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Elana Gomel

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# Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the (Un)Death of the Author

## WRITING SPIRITS

Oscar Wilde wrote his last book twenty-four years after his death. The book, entitled *Oscar Wilde from Purgatory: Psychic Messages*, was edited by Hester Travers Smith, the medium who received the messages while in a trance and inscribed them through the process known as “automatic writing.” The book’s publication occasioned a lively exchange of letters in the spiritualist journal *Occult Review*, in which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his opponent, C. W. Soal, debated the connection between the identity of the writer and the textual persona of the author. Doyle considered the messages to be genuine on the basis of his stylistic analysis of the text: “It is difficult to note these close analogies of style and to doubt that an Oscar Wilde brain is at the back of it” (305). Soal, on the other hand, pointed out that such analogies are easily counterfeited and suggested that the author of the text was the medium herself, even though she may not have been aware of her forgery.

This forgotten anecdote resonates with the contemporary narratological debates over the issue of authorship. The dead man writing from beyond the grave gives an uncannily literal meaning to the catchphrase “the death of the author.” But if the death of the author means, as it usually does, that the actual identity of the writer is unimportant compared to his textual persona, the story of Wilde’s psychic messages suggests that this is not the case. The question hotly debated in spiritualist circles was precisely whether the “Wilde” of the messages was the same *person* as the author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. No less an issue than the immortality of the soul hinged on the answer to this question.

Elana Gomel is Senior Lecturer in the Department of English at Tel-Aviv University. She is the author of *Bloodscripts: Writing the Violent Subject*. She has also published articles on narrative, science fiction, the body in culture, Dickens, fashion, and genocide in such journals as *Textual Practice*, *Journal of Narrative Technique*, *Poetics Today*, and *Science-Fiction Studies*.

While spiritualism is no longer the pressing cultural problematic it was in the 1920s, authorship still is. As Susan S. Lanser writes in a recent article, “the author keeps getting ‘implied’ even in essays that question it” (153). The sides in the authorship debate parallel the positions taken by Doyle and Soal: while some critics believe that there must be a direct connection between the writer and the work, with style (or content) reflecting personality, others argue that the author is a textual phantom, a discursive construct whose relation to a specific person is loose and perhaps even irrelevant. The second position owes its popularity to Michel Foucault’s and Roland Barthes’s celebrated essays “What Is An Author?” and “The Death of the Author,” which have largely set the parameters for subsequent discussions of authorship. For Foucault, the author is a projection of the text, independent of the actual, physical writer: “It would be just as wrong to equate the author with the real writer as to equate him with the fictitious speaker; the author-function is carried out and operates in the scission itself, in this division and this distance” (205). But as I argue in detail below, Foucault’s own language suggests that the “author-function,” like the ghostly author of Wilde’s messages, also operates in a complex and fraught relation with the corporeal person responsible for the text’s production. Like a ghost, it seeks embodiment; and like a ghost, it may inflict damage on the body it possesses.

Oscar Wilde was not the only writer to be kept busy after death; in the heyday of spiritualism, many (including, eventually, Doyle himself) suffered a similar fate. But Wilde’s posthumous Gothic romance was special because it so eerily resembled his own Gothic parables of authorship. The relationship between art and artist, between textuality and subjectivity, constitutes a central concern of Wilde’s oeuvre, just as it shaped his individual fate. This concern is clear in Wilde’s essays, but it is his masterpiece, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that represents his most complex, nuanced, and surprisingly contemporary meditation on the paradox of artistic creativity, particularly on the charged relation between the body and the text. Ordinarily read in terms of its (homo)sexual problematic, the novel is above all a Gothic allegory of the “cultural mythology” of “the death of the author,” understood as the tension between the corporeal particularity of the artist and the potentially reproducible and transferable self projected into the work of art (Boym 3). While a novel is not the same thing as a theoretical treatise, Wilde’s treatment of this cultural mythology has important implications for theories of authorship, for the novel parallels in its uncanny and violent plot the uncanny and violent metaphors that cluster around the death of the author.

In the sections that follow I discuss the issue of authorship in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and several essays by Wilde, and in the last section I consider some parallels between postmodern narratological theory and fin de siècle Gothic fantasy. I use the term “writer” to refer to the actual producer of the work and “author” to designate what Wayne Booth called “an ideal, literary, created version of the real man” (75).

