“Forms of Intellectual Existence”: Plato, Proof, and Performance in Oscar Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying”

“[T]o truth itself I gave what is false no less than what is true as its rightful province, and showed that the false and the true are merely forms of intellectual existence.” – De Profundis

“But are they wily and deceivers by reason of simplicity and folly, or by reason of shrewdness and a sort of intelligence?...Are you not saying that the false are powerful and prudent and knowing and wise in those things about which they are false?” – Hippias Minor

“[A]s seriousness of manner is the disguise of the fool, folly in its exquisite modes of triviality and indifference and lack of care is the robe of the wise man.” – from a letter written by Oscar Wilde to Philip Houghton in February of 1894

Abstract:
This paper argues that Oscar Wilde’s use of the Platonic dialogue is not just a playful provocation; he uses its logic to develop his own theory of art. Just as he inverts the Platonic conception of the relationship of art to life, Wilde inverts the Platonic dialogue form by placing at its methodological center the very rhetorical effects that Plato hopes practitioners of the dialectic will “transcend.” Borrowing concepts from J. L. Austin and John Searle’s speech act theories and applying them to Wilde’s dialogue “The Decay of Lying,” the paper contends that in performance these formal features of language take on the quasi-empirical role of evidence that proves the very statements in which they appear. As a result, the criterion for the veracity of the claims put forth by the dialogue’s interlocutors becomes the aesthetic and dramatic coherence between the rhetorical form and propositional content internal to the language of their discourse. This formalization of the Platonic dialogue can be understood both as an extension of the formalized mode of argumentation that the Platonic dialogue itself initiates in the history of Western philosophy, as well as in terms of the more encompassing historical shift toward the end of the nineteenth century from 1) conceiving veracity and meaningfulness as a function of the perfect representation of external reality to 2) conceiving them as a matter of perfected internal consistency and formal coherence.

I. Introduction: Wilde and the Platonic Dialogue

“Rhetoric is the counterpart [antistrophe] of Dialectic,” announces Aristotle at the outset of his treatise on the former. In his account of the various contexts and means of persuasion that follow, Aristotle attempts to recuperate this discipline and its practice from the accusations of amorality and ignorance leveled at it by his predecessor Plato, most notably in the Gorgias. Book II of the Rhetoric, for example, emphasizes the judicious employment of “character” (ethos) and “emotion” (pathos) as “modes of persuasion” alongside the patterns of reasoning (logos) preferred by Plato, and Book III delineates the orator’s proper use of various elements of “style” and “arrangement,” elements whose poetic qualities, according to Plato, disqualify them from legitimate philosophical use.
It might, at first, seem odd to draw an affinity between this relentlessly rationalistic and category-driven erstwhile student of Plato, on the one hand, and the proudly logic-flouting and constantly category-subverting erstwhile student of Pater, on the other: but in what is perhaps the most famous of his critical dialogues, “The Decay of Lying,” Oscar Wilde indeed resurrects Aristotle’s attempts to vindicate the genuine truth-procuring capacities of rhetoric alongside those of Plato’s dialectic. That is, reaching out in opposite directions to both the extremism of Plato and the extremism of the so-called Sophists – in a gesture that is strangely akin to yet distinct from Aristotle’s moderated ‘compromise’\(^1\) between these two – he refashions rhetorical ethos and pathos “in the image” of reason and logic’s self-sufficiency and self-validation in the dialectic, and strategically foregrounds and mobilizes the stylistic elements from Book III of the Rhetoric in such a way that they in fact imitate the ostensibly style-purified patterns of reasoning authorized under Plato’s dialectical method as logos.\(^2\)

And so, as I argue below, the particular ingeniousness of Wilde’s quasi-Platonic dialogue is that it intensifies the tendency toward abstraction and formalization in the dialectical method, yet does so by welcoming the invasion of the very rhetorical means that Plato feared would be his method’s undoing. Plato complains of “the art of flattery [i.e. the ‘knacks’ such as cookery]…insinuating herself into” the genuine “arts” such as medicine; the former “pretends to be that into which she has crept,” so that “cookery assumes the form of medicine, and pretends to know what foods are best for the body” (Gorgias, 464c-464d). Wilde, on the other hand, cheerfully engineers this impersonation of rhetorical style as dialectical reason, celebrating all the while the way this paradoxically further formalizes the dialogue genre. That is, where Plato

\(^1\) “The truth is, as indeed we have said already, that rhetoric is a combination of the science of logic and of the ethical branch of politics; and it is partly like dialectic, partly like sophistical reasoning” (Rhetoric, II.4, 1359b).

\(^2\) “[Plato] consistently denies any value whatsoever to the particular embodiment of thought. Utterances so brief as to be formless are best; the continuity of speech must not obscure the continuity of reasoning” (Partee, 203).
accomplishes a *thematic* formalization of the dialogue genre (whose interlocutors are meant to discuss and apprehend the ideal abstract Forms rather than their imperfect material manifestations), Wilde accomplishes a *methodological* formalization of the genre, whereby the criterion for the veracity of the dialogue’s claims becomes the aesthetic cohesion between the rhetorical form and propositional content *internal* to the language of the dialogue itself.

In this way, Wilde’s transformation of the Platonic dialogue mirrors the epistemic shift from external reference to internal coherence with the advent of non-Euclidean geometries in the nineteenth century. This analogy in turn leads us to recognize how this formalization of geometry and philosophical argumentation in the nineteenth century also characterizes the aesthetic shift from representationalism and realism to formalism and aestheticism in late nineteenth-century British art and literature, as well as the methodological shift from experimental science’s epistemic priority to theoretical science’s epistemic priority at the turn of the twentieth century. Finally, it is hoped that, by explicating the provocative epistemological propositions underpinning Wilde’s unique brand of aestheticism, this paper can bring to light the perhaps under-recognized coherence and systematicity of Wilde’s declarations concerning the creativity of artistic plagiarism and the continuity of art and criticism, pronouncements which are so often read instead as a mere matter of notoriety-motivated contrarianism and self-advertisement.

