

Oscar Wilde, the science of heredity, and the picture of Dorian Gray.

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 **Oscar Wilde, the Science of Heredity, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray***

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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The thoroughly well-informed man—that is the modern ideal. And

the mind of the thoroughly well-informed man is a dreadful thing. It is like a bric-à-brac shop, all monsters and dust, with everything priced above its proper value.

—Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*¹

With concern for the context of Oscar Wilde's intellectual maturation, the following article addresses the reciprocal manner in which evolutionary thought and aesthetic practice shaped one another in the late nineteenth century. Detailed analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890; 1891) illustrates how contradictory but contemporary scientific hypotheses informed Wilde's artistic practice, the science of heredity emerging as a potent source of his aestheticism: a source that inspired an ethical message and a source that, for the most part, has remained critically latent.

While at Magdalen College, which Wilde entered in 1874, his awareness of hereditary theories—particularly those of English naturalist Charles Darwin (1809-1882), German biologist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), and German embryologist August Weismann (1834-1914)—profited from the instantiation of the *Report of the Royal Commission on Oxford University* (1852) obligated by the related Parliamentary Act of 1854. Prompted by Thomas Carlyle's (1795-1881) "Germanizing" mission, this academic reorientation encouraged a positive reevaluation of continental literature and science, promoted nonsectarian education, and connected, as Gisela Argyle states, "the scientific enterprise with notions of German rigour, industry, and professionalism."² Disciplines emergent in English academia therefore received unprecedented support at Oxford: modern history, philology, physiology, and biology enjoyed positive recognition; scientific research benefited from strong ties with foreign institutions; and important European treatises in natural science were translated into English for intercollegiate dissemination. **[End Page 494]** These "liberal" efforts "toward reforming Oxford helped indirectly to establish" not only "Darwinian supporters there," as M. J. S. Hodge avers, but also followers of Haeckel and Weismann.³

The esoterically minded Wilde found inspiration in the progressive achievements of biology; his journals of collected ideas and discoveries, which he started soon after his arrival in Oxford, document his philosophical appraisal of the subject. If "Abstract sciences (as Logic• Geometry) give us the forms of phenomena," and "Abstract-concrete sciences (as Physics• Chemistry) give us the factors of phenomena," reasons Wilde in his Commonplace Book, then "Concrete sciences give us the products in Their synthetical totality."⁴ Biology holds epistemological preeminence. "There can be no knowledge of human nature," insists Wilde, "without knowledge of the Laws of Mind (Psychology) nor of the Laws of Mind, without knowledge of the Laws of Life (Biology)." The "science of society" thereby "rests on the science of life: sociology on Biology."⁵

Such reasoning prompts Wilde to visualize a biotic hierarchy. "For what characterises an organism as opposed to the undifferentiated aggregate of protoplasm," he contends, "is the mutual dependence of parts, the increased differentiation of function and of structure• The 'physiological division of labour' which Milne Edwards showed was the active law of the individual organism, corresponds to the Politico Economical principle of the division of Labour recognised by Plato as the law of the social organism."⁶ Wilde details his vision with direct reference to Haeckel. The lowest level of "The Protoplasmic Hierarchy," he notes, is the "structureless albuminoid mass" of the "Bat hybius Haeckelii."⁷ Immediately above this amorphous protein is "The Amoeba" where "we find the 'cell,' the morphological unit of organization, the physiological source of specialised function and individualization." These life forms, however, "are unicellular organizations," whereas animals "rise To ... multicellular organizations where every cell has it's own special work and yet all combine for the welfare and unity of the whole."⁸ Wilde's acknowledgement of "Bat hybius Haeckelii," believes Philip E. Smith, "show[s] how a young and brilliant scholar of the classics at Oxford in the 1870's read, recorded, and appropriated for his own critical purposes the latest findings of experimental science."⁹

Having graduated from Oxford in 1878, Wilde relocated to London, but he retained strong connections with his alma mater and remained curious toward natural science. Inheritance became an important issue (Oscar's father, Sir William Wilde [b...

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