DOUBLE VISION: SOME AMBIGUITIES OF *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

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Many of the ambiguities of *Dorian Gray* result from the fact that Wilde's novel is a curious textual hybrid in which the discourses of several genres intermingle: most importantly, those of the comedy of manners and the gothic horror story. Detached from the novel, the story of the portrait evokes the world of Poe's tales, most notably that of "The Oval Portrait", and fits the fin-de-siècle obsession with (gothic) explorations of the doppelgänger theme: the sealed room that is revealed at the end of the narrative resembles not only Frankenstein's operating theatre but also the studio of Dr. Jekyll and the surgical theatre of Dr. Moreau (in this respect, the difference between Wilde and the other gothic texts is that *Dorian Gray* presents the fin-de-siècle crisis of subjectivity in the context of art rather than science, exploring the monstrosity of Dorian in terms of the art/life divide).[1] This textual doubleness or duplicity is further complicated by the presence of other discursive strands – for instance, the melodramatic revenge tale of Jack Vane.

The end result is a text with obvious parabolic and allegorical tendencies; it is, however, much more difficult to decide *what* exactly it is that is being allegorised here. This difficulty is due not simply to the discursive heterogeneity of the novel, but also to the fact that the allegorical impulse is splayed, opening up the allegorical interpretation of the central scenario in so many directions that the different directions end up subverting or

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[1] The portrait in the attic room fulfils the function of the cheval glass that confronts Mr. Utterson in Jekyll's studio. The studios of Frankenstein, Dr. Moreau, Jekyll and Hallward (as well as the attic room of Dorian) are emphatically secluded places in which the solidity of human identity is radically challenged, and which therefore give birth to liminal and monstrous creatures that ought not to exist. Wilde's novel is discussed in the context of the Gothic tradition by Baldick 1987, Punter (1996, 1–26), and Smith (2004, 166–9).

cancelling each other. In addition to the obvious moral exemplariness that is triggered by Basil Hallward's prophetic remarks in the opening chapter ("we shall all suffer" [Wilde 1992, 7]), the text inscribes itself into several other traditions, for example by evoking mythological parallels: the myths of Narcissus and Pygmalion, apparently invoked in order to stabilise the meanings of the allegorical parable, themselves require further allegorical interpretation. Although both mythological stories are concerned with transgressions between life and representation, the Pygmalion story (extremely popular in late Victorian art) keeps this transgression within the sphere of art, whereas the Narcissus story places it in the drama of the subject's self-cognition.

The focus or fulcrum of these allegorical impulses is clearly the portrait, or, more precisely, the relationship between the portrait, its object (Dorian), its maker (Basil Hallward) and its spectator (Lord Henry Wotton). The allegorical overdetermination manifests itself in a telling lack: apart from a few vague references, there is no ekphrastic attempt in the novel to *describe* the portrait (perhaps because what is important is not on the painting anyway), which thus remains empty and asemic, the site of allegorical excess, overburdened with too much "meaning," functioning like the attic room, offering a place where the text can store and sequester its unsolved tensions. The portrait is "outside" the text, establishing "a gap whereby unverbalized meaning can enter the text" (Cohen 1996, 113).

The portrait, then, is primarily and initially a work of art (setting off an allegorical narrative concerned with the nature of art and the relationship between art and life) that gradually becomes a gothic double (the monstrous embodiment of conscience, guilt or the Super-Ego).[2] The two basic allegorical discourses overlap and intersect in unpredictable ways throughout the text.

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[2] Most of the numerous psychoanalytically informed interpretations of the novel are plodding unfoldings of obvious psychoanalytical allegories. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan's reading, for instance, treats the novel purely as the dramatization of a psychoanalytical problem (Ragland-Sullivan 1986); Jeffrey Berman's biographical interpretation also remains on a purely thematic level, reading the relations between the main characters on the basis of Wilde's family scenario (Berman 1990). The most recent and most eventful chapter in the novel's reception is dominated by an attempt to reveal the presence of suppressed homoerotic desire (Sinfield 1994; Dellamora 1996; Arata 1996; Showalter 1987; Cohen 1996). An original reading that combines the theme of decadence with a broadly psychoanalytical approach is Camille Paglia's chapter in her *Sexual Personae* (Paglia 1991).

Influences

The portrait clearly starts its existence as a work of art, gradually transforming into something else (this transformation is signalled by its removal from the artist's studio to Dorian's house). It could be suggested that the cause and essence of the uncanny metamorphosis of the painting is precisely its slippage from the sphere of art (the miasmic growth of materiality is the symptom of the object's displacement from the spiritual, immaterial sphere of art). The fact that it is Hallward who "specially designs" (46) the picture frame suggests not only that he is trying to delimit the possible meanings and uses of the painting, but also that he endeavours to keep it within the limits of art (and thereby, perhaps, maintain his authority over it). The sequence, however, is far from being so clear-cut. To begin with, the context of the making of the portrait is not entirely aesthetic in the first place; further, the aesthetic context does not simply disappear when the painting is removed from the artist's studio and finds its place in Dorian's domestic interior, entering the realm of Dorian's psychodrama. Thus what happens to the portrait subsequently remains, throughout, in an uneasy connection with the fact that it is a work of art.