II. Rhetorical Form as the Materiality of (Dialectical) Reason

“[The liar] alone is in possession of the great secret of all [Art’s] manifestations, the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style…It is style that makes us believe in a thing — nothing but style.” – “The Decay of Lying”

“It is not merely in art that the body is the soul. In every sphere of life Form is the beginning of things…Forms are the food of faith…The Creeds are believed, not because they are rational, but because they are repeated. Yes: Form is everything. It is the secret of life.” – “The Critic as Artist”
In his 1972 essay “Platonic Dialogue,” Michel Serres puts forth a general conception of dialogue as a “battle” waged by two interlocutors to reach understanding (“signal”) between one another by locating and then eliminating a third (“noise”) who interferes and creates confusion (Serres, 67). Emphasizing that the interlocutors of the Platonic dialogue in particular are invested in identifying and delineating the Platonic Form as understood apart from its particular material manifestations³, Serres reasons that “therefore the first effort to make communication in a dialogue successful is isomorphic to the effort to render a form independent of its empirical realizations” (Serres, 69; emphasis in original). Serres identifies this empirical dimension as “the third man of the form, its interference and its noise” (Serres, 69), so that “the first ‘third man’ to exclude is the empiricist, along with his empirical domain” (Serres, 70). Therefore, in Serres’ view, insofar as the Platonic dialogue must “eliminate the empirical” and “dematerialize reasoning” (Serres, 69), its place in the history of philosophy is as “the first movement of mathematization, of formalization” (Serres, 70), coinciding of necessity with “the Greek miracle, that of mathematics” (Serres, 70).⁴

Serres goes on to observe, however, that in spite of the interlocutors’ efforts, the empirical is present in any instance of dialogue, in the form of the very materiality of language itself: namely, the physical variations and imperfections in the ways individuals write and speak. He compares these intractable instances of contingency and disruption to the “noise” that necessarily accompanies “signal” in telecommunications, concluding that “background noise is essential to communication” (Serres, 66; emphasis in original).

³ For example, the ethical principle(s) of ‘Piety’ itself rather than any single instance of pious existence, or the geometric ideal of the ‘Circle’ rather than this or that graphic rendering of a circle.
⁴ “In Platonism, the link between the dialectical method…and a progressive working diagram of abstract idealities in the manner of geometry is not an accident in the history of ideas, nor just an episode in the willful decision of the philosopher: it is inscribed in the nature of things” (Serres, 70).
But beyond the mere physical quirks of handwriting and pronunciation, Serres’ observation of the return of the empirical to the Platonic dialogue can be extended to the rhetorical idiosyncrasies in the ways interlocutors attempt to argue and persuade: that is, where the empirical dimension of language introduces the “noisy” properties of accident and variation to communication, so too does the rhetorical dimension of philosophical discourse re-introduce into philosophical rationalism the threats of contingency and multiplicity from the “empirical domain.”

In the reading of Oscar Wilde’s quasi-Platonic dialogue “The Decay of Lying” that follows, I will attempt to demonstrate that Wilde at least implicitly shares this understanding of rhetorical form as the empirical element within philosophical discourse, and that it is precisely on the basis of this understanding that Wilde paradoxically manages to further formalize and abstract the genre of Platonic dialogue. To review, we have just argued that the empirical always remains in the Platonic dialogue, and that it does so in terms of both discourse – the material variability of the interlocutors’ rhetoric and speech – and the subject matter of that discourse – the material world from which the interlocutors derive the abstract Platonic Form sought after and to which they must make continual reference in their collaborative constitution and verification of this ideal Platonic Form. Understanding the Platonic dialogue to possess a twofold relationship to the empirical in this way, I would contend that Wilde’s quasi-Platonic dialogue consolidates the genre’s reliance on the empirical, and that it does so precisely by transforming the first sort of materiality (of the language of the interlocutors) into the second sort of materiality (the empirical evidence the interlocutors must make reference to), so that the very rhetoric and style with which the main interlocutor Vivian presents (‘gives form to’) his

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5 “When I say ‘bed,’ I am not speaking of such and such a bed, mine, yours, this one or that one; I am evoking the idea of the bed. When I draw a square and a diagonal in the sand, I do not in any way want to speak of this wavering, irregular, and inexact graph; I evoke by it the ideal form of the diagonal and of the square” (Serres, 69).
arguments serves in effect as the ‘evidence’ that substantiates (‘gives substance to’) his claims. This ‘folding’ of the element of empirical evidence within the linguistic form of an interlocutor’s assertion in turn rids this dialogue of the need for the pair of interlocutors, as Vivian’s self-evincing speech suffices to substantiate and corroborate itself before his mostly mute companion, Cyril – hence, the designation of this dialogue as quasi-Platonic. In this way, Wilde might be said at once to affirm and subvert the methodological premises of the Platonic dialogue, insofar as he furthers the rejection of the empirical domain, yet accomplishes this precisely by transferring this empirical domain’s evidentiary function as “proof” to the very rhetorical and formal elements of discourse that Plato rejects in favor of reason and logic.

Just as Wilde makes a quasi-Platonic use of the dialogue form in this way, so too, at the level of his dialogue’s content does Wilde invoke a quasi-Platonic theory of art, one that also paradoxically affirms yet subverts Plato’s premises. That is, where Plato rejects the authority of the artists in his *Republic* on the assumption that the empirical reality imitated in their art is in fact itself an imperfect imitation of the Forms, Wilde accepts the Platonic premise that ‘Reality is imperfect’ and the Platonic conclusion that ‘Art is a lie,’ but turns the latter into a positive solution for the former by insisting, *contra* Plato, on Art’s deliberate infidelity to Reality, its internal preoccupation with formal perfection and its utter indifference to the demands of external reference and representation. The sort of art that Wilde valorizes, then, is indeed a lie and a falsehood, but only because it genuinely and self-consciously betrays and misrepresents reality, and not (as Plato contends) because it passively and unthinkingly repeats the lies of the material world.

Thus, where for Plato the security of the dialogue genre’s philosophical legitimacy resides in the dialectical movement from a vulgar form of external reference (between intra-
linguistic propositional content and extra-linguistic material reality) to a more ideal form of external reference (between intra-linguistic propositional content and the extra-linguistic realm of Forms), the dialogue’s aesthetic and critical legitimacy for Wilde resides in a more radical reliance on internal coherence (the dynamic between intra-linguistic propositional content and intra-linguistic rhetorical form). And so, if we are to believe Serres’ account of the Platonic dialogue as originally modeling itself after geometry’s similar capacity to subsume the various particulars of the external world into the unitary and thoroughly intellectual Platonic Form, then in Wilde’s re-identification of the criterion for the Platonic dialogue’s veracity we see mirrored the Victorian epistemic shift toward internal coherence prompted by the development of non-Euclidean geometries. That is, at both moments in history, geometry (as the “queen of the sciences”) models the criterion for veracity in philosophical argumentation: in the original case, with Euclid and Plato, this criterion is the subsumption of the particulars of external reality under the generalities of the logical system\(^{6}\), whereas in the nineteenth century, the criterion for veracity is simply the internal coherence and self-sufficiency of the logical system at hand\(^{7}\).

