Fabricating the Body

Fabricating the Body:
Effects of Obligation and Exchange in Contemporary Discourse

Edited by

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This book is dedicated to my children:
Lucas, Jacob, and Nicole

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INTRODUCTION

SARAH HIMSEL BURCON AND CONTRIBUTORS

Fabricating the Body: Effects of Obligation and Exchange in Contemporary Discourse is comprised of nine chapters that revolve around the body, and specifically, portrayals of indebted bodies in literature and popular discourses. The first section, "The Body in Literature," examines issues related to gender and class, as well as human bonding and ethical concerns. Section two, "The Body in Popular Discourse," again, concerns gender in addition to matters related to marginalization. All of the chapters in some fashion explore identity and the body in cultural texts.

The Body in Literature

Chapter One, "A Paratactic 'Missing Link': Dorian Gray and the Performance of Embodied Modernity" by Rachel Herzl-Betz, traces Oscar Wilde's literary debt to the atavistic (the belief that humans could return to an earlier form of evolution) discourse of late-Victorian freak shows. It argues that, while critics have explored atavistic obligation in a range of *fin de siècle* texts, they have yet to connect the decadent movement with the ongoing popularity of performed abnormality. This chapter engages recent criticism in disability studies to follow the trappings and atavistic philosophy of the Victorian freak show that lives on in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-1).

Mr. Wroe's Virgins, a contemporary novel, is also set in 19th century England. Chapter Two, "A Gender in Debt: Labor and the Female Body in *Mr. Wroe's Virgins*" by Emily Workman Keller, explores the cultural landscape of Jane Rogers's novel and the effects that this culture had on Hannah, one of Rogers's protagonists. The chapter explores how Rogers's historical vantage influenced her creation of Hannah, a talented and hard-working woman whose labor is devalued because of her gender. To that end, the analysis juxtaposes 19th century and contemporary theoretical discourses, making use of two 19th century writers: Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a feminist manifesto; and

Anna Lætitia Barbauld, the poet who wrote "Washing-Day," a social satire concerned with the toils of domestic labor. The essay dwells upon the options available to single women in the early 19th century, and explores Hannah's characterization as the ideal female capable of navigating the changes that Rogers, by virtue of being able to look back at a time that has passed, is able to anticipate.

Chapters Three and Four also explore gender issues. Matthew J. Sherman's "The Costs of Debt: The Indebtedness of the Female Body in Arthur Schnitzler's *Fräulein Else*" examines the novella, *Fräulein Else,* which is the inner monologue of a nineteen year-old Viennese woman. The protagonist, Else, must decide if she will pose nude for Herr von Dorsday, who, in return, will pay off her father's substantial debt. Else contemplates the deed as her thoughts oscillate between repulsion and excitation. This chapter appropriates a psychoanalytic framework to uncover the reciprocity of external and internal realities, and to expose how psychical conflict, specifically regarding female sexuality and the body, reflects the interconnectedness of irreconcilable debts. This irreconcilability owes itself, to a great extent, to matters of gender and class. Else's body is the site for the negotiation of masculine desires. She is obligated to the patriarchal social structure that prostitutes her. There is no possibility for her to establish autonomy over her body or her sexuality. Her indebtedness denies reprieve and leads to a violent backlash against society and the self. In Chapter Four, "Unbinding the Tragic 'Dream' of Human Abjection: Paying the Debt of Gender-Based Abjection in Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*," Mary Catherine Harper points out how, as a whole, the linked volumes of *The Sandman* series explore the maturation and eventual tragic death of the central character, Morpheus. Furthermore, in the course of the ten plot-linked volumes, Morpheus shifts from allegorical figure to a well-rounded character that has to recognize, struggle to understand, and take responsibility for a range of human psycho-social problems in which he is implicated. As the chapter teases out Morpheus's struggle with his impulse to abjectify along gender lines, it exposes some of the tragic qualities of abjection still circulating in our postmodern cultural environment.

Moving away from gender and into the arena of a post-apocalyptic world, Chapter Five, Lo Chi Man's "The Land and the Human Body in McCarthy's *The Road*: The Importance of Moral Values in Human Connection and Bonding," examines Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and argues that, as a post-apocalyptic fiction, it does not merely demonstrate the struggles of life in the state of devastation, but also forcefully leads the readers to reflect on the basis for the establishment of human bonding and

the contribution to a meaningful life, as well as the fragility of moral values as illustrated through the connection between the catastrophic landscape and the human body. Under the context of the obliteration of the fundamental principles—the principles which are constructed by divine and authoritative governance regarding the moral standards and the meanings of human life—which indicates that the original developed systems and ideas of human civilization in the pre-apocalyptic world have been lost after the catastrophic incident, McCarthy actually provides the possibility of and hope for the recreation or reestablishment of human bonding, as well as raises the basis for a meaningful life.