Thus the ambiguity around the portrait already pervades the circumstances of its conception. From Basil Hallward's account of his first encounter with Dorian, it is obvious that Dorian is his uncanny double before he becomes an artistically "interesting" model. "A curious sensation of terror came over me – says Hallward. – I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself" (9). In the last sentence (just as in Hallward's whole experience), *nature* and *art* find themselves in dangerous and contagious proximity (appearing in the same syntactic unit), foreshadowing the nature of the ambiguity that surrounds the portrait. It is as if Dorian Gray's mere appearance meant the possibility of a transgression between the two ontologically different spheres. The moment when their fateful encounter takes place is evoked by Basil thus: "we were quite close, almost touching" (9). The possibility of contact opens the door to a general permeability of borders (between painter and model, art and life). In his account Basil is desperate to keep his explanation within the aesthetic sphere, emphasising Dorian's role in his (that is, Basil's) art: "What the invention of oil-painting was to the Venetians, the face of Antinous was to late Greek sculpture, and the face of Dorian Gray will some day be to me" (11). Yet the exact nature of the relationship, of the way Dorian affects Basil's art, proves to be ungraspable either in conceptual or in metaphorical

terms. Hallward's confused account keeps piling up metaphors of the most diverse kinds in its attempt to "place" and name the relationship between Dorian and his art, and to distance it from such obvious traditional metaphors as those of the "muse" or "inspiration".[3] What is clear is that, stressing the effect of Dorian's "visible presence" and trying to describe the "subtle influence" passing from Dorian to him, he removes the relationship from the order of mimetic and metaphorical art, describing the influence of Dorian's beauty as a "motive", a style or attitude that permeates all his work: "Dorian Gray to me is simply a motive in art. [...] He is never more present in my work than when no image of him is there. He is a suggestion, as I have said, of a new manner. I find him in the curves of certain lines, in the loveliness and subtleties of certain colours" (12).

The key to Basil's confusion is perhaps that the rhetoric of his confession suggests a specifically "artistic" inspiration: he describes Dorian's influence on his art in terms that we would expect him to use in describing the effect of another painter's work or a work of art rather than a person. Thus Dorian Gray's first appearance is metaleptic not only because he is an image before he is someone, but also because his effect on Basil is described in terms that would suggest an artistic "influence". Consequently Dorian's presence or proximity is enough in itself to create the possibility of the permeability of barriers. It is in this scene that the novel's fundamental metaphor for (inter)relationships of any kind is established; Dorian's presence in Basil's art, as the painter insists, is not metaphorical or mimetic (he is not important as a theme or a model), but works as a "subtle influence".[4] Instead of entering relationships of (metaphorical) mirroring, entities in the novel tend to leak or flow into each other (as is suggested by the etymology of *influence*, which, together, with *poison*, is one of the most frequent words in the novel).[5] Thus

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[3] "Inspiration" appears only in the context of an inferior art, in the Sibyl Vane subplot.

[4] Even in the "internal" psychodrama of Dorian and the portrait, the logic of influence overrules that of metaphoricity. "Was there some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms, that shaped themselves into form and colour on the canvas, and the soul that was within him? Could it be that what that soul thought, they realised? – that what it dreamed, they made true?" (77) The secret affinity later becomes "horrible sympathy" (85), evoking the magical meaning of "sympathy", where similarity and contiguity are inseparable.

[5] Although the metaphor of influence is the most pervasive and conspicuous in the relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian, it is important that it makes its first appearance in the Hallward/Dorian relationship, and thus when it is used to denote

relationships are based on adjacency and contiguity, which suggests that entities (most importantly, entities of life and art) are in the same dimension or plane rather than occupying radically different ontological spheres.

Whether Dorian's presence is the cause or only the symptom of a general erosion of metaphoricity, representations and subjectivities tend to flow into each other throughout the novel: rather than existing on the opposite sides of a barrier or screen, and then entering into relationships of metaphoricity or correspondance, things tend to ooze metonymically into each other. The painting is duly contaminated by this logic, becoming its centrepiece (and embodying its workings) in the rest of the narrative. The relationship between model and image is not the similarity or identity of two things on opposite sides of an ontological borderline; they enter instead into the ungovernable logic of influences, transfusions and leakings, a logic that radically challenges the hierarchy of "original" and "model". The sea change of the portrait, the gradual distortion of the depicted face, might thus also be caused by the fact that, contrary to Wilde's declared aesthetic views, in the novel "life spills over into art" (Ragland-Sullivan 1986, 114), making any reassuring distinction between the two spheres rather difficult. Entering the circulation of in-fluence and con-fluence, the portrait becomes an indexical representation, like a photograph: registering or recording the trace of its object rather than reproducing or recreating it according to the rules of a representational code. The novel can be read as a series of two-way transgressions between art and life, narrativised through repeated metamorphoses of the Pygmalion myth (which, in turn, is presented as a version of the Narcissus myth).