And yet, unlike the empiricism-eschewing orientation of, say, symbolic logic or hyperbolic geometry, Wilde’s further formalization of the Platonic dialogue proceeds (as mentioned earlier) in a decidedly (though unconventionally) empiricist manner, insofar as his method of exposition requires that he openly avows and strategically shapes the rhetorical aspects of the language that he reasons with. This simultaneous intensification and abstraction of the empirical within the Platonic dialogue renders Wilde’s methodology paradoxically more and less ‘Platonic’ than the original Platonic dialogues. I would contend that this paradox is best

\[^{6}\] E.g. all circles encountered in everyday life are imperfect deviations from the ‘Circle’ as it is abstractly – and therefore ‘perfectly’ – defined by geometry.

\[^{7}\] E.g. the fallacy or veracity of a syllogism’s conclusion in propositional logic is dependent not on its empirical verifiability in everyday life, but rather entirely on the logical relations between the premises that precede it.
understood as a function of Wilde’s education at Oxford and Trinity College, where he studied
the Classics, the Continental tradition, and of course the English canon. Consequently, it is no
wonder that Wilde’s appropriation of the Platonic tradition should so creatively fuse the
philosophical idealism and rationalism of Europe with the philosophical materialism and
empiricism of his own (adopted) nation. In this way, Wilde’s is a very ‘English’ version of
formalization, insofar as it reconciles the island’s culturally idiosyncratic tendency towards
empiricism with the more encompassing scientific and mathematical movement towards
formalism.

III. Argument vs. Performance in Wildean Discourse

“I dislike arguments of any kind. They are always vulgar, and often convincing.” – The
Importance of Being Earnest

“I think you are wrong, Basil, but I won’t argue with you. It is only the intellectually lost who
ever argue.” – The Picture of Dorian Gray

“‘Conversation, indeed!’ said the Rocket. ‘You have talked the whole time yourself. That is
not conversation.’

‘Somebody must listen,’ answered the Frog, ‘and I like to do all the talking myself. It saves
time, and prevents arguments.’” – “The Remarkable Rocket”

Before turning to “The Decay of Lying” itself, let us briefly turn to the conception of
speech acts in the philosophy of language in order to pinpoint just how an assertion’s rhetorical
form may be said to ‘evince’ that same assertion’s propositional (semantic) content. To begin
with, we might recall J.L. Austin’s distinction between the ‘locutionary’ (the semantic content of
a sentence, or what is said), the ‘illocutionary’ (the performative force of a sentence, or the

8 Cf. the Appendices to Ross’ Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece, which provide the syllabi of Wilde’s studies of the
Classics at Oxford and Trinity College Dublin: in particular, “Appendix B - Oxford syllabus, School of Literae
Humaniores” shows that Plato’s Gorgias was among the prescribed texts for Wilde’s philosophy paper under the so-called “Greats” course in Classics.
9 Perhaps owing to his familiarity with the ‘British Idealism’ of William Wallace, Benjamin Jowett, and other so-called ‘Oxford Hegelians’ (Oxford Notebooks, 17-22), Wilde makes several references to Hegel in “Historical
Criticism” (Wilde, 1199, 1216, 1223) and “The Truth of Masks” (Wilde, 1173). Wilde’s familiarity with Spinoza’s
Ethics is likewise evident in his Oxford notebooks (Oxford Notebooks, 142), as well as in his occasional references
to Spinoza in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (Wilde, 1181) and “The Critic as Artist” (Wilde, 1135, 1143).
action taken in saying what is said), and the ‘perlocutionary’ (the psychological consequence of a sentence, or the effect accomplished through saying what is said) (Austin, 94-107): taken broadly, we might say that rhetorical form and stylistic flair are that which ‘perform’ (in an illocutionary sense) the locutionary ‘claim’ of a sentence, thereby in turn convincing the listener (in the perlocutionary sense) of the veracity of that claim. Indeed, according to Vivian, Wilde’s stand-in in “The Decay of Lying,” “Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style” (Wilde, 1081), since “[i]t is style that makes us believe in a thing – nothing but style” (Wilde, 1089).

A complementary way of understanding this operation is through a particular species of illocutionary act that John Searle identifies as “declaration” and defines as follows: “an utterance is a declaration if the successful performance of the speech act is sufficient to bring about the fit between words and world, to make the propositional content true” (“How Performatives Work,” 547), so that “They [declarations] change the world by declaring that a state of affairs exists and thus bringing that state of affairs into existence” (Making the Social World, 12). In other words, they are speech acts that make something the case (the veracity of the propositional content) just by representing it as the case (via the rhetorical form and the perlocutionary effect that follows). As Wilde’s stand-in, Gilbert, in the dialogue “The Critic as Artist” puts it, it is “language, which is the parent, and not the child, of thought” (Wilde, 1121), and similarly it is “Form, which is the birth of passion” (Wilde, 1149), so that “the real artist is he who proceeds, not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion” (Wilde, 1148). In contending, via Gilbert, that it is words and their utterance that makes up the world and our experience of it, Wilde is essentially describing the more general phenomenon of which his contention (via Vivian) that “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life” (Wilde, 1082, 1085, 1091) is a mere species: that is, just as

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10 “Do you wish to love? Use Love's Litany, and the words will create the yearning from which the world fancies that they spring” (Wilde, 1149); “Wordsworth went to the lakes, but he was never a lake poet. He found in stones the sermons he had already hidden there” (Wilde, 1078).
Life and Nature are quick to reproduce themselves according to the manner and style that artworks (of high aesthetic value) depict them in, so, more broadly, can a declaration or proposition (of appropriate rhetorical form) concerning a given circumstance end up serving as the model of which that very circumstance will soon enough become a facsimile.

This alternative understanding (via Searle) of the relation between rhetorical form and propositional content actually neatly dovetails with Austin’s emphasis on their relation via the performative dimension of an assertion, since the etymological derivation of ‘perform’ is the Anglo-Norman and Middle French “parfornir,” which variously meant “to carry out, execute,” “to achieve, complete, finish,” and “to supply (what is wanting),” this latter sense of which can be seen if we break down “parfornir” into its constitutive parts as the prefix “par-” which means “completely” and “fornir” which means “to provide” or “to furnish” (OED Online, “perform, v.”). That is, the ‘performance’ of an assertion’s ‘rhetorical form’ in the moment of utterance is a kind of ‘completion’ or ‘fulfillment’ of the propositional content of that assertion, a ‘furnishing’ of the semantic content with a rhetorical ‘body,’ and thus, a real-ization of that content (both linguistically and epistemologically).

Finally, this emphasis on the performative dimension of an assertion highlights the difference between the ‘self-evident’ propositions of the axiomatic method of Euclid or Spinoza, on the one hand, and the ‘self-evincing’ propositions to be analyzed in Wilde’s dialogue, on the other. That is, the first sort of proposition is self-evident because of the rules of logic itself: its self-evidence is pre-given and at-hand before the proposition is ever uttered. For example, the proposition “Red is a color” is self-evident on account of the classification of ‘red’ as a species of the genus ‘color.’ But the sort of self-evincing assertion that’s of concern to our reading of Wilde does not have a pre-given self-evidence, but rather accomplishes and achieves its self-
evidence *dynamically* in its very utterance or *being said*, as only the manifestation of the assertion’s rhetorical form (and its subsequent perlocutionary effect on the interlocutor) can serve to ‘evince’ the assertion’s propositional content.

