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The Aest/ethics of Imagination and Deceit in Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation*:

A Foucauldian-Aristotelian Reading

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In *Six Degrees of Separation*, John Guare's gender-reversed version of *Pygmalion*, a nameless young African American off the streets becomes a cultured young man through the teachings of his former lover, Trent Conway, the gay son of wealthy Manhattanites. Self-fashioned as the fictitious son of actor Sidney Poitier, Paul Poitier stabs himself to gain entry into the home of Flan and Ouisa Kittredge, an art dealer and his socialite wife. Once admitted, Paul charms the couple and their wealthy South African guest, Geoffrey Miller, with metaphysical musings on art, literature, and the theater and woos their palates with his culinary "wizardry" (Guare 27). In this respect, Paul presents himself as the kind of "philosophical dandy" to which philosopher and theorist Michel Foucault aspired in his late years.

While Foucault is best known for his discourses on power and knowledge and his exposure of how human institutions train and control the modern subject, he was also deeply concerned with the aesth/ethics of the self in his late writings, which have unjustifiably attracted far less critical attention: "[W]hat finally mattered was not so much saving the world ... as it was achieving a certain piercing truthfulness, conveyed with exemplary beauty and wit, and combined with a sense of unashamed pleasure in the living of one's life" (Miller 875-76)—the philosophical life integrating aesthetics and ethics. "More than a theoretical discipline," James Miller explains,

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philosophy was once a way of life. To be a philosopher entailed striving for happiness, or peace of mind, aiming at one's goal by living one's life according to a thoughtfully examined set of precepts and beliefs, embodied in word and deed.

The contemplation of theories might of course help properly regulate one's life, in conjunction with some more or less elaborate set of empirical inquiries and corporeal exercises. [And thus,] when Socrates received an injunction from the oracle at Delphi, it was not to write books or to teach seminars in logic. It was rather, as he said, "*to live the life of the philosopher, to examine myself and others.*" (Miller 871; italics in original)

Foucault, who lamented the "negligence" of the philosophical life in the modern world, attempted in his last years to live the life of the aesth/ethic philosopher, who acts "upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself" (*Pleasure* 28).

Paul Poitier of *Six Degrees* embodies this Foucauldian aesth/ethic philosopher to a great extent. Insofar as he enacts a deliberate and disciplined aesth/ethics of the self as Foucault enjoins, I sharply disagree with the views of Robert Andreach and C. W. E. Bigsby, who argue that Paul lacks a sense of self because of his protean quality and that "his inventions become all-consuming, until he treads the edge of madness" (43). Though unbridled aestheticism poses such a danger, Paul enacts throughout the play a purposive, ontologically lucid "elaboration of the self" as the *telos* of life (Foucault, "Enlightenment" 40, 42).

First of all, Paul gives primacy to the essentials of well living over the incidentals of controversial social issues:

But the world has been too heavy with the right-to-lifers—protect the unborn, constitutional amendments, when does life begin? Or the converse—the end of life, the right

to die. Why is life, at this point in time, so focused upon the very beginning of life and the very end of life? What about the years we have to live between those two inexorable book ends? (Guare 45)

Central to the philosophical imperative of self-examination, as part of well living, is imagination (Guare 34). As Paul reveals, however, this important faculty has sadly “moved out of the realm of being our link, our most personal link, with our inner lives and the world outside that world, this world we share” (Guare 34):

The imagination has been so debased that imagination—being imaginative—rather than being the linchpin of our existence, now stands as a synonym for something outside ourselves. Like science fiction. Or some new use for tangerine slices on raw pork chops—what an imaginative summer recipe—and *Star Wars*! So imaginative! And *Lord of the Rings*—all those dwarves—so *imaginative*.... (Guare 33)

A disciplined practice of the imagination also happens to be the “linchpin” of Foucault’s ontology of the self as a modern subject. Following Baudelaire, Foucault defines modernity as “the ephemeral, the fleeting, the contingent” and being modern as “recapturing something eternal that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it” (“Enlightenment” 40). In this sense, modernity, “distinct from fashion, which does no more than call into question the course of time, ... is the attitude that makes it possible to grasp the ‘heroic’ aspect of the present moment” (40). In other words, Foucault’s philosophical dandy tries to extract the poetry within the present by “pursuing the free play of imagination wherever it may lead” (Miller 878). In one of his last interviews, Foucault urges: “in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life.... But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the

lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?" ("Genealogy" 350).