The original reason for removing the painting from the sphere of art is Basil's refusal to have it exhibited: "I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul" (8; cf. 92). Thus the painting, which after a certain point begins to embody and reveal Dorian's secret, does not cease to embody Basil's secret, either; in both cases, it embodies something that could not be known without it (like some Lacanian *objet d'art supposé savoir*). Thus Basil's secret is still in/on the portrait when it is moved to Dorian's flat; and its subsequent vicissitudes (especially the fact that that it ends up demanding the death of both its creator and of its model) suggest that, by completing it, Basil has done something transgressive (even if the diverging allegorical strands fail to reassuringly specify the exact nature of

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purely intersubjective relationships, it still bears upon itself the traces of the artistic context.

this transgression). If Basil, as he suggests, has indeed put "too much of himself" into the portrait, he has violated the decadent and modernist aesthetic creed that also appears in Wilde's essays, and which is formulated by Hallward himself: "An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them" (12). If art is the extinction rather than the assertion of personality, the portrait could not be a masterpiece according to Basil's own norms, as it was conceived in the false spirit of "artistic idolatry" (12), unpardonably exceeding and violating the purely aesthetic relationship.[6]

In a different allegorical reading, however, which intersects with the former allegory of aesthetic sin, Basil's crime can be seen as just the opposite of the breach of "aesthetic" rules: rather than the unpardonable intrusion of personal emotions into the sphere of art, the sin that is embodied in the portrait (entailing a death sentence) is the translation or transference of a human relationship into the aesthetic order. This is the anti-Pygmalion crime: the transformation of the other person (the beloved) into a work of art. As Basil explains much later, his earlier renderings of Dorian were without exception aestheticised portraits in which Dorian's beauty appeared not as his own but as an attribute of figures from classical mythology and history (Adonis, Narcissus, Antinous). Dorian's beauty, then, was rendered in such a way that it was deprived of its threatening "personal" potential, becoming the repetition or representation of models well known from the aesthetic sphere: rather than his own beauty, it is the *representation* of the beauty of imaginary figures.[7] These paintings, then, "had been what art should be, unconscious, ideal, and remote" (92). In the final, perfect portrait, Basil's anti-Pygmalionic desire might be said to manifest itself in its undisguised purity, not masked by the accoutrement of the artistic tradition.

Dorian's metaleptic and transgressive nature is also obvious from the fact that, even at the start, he is image (*art*) as well as character (*nature*). At the time of his first appearance, Dorian the character is nothing but external form, possessing "nothing like an 'authentic' interiority. Repeatedly he is described in terms that emphasise his lack of interiority"

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[6] Hallward's crime (or sin) could, of course, also be seen as a Platonic primal sin: he unpardonably represents an ideal, a pure Form.

[7] This could be the explanation for a seemingly incongruous adjective on the opening page of the novel. The still unfinished portrait is first referred to by the narrator as "the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary *personal* beauty" (Wilde 1992, 5 – emphasis added). It is precisely the "personal", individual nature of Dorian that is divested from him in the earlier paintings, and which is allowed to appear in the fatal portrait.

(Arata 1996, 60). Basil, for instance, characterises Dorian in terms that define him as an exceptional constellation of aesthetic qualities. Since, for Basil, Dorian is a work of art in the first place, the portrait might be said to represent Dorian himself *as a work of art* (no longer dissembling this fact by dressing him up in mythological costumes), also making this representation, for the first time, available for Dorian himself. "You know the picture is yours, Dorian – says Basil.– I gave it to you before it existed" (Wilde 1992, 26). The act of offering the portrait to Dorian, however, is a profoundly ambiguous gesture, as it also suggests that it was Basil who provided Dorian with a (his) picture, his appearance, in the first place: in this sense it was Basil who created Dorian *as an image* (calling him "the visible incarnation of [an] unseen ideal" [92]), thereby depriving him of an interiority which then could be projected phenomenally into an external image or appearance. Basil, then, does indeed give a picture or image to Dorian (projecting his own desire onto Dorian's represented body), while the transaction also enacts the reverse process: "Basil takes his image from [Dorian] and exhibits it to him as art, as an object for contemplation" (Oates 1988, 425). Thus the completion of the portrait might signal the fact that the "original" has become superfluous, and that is why, after the moment of metamorphosis, Hallward can announce that he shall "stay with the real Dorian" (Wilde 1992, 26). For Basil, Dorian is an image in the phenomenological sense of the word, which makes the portrait *the image of an image*. Dorian's "birth" is in this sense the awakening of an image: masquerading as a human being, the image-machine sets out into the world, wreaking havoc wherever it goes.

Since Dorian Gray is both character and image (work of art) from the very beginning, the events of his life are both the events of his life and moments in the destiny of a figure that has been transformed into a work of art twice over. Consequently Dorian is both responsible for his fate and exempt from all responsibility; murdering Basil is a crime as well as a compulsive, helpless act of rebellion (like the revolt of Frankenstein's monster).