IV. “feigned ardours and unreal rhetoric are delightful”: Performing Self-Evincing Lies in Oscar Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying”

“[Politicians] never rise beyond the level of misrepresentation, and actually condescend to prove, to discuss, to argue. How different from the temper of the true liar, with his frank, fearless statements, his superb irresponsibility, his healthy, natural disdain of proof of any kind! After all, what is a fine lie? Simply that which is its own evidence. If a man is sufficiently unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie, he might just as well speak the truth at once.” – “The Decay of Lying”

“The note of the perfect personality is not rebellion, but peace…It will never argue or dispute. It will not prove things. It will know everything. And yet it will not busy itself about knowledge…it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is.” – “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”

Towards the beginning of this quasi-Platonic dialogue, the interlocutor Vivian (who ‘stands in’ for Wilde) draws a contrast between the manners in which artists and politicians lie that serves as a usefully (and unusually) clear isolation of the qualities that Wilde would like for the term ‘lying’ to affix to art. On the one hand, Wilde (*qua* Vivian) critiques a certain *passivity* in the politician’s infidelity to the truth, since the politician leaves unaltered the conventional empiricist and rationalist criteria for veracity (logic, evidence, etc.), instead merely trying to ‘disguise’ and ‘pass off’ his lie by ‘dressing’ it in these Realist criteria. In contrast, he valorizes in the artist’s dishonesty a certain *activity of form* whereby the beautiful lie, just “by being what it is” (by openly revealing itself as a lie and affirming its falsity), manages to *transform* these Realist criteria along Formalist lines. That is, in the artist’s shift in focus away from “the level of *misrepresentation*” (the politician’s deceptive imitation of – and therefore ultimately *traditional* reliance on – a Realist model of truth) to a non-simulative aesthetics (the artist’s strategic transformation and mobilization of all the rhetorical elements that Aristotle delineates under the
categories of “style”/“arrangement” and ethos), Wilde witnesses the rejection of a static and representational understanding of “proof” as ontologically external and logically prior to the “claim” it evinces, and its replacement with a dynamic and performative understanding of “proof” as both concurrent with and internal to a claim in the moment of its very utterance:

“After all, what is a fine lie? Simply that which is its own evidence” (Wilde, 1072).

Hence, the deliberately ambiguous phrasing of Vivian’s declaration that “[i]f a man is sufficiently unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie, he might just as well speak the truth at once” (Wilde, 1072): the statement can (and should, I argue) be read two ways, as unqualifiedly asserting, on the one hand, that the very use of evidence is altogether unimaginative and unworthy, and as asserting on the other (and more qualified) hand that a successful exercise of evidence would require a certain level of imagination and artistry. That is, even while this passage denounces the politician’s very presentation of invented facts and fabricated reasons for his false claims in the first place (and thereby rejects the Realist conception of evidence as a matter of external reference), it also more specifically denounces the lack of imagination intrinsic to this attempt at simulating the lie as true (and thereby proposes, in place of this Realist conception of evidence, a Formalist conception of evidence as a function of the lie’s coherence-granting rhetorical form).

And so, at the level of content, “The Decay of Lying” affirms not the absolute relativity or indeterminability of an artwork’s value or accomplishment, but simply the need to recognize a new Formalist set of criteria for judging and verifying this value (aesthetic properties and dramatic/affective efficacy) in place of a Realist set of criteria (representative fidelity and moral/social efficacy). Similarly, at the level of form, “The Decay of Lying” does not dispense with the possibility for a philosophical proposition’s truth or veracity altogether, so much as it
combines the traditional rationalist requirement for epistemic veracity (the internal, logical coherence of what is claimed) with the traditional empiricist requirement for this veracity (the claim’s external correspondence to lived reality): in Wilde’s hands, these competing criteria operate together as the demand for internal, formal coherence between what is claimed (semantic content) and how it is claimed (its empirical realization in rhetorical performance).

In the readings of Vivian’s idiosyncratic rhetoric to follow, this paper will suggest that, in order to properly corroborate and substantiate his anti-Realist claim (that Art ought to lie without simulating itself as the truth), Wilde does not argue for the ‘art for art’s sake’ claim with proper logic, reason, and evidence, but rather performs or embodies the ‘art for art’s sake’ claim with barefaced hyperbolic language, blatantly fictitious evidence, and transparently false premises. In this way, Wilde both 1) avoids a certain charge of hypocrisy (namely, that he wrong-headedly tries to ‘prove’ by conventional means the ‘truth’ of his claim that conventional notions proof and truth ought to be done away with) as well as 2) effects an alternative proof-by-formalization (wherein the reader is compelled to accept Wilde’s claim that lying is valuable and worthwhile since she or he is all the while witness to the wonderfully humorous and beautiful effects of this ‘dishonesty’ in the dialogue’s stylistic elements and rhetorical forms).

Perhaps the most pervasive method with which Wilde accomplishes these two things is by purposely overselling his argument. Take, for example, Vivian’s rant on Nature that opens the dialogue, and in particular, his second rejoinder to Cyril. Here, he humorously and fancifully overstates 1) the ‘dehumanization’ of Man in the natural world and 2) the positive role that Art (in the form of architecture) has had in advancing human civilization and in granting individuals

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11 “If Nature had been comfortable, mankind would never have invented architecture…Out of doors one becomes abstract and impersonal. One’s individuality absolutely leaves one…Whenever I am walking in the park here, I always feel that I am no more to her than the cattle that browse on the slope, or the burdock that blooms in the ditch. Nothing is more evident than that Nature hates Mind.” (Wilde, 1071).
their ‘humanity’\textsuperscript{12}. The hyperbole on display in these lines deliberately takes the linguistically conspicuous form of distinct adverbs and indefinite pronouns – “entirely,” “everything,” “never,” “always,” “nothing,” “absolutely” – in order to emphasize that this is an excess on the order of expression (rhetorical form) before it is an excess on the order of thought (propositional content): in this way, Wilde clues his reader into the fact that – with the simple replacement of these claim-universalizing adverbs and pronouns with more parameter-narrowing ones – he could just as easily have made his claims more plausible and evincible rather than less so (as he does here). The intention, then, behind Wilde’s absolutizing of his claims to their literalist extremes is to thrust into the spotlight both 1) the ridiculousness of what he says and 2) the wit and self-assurance of the ethos behind how he says it. The reader can’t help but laugh at how elegantly it is managed, and at how wonderfully arrogant and confident the personality behind the claims must be: this perlocutionary effect of laughter in turn encourages the reader to concur with the positive valuation of egotism and creativity within the propositional content of the claims, insofar as they (the reader) have just delighted in the conceit and craftsmanship on display in the bold rhetorical choices Vivian makes in presenting his line of argument. And so, with the use of ironic overstatement, Wilde manages to turn the formal-rhetorical preclusion of traditional proof (the deliberate use of parameter-broadening adverbs to make his claims impossible to verify) into its own form of proof, embodying in his ‘lying rhetoric’ the same creativity- and ego-affirming values he attributes to Art in his argument: that is, just as the architectural art of building structures of dwelling marks the beginning of collective civilization, so the rhetorical art of building beautiful lies marks the beginning of individual aesthetic cultivation.