Indeed, art objects are prevalent in *Six Degrees* as décor and subjects of conversation but, more importantly, as emanations of the human soul. In speaking of the double-sided Kandinsky, Flan explains the Russian artist's view that the process of aesthetic composition synaesthetically strikes the chords of the soul: "The choice of object that is one of the elements in the harmony of form must be decided only by a corresponding vibration in the human soul" (Guare 19). Here, the musical (and thus mathematical) reference suggests an ideal of aesthetic unity toward which Foucault strived in his aspiration to the philosophical aesthete. Yet James Miller, à la Montaigne, cautions thus about Foucault's endeavour to become a work of art:

After all, a human being is not an inert object like the lamp or the house. So what is a human being to do about all those aspects of itself—those moments of irresolution, impulsiveness, inconstancy, inconsistency, weakness of will, and self-deception that, though unmistakably a part of one's life, can nevertheless not be fitted, without contradiction, into a whole that is organically unified? (888)

Indeed, at the end of the play, Ouisa, in a moment of piercing self-awareness, bewails the lack of such organic unity in her life in the very terms that Flan uses to discuss art in the abstract, coldly detached from the reality of human lives: "There is colour in my life, but I'm not aware of any structure.... I am a collage of unaccounted-for brush strokes. I... am all... random" (Guare 118). Her life, filled with colour but lacking a unifying structure, reminds us of the double-sided Kandinsky, "painted on either side of the canvas in two radically different styles. One wild and vivid, the other somber and geometric.... Chaos, control. Chaos, control" (*Six*

Degrees)—two sides relegated to opposition rather than integration. Much like this painting, Ouisa’s life, exhibiting “wild and vivid” “chaos,” lacks “control”—something like that ontological *telos* essential to a Foucauldian aesth/ethic “self-formation”:

[A] process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself. There is no specific moral action that does not refer to a unified moral conduct. (Foucault, *Pleasure* 28)

How does one marshal vibrant, chaotic energy toward that aesth/ethics of living that Foucault understands as not only an imaginative but also a deliberate and disciplined exertion of the self (*pratique de soi*) (28)? How does one act toward that *telos* of “regulative ideal of wholeness” (Foucault, *Pleasure* 27; Miller 887) without getting lost in the aesth/ethic endeavour as Paul does by advancing the aesthetic pursuit in reckless disregard of the dissimilar needs of others?

In modernity, art and ethics have not been easy bedfellows. An “inherent and perhaps irreconcilable conflict between art and morality or between aesthetic and ethical consciousness” arises, as Eliot Deutsch keenly observes, “from the recognition that, on the one hand, art and morality are kindred forms of spiritual life and, on the other, there are sharp differences between them and that, accordingly, they make opposing claims upon us” (81). Historically, as Deutsch explains, “[t]he dominant presupposition from the Hellenistic period to the Renaissance was simply that art was subservient to (or could in no way be separated from) the demands of morality, as theologically and politically defined and understood” (82). In

modern times, however, "art has established its autonomy"
simply as art:

Many (at least non-Marxist) aestheticians and critics today would even go so far as to say that the only "goodness" in art is of a strictly aesthetic kind. A work of art that is aesthetically right is simply "good" by virtue of this rightness—without moral remainder. We allow intrusions from the ethical into art only insofar as they can be taken over and entirely assimilated by purely aesthetic considerations. (Deutsch 82)

In other words, it is the job of the artist "to add to the world objects and ideas—delineations, symphonies—which ought to be there, and whose end is contemplation and appreciation; things which deserve to become the focus of a truly disinterested affection" (Gass qtd. in Deutsch 82).

In an effort to reconcile aesthetics and ethics, Deutsch maintains, however, that

[c]reativity ... always manifests concern; and thus by its very nature, art is a celebration of personhood and world, if not in their given actualities at least in their (real) potentialities.... [S]eeing the gross stupidity, selfishness, and perversity—the evil, in short—that seems always to intrude into human affairs; being aware of that nothingness, the obliteration, that appears finally to render all human achievements futile, the artist, nevertheless, as artist, possesses that loving consciousness which acknowledges an intrinsic value to self and other.... Art cannot help but be celebrative....