Hallward's anti-Pygmalionic act is simply the most important in a series of trespassings between life and art (representation). The central moment of the novel (Dorian's metamorphosis), which can be seen as the consequence of this gesture, is not just a metamorphosis but a twofold chiasmic metamorphosis: Dorian becomes an image, whereas the picture in some way comes to life (or is given life, which, in the present case, means partaking of the process of change, aging and decay). Thus, if J. Hillis Miller is right in suggesting that every metamorphosis is the literalisation of a metaphor, here at least two metaphors are literalised, one

of the two being the aesthetic version of Hans Belting's anthropological insight: "The body itself is an image, even before we would recreate or reproduce it in an image" (Belting 2003, 104). Making an image, then, is not the reproduction of the body but the production of an image of the body, an image that is already given in the self-representation of the body. In this interpretation Dorian is a victim who, in his story of suffering, *lives* a universal experience (we all exist as images, we appear to the others as images, we are all transformed into images of ourselves, and every representation is also the transformation of the model into an image) that the rest of us choose to conceal from ourselves.

The novel dramatises this insight in the context of artistic representation. A portrait, as Francette Pacteau suggests, is not made of the model but of the image of the model: that is why the good model, ideally, approximates the immobility of the image (Pacteau 1994, 15). Accordingly, during the last session Basil is mightily pleased with the unprecedented immobility of Dorian, who is being entertained and seduced by Lord Henry. Dorian Gray's eternal youth is the eternal youth or, more precisely, the timelessness of art objects (in Dorian's case, this timeless moment happens to coincide with that of youth, but it could be a different human age a well). His transformation is simply the symptom of a condition that prevails in the world of the novel: life and art are mixed and mixed up at every level, with life being interpreted repeatedly as image or art, and works of art entering or spilling over into life. This chiasmic process, confluence or confusion, however, occurs in such a way that neither "life" nor "art" means the same thing throughout. Thus instead of taking place between two otherwise fixed entities, it is the act of transgression or trespassing itself that produces the two entities on either side of the barrier. The series of border crossings between life and art causes a pervasive Pygmalion syndrome in the novel; due to the uncertainty of the basic categories, and the pervasive logic of influence and contamination, nearly every major character can be seen as a Pygmalion figure, transgressing the already porous and tenuous borderline between life and representation. It is not only Basil and Lord Henry who transform someone else into a work of art – inspired by their different aesthetic creeds – for Dorian himself is a thoroughly (anti-)Pygmalion figure: it is his kiss that brings about the metamorphosis of Sibyl Vane from a work of art (a creature existing exclusively in and through the characters of Shakespeare's plays) into an individual (Wilde 1992, 71) who is then found aesthetically deficient due to her vulgarity: the sobbing Sibyl "seemed to him absurdly melodramatic" (71–2).

Beauty

The Pygmalion syndrome – like the allegorical incoherence of the portrait – is presented in the novel as the symptom of an even more general predicament: a deep crisis of phenomenality. Wilde's novel can be read as an important early example of the radical Modernist questioning of the continuity between seeing and knowing (Jacobs 2001, 19). It is the crisis of phenomenality that connects the theme of the continuity between seeing and knowing with the allegorical and aesthetic self-reflexivity that explores the relationship between life and art, as well as with the subversion of the Victorian ideal of the self-identical subject.[8]

The focus of the general crisis of phenomenality is the phenomenon of *beauty*: it is through this that the novel dramatises not only the various modalities of the chiasmic inversions between art and life, but also the more general confusion of the relationship between exterior and interior. Beauty in and of itself causes a profound disturbance in the art/life dichotomy, if for no other reason than because it appears in both spheres, and a reassuring distinction of the two "kinds" of beauty is theoretically extremely difficult. In this sense, the basic phenomenological issue raised by Wilde's novel is the following: is beauty the manifestation, revelation or expression of some inner content, or is it simply a phenomenally unintelligible entity, a surface or form that hides or expresses no inner content? Ironically it is Basil, the artist, who proves to be the phenomenologically most naïve character, believing in the unproblematic continuity between interior and exterior ("Sin – he claims – is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. People talk sometimes of secret vices. There are no such things. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding of his hands even" [119].) Thus, inasmuch as by definition it

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[8] The doppelgänger itself is, among other things, a symptom of the deep crisis of phenomenality, the flawed dialectics of the internal and external spheres. If Dorian is indeed Basil's double, then – according to Lacan's conception of the double – he represents a part of Basil that by definition cannot become visible: the remains of subjectivisation, something that the ego excludes from its coherent and well-contoured mirror image, and which will thereafter haunt him/her as the Real; for instance, as the subject's double (cf. Boothby 1991, 37–40). In this novel, an inverse process seems to be unfolding: it is as if the solid and coherent subjectivity fixed by (in) the picture were transferred onto the subject itself, while the image, instead of being the vehicle of this reassuring image or imago of subjectivity, itself metamorphoses into that unrepresentable excess that the subject excludes from itself, and the glimpse of which will inevitably lead to psychotic disturbance.

invariably makes something visible, beauty for Basil must be the manifestation of something good, for instance, the noble sentiments or character of Dorian. For Lord Henry, whose aesthetic and phenomenological views are radically different from Hallward's, Dorian's beauty is not the manifestation of an inner content (unless of some natural force or universal principle), but an opportunity: it is precisely Dorian's beauty that can be manifested in or through action, in or through a certain kind of living.[9] In order to make this claim Lord Henry must first divorce Dorian's beauty from any kind of psychological context and reinscribe it into nature. "And Beauty is a form of Genius – it is higher, indeed, than Genius, as it needs no explanation. It is of the great facts of the world, like sunlight, or spring-time, or the reflection in dark waters of that silver shell we call the moon" (21).