Along a somewhat similar vein in terms of ethics, Chapter Six looks to various texts that highlight ethical concerns. Melissa Ames's "Bodies of Debt: Interrogating the Costs of Technological Progress, Scientific Advancement, and Social Conquests through Dystopian Literature" is a pedagogy-focused chapter that discusses the successes and challenges of teaching a cross-curricular course on science and literature. The course studied narratives that wrestle with ethical concerns surrounding "progress" (societal achievements, technological and scientific discoveries, etc.). Some contemporary debates addressed in this course included: cloning, stem cell research, human trafficking, and capital punishment, and students analyzed various fictional texts (for example, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, along with contemporary film companion texts such as *I, Robot* and *Repo Man)* that critique these issues. Class discussion revolved around the following questions: what do we do when human survival and societal progress come at extreme costs, and how might such advancements question our faith in humanity?

The Body in Popular Discourse

Section Two moves away from literary/filmic narratives and looks instead to popular culture to tease out actual spaces in which the body is highlighted and interrogated. In Chapter Seven, "Selling Weddings and Producing Brides: Mediated Portrayals of that 'Perfect Day,'" Sarah Himsel Burcon analyzes various mediated portrayals of American weddings in order to problematize marriage "performances" that are arguably grounded in materialist concerns. The essay points out how weddings, which were once small, private affairs, have now become a $48 billion industry, with the average cost of a U.S. wedding in 2012 being around $28,000**.** The essay takes a historical look at weddings, ultimately arguing that cultural products depicting weddings, such as magazines,

films, and television shows, often work to reinforce the traditional status quo that connects women with domesticity, rather than to resist stereotypes by offering up stronger models of femininity.

Gender is also significant in Chapter Eight, Kristi McDuffie's "Epideictic Rhetoric in *Jezebel's* Breastfeeding Blogs: The Battle for Normalcy." This chapter examines breastfeeding rhetoric in recent years. Breastfeeding rhetoric, which has proliferated in recent public discourses about debates over breastfeeding, elicits some of the strongest praise and blame rhetoric in contemporary U.S. public discourses. One particular online women's blog, *Jezebel,* demonstrates the variation and strength of this rhetoric in its scope and tone of its posts. By looking at the praise and blame rhetoric, or what Aristotle calls epideictic rhetoric, of breastfeeding discourse in *Jezebel,* this chapter finds that breastfeeding rhetoric encompasses constant arguments for what should be normative about breastfeeding. Following Judy Segal's application of epideictic rhetoric to medical discourses and utilizing Lennard Davis's concept of normalcy, this chapter analyzes breastfeeding rhetoric as a site of contention about normalcy regarding women's bodies, behaviors, and values. Ultimately, this analysis determines that the use of epideictic rhetoric, as well as corresponding rhetoric that argues for any behavior to be normative in women's lives, is not supportive of women; instead, breastfeeding rhetoric should refrain from arguing for any particular norm and embrace diversity in women's bodies and women's lives.

The final chapter examines the ways in which prison literature might act to carve out an identity for Life Without Parole (LWOP) prisoners. Chapter Nine, "The Forever Indebted Body: Life Without Parole" by Adrienne Bliss, draws on prisoners' real-life accounts and examines how individuals who are sentenced to life without parole have to go through the process of learning how to live as less than or marginalized due to incarceration. The chapter points out that these prisoners must also reconcile with the fact that society will *never* let them return. Ultimately, it questions the cost to society, emotionally and economically, given the fact that the United States has an increasingly aging prison population and is also one of the very few nations that sentences juveniles to LWOP.

As a whole, these chapters work to both prompt and continue conversations surrounding the body, and specifically, bodies that can be labeled "indebted." *Fabricating the Body* brings together issues of gender, class, and identity, and investigates ethical concerns along with topics related to marginalization and the mind/body split. Finally, it problematizes issues related to Modernity and postmodern culture - such

as disruption, contradiction, performance, and fragmentation - in order to position the body as a productive space for academic research.

SECTION I:

THE BODY IN LITERATURE

CHAPTER ONE

A PARATACTIC "MISSING LINK": DORIAN GRAY AND THE PERFORMANCE OF EMBODIED MODERNITY

RACHEL HERZL-BETZ

In 1883, at the infamous Westminster Aquarium[1], G.A. Farini introduced the newest addition to his freak show tour: a seven-year-old girl from "Indochina" who was professionally known as "Krao, the Missing Link" (Durbach, *Spectacle* 57). She would remain an integral part of the international freak show circuit for forty-five years, but her career began at the "Aq," where prostitutes prowled the promenade and where sea creatures were quite beside the point (Durbach 58). Krao's first audiences had the chance to judge her validity as a genuine missing link in Darwin's evolutionary chain. One such observer, from *The Continent,* emerged equally delighted and confused:

> It will be seen that her legs from the knee down and her arms from the elbow down are quite too long for a human child; yet in her great black lustrous eyes seems to shine an intelligence far above that of the brute creation. Her ability to speak, to learn even the ways of civilization, seem to warrant the belief that she ought to be ranked with the race which cooks and prints and laughs and talks. But what shall be inferred from the marks and features which seem to emphatically connect her with a lower order of beings? (240)