The positive moral dimension of art as art ... has to do ... with that special lovingness which informs imagination and intuition and that is at the heart of artistic creativity... In at least this sense, then, all genuine art is inherently moral. And it affords the grounding of art in social

community... a coming together through shared values and interests... a reaching out to others in and through the celebrative art-making and aesthetic experience. A communion to be established with others is always implicit in all art making and experience. (87)

This element of human connection becomes even more significant in the Foucauldian endeavour to make one's life a work of art, which unavoidably entails human interactions and the ethics implicit in these encounters with others. Sidney Zink presents a comparison of the seemingly opposing claims of art and morality, which will be useful in the following examination of Paul's aesth/ethic pursuit of self:

Morality insists upon the interconnectedness of experiences; art insists upon the self-containedness of each particular experience. The moral man scrutinizes the given action for its relations to other actions; the aesthetic man absorbs himself in the immediate experience. Morality insists upon the inviolability of the man, art upon the inviolability of the experience. Morality recognizes the fact of dimensionality in life; art stresses the fact of qualitiveness. The first would make life consistent; the second would make it intense. Morality speaks in the interest of the whole, art in the interest of the part. (qtd. in Deutsch 81)

By examining the actions of Paul Poitier as an aesth/ethic subject, this essay explores the possibilities and challenges of integrating the aesthetic and ethical imperatives of self-formation within the limits of one's historical and cultural situation. In Guarian terms linking art and life, how does one find the salutary balance between chaos and control; how does one give structure, or teleological purpose, to a life of random color? While the scholarship on Guare's play readily includes discussions on race, class, and sexuality, notably lacking are rigorous ethical examinations that explore the play's signature

concerns of aesthetics and ethics embedded in the issues of race and economics. A discerning examination of Paul's aesth/ethic pursuit within the framework of Foucauldian and Aristotelian ethics, I believe, illuminates the play in unprecedented ways, at the same time offering valuable ethical insights into our own endeavors to live the good life.

I

Through the free play of his imagination, the Foucauldian subject works on the aesth/ethic "elaboration of the self" as the *telos* of life (Foucault, "Enlightenment" 40, 42). Paul, the Foucauldian aesthete in *Six Degrees*, shows how imagination is there

to sort out your nightmare, to show you the *exit* from the maze of your nightmare, to transform the nightmare into dreams that become your bedrock. If we don't listen to that voice, it dies. It shrivels. It vanishes.... The imagination is not our escape. On the contrary, the imagination is the place we all trying to get to. (Guare 34, 62-63; emphasis added)

The imagination, the power of the mind, is the means and end of the aesth/ethic self, which, according to Paul, desires such Platonic ideals as beauty, quality, and eternal friendship (Guare 112, 99). Immanuel Kant, whose famous essay on enlightenment became a key pronouncement for the intellectual movement of that name, states that enlightenment through the exercise of reason is man's exit (*Ausgang*) from his self-incurred "immaturity" (*Unmündigkeit*), meaning a mental dependence on others. This exit is most effectively manifested through disenfranchisement—the loss of political voice—as implied by the literal sense of *unmündig* (Kant).

Revising Kant's view on enlightenment, imagination, in Paul's conception, is both means and end. It is the "exit," "our out" (Guare 63, 62) engaging us in the ceaseless act of enlightening: "The imagination is the noon voice that sees

clearly and says yes, this is what I want for my life" (62). But because we are subject to whatever constraints our historic and cultural situation places upon us, "Our imagination teaches us our limits and then how to grow beyond those limits" (Guare 62), in Paul's case, poverty, blackness, and homosexuality. In Foucauldian language, the "ontology of the self" entails "a historico-practical test of the limits that we may go beyond, and thus ... work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings" ("Enlightenment" 47). Foucault, who uses Kant's essay to clarify his own views regarding reason, freedom, and the aesth/ethic imperatives of modern subjectivity, believes less in finding "an exit" from the limitations upon our lives than in "illuminating and critically testing" such limits through the possibilities of self-creation in daily life; freedom, though historically and circumstantially limited, offers "concretely possible transformation" (Seppä sections 6 and 3). Likewise, Paul affirms that disciplined imagination is not ultimately "our escape. On the contrary, the imagination is the place we are all trying to get to" (Guare 63), the site and practice of the aesth/ethic self in a contingent world.