In an attempt to explore the way beauty disturbs the order of phenomenality, one might start with the ideal of the decadent or aestheticist philosophy of existence, repeatedly formulated in the novel by both Lord Henry and Dorian: if the "search for beauty" is indeed "the real secret of life", as Dorian claims (41), echoing Lord Henry, then the life of the aesthete is spent in search of an unreachable goal. Roland Barthes and Francette Pacteau both emphasise that in any attempt to grasp and formulate beauty, we must inescapably *refer* to something else: something is always "as beautiful as something else", and this something else is fundamentally a work of art, something that belongs and owes its sheer existence to the sphere of aesthetics. As Barthes explains in his comments on Balzac's *Sarrasine*:

> **beauty cannot assert itself save in the form of a citation: that Marianina resembles the sultan's daughter is the only way something can be said about her beauty; it derives from its Model not only beauty but also language; left on its own, deprived of any anterior code, beauty would be mute. Every direct predicate is denied it; the only feasible predicates are either tautology (*a perfectly oval face*) or simile (*lovely as a Raphael Madonna, like a dream in stone*, etc.); thus, beauty is referred to an infinity of codes: *lovely as Venus?* But Venus lovely as what? As herself? As Marianina? There is only one way to stop the replication of beauty: hide it, return it to silence, to the ineffable, to aphasia, refer the referent back to the invisible, veil the sultan's daughter, affirm the code without realizing (without compromising) the original (Barthes 1974, 33–4).**

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[9] Lord Henry must inevitably subscribe to this view since he believes that man has no soul (that is, an inner content that could be expressed or manifested): it is only art that possesses a soul (170). Dorian himself reads the portrait throughout as the representation or manifestation of his own soul (98, 176).

The description of Dorian's beauty is exhausted in a few obligatory and all too general clichés; the novel speaks not about Dorian's beauty but about the beauty-phenomenon that is embodied in and through him.

When Dorian, disabused of his infatuation, complains about Sibyl Vane's failing artistic talent, Lord Henry cynically retorts: "She is beautiful. What more can you want?" (69) His question is fully justified inasmuch as Dorian is trying to shape his own life to conform to Lord Henry's dictum (a life that is worthy of being lived is an unending quest for beauty). Nevertheless, the Sibyl story seems to contradict his project: although the girl, naturally enough, does not lose her beauty along with her talent, Dorian turns away from her scornfully: Sibyl's beauty is attractive only as long as it is the "artistic", artificial beauty of Shakespeare's heroines. Thus, without the support of art, "beauty" in itself no longer suffices.

For Basil, finding Dorian amounts to the discovery of the ultimate model that could close the endless chain of referring set off by the phenomenon of beauty. In this respect, Basil resembles the protagonist of Balzac's "Sarrasine", who believes to have found ideal beauty, or the idea(l) of beauty, in Zambinella. The attempt to grasp Zambinella's beauty, however, immediately and inevitably introduces into the story the proper sphere of beauty, that is, art: perfect beauty can only be grasped through works of art, as Sarrasine himself is compelled to realise when he exclaims: "This was more than a woman, she was a masterpiece!" (Balzac 1974, 238) To find someone beautiful is to make him/her correspond to a model; if there is no specific model at hand, we might evoke art itself, the metaphor of the work of art, or of the masterpiece as the basis for the correlation – as in the idiom "pretty as a picture". The picture is in itself a standard or reference point of beauty, irrespective of its content. In Balzac's story, which foreshadows Wilde's novel, Zambinella may follow the anti-Pygmalionic route, turning into a work of art and thus consummating the idea of perfection that has become her lot, or, exposed to the ravages of time and aging, she might lose her work-of-art perfection and live on as the increasingly less perfect copy (Pacteau 1994, 22), travesty, and eventually ghost of a perfect work of art. The effect is uncanny in both cases. The uncanny effect of the excessive beauty that appears in the human sphere, beauty inscribed on a human body – in Wilde's novel, Dorian's personal beauty – is partly the result of this logic. If beauty as a phenomenon cannot fully exist outside the sphere of art, Dorian's beauty is uncanny precisely because it is "aesthetic", because it is, by the mere fact of being *beauty*, the unchanging and unchangeable beauty of a work of art inscribed, incongruously, on a living human figure. In this sense

Wilde's novel can be compared to another well-known gothic tale of the fin-de-siècle, H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887), in which the mysterious white queen ruling a kingdom in the heart of Africa shares Dorian's fate. The comparison is reinforced by the closing scenes of the two novels: the instantaneous aging of the bodies that serve as carriers of the uncanny (and fatal) beauty, the destruction of the image (body) of beauty reveals the spectacle of the abject, putrifying body. What remains in the end is the material, therefore necessarily corruptible and perishable, carrier of the *image* of beauty (because human beauty is always the image of aesthetic beauty), the shrivelled corpse: "Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage." (177)[10]

Thus the unchanging beauty of Dorian and She is proof of their being dead (or living-dead), and Dorian's choice of words is more than adequate when he borrows the abject attributes of the rotting body to characterise the monstrosity of the portrait: "The rotting corpse in a watery grave was not so fearful" (125). In this sense the transformation of the portrait might be likened to the case of an image that is painted on a corruptible, mortal body: the distortion of the image would be nothing (and 'signify' nothing) but the physical decay and final decomposition of the human body.