How, he wonders, can Krao exist as both the brute and the civilized human? Her body appears to fit the narrative Farini concocts about "a strange family of human monkeys" discovered in "Upper Birmah," but her mind does not match (240). The question appears throughout the coverage of Krao's late-Victorian tours. Another article glibly juxtaposes the

[1] See Durbach 57-58 for the Aquarium's history as venue for freak acts, variety shows, and prostitution.

supposed pouches in her mouth and the extra "dorsal vertebrae" in her spine with her "mild, affectionate, and remarkably intelligent" nature (*Michigan* 7). Krao appears to represent two identities simultaneously, a trait she shares with most late-Victorian freak show performers and which sets her apart from almost every performer outside of the Victorian context. Yet, few critics within freak studies have explored the significance of a gap between the freakish body and the freakish mind.[2]

This essay holds that the critical silence about the mind/body gap Krao shared with countless other "freaks" comes down to a problem of context. Critics have not counterposed late-Victorian freak show discourse with another performance of separated identity constructed near the Westminster Aquarium. During Krao's time in London, Oscar Wilde composed his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. There, he tells the story of a man whose mind and body are split into separate entities as he performs a heightened version of himself for his friends and curious servants. At the urging of his mentor, Lord Henry Wotton, Dorian fashions his life as a performance of endless physical beauty, while his portrait symbolically enacts his mental degeneration behind closed doors. Critics commonly contextualize Dorian Gray and his decadent compatriots through an upper-class form of social Darwinism popularized by Max Nordau and Cesare Lombroso. In fact, social Darwinism and decadence have long existed as paired phenomena in the conversation surrounding late-Victorian literature. Critics variously associate H.G. Wells's Eloi, Robert Louis Stevenson's Hyde, and Bram Stoker's Dracula with the fear that humanity could return to pre-modern monstrosity. The freak show contributes to the discourse of, but has often been read as too pre or non-modern to comment on, the decadent man. As a result, critics have yet to contextualize Dorian's divided identity through non-normative performances taking place down the street from his artistic inception.

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[2] Like others in freak studies, I refer to the performers I study as "freaks" and to their places of employment as "freak shows." My chosen language is not intended to signify an inherent non-normativity, nor do I seek to reify a spectacular relationship between the human object on stage and the, supposedly, normative observer. Instead, I refer to the performers by their job description because, when they are on stage and in character, they are performing as freaks. My choice of terminology is not meant to negate the victimization of many performers in the industry and should not be taken as a reflection on current performances of non-normativity. Members of the contemporary disability community are not "freaks" unless they choose to frame and perform themselves as, contextually, "enfreaked" (Thomson, *Freakery*). Disability and freak studies overlap, but they still represent separate fields with distinct foci.

I argue that juxtaposing the freak and the aesthete highlights their shared gap between body and mind. Both performers create fragmented identities, which other agents stage, frame, and control. Placing the freak show beside the decadent performance redefines each discourse and contradicts current critical dogma: first, the freak show's explicit perfomativity highlights the many agents framing Dorian Gray's aesthetic identity. Second, the aesthetic novel's emphasis on contradictions between embodiment and interiority highlights the juxtaposition of mind and body in each freak show performance. Using a theoretical framework proposed by Susan Stanford Friedman, I further claim that parataxis, "the juxtaposition of things without providing connectives" (494), best captures the disjunction and the creative potential of the freak performance. The performer's embodied parataxis places the freak show where it properly belongs: within ongoing debates about how to define the modern, if the modern is understood as a disruption and fragmentation of "conventional sequencing, causality, and perspective" (Friedman 494-95). Indeed, the late-Victorian freak performer embodies the fragmentation, discontinuity, and contradiction more commonly associated with aesthetic Modernity. I demonstrate this hitherto overlooked connection by viewing the late-Victorian freak show beside and through *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This juxtaposition not only highlights a key historical context shaping Wilde's protagonist, but it also reveals a form of Modernity at the heart of every freakish performance.

Framing the Freak Show

Freak show discourse has been read as pre-modern or anti-modern in part because of its extensive history. Robert Bogdan, Rachel Adams, and other foundational scholars in the field now known as freak studies have established the freak show's continued success since the early modern era. Curious consumers could pay to see human anomalies in marketplaces, taverns, coffeehouses, and public fairs from the 1500s until well into the 20th century. Although "liminal" bodies maintained their appeal for more than 500 years, that appeal morphed from early modern wonder into 18th century curiosity. With the late 18th and early 19th century rise of statistics and eugenics, freak shows began to merge scientific and spectacular discourse, offering skeptical viewers the chance to test the unknown.[3] Only in the mid-19th century, with the establishment of abnormality as a

[3] For a history of the freak show and normalcy, see Rosemarie Garland Thomson and Lennard J. Davis.

coherent category, did performers become known as "freaks of nature" or simply "freaks" (Durbach, *Spectacle* xvi).

