

Thus sin emerges not simply as deliberate choices but as something more terrifying and opaque—as freedom’s irruption, which convention labels a “fall,” Ricoeur and Kierkegaard a “leap.”

My point is not that reason plays no part in the poem’s etiology of evil but that, alone, it is an insufficient cause. So for my other two points: sin is individual but also environmental, psychological but also behavioral. As I argue in my essay, Milton takes a comprehensive view of the sources of sin, as does Scripture. Though he stresses self-determination, Milton is not trapped by the reductive either/or logic of absolute freedom on the one hand and rigid determinism on the other. Unlike modern analysis, which approaches questions of causality from a mechanical model, as if “efficient” causes are the only explanations that count, Milton’s tradition recognized material, formal, and final causes as equally important. Relying on human agency instead of billiard balls as their model, older approaches to causality were less likely to presume that so-called external influences necessarily abrogate freedom. After all, human freedom always occurs within a particular history, language, material world, and so forth. It situates itself within the very constraints of “Place and Time” that Satan denies (1.253), along with every determinant outside the self—such as matter, others, law, God. For Milton, responsible freedom grounds itself within just such conditions. Human freedom is not *ex nihilo*.

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### Oscar Wilde and His Context

To the Editor:

Engaged in studies of the 1890s for which Oscar Wilde is important, I turned for instruction to Ed Cohen’s closely argued essay (102 [1987]: 801–13) and was both engaged and disappointed. It seems to me to illustrate some of the ways in which recent scholarship has been going astray (perhaps). Aiming to be historical and “contextual,” his essay may lose sight of the forest for one large tree, plus some currently fashionable rhetoric.

That the year of *Dorian Gray* also witnessed the publication of *Teleny* (whatever the circumstances) is worth more than a footnote—but we get a mountain of explanation. The two novels did not “put male desire for other men into discourse”—at least not in the usual sense of “put into discourse.” It is wrong to exaggerate the novelty of either work for a culture in which knowledge of Greek texts was common. Perhaps the term *homosexual* was coined in 1869, but the realities behind it were as old as the hills.

Contextual criticism should be broad to be valid and useful—that is, “true” to the total situation. The case of

Wilde was not just one of a “repressive” social morality but most emphatically—in the age of Darwin, W. James, Charcot, and Freud—one of “degeneration” in the sense of *sickness*: the fin de siècle was widely perceived as a *mal de siècle*. That Wilde was well aware of this is clear from the opening paragraph of his petition “To the Home Secretary” (2 July 1896): with a peculiar mixture of pride and humility he cites Max Nordau’s famous book, which devoted “an entire chapter to the petitioner as a specially typical example of this *fatal law*” (my italics)—that which links “madness and the literary and artistic temperament.” Cohen does use Cesare Lombroso, to whom Nordau dedicated his book, and much recent scholarship updating the socioanthropological approach; but he ignores this most obvious and popular contemporary discussion, perhaps because it effectively links moral values with a medical “diagnosis.”

No single essay, of course, can say everything; but the cultural historian should strive first of all, I think, to be as faithful as possible to the facts and spirit of the period depicted; and indeed Cohen seems aware of this desideratum. What really matters, however, is whether his analyses help us to read *Dorian Gray* better. He certainly makes me curious about *Teleny* and will send me back to reread Wilde’s novel. Making the famous “picture” a way of stating the problem “of representation itself” is a very interesting formulation; but from what I remember, it might have puzzled Wilde himself, who probably thought he was basically writing an allegory of “good and evil” (which does not mean that he did not *also* write the novel Cohen has revealed to us).

My gratitude to Cohen is qualified by one other difficulty: he fails to do justice, I feel, to the complexity of the religious dimension. He quotes from *Dorian Gray*: “The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, and the terror of God, which is the secret of religion—these are the two things that govern us.” I have always thought of Christianity as a religion of love, not terror, and it seems to me that Wilde was steeped in some such awareness when he went on to write *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. I myself would stress that *Dorian Gray* is a “pagan” book (hedonistic), written for an ostensibly Christian readership.

Again, in terms of method, “contexts” should involve *all* the relevant facts—in this case, ideally, the full range of Wilde’s writings. Might such a broadening of scope, perhaps, at least modify Cohen’s own reading of the novel?

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Reply:

While I am quite gratified that Sholom Kahn was “engaged” enough by my essay to undertake a serious re-