The grand Narcissus scene of the novel, the one in which Dorian, contemplating the portrait, is awakened into (self-)consciousness, also inserts the beauty phenomenon – precisely by means of the Narcissus references – into the novel's exploration of the crisis of subjectivity. But the structure of this grand scenario, which is built up of a series of overlaid triangles, must be sketched before any consideration of the interrelationship of subjectivity and beauty.

Versions of Narcissus

Occupying a central, almost cultic position in Hallward's studio, Dorian Gray's (unfinished) portrait is there before Dorian Gray the character makes his first appearance (thus echoing Wilde's precept: art precedes and preempts life, which is trying to imitate it): Dorian appears only at the beginning of Chapter Two, reenacting his presence as an image. In the first triangular constellation, then, Basil paints (in the opening chapter, he is watching the portrait rather than working on it), and Lord Henry, as always, contemplates the scene and talks a lot, while the picture simply *is*. After Dorian's arrival, what we have is not so much a

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[10] Cf. H. Rider Haggard 2007, 294.

quadrangle as the overlaying of several triangles. On the one hand, we still have the Dorian-Basil-portrait constellation that will affect the subsequent unfolding of events (Dorian repeatedly claims that everything is Basil's fault), while, on the other hand, a new triangle is created, consisting of Dorian, the portrait, and Lord Henry, which serves as the basis of a different allegorical strand.

It is important to note that, until the end of Chapter Two, the portrait remains uncompleted; it is one of the "characters", at least in the sense that, like other existents of the world, it is continually changing. In this section Basil is silently working on the painting, Dorian is sitting still (like Galatea, petrified), listening all the while to Lord Henry, whose ceaseless flow of words is seducing and gradually transforming the model. Interiorising Lord Henry's "influential" monologue, Dorian in fact receives a soul: he is brought to life, animated, just like Galatea in Ovid's version of the Pygmalion myth: while he is sitting motionless for several minutes, "he was dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him. […] he felt he was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses" (19). Later, "there was a look of fear in his eyes, such as people have when they are suddenly awakened" (20).

In this scene, with the allegorical impulse splayed and refracted amidst multiple metamorphic and pneumatising processes, we cannot even be certain as to *what* exactly the model is that appears in the completed portrait. On seeing the change, Basil remarks jubilantly that his model has never been so perfect: "I dont know what Harry has been saying to you, but he has certainly made you have the most wonderful expression" (19). This remark indicates that the Dorian that emerges from this scenario is in fact the product of a collaboration between two creators: Hallward and Lord Henry are like a Victor Frankenstein split in two, or like Coppola and Spalanzani in "The Sandman".[11]

It could be argued that what enables Basil to complete the portrait is precisely the fact that, while posing for what turns out to be the final instalment of the painting process, Dorian is awakened and animated by

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[11] The crucial difference between Hoffmann's tale and Wilde's novel is that Basil and Lord Henry create Dorian according to two very different aesthetic credos, producing two distinct human/work-of-art hybrids: Basil's work is embodied in a work of art, while Lord Henry's work exists outside the order of representation. While, in psychoanalytical terms, Dorian enters the imaginary order (the order of vision, of narcissistic self-reflexion), Lord Henry's mesmerizing flow of words (the physical effect of his voice is evoked by Dorian on several occasions) inserts him in the symbolic order, the order of language (or, more precisely, Dorian accepts the proffered position as the object of the Other's desire).

Lord Henry. Thus the portrait can be seen as that of the newly awakened and self-conscious Dorian, no longer purely a work of art, an image or representation of beauty. This duplicity is suggested by Basil after he sees Dorian's despair: "This is your doing, Harry" (25).