Between early performances of abnormality and their contemporary cousins, the freak show developed a series of recognizable structures and rhetorical moves meant to frame the spectacular body for public consumption.[4] Although, as Rachel Adams argues, "freakishness is a historically variable quality" shaped by temporally, geographically, and culturally specific definitions of deviance, "theatrical props, advertising, and performative fanfare" cued audiences to expect a freakish identity (5). Creating a heightened role for performers was always central to the freak show experience, but during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, top managers turned their shows into finely tuned machines. For those impresarios who initiated, supervised, and controlled popular acts, everything under their domain "framed and choreographed bodily difference" (Thomson, *Extraordinary* 71). The freak show's self-conscious framing process began before audience members stepped into the performance space and followed them when they left. Outside the tents or temporary "showshops," barkers echoed their own advertisements as they called to passersby, promising contradictory performances marked by their epigrammatic titles (Durbach, *Spectacle* xx). Figures such as the "Ugliest Women," the "Hottentot Venus," or the "Hairy Belle" created interest through surprising reversals in which one term "pervert[ed]" the second (Thomson, *Extraordinary* 71). Within the performance space, audience members turned towards the "elevated freak platform," where a costumed figure enacted repetitive choreography that reinforced the freak's fabricated history, while another barker walked through the audience spouting a constant stream of "blatant contradictions and inconsistencies" (Thomson, *Extraordinary* 60, Blyn, *Stage* 145). At the end of the show, audience members could purchase a staged image—or "*carte de visite*"—of their favorite performer encased in a literal frame (Bogdan). Shows that thrived during their late 19th and early 20th century heyday turned the problem of sideshow dishonesty into one of its greatest appeals.

A growing field of scholars argues that the middle classes used the freak show's conscious construction to shape England's developing Modernity, but upper and middle-class commentators tended to dismiss the freak show as a pre-modern response to a scientific problem. Show managers incorporated scientific curiosities as soon as they were published, but the rise of social Darwinism discredited that curiosity as

[4] For further discussion of the contemporary freak show, see Elizabeth Stephens and Eli Claire.

uneducated and vulgar (Thomson, *Extraordinary* 58). In 1859, at the closing of Bartholomew Fair, journalist Henry Morley spoke for his entire cultural community when he celebrated England's recovery from its collective "taste for Monsters" (246). The freak show had become so tightly tied to the past, that Morley conflated the end of one performance venue with the end of the genre, thereby ignoring five flourishing shows in nearby Whitechapel (Williams 6-11).[5]

Rather than turning to Tom Thumb or "Jo-Jo the Dog-Faced Boy" to confront questions of abnormality, Victorians increasingly turned to theories of atavistic science forwarded by Cesare Lombroso's *Criminal Man* and Max Nordau's *Degeneration*. Nordau argues that the decadent lifestyle of British and French aesthetes represents an evolutionary reversal, while Lombroso focuses on the degenerate criminal. Since the 19th century, critics have read both arguments as immensely influential for decadent authors. The popularity of such associations is, to an extent, justified. English translations made both texts widely available, and Nordau identifies Wilde as the chief "representative" of literary atavism (309, 317). At the same time, freak show impresarios created their own version of atavism, but scientific and literary communities refused to regard freak shows as contributors to an ongoing debate about the meaning of the atavistic body. On a basic level, every version of atavism originates in a misreading of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and builds from Ernest Haeckel's argument that individual development "recapitulates" the development of the species or, in other words, "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" (113). Following Darwin's demonstration that humanity has passed through a process of evolutionary stages, Haeckel argues that children re-enact evolution as they move through the developmental process; the individual essentially "climbs its own family tree" (Gould 114). Degeneration, in turn, can be defined by those cases in which development stops before the individual reaches evolutionary Modernity. Such individuals become "evolutionary throwbacks in our midst" or "atavists" (Gould 124). Lombroso, Nordau, and other upper-class Social Darwinists read physical atavism as the mark of an equally degenerate mind, and literary critics have ignored the alternate philosophy that freak shows created for their new audiences.

At the end of the 19th century, Victorian freak shows drew an increasingly working-class clientele, and that new audience was uncomfortable with the "tomfoolery, crowds, and class insubordination"

[5] For the relationship between the former site of Bartholomew Fair and the Whitechapel neighborhood, see *Cross's London Street Directory 1851*.

