margins are the "frontiers" for evolution. Certainly twentieth-century gay literature arises from the margins. But not until after Highsmith does it emerge from the closet.

Deb: As Bronski writes, Ripley's story begins in the context of "the fears of the 1950s" (15). For Ripley and for Highsmith herself, the closet is first and foremost a place of safety.

Jonathan: And one can surely say the same for Wilde and Dorian -- at least until they are both "outed." But there is a double movement here with regard to the closet, which also functions as a place where queerness can be divorced from ethics. Specifically, both Dorian and Tom act out the privileging of æsthetics over ethics -- divorcing their lives just long enough from the constraints of ethical conventions to see their lives as æsthetical possibilities, as possibilities for creation, re-creation, and *queering*.

Deb: Yes, and there is even a further doubling as the æsthetical experience seems ethically charged. I am thinking of the place in *Ripley Under Water* where Tom reads Ellmann's biography of Oscar Wilde and meditates on the significance of Wilde's life for his own. "His story reminded Tom of that of Christ, a man of generous goodwill, with a vision of expanding consciousness, of increasing the joy of life. Both had been misunderstood by contemporaries, both had suffered from an envy deeply buried in the breasts of those who wished them dead, and who mocked them while they were alive" (210-11). Tom's willingness to see Wilde as a persecuted martyr -- like Jesus, in fact -- implies an ethics of

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æsthetics. Could it be that the links between Wilde and Highsmith reveal the working out of a queer ethics?

Jonathan: An ethics that will take into consideration movement, possibility, queering? Mutation, multiplying -- evolution?

Deb: It seems, then, that we are beginning to see, from Wilde through Highsmith, the evolution of a separate Doppelgänger tradition -- one that uses the figure of the double to see in itself the possibilities of its own queerness.

Wilde "Come! We have talked enough" ("Decay" 72). "I am tired of thought" ("Critic" 188).

Highsmith: Yes. "All the above is rot" (*Plotting* 5).

Jonathan: Now wait a minute....

Deb: Yes, that does not seem particularly fair considering all the time we have spent on you.

Wilde: "Life is never fair.... And perhaps it is a good thing for most of us that it is not" ("Wit" 65).

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