If Basil has indeed taken or stolen Dorian's soul, imprisoning it in the painting (evoking the archaic fear of the portrait), there is a moment in the course of the painting process when Dorian is empty: a perfect chance for Lord Henry to extend his influence over him by demonically sending his own soul into Dorian, transforming him in a technical sense into a zombie, a ventriloquist (Paglia 1991, 518), and making the first touches on his own work of art. Lord Henry's creation, however, when he chooses to "influence" Dorian, is twofold from the very beginning: he "creates" Dorian not only – perhaps not primarily – as a work of art but as an *artist*, which certainly makes sense if we consider that Lord Henry himself is not an artist but a connoisseur of art, a critic, an aesthete. For him, the work of art is not Dorian himself but the life that Dorian potentially harbours and that, given proper guidance, might become a reality (again, a work of art – but not Basil's work of art – violating the borderline and crossing over into actual existence). According to Lord Henry's aesthetics, everyone is potentially an artist, for "[l]ife was the first, the greatest, of the arts, and for it all the other arts seemed to be but a preparation" (104). Given the fact that most people are poor artists, living their lives in a manner that is aesthetically deficient, formless or melodramatically vulgar, Lord Henry is seeking lives that are satisfactory works of art. Dorian Gray is thus partly a work of art and partly an unwitting artist who turns his own life into a work of art: "I am so glad – Lord Henry tells Dorian towards the end – that you have never done anything, never carved a statue, or painted a picture, or produced anything outside of yourself! Life has been your art." (172) If Dorian is an artist, then the conflation of artist and work of art becomes visible in the fact that he is the only one who is deprived of the enjoyment of the work of art that he creates by living. He is deprived both of art (because he himself is a work of art) and of a life (because his life is a work of art that is, in terms of actual existence, inconsequential).

Lord Henry, then, is the connoisseur-aesthete as demonic muse-succubus. In terms of the mythological parallel that is never far from the world of the novel, Lord Henry transforms Dorian from Narcissus into Echo, into a subject that has no words of its own.

The moment of the portrait's completion is clearly the central moment of these processes, the moment when the situation is frozen, when the story, as it were, passes through the picture and undergoes a transformation in the process. When Dorian interprets the situation as a

perfectly chiasmic one (whatever he loses is gained by the picture), he "halves" both the picture and himself, identifying himself as nothing but body (formerly it was he who said that the life that will mar his body will create his soul), and seeing the picture not as some eternal soul or spirit but as an entity that assumes or appropriates his lost attribute of beauty. "Every moment that passes takes something from me, and gives something to it" (25). Dorian's chiasmic despair is to a certain extent justifiable, yet the picture is not – or not only – one diagonal of the chiasmic divider pattern, but the fulcrum of the chiasmic, metamorphic moment, the non-place into which the story vanishes in order to return fully transformed.

The metamorphosis is preceded by the grand Narcissistic scene that places the beauty phenomenon and the confusion of image and reality in the context of subjectivity.

> When he [Dorian] saw it [the painting] he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognised himself for the first time. He stood there motionless and in wonder, dimly conscious that Hallward was speaking to him, but not catching the meaning of his words. The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before. Basil Hallward's compliments had seemed to him to be merely the charming exaggerations of friendship. He had listened to them, laughed at them, forgotten them. They had not influenced his nature. Then had come Lord Henry Wotton with his strange panegyric on youth, his terrible warning of its brevity. That had stirred him at the time, and now, as he stood gazing at the shadow of his own loveliness, the full reality of the description flashed across him. Yes, there would be a day when his face would be wrinkled and wizen, his eyes dim and colourless, the grace of his figure broken and deformed. […] The life that was to make his soul would mar his body (23–4).

When the portrait is completed, it is Lord Henry who summons Dorian to fulfil his narcissistic fate: "Mr. Gray, come over and look at yourself" (23). By this time, thanks to Lord Henry's internalised words, Dorian is already animated, more or less aware of what he is; therefore, he sees a painting that is tinted by Lord Henry's words, and by this moment the painting, for him, is relegated into a Platonic shadow. Dorian is acutely conscious of the split (the split of the picture, as well as his own split into a half that is thrown into time and existence, and another, timeless entity). From this moment, it is not himself that he sees in the painting but the version of himself that has just been talked into being by Lord Henry: something solid and unchanging, something that is moving away from him.

Dorian's awakening is the interaction between Hallward's painting and Lord Henry's siren song. Just as the painting is indispensable for Lord Henry's seduction to take effect, Lord Henry's speechifying is also necessary for the portrait to come into its own. On its own, neither would be sufficient to bring about the awakening, which also means that, left to itself, neither would be able to gain its meaning. The meaning of the portrait is decided by Lord Henry's words which therefore turn it into an allegorical image (it requires an external authority to signify). The diacritical nature of allegory manifests itself in its mechanism of delay: verbal and pictorial representations alike gain their respective meanings in the moment of linking up with the other.

There is no space here to follow the many transformations of the Narcissus myth in the novel: from the beautiful brainless Narcissus who is beautiful precisely because of his lack of self-consciousness (Wilde 1992, 6), Dorian becomes the unhappy creature enamoured in his own image (25), then the figure of self-love (the portrait "had taught him to love his own beauty" [74], cf. 85), to become in the second half of the story the allegorical figure of the unhappy split subject. The narcissistic relationship persists even in the period when the hideous ugliness of the portrait is apparent, in the sense that Dorian continues to feel a desire to see the portrait; and the new situation once again reintroduces the element of enjoyment (now become perverse): "For there would be a real pleasure in watching it. He would be able to follow his mind into its secret places. This portrait would be to him the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul" (86). It is clearly not his beauty the contemplation of which provides enjoyment for Narcissus, for then he would hang mirrors all over his walls, yet the intensity of the desire to see the portrait is not diminished. Even the repeated act of hiding seems only to enhance the perverse pleasure that accompanies the act of revealing; it is as if the changing of the portrait signalled the impossibility of ever getting used to the painting, for it provides again and again the experience of painful and traumatic self-recognition.