encouraged by the international freak show circuit (McHold 24). Even lower class audience members aspired to bourgeoisie morality, so the shows invented their own form of atavism, which contradicted Nordau and Lombroso's upper-class conflation of mental and physical degeneracy. Performances that had celebrated wild liminality began to emphasize a respect for the markers of middle-class identity, including "gender difference, domestic virtue, hard work, productivity, and consumerism" (Durbach 22). Impresarios juxtaposed the appeal of degeneration with middle-class morality by presenting their ugly women and wild children as mentally and spiritually civilized. Their bodies might remain abnormal, but their souls could be pure. Thus, when established characters came to England, their costumes, printed materials, illustrations, and origin stories shifted to reflect traditional marriage, families, leisure activities, acquisition, and labor. Female "oddities" asserted their interest in "feminine handiwork," married anew at each stage of a tour, displayed borrowed children, and performed dances dressed as Victorian children (McHold 28, Durbach 146). For Krao's first tour across the Atlantic, a local newspaper depicted a "neatly dressed Krao" beside a "decidedly more simian version of herself" copied from earlier pamphlets (Durbach, *Spectacle* 71). Readers of the *Peru Republic* could still see the large lips, hairy arms, and dark complexion that marked her degenerate body, but her new costume and demeanor indicated that a British soul had always waited within.

In spite of the freak show's active engagement with atavistic discourse, contemporary scholars have ignored how freakish performance is, itself, modern. Scholars studying 19th century freak shows from a disability studies perspective commonly claim that audiences used their presumed difference from non-normative spectacles to define themselves as culturally modern.[6] At the same time, a small number of literary critics point to early 20th century authors who used freakish discourse within literary modernism.[7] Together, they suggest that the freak show can only become part of Modernity or modernism through someone else's eyes. Either the Victorian audiences must use their interpretive power to transform the pre-modern into the modern or, as Robin Blyn suggests, modernist authors must use the freak show "as a formal strategy" to turn the "pitiful freak" into a "social renegade" (138, 146). In contrast, I argue that freakish discourse does not need a helping gaze to take part in modernity. Turning now to Wilde's *Dorian Gray,* we will see how

[6] For examples, see Rachel Adams and Rosemarie Garland Thomson.

[7] For two direct examples, see Robin Blyn's "From Stage to Page: Franz Kafka, Djuna Barnes, and Modernism's Freak Fictions" (2000) and "*Nightwood*'s Freak Dandies: Decadence in the 1930s" (2008).

Modernity and freakish performance function in mutual constitution in the Victorian period.

The Enfreakment of Dorian Gray

The greatest strength of a comparison between the late-Victorian freak show and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* begins with the two discourses' obvious dissimilarities: the freak show exists to glorify useless ugliness, while decadent aestheticism celebrates useless beauty. The impresario's bearded women and giant men are, ostensibly, born to a life of freakish abnormality, while the aesthete crafts his own non-normative identity. Perhaps most damningly, aesthetes may choose to become unusual because they are economically independent. Unlike the freakish performer, who takes to the stage for sustenance, the aesthetic figure can afford to gild his home, his friends, and even his pets.[8] If the freak and the aesthete do not share an aesthetic appeal, a biological origin, or a sense of economic urgency, it seems fruitless to force such dissimilar discourses into a common space, where equivalencies come to little more than coincidence. However, the dissimilarities between freakish and decadent performances lend creative potential to their stark juxtaposition. The two late-Victorian methods of presenting non-normative bodies should not be reduced to variations on the same theme; responsible comparisons attend to the differences between mentally disabled men, women, and children who performed as "Aztec Wonders" and wealthy men who performed as young dandies for equally affluent friends (Bogdan 131). Such comparisons also attend to their common structural similarities, which only appear in light of more obvious difference. By paratactically aligning the two and resisting the impulse to make one discourse permanently subordinate, we can trace the commonalities that render freakish and decadent rhetoric dependent on one another.

Juxtaposing freak shows and *Dorian Gray*'s decadent performers reveals two central commonalities. First, the two discourses share a structure of distributed agency, in which many participants frame each performance. When Krao steps onto the freak platform, her impresario, barkers, visual representations, and audience construct her performance identity, just as Dorian's many handlers, images, and observers turn him into the embodiment of his age. Neither the freak nor the aesthete creates his or her performance in a vacuum, and their framing undermines

[8] See *Against Nature* for Des Esseintes's decision to "have his tortoise's buckler glazed with gold" (Huysmans 41).

attempts to think of either discourse as biologically determined. Second, freakish and decadent performances share a systemic division between the performer's external body and his or her moral, spiritual, and intellectual interiority. Gaps between *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s narrative genres echo similar gaps between its protagonist's body and mind, as well as gaps between the freak's body and mind. Suddenly, the gaps demand our attention. They multiply upon one another, revealing the paradox at the heart of both performances: to draw a middle-class audience, freaks and aesthetes must maintain two irreconcilable identities. The two personas overlap, connect, and contradict, creating possibility through difference.