\textsuperscript{12} “In a house we all feel of the proper proportions. Everything is subordinated to us, fashioned for our use and our pleasure. Egotism itself, which is so necessary to a proper sense of human dignity, is entirely the result of indoor life” (Wilde, 1071).
This sort of hyperbolic literalization and ironic overstatement we find in a more qualified form as well, in passages where Wilde tries to have his argument be both 1) aesthetically appreciated as a brilliantly presented lie and 2) philosophically regarded as a rigorously reasoned certainty. For instance, in the dialogue’s discussions of the Impressionists’ rendering of London fog (Wilde, 1086) and of the Japanese artists’ rendering of the Japanese people (Wilde, 1088), Wilde makes sure to precede passages containing his trademark literalism and hyperbole\textsuperscript{13} with strikingly serious explanations of their credibility\textsuperscript{14}. In this way, embodied in the particular order with which Wilde unfolds his assertions of varying credibility is the very meaning at stake in a sentence like “At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects” (Wilde, 1086): that is, just as it is not fog’s mere existence but its \textit{demonstrated beauty} that ensures its phenomenal appearance to Victorian city-dwellers, similarly for Wilde’s claims about lies (and about Life and Nature’s imitation of them) to be regarded as true, it is not enough that he show (through reason and evidence, “from a scientific or metaphysical point of view”) that those claims are \textit{actually the case}, but what’s more Wilde must \textit{teach} his readers the \textit{lovely effects} of the beautiful lie by capturing it in rhetorical form (that is, in having the wonderfully untrue exaggerations \textit{conclude} his more qualified and reasoned argumentation).

Perhaps one of the most impressive examples of Wilde ‘validating’ or ‘certifying’ the loveliness of dishonesty by practicing it himself is his infamous plagiarism of Whistler in this dialogue. At the height of his public feud with Wilde, Whistler writes, in an article published in \textit{World}, that “[Oscar] has the courage of the convictions…of other people!” (Charles, 94-95). In

\textsuperscript{13} “They [London fogs] did not exist till Art had invented them” (Wilde, 1086); “In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people” (Wilde, 1088).

\textsuperscript{14} “Consider the matter from a scientific or metaphysical point of view…Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us” (Wilde, 1086).
response to this accusation of plagiarism, Wilde in fact lifts this very phrase and places it in the mouth of Vivian, as part of one of that character’s many tirades against the Realist novelist: “He has not even the courage of other people’s ideas, but insists on going directly to life for everything” (Wilde, 1073). As cleverly and delightedly subversive as Wilde’s choice to prove Whistler’s accusation is (that is, by in fact plagiarizing once more from Whistler), what’s more impressive and revealing is how the frankness and fearlessness of Wilde’s lifting from Whistler embodies Vivian’s aforementioned description of “the temper of the true liar.” That is, Wilde does not plagiarize here in the manner that Vivian’s “politician” would: far from trying to deceive his audience and disguise Whistler’s turn of phrase as his own, Wilde in fact requires that his act of plagiarism be readily recognized as such in order to make visible at all this connection between the two moments in his dialogue. Thus, how the phrase’s transplantation is carried out entails a re-evaluation of the very act of plagiarism itself, affording it exactly the opposite moral and aesthetic statuses that Whistler’s original use of the phrase intended: where Whistler intends for the phrase to establish his rival’s duplicity, unoriginality, and general inferiority of intellect and imagination, Wilde’s own repetition of the accusation manages to shine with imaginative and intellectual force. What’s more, in managing to exude such originality and creativity, this repetition sees Wilde maintaining a more idiosyncratic sort of honesty, to himself: that is, a certain fidelity to (or consistency with) his own claims in this dialogue concerning the admirable character and aesthetic merits of lying. And so, far from making him duplicitous and inconsistent (and therefore unreliable), Wilde’s mode of plagiarism is one whose exercise amazingly and paradoxically works to cement the coherence (and therefore trustworthiness and credibility) of his thought.
And so, although the phrase itself concerns “the courage of other people’s ideas,” in truth it is not so much the original idea or meaning of Whistler’s words that catches Wilde’s aestheticist eye here: rather, divorcing form from content, Wilde treats Whistler’s words not as a claim on reality worth countering but as a turn of phrase worth making more clever, and ignores the demand to ‘wrestle’ and ‘contend’ with the accusation at hand in favor of ‘playing’ with its clever expression, the way a poet might re-appropriate a line of Homer’s or Shakespeare’s. The result is that the moral concern over whether Whistler’s original accusation is ‘true’ or not disappears behind the technically impressive and dramatically pleasing ‘play’ of theft and re-contextualization on display here, so that the epistemic and the moral give way to (or indeed, are refashioned as) the aesthetic.15

Moreover, in refusing to “argue or dispute” (Wilde, 1179), and instead remain “perfectly and absolutely himself” (Wilde, 1181), Wilde comes close here to embodying that “perfect personality” (Wilde, 1179) that serves as one of his subjects of discussion in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” a personality whose qualities of independence, internal coherence, and self-identity are not incidentally assigned as well to the ideal artwork in “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist.” “What I mean by a perfect man,” writes Wilde, “is one who develops under perfect conditions; one who is not wounded, or worried or maimed, or in danger. Most personalities have been obliged to be rebels. Half their strength has been wasted in friction” (Wilde, 1179). And indeed, in contrast to Wilde’s artful and elegant (non-)rejoinder to Whistler...
in this dialogue, the feud he carried on with him in real life was as bitter and petty as it was
public and protracted, often amounting on Wilde’s part to pathetic pomposity and awkward
descension\textsuperscript{16}: unsurprisingly, then, Wilde himself takes note of this disparity between the
possibilities for perfecting personality in real life and in art, writing in “The Soul of Man” that
“[i]t is a question whether we have ever seen the full expression of a personality, except on the
imaginative plane of art. In action, we never have” (Wilde, 1178).