This perverse and distorted Narcissus scene takes us back to the phenomenological crisis of the relationship between the interior and the exterior in the context of the crisis of subjectivity. If the portrait, as Dorian believes, is indeed the representation or expression of his soul, then one might ask *who* is doing the contemplating here. Who or what is the subject of this self-reflexive act? Dorian's speculations would suggest that the subject is the image of the body itself, newly self-aware (for it is the image of the soul that he is watching with enjoyment from the safety of his own

permanent youth). It is the subject itself that has become a mirror image and that participates in the interactions of the symbolic world.

If, as an image-subject, Dorian is forced to live out the literalisation of the metaphor of a universal predicament – thus suffering instead of everyone else – then the same can be said about him in his capacity as a Narcissus figure; for although he is not the only Narcissus figure in the novel, he is the only one who lives out the fate of Narcissus to its tragic end. Basil, recognising himself in the portrait, is clearly a Narcissus, just like Lord Henry, who simply transfers his narcissistic pleasure into the audial sphere, treating Dorian as his Echo: "There was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence. No other activity was like it. To project one's soul into some gracious form, and let it tarry there for a moment; to hear one's own intellectual views echoed back to one with all the added music of passion and youth; to convey one's temperament into another as though it were a subtle fluid or a strange perfume: there was a real joy in that" (31).

The evocation of the Narcissus story might suggest yet another allegorical interpretation of the central scenario. The eternal youth and beauty of Dorian-Narcissus might signal that, just like his mythological precursor, Dorian, unwilling to grow old, dies young. In mythology, the price of such defiance is usually death and/or metamorphosis (as in the case of Adonis, also invoked in the novel). In this sense, Dorian exists – to borrow Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian formulation – "between the two deaths" (Žižek 2000, 145): he has already fulfilled his symbolic function yet he is still "here" (just like Zambinella). He splits into an image that is fixed for ever (and this part is, uncannily, going about in the world) and a disintegrating, abject, excessive half that is embodied in the equally uncanny portrait.

Dorian's implosion or collapse into his image implies, once again, the living out of an anthropological predicament. The birth of the image entails the possibility of the absence and ultimately the death of the original. The image – as Maurice Blanchot says – comes into existence *after* the object or model, thus it is derivative or secondary (Blanchot 1982, 255); at the same time, it is more perfect than the model in the sense that "its presence is liberated from existence" (Blanchot 1982, 256). Blanchot's speculations concerning the uncanny resemblance between the photograph and the cadaver are particularly relevant here. If Dorian's metamorphosis into an image is at the same time also the death of "Dorian Gray", then the portrait is, in a sense, Dorian's cadaver.[12] According to

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[12] This correlation "appears" in Salvador Dalí's Narcissus painting.

Blanchot, the cadaver's "being-here" (just like that of the image) suspends the relation to place: it is not "here", in this world, not even if it is here: it is somehow, more, "more beautiful and imposing; he is already monumental and [...] absolutely himself" (Blanchot 1982, 258). This grandeur, adds Blanchot, "through its appearance of supreme authority, may well bring to mind the great images of classical art" (258). It "appears" in the world only in the mode of an image. The ontological hierarchy seems to be inverted: the body seems to be the imperfect double of the cadaver-image, and "it is as if he [the cadaver] were doubled by himself, joined to his solemn impersonality by resemblance and by the image" (258). The cadaver/image appears as the appearance, the becoming visible, of a hitherto invisible original: the cadaver is its own image; it is like a shadow or a mirror reflection, dominating the life it reflects, and devouring it at the same time. As Mladen Dolar suggests, owing to their immateriality the shadow and the mirror reflection "survive" the body, and that is why our essential identity is made up of reflections (Dolar 1996, 12). The cadaver functions as an image also in the sense that the body, by becoming a cadaver, leaves behind the order of change, or more precisely, its changing is no longer "somebody's" culturally interpretable alteration but simply the attrition and erosion of matter (just as the alteration of a photograph or any other representation having a material carrier is the consequence of material decay: what changes is not the image but the material vehicle).

The kind of similarity that becomes threatening for Dorian is nothing but the uncanny itself. When it seems to us that someone "resembles himself" (Blanchot 1982, 258), that person seems more alien, "astray in himself" (*égaré en soi*) (Blanchot 1982, 258, Blanchot 1988, 347), as if he were already his own ghost. For Blanchot, this is like the moment when a certain tool becomes crooked and, ceasing to dissolve in its use, becomes its own image: "this appearance of the object is that of resemblance and reflection: the object's double, if you will" (Blanchot 1988, 258). As Blanchot says, "only that which is abandoned to the image appears, and everything that appears is, in this sense, imaginary" (Blanchot 1988, 259). If what appears on the portrait is similarity itself, then its effect is inevitably uncanny and traumatic. The portrait – every portrait – is also a Medusa head: life, confronted with its own image, is frozen, petrified, metamorphosing into its own unmoving sculpture.

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