Counterposing the constructed, freakish world of Krao Farini with the aesthetic world proposed by Oscar Wilde highlights how many agents control Dorian Gray's non-normative performance. In Oscar Wilde's discursive freak show, Lord Henry Wotton, Dorian's dandified friend, declares himself Dorian's master of ceremonies. From the first, the good lord owns that "to a large extent the lad was his own creation" (Wilde 385, 409). Basil Hallward, who paints Dorian's infamous portrait, may be the first to order Dorian "up on the platform," but Lord Henry becomes Dorian's impresario, barker, and embodied advertisement in one (Wilde 386). Like a good manager, Lord Henry finds a naturally extraordinary figure and nurtures him into a performer. As Dorian stands upon the little stage, Henry shows him what power can come from abnormality and teaches him to love the "the hollowness, the sham," and the "silliness of the empty pageant" (Wilde 387, 425). Like a successful barker, Henry finds constant occasions for performances at dinners, "private views" "charity concerts," and the opera (Wilde 429). Like an educational pamphlet about a freak performer, Lord Henry equates his influence to conducting an "interesting study" for the good of "natural science," giving his work a veneer of moral respectability (Wilde 408). Calling attention to the ways that Lord Henry frames Dorian, Gray's aesthetic performance seems almost too obvious, but traditional readings have yet to combine Dorian's framers into a system of distributed agency.

The literal frame around Dorian's ageless portrait offers the most direct symbol of his many controlling agents. Like the frames around freak show illustrations, the border around Dorian's portrait defines the boundaries of an image, which, in turn, defines Dorian Gray. Others create it and try to sell it, while arguing that the image should be considered a more accurate representation of Dorian's identity than his physical presence. As long as Basil controls Dorian's portrait, he believes that he can claim a distillation of Dorian's identity. Freak shows offered a similar chance to capture a freak and take him/her home. As audience members left, shows sold

framed images of their performers as mementos and, like Dorian's portrait, they offered the promise of capturing an unchangeable essence of the performer's identity. While the living performer changed and aged, the illustration promised to hold onto the performer's freakish essence; however, Dorian and the exhibited performers violated that promise: freaks often maintained the same performance identity over an entire career regardless of age, while their illustrations were adjusted to fit passing fads (Durbach, "Missing" 134). Like Dorian, their portraits aged and their bodies remained, on the surface, unchanged.

If the juxtaposition of the aesthete and the freak allows us to envision Dorian as a living exhibit, then who becomes his captive audience? Dorian performs for his peers, but his maids, footmen, and butlers provide a more fitting corollary for the freak show's middle-class audience. Traditional readings of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* imagine servants at the mercy of tyrannical aesthetes who monopolize the narrative's social and visual agency, but reading the aristocrat beside the freak reverses the power of the gaze and locates it in the servant, equating Dorian with the lowest social pariahs who exhibit their bodies to survive. The context of freak show discourse takes Dorian's paranoia about the horror of having "a spy in one's house" and of "rich men who had been blackmailed all their lives by some servant" and turns that fear into fact (Wilde 446). The accumulation of watching bodies suggests that his servants only wait for the best moment to use their secrets. Dorian's peers may joke about how they "daren't" punish their servants' misdeeds, but their humor hides a genuine fear of lower-class observation (Wilde 446). Like the freak show audience, the novel empowers butlers and maids to watch their employers and thus validate their own relative normalcy. For themselves and for their employers, butlers and maids represent what the narrator refers to as "[r]eality in the shape of a servant" (Wilde 400). Both aristocrats and the lower classes use one another to shape their respective identities, but freak show discourse gives the servants interpretive control. They watch and define the atavistic aesthete as the parasitic counterpart to their own laboring bodies. Rather than negating Dorian's agency, calling attention to Dorian's directors demonstrates how he exhibits himself within and against others' interests.

The Picture of Dorian Gray's divided form further establishes its status as a freakish textual performance. Since its publication, critics have identified two competing generic trends within its pages: that of the formless, French decadent novel and that of the traditional *Bildungsroman*. Reviewers have been unable to define this "curious hybrid" of a novel that seems unsure whether to be "a novel or a romance" and, instead, "partakes

of both" (Clausson 341, 340). Rather than wade into Wilde's generic confusion, most critics pick a genre and argue for its ascendance, thus turning a pair of possible forms into a hierarchy or battle. After the publication of Wilde's text, *The Daily Chronicle* and *The St. James Gazette* mourned the novel's resemblance to the "leprous literature of the French Decadents," while, more recently, Isobel Murrey celebrated its resemblance to the traditional self-discovery narrative (Clausson 342, 344). Those who engage with the text's generic instability tend to read *Dorian Gray* as "a flawed work, riven by generic dissonances," but the novel's juxtaposition of French decadence and English commodity culture also makes it palatable for a middle class audience (Clausson 343).