At the same time, even Wilde’s ingenious plagiarism of Whistler’s turn of phrase fails to
serve as a \textit{completely} perfect expression of personality, precisely because it ultimately still relies
on external reference: “Crime, which, under certain conditions, may seem to have created
Individualism, must take cognizance of other people and interfere with them. It belongs to the
sphere of action. But alone, without any reference to his neighbors, without any interference, the
artist can fashion a beautiful thing” (Wilde, 1184).\textsuperscript{17}

Thus, the most ‘perfect’ (the least reactive and self-defeating) of Wilde’s self-evincing
lies in “The Decay of Lying” are those that, unlike the aforementioned example, are entirely
reliant on their own rhetorical form. Take, for example, the more micro-level operations of
sentence structure in this dialogue, where we find a certain ‘joke syntax’ (the “rich rhythmic
utterance” Vivian attributes to the liar) that highlights implausibility and unreality similarly to
the way ironic overstatement does. At one point in his sparsely-punctuated lecturing of Cyril,
Vivian delineates by negative-relief what he deems to be the proper subject matter of Art: “As

\textsuperscript{16}For instance, in addition to responding to Whistler’s accusation of plagiarism in the aforementioned manner in
“The Decay of Lying,” Wilde also had published the following day in World a response that read, in its entirety,
“What is so sad about our dear Jimmy is that vulgarity begins at home and ought to stay there” (Charles, 95).
\textsuperscript{17}Cf. “The Critic as Artist,” where Gilbert affirms possibilities for perfection in ‘words’ over ‘action’ like so:
“More difficult to do a thing than to talk about it? Not at all. That is a gross popular error…No, Ernest, don't talk
about action. It is a blind thing dependent on external influences, and moved by an impulse of whose nature it is
unconscious. It is a thing incomplete in its essence, because limited by accident, and ignorant of its direction, being
always at variance with its aim. Its basis is the lack of imagination.” (Wilde, 1121).
long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for
pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we
live, it is outside the proper sphere of art” (Wilde, 1079). The use of the phrase ‘as long as’ to
frame all the traditionally ‘positive’ predicates subsequently cataloged (utility, necessity,
poignancy, proximity, etc.) is, of course, an instance of the aforementioned technique of ironic
overstatement. But what’s more, by deferring to the end of the sentence the ‘punchline’ that the
specific significance ascribed to all these qualities is their unsuitability for art, Wilde ‘furnishes’
his expectation-subverting characterization of Art’s subject matter (as useless, superfluous,
indifferent, etc.) with a syntactic form that, in the moment of performative utterance, arouses
laughter and delight in the very arbitrariness and gratuitousness of Vivian’s rhetorical use of
‘negative’ rather than ‘positive’ characterization, thereby endearing the audience to the
unconventional claims (the semantic content) of the sentence, where they might have otherwise
reacted with indignation and critical opposition. Put on practical display in the very way that
Wilde argues for them, the anti-bourgeois and anti-utilitarian principles of excess and caprice
shine doubly bright, in the dual modes of propositional content and rhetorical form, thereby
confirming and endorsing themselves before Wilde’s audience with seeming self-sovereignty
and autonomy.\(^{18}\)

A similarly strategic use of a sentence’s moment of syntactic closure can be seen in this
earlier-mentioned proposition of Vivian’s: “Egotism itself, which is so necessary to a proper
sense of human dignity, is entirely the result of indoor life” (Wilde, 1071). An easy way to see
the subtle effect of the particular placement of “egotism” and “indoor life” in the sentence above
is to re-write it in more conversational syntax (in this case, without dividing the subject and verb

\(^{18}\) Cf. Nietzsche in *The Wanderer and His Shadow*: “It is good to express a matter in two ways simultaneously so as
to give it both a right foot and a left. Truth can stand on one leg, to be sure, but with two it can walk and get about”
(*Human, All Too Human*, 307; translation modified).
with an interrupting clause, as Wilde does here). In that case, we would get something like
“Indoor life is entirely responsible for egotism, which is so necessary to a proper sense of human
dignity.” Juxtaposing this alternate sentence with the original, we can see that the value of the
interrupting clause (and of the placement of “egotism” and “indoor life” at the beginning and end
of the sentence, respectively) is to give a certain ‘comedic’ arc to the declaration: the whole
sentence takes on the structure of a joke, as we 1) begin with the expectation-subverting
“egotism,” 2) are then presented with the tantalizingly bizarre ‘set up’ that egotism is somehow
“necessary” for “human dignity,” and 3) finally are witness to the ‘punchline’ that egotism is
itself the result of something as mundane as “indoor living.” Written as a syllogism, in
conceptual sequence, we would begin with a nominal mundanity – living indoors – that gives
birth to a nominal vice – sense of self-importance – which itself gives birth to a nominal bedrock
of civilization – sense of humanity. But here, we are given the middle term first, and then learn
what its logical predecessor and successor are, so that the logical implausibility and
unconventional historiography of the sequence in total is purposely deferred till the end, to
humorous effect: in lieu of attacking the dubiousness of the claim (of which the rhetoric is so
obviously already aware), the reader is encouraged to relinquish their tedious delineation of
what’s true and what isn’t for the sake of laughter.\textsuperscript{19} To contrast, in the alternative sentence
structure (“Indoor life is entirely responsible for egotism”), the reader is struck by the ridiculous
thrust of the claim not at the end (a la a joke) but rather up front (a la a formal proposition), so

\textsuperscript{19} While the sequence of ‘premises’ in syllogistic logic bear no consequence for the logical validity or invalidity of
the ‘conclusion’ that follows from those premises, we see precisely in this quasi-Platonic dialogue that the ordering
of the presentation of the logical relationships between “Egotism,” “human dignity,” and “indoor life” in fact \textit{is material}
(in the sense of being $\textit{consequential to} – \textit{and even constitutive of} – \textit{the claim’s ultimate ‘veracity’}).
that the claim comes off as much more earnest and straightforward, and is therefore criticized for its implausibility rather than enjoyed for it.\textsuperscript{20}

Sometimes, it is not the syntactically-engineered surprise of Wilde’s claims that turns their rhetorically-pronounced implausibility into its own performative verification, but rather the ‘semantic pleonasm’ or tautological redundancy in these jokes that transforms the sheer lack of any claim whatsoever into an experience of its self-confirmation. Take, for example, the following example of an assertion followed by its (supposed) clarification: “Art itself is really a form of exaggeration; and selection, which is the very spirit of art, is nothing more than an intensified mode of overemphasis” (Wilde, 1079). The phrase “intensified mode of overemphasis” doesn’t add any new meaning to the word “selection” so much as it simply overemphasizes the definition of “selection.” What’s more, the entire ‘clarification’ (“and selection, which is the very spirit of art, is nothing more than an intensified mode of overemphasis”) is itself nothing more than an intensified mode of overemphasizing the previous ‘assertion’ (“Art itself is really a form of exaggeration”). And so we are provided in this passage the entire message and method of Wilde’s dialogue in miniature: the propositional content of the claim put forth (that art is a matter of exaggeration) is validated by pure \textit{rhetorical demonstration} (that is, by being put forth \textit{in the very mode} of exaggeration and overemphasis).