To go beyond the economic, racial, and gendered limits imposed on his historically situated self, Paul commits himself, in Foucauldian terms, to the "ascetic elaboration of the self" through a "transfiguring play of freedom with reality" ("Enlightenment" 42). With the aid of Trent Conway (who provides the way for him to con the wealthy Manhattanites), Paul submits to the "task of producing himself" (Foucault, "Enlightenment" 42)

as a theatrical work in progress, elaborating a kind of double of oneself, using artifice to suppress unwanted aspects of one's nature, representing outwardly only what one chooses. How one fashions this self-contained double will to a large degree be a matter of taste, but also an

outcome of what Foucault at the end of his life called "a deliberate practice of liberty." (Foucault, "Ethic of Care" qtd. in Miller 888)

Accordingly, the film version of *Six Degrees* shows numerous shot cuts to Paul practicing before a mirror; in Baudelairean words, he lives and sleeps before a mirror (Baudelaire qtd. in Miller 888). Propelled by a vision of personal happiness, the gay, socially isolated Trent Conway, "the Henry Higgins of our time" (Guare 81) fashions for his lover Paul "a new identity" (79)—the cultured son of acclaimed barrier-breaking actor, Sidney Poitier—beyond the historical and cultural limits of poverty, race, and homosexuality:

I'll make you the most eagerly sought-after young man in the East. And then I'll come into one of these homes one day—and you'll be there and I'll be presented to meet you for the first time and our friendship will be witnessed by my friends, our parents' friends. If it all happens under their noses, they can't judge me. They can't disparage you. (79)

It takes, moreover, a gritty imagination to break through the socio-economic barrier that effectively impedes the association of a black man off the streets with Manhattan socialites; with a new turn on the phrase "cut a figure," Paul takes the knife to himself, sculpting a wound that will admit him into the world of the New York upper crust. In the words of Foucault, Paul imposes on himself "a discipline more despotic than the most terrible religions," making "of his body, his behavior, his feelings and his passions, his very existence a work of art" ("Enlightenment" 41-42).

Once admitted, Paul successfully presents "a figure of artful wholeness" (Miller 888) with a "wild quality," according to Ouisa, "yet a real elegance and a real concern and a real consideration,"—a "dreamboat," in her daughter Tess's sneering words, who self-consciously strikes poses for

admiration, confessing “a thrill to be looked at” (Guare 60-61, 38). “By cultivating the sexual body as a site of aesthetic recreation,” Paul, as a philosophical dandy, “represents a culture of difference and differentiation” resonant of “Baudelaire’s descriptions of the androgynous gender of dandies” and thereby manifests “not only an individual lifestyle, but also one’s philosophical, moral and political attitudes toward present society” (Seppä sec. 5). A figure androgynously alluring to the other characters—male and female—Paul emphatically queries the homophobia in the wake of the AIDS epidemic.¹

The night at the Kittredges is an extraordinary one during which Paul enchants his audience intellectually, aesthetically, and gastronomically. In his later phone conversation with Ouisa, Paul confides, “That night was the happiest night I ever had” because “[y]ou let me use all the parts of myself that night” (Guare 106-07). Ouisa confirms, “It was magical. That Salinger stuff.... Your cooking,” and later reveals at the Banister dinner party: “He did more for us in a few hours than our children ever did” (107, 117). When the rapturous evening comes to a close, Paul, alone again, indiscreetly invites a gay hustler into the Kittredge residence. As he later explains, “I was so happy. I wanted to add sex to it” (108). This action repulses the Kittredges, who, in feeling their privacy violated, throw Paul back to the streets from whence he came (even as

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers who gave me the impetus to revamp my essay into what it is now—a more cohesive examination with a stronger theoretical framework.

¹ At the play’s end, Ouisa reminds Flan: “You were attracted to him Attracted by youth and his talent and the embarrassment prospect of being in the movie version of *Cats*,” to which she refers earlier as being “star fuckers” (117, 30). For a gender reading on Flan’s complex relationship with Paul, see Jennifer Gillan, who argues that he is “disturbed that his liberal sense of cross-racial identification (his ability not to notice Paul is black) may have crossed over into some erotic identification with Paul as homosexual” (62). Without specific mention of physical attraction, Elizabeth avows in the film version that Paul “opened up a whole new world to us.”

they royally reap the rewards of Paul's decisive role in winning the wealthy Geoffrey Miller's financial backing for Flan's lucrative sale of a Cezanne painting). It is at this point that lying and deceit first emerge as an ethical issue in Paul's aesthetic endeavor.