Dorian's original readers may have had an easier time identifying the experimental half of the generic marriage because Wilde references a contemporary symbol of aesthetic form. Early in his education, Lord Henry gives his *protégé* a book that fills his mind with "metaphors as monstrous as orchids" (Wilde 447). The tome goes unnamed, but Wilde's contemporaries would have recognized the "novel without a plot, and with only one character" as *A Rebours* by M. Joris Karl Huysmans who, by 1891, was already commonly read as the public embodiment of the decadent age (Wilde 447).[9] Huysmans creates a textual representation of the decadent lifestyle, without plot, characterization, or interaction, and Dorian sees the novel's protagonist as "a kind of prefiguring type of himself" (Wilde 448). Following its appearance, the narrative transforms into a miniature *A Rebours,* disappearing down a rabbit hole of sensations and collections. However, active Dorian Gray can only channel the anemic Des Esseintes for twelve pages, at which point the plot returns and Dorian runs off to his own birthday. Such moments, when Wilde downplays aesthetic sensation and homosexual desire, suggest a kind of ideological retreat. They seem to hint at a bolder, more decadent version of *Dorian Gray* that Wilde does not allow himself to reveal, as though the novel's purely aesthetic passages represented Wilde's true intent.[10] However, a juxtaposition with freakish discourse supports an alternate reading.

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[9] As early as 1883, Paul Bourget described how *A Rebours's* narrative "unity decays to make way for the independence of the page, where the page decays to make way for the independence of the word" (Denisoff 38).

[10] Nils Claussen argues that the textual rewriting that took place between the story's original serialization in 1890 and its publication as a novel in 1891 undermines the novel's subversive potential. In the intervening year, Wilde minimizes aspects of the novel attributable to queer sexualities and creates a heterosexual subplot. Claussen claims that the author's changes rendered the novel

The formal gap between the two genres allows the novel to find purchase with middle-class readers, much as the freaks' performative gaps allow their shows to find purchase with middle-class viewers. As Denisoff argues, the author "consciously took part in the cultural machinery that was nurturing a less daring form of decadence for the masses" (40). Wilde's identity, and the identity of decadence as a whole, establishes itself not on pure aesthetic bliss, but on the calculated juxtaposition of upper class excess and respectable, middle-class consumerism. Wilde's formal combination and contrast of contradictory forms echo similar relationships between Dorian and his servants, as well as those between the freak show performer and his audience. The novel's paradoxical combination of abnormality and normality simultaneously defines Wilde's decadent performer and the irreconcilable parts of *Dorian Gray*'s narrative form. Just as the successful freak show performer must draw on both moral and degenerate identities to capture an audience, Wilde needs both the decadent experimental form and the *Bildungsroman*, because neither appeals to the middle class on its own.

Modernizing the Missing Link

The last section of my argument demonstrates how 19th century freak shows drew Victorian audiences by adapting many of the same methods of juxtaposition that gave aesthetic novels their populist appeal. It seemed that middle and lower class viewers were not interested in the complete alterity popular in America and on the continent, so late-Victorian impresarios created a freakish performer who could represent both degeneration and moral integrity, thus allowing nervous audience members to imagine themselves within a coherent, middle-class identity. An implied collaboration between managers and audiences sounds suspiciously like one of the two ways of "modernizing" freak show rhetoric referenced earlier in my argument. Once again, freakish minds and bodies cannot take part in Modernity without an observer's help, but the freak show's implications do not end in what Matei Calinescu calls the "practical modernity of bourgeois civilization" (4). In addition to its role in economic Modernity, freakish discourse also belongs in ongoing debates about the definition(s) of the modern.

When managers and impresarios created an innocent freak, they also created a freak show performer who juxtaposed two identities in the same

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incapable of making a potentially radical statement about subversion and degeneration (344).

embodied performance. Physically, a performer's body displayed the marks of degeneration, but his or her clothing, behavior, and publicity materials indicated a civilized mind and spirit. If Modernity is indeed a relationship with contradiction in which performing multiple, irreconcilable identities embodies the same disruption and fragmentation of "conventional sequencing, causality, and perspective" that characterizes parataxis, then freak shows do not exist outside the modern, but rather at its disjointed heart (Friedman 494-95). By bringing freak show discourse into the modern conversation, I am not interested in reifying a false boundary between middle-class and aesthetic Modernity, or suggesting, in Ivan Kreilkamp's words, that Victorian culture's value "must lie in the degree to which it anticipates later developments" (605). Instead, I want to ensure that the Kraos of freak discourse take their place in debates about what it means to be modern.

On its own, Victorian freak show discourse has long been associated with multiplicity, but its commonalities with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* illustrate that the freak's identities do not mix, blend, or overlap; instead, they co-exist in uneasy contradiction. For a similar relationship of paradox through juxtaposition, we might consider the epigrams that characterize Wilde's narrative. While reflecting on his role in Dorian's self-performance, Lord Henry Wotton considers the "separation of spirit from matter" and breathes "[s]oul and body, body and soul—how mysterious they were!" (Wilde 409). Critics have commonly taken the sentiment at face value and thus argued for the pervasive influence of upper-class social Darwinism.[11] However, counterposing *Dorian Gray* with freak show discourse suggests that the first portion of Henry's thoughts belong in the long list of epigrams that make up the novel's preface. Dorian's literal and figurative separation from himself builds a gap between the aesthetic body and soul until Henry's juxtaposition starts to read like an encapsulation of the novel's contradictions. Lord Henry's linguistic contradiction cannot be conflated with the freakish body, but bringing the two into conversation highlights the paradoxes embodied within the freak show's paratactic Modernity.