There are, finally, when it comes to the matter of evidence-by-rhetorical-form, two other related routes that Vivian and Wilde take and that are philosophically in line with their assertions

\textsuperscript{20} Even more, though, the manner in which this syntax ‘convinces’ the reader of the claim’s veracity goes beyond the mere suspension of the reader’s critical suspicion, and entails in fact a quasi-empirical \textit{corroboration} of what the claim specifically asserts in the form of how that claim is presented. That is, the content of Wilde’s words seems to be saying that human beings are worth honoring and respecting (“human dignity”) because they regard and care for themselves to excess (“egotism”), and human beings regard and care for themselves insofar as they subordinate the ‘accidents’ of their surroundings to fulfill their own purposes and to please themselves (“indoor life”), thereby becoming ends in themselves: similarly, the form of his words seems to being saying that sentences are worth believing in (are true) because they are excessively preoccupied with and attentive to themselves (are rhetorically self-serving), and sentences attend to themselves insofar as they subordinate the ‘accidents’ of their form to their own purposes and for their own sake (are aesthetically well-formed), thereby becoming ends in themselves.
about Art and Life. One is when a lack of reason and evidence is capitalized on as an opportunity to launch into a poetic tour de force. Consider the moment when, contending that none of the worthwhile novelists of the time are Realists, Vivian is suddenly asked by Cyril why in that case he enjoys reading the novels of George Meredith. In his response, Vivian attempts to affirm Meredith as a Romanticist (rather than Realist or Naturalist) through a shifty succession of evocative metaphors for Meredith’s prose and aesthetic:

His style is chaos illumined by flashes of lightning…[he is] a man who is always breaking his shins over his own wit…he is a child of realism who is not on speaking terms with his father…He has refused to bow the knee to Baal…he has planted round his garden a hedge full of thorns, and red with wonderful roses. (Wilde, 1076)

By their non-sequitur arrangement, one after another, these metaphors deliberately fail to appear full of sharp insights relevant to the Romanticist/Realist debate concerning Meredith, blatantly dodging the debate at hand and instead simply using the occasion as an opportunity to indulge in poetic language and wit for their own sake: the “flashes of lightning” and “garden hedge” metaphors, for example, are more evocative of the very aesthetic undergirding Vivian’s argumentation in this dialogue21 than they are genuinely and usefully descriptive of the specifics of Meredith’s prose style, whereas the “child of realism” and “Baal” metaphors put forth the assertion that Meredith is not a Realist on no base other than their own cleverness. In this way, the positive yields of a conception of Art as ‘lying’ (delight, entertainment, and most importantly, an openness to novelty and imaginative possibilities) is demonstrated rhetorically and stylistically rather than determined rationally and empirically.

Another way Wilde handles his lack of reasoned evidence is to replace this lack with illegitimate evidence that, far from simulating itself as true and reliable, celebrates rather the

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21 We might read, for example, in the “flashes of lightning” Wilde’s preference for brilliant aperçus over slow and methodical demonstration, whereas in the “hedge full of thorns” we might read Wilde’s use of circular reasoning to deliberately contain his theory and cut it off from engagement with the empirical realities of the outside world.
creative impulse underlying lying. We see this of course in the ingenious ‘examples’ of people’s lives imitating the events described in novels by Thackeray and Stevenson (Wilde, 1084), the latter example ending with Vivian’s deflating comment, “At least it should have been” (Wilde, 1084): by making clear to the reader that these stories of life imitating fiction are themselves fictional, Wilde avoids a certain charge of hypocrisy (that he relies on the efficacy of conventional evidence to prove his claim that the efficacy of this sort of evidence ought to be done away with) and instead shows that to defend and justify creative lying is simply (and necessarily) to celebrate and practice it.

The epitome of Wilde’s celebratory lying in the defense of lying, however, arrives with the conceit that George Washington’s childhood encounter with a cherry-tree is responsible for America’s supposed literalism and lack of imagination (Wilde, 1081). The rhetorically-exquisite ‘trap’ that Wilde sets here for his ‘fact-clinging’ and ‘truth-worshipping’ reader is that, should the reader protest that the cherry tree myth never actually happened (i.e. is indeed a national myth), Wilde can then simply reply that the fact it is a lie about Washington’s childhood precisely proves his point: that is, the cherry tree story (like the fictions of *Vanity Fair* and *Dr. Jekyll*) needn’t itself be true in order to have an effect on the nation. What’s more, it’s worth noting that in refusing to make explicit the fanciful origin of the story (i.e. in refusing to make certain for the reader whether Vivian knows the story is just a national myth), Wilde in fact appears to deliberately engineer such a response from his reader, a response that not incidentally performatively confirms Wilde’s theory of what he deems to be the true nature and function of lies: in this way, the passage is just one more example of Wilde pre-determining the reader’s ‘perlocutionary response’ to an utterance so that it ‘furnishes’ (*performs*) and ‘completes’

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22 “[I]t is not too much to say that the story of George Washington and the cherry-tree has done more harm, and in a shorter space of time, than any other moral tale in the whole of literature” (Wilde, 1081).
(perfects) the propositional content of that same utterance, all via his shaping of that utterance’s rhetorical form.

Finally, the manner in which Wilde has the dialogue conclude serves as a particularly illustrative example of rhetorical form’s ‘substantiation’ of propositional content. Having provided a sort of distillation of the aesthetic contentions undergirding his article, Vivian says to Cyril, “The final revelation is that Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art. But of this I think I have spoken at sufficient length. And now let us go out on the terrace, where ‘droops the milk-white peacock like a ghost,’ while the evening star ‘washes the dusk with silver’” (Wilde, 1092). The syntactical seamlessness of the quotations’ integration into Vivian’s sentence (the lines are ‘used’ rather than ‘mentioned’) and the deliberate maintenance of their authors’ anonymity (the names ‘Tennyson’ and ‘Blake’ do not appear) suggest (in their minimization of the appearance of the lines of verse as quotations) that these images from poetry truly ‘enter’ the scene of twilight as ‘furnishings’ that ‘complete’ the scene: self-conscious quotation of these poets’ lines is concurrent with (and perhaps even the same as) casual description of the natural scene at hand. In this way, the stylistic and syntactical choices that Wilde makes in integrating these quotations into Vivian’s speech emulate in form his (and Vivian’s) Aestheticist argument that Art superimposes its recreations of the natural world onto Nature, as though Nature were the ‘canvas’ of Art: the rhetorical play of Vivian’s final sentences in this dialogue embodies and performs the propositional content of the four summary “doctrines of the new aesthetics”\(^\text{23}\) that he provides Cyril just before. Just as Wilde’s more sensible and well-reasoned arguments concerning Japanese art and the English Impressionists are concluded (‘completed’) by Vivian’s performative overstatements, so these more straightforward and

\(^{23}\) “Art never expresses anything but itself…All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals…Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life [and] external Nature also imitates Art…Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art (Wilde, 1091-1092).
propositional ‘doctrines’ are ultimately finished (‘furnished’) by the performatively significant quotation-without-citation of Tennyson and Blake’s lines of verse.