II

Foucault and Aristotle—unlikely philosophical bedfellows—offer a theoretical framework through which we can examine the ethical ambiguities of the aesth/ethic philosopher, as manifested in Paul Poitier. Like Kant, Foucault considers a subject's intellectual autonomy "essential to [his] ability to exercise critical judgement, free from dominant beliefs, norms and desires" (Seppä sec. 1). Moreover, "for an action to be 'moral,' it must not be reducible to an act or a series of acts conforming to a rule, a law, or a value" (Foucault, *Pleasure* 28). Foucault uses the conduct of fidelity further to elucidate his understanding of the moral conduct required of the aesth/ethical philosopher:

One can, for example, practice conjugal fidelity and comply with the precept that imposes it, because one acknowledges oneself to be a member of the group that accepts it, declares adherence to it out loud, and silently preserves it as a custom [tribal tradition]. But one can practice it, too, because one regards oneself as an heir to a spiritual tradition that one has the responsibility of maintaining or reviving [religious faith]; one can also practice fidelity in response to an appeal, by offering oneself as an example [social model], or by seeking to give one's personal life a form that answers to criteria of brilliance, beauty, nobility, or perfection [Aristo-Platonic virtue]. (Foucault 27)

The advantage to this multivalent understanding of moral action is the freedom it allows the ethical subject to construct a pattern of moral conduct, responsive to his historical and

cultural situation. The absence of “universally valid norms for human action and morality,” however, also presents the unsavory possibility that a subject may rape, kill, or commit other crimes in a delusion of realizing his freedom and “creating a unique aesthetics of the self” (Seppä sec. 1). What are the suicide bombings of terrorists if not fanatical acts of violence executing the radical values of certain despotic groups?

Despite these possibilities of aesth/ethics abused for evil ends, Foucault is right not to yield to the deontological approach of following a certain set of rules and laws and instead to adopt an Aristotelian situational approach. Aware of the complexity and particularity of ethical action relative to the subject and to the situation, Aristotle explains that

the whole account of matters of conduct must be given in outline and not precisely, ... that the accounts we demand must be in accordance with the subject-matter; matters concerned with conduct and questions of what is good for us have not fixity, any more than matters of health. The general account being of this nature, the account of particular cases is yet more lacking in exactness; for they do not fall under any art or precept but the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion, as happens also in the art of medicine or of navigation. (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II.2.1104a 2-8)

The general rule that Aristotle offers, however, is that one must act according to the golden mean; yet even this conduct of moderation is not a rigid arithmetic mean but rather a flexible moral barometer moving within the extremes of deficiency and excess, relative to the agent and the particular circumstance. Practical wisdom, or virtuous prudence, counsels the best action at the best time, in the best way, for the best end (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II.6.1106b 20-22). By this

standard, the violent means of terrorist acts, in complete disregard of human life, can never justify the worthy ends that they purport.

Paul's actions of deceit are more complicated. In discussing truthfulness as a virtue of social intercourse, Aristotle does not treat "lying and truth-telling in general" but rather in reference to "correct presentations or misrepresentations of one's possession of things held in good repute (*endoxa*)" (Zembaty 9), which is precisely the issue with regard to Paul. While Aristotle holds that "falsehood is *in itself* mean and culpable" (*Nicomachean Ethics* IV.7.1127a 28-29; italics in the original), he distinguishes between lies that are just and unjust. In general, "we call those acts just that tend to produce and preserve happiness [flourishing] and its components for the political society" (*Nicomachean Ethics* V.1.1129b18-19). Justice is highly valued in Aristotelian ethics as one of two virtues "most useful to others.... [It] is a virtue which assigns to each man his due in conformity with the law; injustice claims what belongs to others, in opposition to the law" (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I.15.1366b6-11). Laws, as Jane Zembaty explains,

are prescribed for the good of the political community Thus, the specific moral badness of those lies which are instances of injustice does not consist simply in their being lies. Rather their badness lies in their serving as a means to an unfair gain of goods or an unfair diminution of burdens—states of affairs that work against the good of the political community in contrast to just acts which are useful to others and promote the good of the *polis*. (Zembaty 10)