[11] Social Darwinism hinges on the belief that physical "brand-marks" accurately indicate mental and spiritual degeneration, such that moral laxity can be read through bodily deformity (Nordau 17). Critics tend to read Wotton's musings as a reflection on how Dorian's morality and his rotting portrait perform the direct link between "body" and "soul" (Wilde 209). For recent examples, see Claussen (2003) and Bristow's introduction to the 2007 Oxford edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

As an embodiment of paratactic Modernity, the freak performer contains a series of contradictions in each of his or her performances, including the contradiction between subject and object, between forms of temporality, and between means of defining identity. In his 2000 philosophical exploration of *Modernity and Subjectivity*, Harvie Ferguson could be speaking directly about Krao or Dorian Gray when he calls on Habermas to define the gap between subject and object (or mind and body) as Modernity's defining quality (5). Through the modern subjective lens, "Body is not subordinated to Soul, or Soul to Body." Instead, humanity's internal and external identity have been "subdivided and fragmented," to the point where each body, mind, and soul might as well exist within their own "autonomous realm[s] of meaningful experience" (Ferguson 2, 192). Freak show performances, like Ferguson's vision of Modernity, define themselves through the space between irreconcilable images of self. In her frilly dress, Krao embodies her freakishness as a separation between the object her audience perceives and the subject who performs from her own experience.

Beyond the division between self and other, interior and exterior, freak performers embody less explicit temporal paradoxes, as their shows move between contradictory methods of measuring time. The late-Victorian freakish performance moves in two temporal directions simultaneously: the performer's body seems to move backward in time, to humanity's evolutionary past and a never-ending childhood, while the performer's mind accelerates into the modern future, embodying the "oscillating consciousness of the old and the new" that Marshall Berman describes as inherent to modernism (Walker 3). Freak performances juxtapose the retrogressive temporality of degeneration with Modernity's implied progression. Current scholarship may have rejected linear definitions of Modernity, but its tropes signified forward motion to Krao's paying customers.

While those consumers oscillated between the old and the new, they also had to grapple with the contradiction between the freak as both a representative of a collective history and as an individual entity. Social Darwinists, managers, and audiences endowed freak show performers with multiple symbolic identities, each of which carried the weight of a long history. The freak signified the moral history of human evolution, of the English nation, and of economic class; his/her performances stood for the audience's history *en masse*. At the same time, the freak was an individual whose morality or degeneration, according to most social Darwinists, also represented individual sin. Calinescu defines that same contradiction as an oscillation between historical and personal temporalities. He argues that

Modernity should be seen as the "irreconcilable opposition between the public/historical long *duree* (of the many versions of deep time)," which would include deep evolutionary, national, and economic time, "and the personal, subjective, imaginative *duree*, the private time created by the unfolding of the 'self'" (Calinescu 5). Although the freak was freighted with multiple public histories, the concept of "private time" seems even more difficult to quantify. For the freak performer, private time could signify individual self-expression through one's paratactic performance, but it could just as easily signify the mark of individual sin. The gaps between individual and public time, like the gaps between mental and physical identities, multiply as quickly as we try to tie them down. The freak show embodies a certain type of relational, paratactic Modernity and, as such, cannot help but split into irreconcilable fragments.

If the freak does, in fact, embody paratactic Modernity, then tracing the significance of that Modernity matters as much as a linguistic definition, especially when we consider the multiplicity of contradictory definitions in the field .[12] Would a freakish Modernity resemble the accelerating, progressive, "practical" Modernity of the middle-class Victorian audience member? Or, will freakish Modernity—as highlighted by an "enfreaked" Dorian Gray—come closer to decadent dispersal, alienation, and disintegration, in which Modernity betrays "oceans of liquid matter, only needing expansion to rend into fragments"? (Walker 12). While middle-class, economic Modernity is all efficiency and coherent order, decadent Modernity rends that order into a culture of "flux, dissolution and collapse" (Kreilkamp 14). Although the freak show takes part in both discourses, its paratactic performance is, most importantly, a Modernity of possibility and potential. In the freak show, fragmentation and juxtaposition do not signify the collapse of that which was once whole. Each performer's separate mental, physical, and spiritual identities have always been constructed and separate, so their combination only offers the potential for unexpected new creation. Unexpected juxtapositions cause unexpected connections, which, in turn, inspire the next day's show. Where Des Esseintes's decadent Modernity slowly saps him of his remaining vigor, the freak apparatus creates a remarkably generative take on the modern. Even though its return to the evolutionary past would seem to forestall forward motion, the freak's insistence on difference takes a potential turn back and turns it into pure potential.

[12] For an explanation and refutation of Modernity's contradictions, see Friedman's "Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism" (2001).