V. Conclusion: Wilde’s Felicitous Infidelity to Plato

“And so, Glaucon, the tale was saved, as the saying is, and was not lost. And it will save us if we believe it.” – Republic

“Whatever is realized is right.” – De Profundis

In putting forward the preceding claims concerning “The Decay of Lying,” I readily presume both that Wilde makes conventionally ‘Platonic’ use of the dialectic – that he is sensitive to the rationalistic procedures of dialogue as a philosophical method – and that he proceeds in direct opposition to Plato’s avowed method – that he recognizes and deliberately capitalizes on the rhetorical and poetic opportunities lying in wait in the dialogue as literary form. In distributing equal significance between these two assumptions, I seek to replace the simplistic notion of Wilde as an unreserved denier of the possibilities for acquiring truth and for being sincere (a set of contentions popular in much Wilde criticism, of the distant and recent past), with the more tempered suggestion that Wilde is better understood as instead revising the character and operation of truth and sincerity by foregrounding the elements of form and performance therein.

Of course, ironically enough, already with Plato himself do these elements of form and performance receive integral (though disavowed) functions within the dialectical ‘ascension’ toward truth: that is, undergirding Socrates’ explicit denigrations of rhetoric and poetry in the Platonic dialogues is a performative and theatrical context rich with rhetorical flourish and teeming with poetical elements. After all, given Wilde’s claim (in that other quasi-Platonic dialogue of his, “The Critic as Artist”) that “[t]o arrive at what one really believes, one must speak through lips different from one’s own” (Wilde, 1143), we should be reminded that the
‘voice’ of Plato ‘speaks’ in his dialogues through the persona of Socrates (and his dialectical interaction with other personas). Considering in turn that this voice makes frequent recourse to myth and metaphor in the dialogues in order to properly articulate and frame Plato’s intended meanings, it is hard not to recall the line in “The Critic as Artist” that immediately follows the one above: “To know the truth one must imagine myriads of falsehoods” (Wilde, 1143). Even Socrates’ incessant recourse to that infamously playful yet didactic irony – in which he poses as ignorant in order to entice his interlocutors to enter the ‘game’ of dialectical reasoning – exemplifies how philosophical sincerity can fasten itself to rhetorical insincerity.

Thus, at the same time as I hope to have shown how Wilde is more conventionally Platonic than might otherwise be thought at first, so too do I hope that the juxtaposition of Wilde and Plato has shown the latter to himself be less conventionally ‘Platonic’ than he admits: that is, because there exists from the get-go this generative contradiction in Plato between 1) rhetoric’s constantive exclusion-by-declaration from philosophical discourse and 2) its performative integration-by-implementation into that same discourse, Wilde can only make ‘Platonic’ use of the Platonic dialogue by making un-Platonic use of it, so that the very distinction between fidelity and infidelity to Plato falls apart. To ‘fulfill’ Plato, as it were (to make Plato more ‘perfect,’ which is to say internally coherent and self-consistent), Wilde must in fact ‘betray’ him (alter and depart from him, make inappropriate use of his method and apply disloyal amendments to his thought).

Thus, where Aristotle’s approach to reconciling the contradictory tendencies internal to Plato is to restrict the rhetorical forms of philosophical discourse so that they all conform to the rationalistic content of philosophical discourse (so that rhetoric, now winnowed down to just
those techniques that ‘resemble’ the dialectic\textsuperscript{24}, can be readily admitted as the latter’s “counterpart”). Wilde’s solution is instead to formalize this very contradiction itself, so that the demand for systematicity that once applied to only the content of philosophical discourse (how sets of propositions logically cohere by leading to and following from one another, how claims about external reality correspond with empirical conditions in external reality), now applies to the relationship between that discourse’s form and content (propositions confirming not one another through logical coherence but rather confirming themselves through correspondence between their constantive content and performative presentation).

The upshot, to my mind, in acknowledging Wilde’s continued (if idiosyncratic) regard for the value of rigorously-acquired truth and rhetorically-sincere speech is, appropriately enough, the possibility of our own recognition of the rigor and systematicity of his aesthetic theories, as well as our appreciation for the sincerity and seriousness\textsuperscript{25} of the theories espoused in his critical work. What ultimately secures these two properties (systematicity and seriousness) for Wilde’s thought is the performative dimension of his writing: when the originally unacknowledged

\textsuperscript{24} See, for example, Aristotle’s distinction in the Rhetoric between ‘true’ enthymemes and ‘sham’ enthymemes (the latter of which are denigrated for their use of unsound reasoning). Along the same lines, Aristotle chooses to highlight only three particular ethos characteristics (‘expertise’ [phronesis], ‘trustworthiness’ [arête], and ‘goodwill’ [eunoia]) worth cultivating as a rhetor, characteristics that not incidentally only contribute to a speaker’s persuasiveness insofar as they suggest something about the logos of the speaker’s argument. In this way, Aristotle appears to account for ethos’ persuasive power as a mere function of logos’ persuasive power. Of course, Wilde, admitting (and privileging) a whole slew of ethos traits other than these three (humor, contrarianism, condescension, absurdity, facetiousness, stylishness, impracticality, etc.), affirms ethos as a means of persuasion in its own right, freeing it from its subordinated role as mere index of logos. What’s more, where ‘sham’ enthymemes are for Aristotle at best failures in reasoning, and at worst knowingly manipulative and misleading, they are for Wilde a primary manifestation of the basic operations (and accompanying delight) of the human faculty for imagination and creativity.

\textsuperscript{25} Writing to Violet Fane, Wilde says of “The Decay of Lying,” “It is meant to bewilder the masses by its fantastic form; au fond it is of course serious” (Complete Letters, 386). The subtitle to “The Importance of Being Earnest” is of course “A Trivial Comedy for Serious People,” and in another letter Wilde remarks that the “philosophy” of the play is “[t]hat we should treat all the trivial things of life very seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality” (More Letters, 196). It is worth considering here how Wilde’s emphasis on the ‘trivial’ (and on “studied triviality” in particular) suggests the etymological root of “trivial” in the “trivium” of the Medieval university, which was comprised of course of rhetoric, grammar, and logic: precisely the three elements that are playfully twisted by Wilde into idiosyncratic relation with one another in order to ‘stylize’ the serious and long-standing debates that this dialogue intervenes on (concerning the character and basis of Art and Culture, the aims and operations of Life and Nature, etc.).
The performative dimension of the Platonic dialogue is frankly foregrounded and strategically mobilized by Wilde, not only is Plato the staunch dialectician reconciled to Plato the skillful rhetorician, but so is Wilde the thief reconciled to Wilde the original, Wilde the critic reconciled to Wilde the artist, and Wilde the quasi-British empiricist reconciled to Wilde the quasi-European rationalist.

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