While Paul is guilty of falsehood in the respect that he appropriates a fictitious persona, he does not receive an "unfair gain of [material] goods" vis-à-vis Dr. Fine. The obstetrician "courageously" goes home "with a policeman" to

arrest Paul for “breaking and entering,” but the officer cannot do so since Dr. Fine offered Paul “the keys to the house” and “nothing’s taken from the house” except the consumption of a little brandy (Guare 66). Nor does Paul enjoy an “unfair gain of [material] goods” vis-à-vis the Kittredges since they will make several million dollars on the sale of Cezanne painting thanks to Paul’s stellar effect on Geoffrey Miller. Dr. Fine is, however, disturbed by Paul’s misrepresentation of his identity, social status, and honor; retorting that he gave Paul his keys “under false pretenses. This fucking black kid crack addict came into my office lying,” and he wants Paul to be arrested for “fraud” (Guare 66), in American law, “an intentional misrepresentation of a material existing fact made by one person to another with knowledge of its falsity and for the purpose of inducing the other person to act, and upon which the other person relies with resulting injury or damage” (“Fraud”).² In the absence of economic harm, the shock and injured pride that Fine experiences in discovering Paul’s charade do not in themselves constitute actionable damage for mental distress.

Paul’s interaction with the Kittredges is a little more complicated. In admitting the hustler into the Kittredges’ home, Paul transgresses the dictates of guest hospitality, according to which both host and guest must conduct themselves in ways of mutual respect. In capping the evening at the Kittredges with sex, Paul misconstrues sensual pleasure, an external good, as the end rather than the auxiliary of virtue: pleasure is a necessary but not sufficient element of

² Also, philosopher T. M. Scanlon reviews the conditions by which Person A’s treatment of Person B would constitute wrongful subversion of B: a) the lack of consent and/or the lack of opportunity to give or withhold such consent; b) B’s refusal of consent, given this opportunity (21-23). In the situation of neither the Kittredges nor Dr. Fine did Paul take advantage of their lack of information or require some active contribution from them, which would prompt them to withhold their consent. Paul did not take anything from their homes.

virtuous conduct.³ Nonetheless, Paul's violation of the Kittredges' respect and right to privacy in their home is properly seen in Aristotelian ethics as an act of intemperance rather of vice and injustice. Paul's imprudent act of bringing the hustler into the Kittredges' residence fits "the accurate picture of a male adolescent" (Guare 33) that he, during his discourse on J. D. Salinger, so insightfully paints of Holden Caulfield—ironically ignorant of its self-reference. Along with the enormous economic windfall the Kittredges enjoyed and whatever psychological and emotional harm that they experienced in seeing a naked stranger in their home, we must also consider the ontological insights and sensuous pleasures that the couple experienced that evening in order to assess whether or not Paul's conduct as a philosophical dandy was ethical. To wit, we must question whether the aesth/ethics that Paul imparts is praiseworthy or whether he is a philosophical fraud acting on a falsehood about his true identity. In short, does his pretense as Sidney Poitier's son vitiate the aesth/ethic mode of life that he promotes?

To be sure, the Kittredges do not respond identically to Paul. Ouisa is the one more patently moved by Paul: "I just loved the kid so much. I wanted to reach out to him" (Guare 31). Though less expressive, Flan is also impressed by Paul. When Paul finishes his discourse on *The Catcher in the Rye*, Flan indirectly praises him: "I hope your muggers read every word" (35). Later at the Banister dinner party, Flan exhibits less warmth toward Paul:

OUISA. He did more for us in a few hours than our children ever did. And he

³ Aristotle, Rhetoric *I.9.1366a: "The noble, then, is that which, being desirable in itself is at the same time worthy of praise, or which, being good, is pleasant because it is good. If this is the noble, then virtue must of necessity be noble, for, being good, it is worthy of praise"; Eudemian Ethics, VIII.3.1249b 18.

wanted to be your child. Don't let that go. He sat out in that park and said, "That man is my father." He's in trouble, and we don't know how to help him.

FLAN. Help him? My God! We could've been killed. Throats slashed.

OUISA. You were attracted to him.

FLAN. Oh, please. Cut me out of that pathology right now.
(*Six Degrees*)

Whether or not Ouisa's concern for Paul is a "pathology," it is important to bear in mind here that Flan may be expressing himself more reservedly—despite his self-congratulatory statement, "We have hearts"—because he is speaking in public, as a former "lawyer ... terrified of libel" and embarrassed by Paul's story of Flan's abandonment of his "Negro son" (Guare 117, 22, 82). As Ouisa says to Paul during their conversation the evening before, "My husband feels you betrayed him" (98). Tellingly, however, Flan tows the line without a word when Ouisa—as a direct reaction to his outburst against Paul—resolves to skip the schmoozing before the Sotheby's auction in order to escort Paul to the police.

When Paul asks her point blank: "Do you feel I betrayed you? If you do, I'll hang up and never bother you again—," Ouisa merely returns a solicitous question, implying that far from being betrayed, she has gained a whole new perspective on the "paltry" life they led and "envied" Paul's aesth/ethic mode of living more than he "envied us" (Guare 98, 117). As the best tribute to his memory, Ouisa seeks to emulate him by taking on the "task of producing [her]self" (Foucault, "Enlightenment" 42): to "keep the experience" (Guare 118) of Paul, by accounting for the brush strokes, by adding structure to the colour in her life. Although the connection to celebrity, like the knife wound that he fakes, gives Paul a ready audience, it is ultimately his self-fashioned, aesth/ethic

"wizardry" (Guare 27) that enchants all who encounter him. Young Juliet of Shakespeare's tragedy of "star-crossed lovers" rightly says: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet" (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.1.85-86). In the light of his cavalier disdain of money ("Money is the one commodity you can always get" [*Six Degrees*]), Paul deploys deceit to advance something like the Foucauldian ontological self or Baudelairean "man of modernity" (Foucault, "Enlightenment" 40) through "a kind of ethical self-preservation, maintaining integrity by a strategic practice of disintegrity" (Bristol 28). In sum, Paul's conduct at the Kittredges is more ethical than not—both from a utilitarian assessment of a net increase in good and an Aristotelian situated assessment of promoting the happiness, or well living, of self and other. In his art of living—to become a work of art—Paul in the pink shirt associated with him, is like the "pale color being forced to carry the weight of the picture ... [a] burst of color asked to carry so much" (Guare 14) within the Cezanne painting that Flan is discussing at the very moment Paul first enters.

III

It is one thing to deceive the likes of wealthy socialites like the Kittredges; it is quite another to ingratiate oneself into the life of a poor young couple like Elizabeth and Rick and to squander their meager savings for the sake of experience, for a night of sensuous pleasures. In his compulsion for aesthetic experience, Paul, by deceit, coaxes the impressionable Rick to lend him money out of the couple's joint account. The story about needing two hundred fifty dollars to meet his father in Maine is as it turns out, merely a ploy to invite Rick to an extravagant night on the town—wining, dining, and dancing at the Rainbow Room—capped with sex in a carriage in Central Park. For Rick, this is figuratively and literally the experience of a lifetime, "the greatest night I ever had" (Guare 91), for,

indeed, upon the realization of his gross breach of Elizabeth's trust, he promptly takes his life.

Paul's interaction with the young couple as opposed to the wealthy socialites escalates into a fatal casualty. The aggrieved Elizabeth demands retribution: "I want [Paul] dead. He took all our money. He took my life. Rick's dead! You bet your life I'll press charges" (Guare 93). For what? Involuntary manslaughter? Fraud? First of all, Paul would not be prosecuted for involuntary manslaughter for two reasons: first, because his deception was not "by its nature dangerous to human life or was done with reckless disregard for human life" ("Involuntary manslaughter"). Second, it was not reasonably foreseeable that his deception would cause Rick to commit suicide.

If Paul is not accountable for involuntary manslaughter, let's examine whether he is accountable for tort fraud, which indirectly contributed to Rick's suicide. To this end, we must answer two questions: a) did Paul unlawfully, designedly and knowingly, appropriate the property of another? and b) did he act with criminal intent? ("Fraud"). While Paul "designedly and knowingly" deceived Rick and Elizabeth with a fraudulent reason to borrow money, he did not unlawfully appropriate the two hundred fifty dollars that Rick voluntarily lent him. Moreover, Paul did not use the money solely to his advantage; he got Rick unwittingly to finance an extravagant night for the two to experience together. While Elizabeth's situation—the loss of Rick as well as her savings—is truly unfortunate, the charges, legally, do not amount to much—with a sentence—if that far—of "A few months tops" (Guare 111), according to Ouisa.

Regardless of the legality of Paul's deceit, an Aristotelian and a Foucauldian analysis of ethical action reveals precisely how his unjust manner of spending the couple's money, misrepresenting it as his own, results in exuberant experience

at the price of harm to others, suggesting the dangers of unbridled aestheticism. In the sense that both Paul and Rick seek experience as something beyond the mere anecdotes that the Manhattan socialites relish, they eschew the pose of the Baudelairean *flâneur* even if they do not quite approach his "man of modernity" that Foucault so extols:

The *flâneur*, the idle, strolling spectator, is satisfied to keep his eyes open, to pay attention and to build up a storehouse of memories. In opposition to the *flâneur*, Baudelaire describes the man of modernity: "Away he goes, hurrying, searching.... Be very sure that this man ... —this solitary, gifted with an active imagination, ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert— has an aim loftier than that of a mere *flâneur*, ... something other than the fugitive pleasure of circumstance.... He makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history. (Foucault, "Enlightenment" 40-41)

While commendably evading the attitude of the *flâneur*, Paul and Rick, nonetheless, act imprudently in disregard of the well-being of others, thereby inducing tragedy.

Oscar Wilde, the leading figure of the Aesthetic movement in *fin de siècle* England, espouses "the ideal that the utility of one's actions should be to create the maximal amount of beauty and pleasure in one's life, and nothing more" (Duggan). Indeed, based upon his preface as well as Lord Henry's professorial lectures, his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* seems whole-heartedly to promote a purely aesthetic mode of life. Nonetheless, the deterioration of Dorian Gray's portrait, a record of the aesthete's wholesale dissipation, presents Wilde's more qualified view toward aestheticism. According to Patrick Duggan,

Wilde realized and depicted in the life of Dorian Gray, a need for a more controlled and deliberate approach to

aestheticism, without which morality will inevitably be elusive. The adoption of unrestrained aestheticism, as exhibited by Dorian, results in a lack of remorse, self-absorption, and intellectual regression.

He admires actress Sibyl Vane only for her art, and when she leaves the theater, she “no longer serves a purpose in Dorian’s aesthetic life” (Duggan). Even as he lives by the uselessness of art, Dorian disposes of Sibyl as a useless good, directly triggering her suicide. “[I]n the practice of Wilde’s aestheticism,” Duggan concludes, “forethought and constraint are necessities, yet too often lacking, and without them, one is doomed to suffer the same fate as Dorian Gray.”

While the causal link to Rick’s suicide is even thinner in Paul’s case, Duggan’s comment on Wilde’s aestheticism is as germane to Dorian as to Paul. “All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment”, Wilde concludes in *Dorian Gray* (248), invoking Delphic wisdom.⁴ The absoluteness of this rule is echoed in Aristotle’s injunction against lying. As much as Paul inspired others toward a conscious pursuit of self-flourishing and the audience looked forward to the promises of Ouisa and his “[e]verlasting friendship” (Guare 99), Paul falls victim to his failure to follow the rules of society. While Juliet is right to protest, “What’s in a name?” Paul, in his stubborn refusal to reveal his real name, fatally prevents Ouisa from helping him when Manhattan traffic prevents the Kittredges from arriving in time to deliver him to the police. “[K]indness and affection” (Guare 110), tragically, are not enough to combat the dual limits of existential randomness and social inequalities within the judicial system that the New York traffic and the police station respectively emblemize. As Wilde, Foucault, and Guare suggest, the aesth/ethic pursuit of the self is enacted through disciplined

⁴ The Delphic Oracle proclaims two premier injunctions: “Know thyself” and “Nothing in excess.”

free play of the imagination, a deliberate integration of “chaos” and “control,” of public and private morality within the limits of our historical and cultural situation: “A moral action” aims to establish “a moral conduct that commits an individual, not only to other actions always in conformity with values and rules, but to a certain mode of being, a mode of being characteristic of the ethical subject” (Foucault, *Pleasure* 28). Otherwise, one could well “lose the painting” (Guare 46), as Flan’s dream portends, and, more fatally, lose oneself, as Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* implies. The robust use of the imagination to promote the aesth/ethic self beyond one’s economic, race, and gender limits must ultimately be bound by our moral responsibility to others—a point on which Foucault and Aristotle converge. ●

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