## THE AUTHOR AND THE WRITER

In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde writes, “To reveal art and to conceal the artist is art’s aim” (377). But in the novel the fatal picture is revealed as

an independent and autonomous *objet d'art* only when both its creator and its model are dead. The violence that separates art from the artist indicates a strain and hostility in their relationship. "Art's aim" suddenly sounds like an implicit personification that credits "art" with scheming against the artist, perhaps to the point of murder.

The schism between the (textual) author and the (actual) writer is evident already in the eighteenth century, when the rise of authorship as a profession assumes as its "occasional metaphor . . . the writer's death" (Rosenthal 30). But it is in the nineteenth century, precisely when romanticism, with its cult of the genius on the one hand, and copyright laws, with their definition of intellectual property on the other, emphasize the individual nature of creativity, that "writing [becomes] linked to . . . the sacrifice of life" (Foucault, "What" 198). The paradox whereby artistic creation, supposedly predicated on individual talent, at the same time demands "the death of the self" (Boym 12) indicates a split between two concepts of subjectivity: the physical subject, rooted in the limited and mortal body, and the textual subject, infinitely reproducible and potentially immortal. As the text is born, argues Sartre, the umbilical cord linking it to the writer is decisively cut: "We hope that our books remain in the air all by themselves and that their words, instead of pointing backwards toward the one who has designed them, will be toboggans, forgotten, unnoticed, and solitary, which will hurl the reader into the midst of a universe where there are no witnesses" (158).

But what Sartre imagines as a painless separation between the body and the text is charged with tension, since by readerly consensus, the textual author still "implies" a particular writer. The author and the writer are a self split into a pair of uneasy and hostile conjoined twins who can neither reunite nor completely separate. The aporia of their relationship generates paradoxical and grotesque metaphors and plots. (Even in Sartre's passage, the striking image of books flying through the air like toboggans registers the strain between the "ideal self" of the text and the "one who has designed" it.)

Wilde astutely analyzes this aporia in a series of essays: "The Critic as Artist," "The Decay of Lying," and "The Soul of Man under Socialism." For him, as for other fin de siècle aesthetes, the process of artistic creation takes the form of cultivating an ideal self or "personality" that is then projected into the work of art. But Wilde is also aware of the dangers and difficulties of this process, and thus he makes a distinction between the utopian dream of art and its reality. In "The Soul of Man under Socialism," Wilde suggests that in the future utopian society "personality" will be as much a work of art as any painting or statue: "A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is" (924). However, in the imperfect world of industrial capitalism, in which cultivation of an ideal self in real life is often an economic and psychological impossibility, a split is created between art and the artist. The grotesque form this split may take is explored in Wilde's essay "Pen, Pencil and Poison," which is dedicated to the career of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, a minor writer, a painter, and a serial killer.

Realizing that "life itself is an art, and has its modes of style no less than the arts that seek to express it," Wainewright seeks "to be somebody, rather than to do something" (846). He cultivates his ideal self in his writings under a variety of fanciful

pseudonyms that “intensified his personality” (845). These textual masks are evidence of a conscious and sustained effort of self-creation as a wit, a connoisseur of culture, and a true gentleman. However, in addition to his artistic pursuits, Wainewright also liberally dispenses strychnine to people unlucky enough to come to his attention.

“Janus Weathercock” and “Egomet Bonmot,” Wainewright’s whimsical textual doubles, are the creations of an obsessive, if not insane, murderer. Wilde emphasizes the gap separating the writer from the author by refusing either to overlook Wainewright’s murders because of his talent or to invalidate his artistic achievements because of his criminality. The essay’s ironic tone indicates the paradoxical nature of the relationship between personality and person. The two both are, and are not, the same. The mask conceals the face but also adheres to its contours. The “crude violence of words” (849) that Wilde discerns in Wainewright’s prose is not the same as the violence of a serial killer, but to what extent does it derive from it?

The paradox of the split subjectivity can be resolved only when the corporeal person of the murderer no longer casts its shadow over the textual persona of the dandy. Dead and buried, Wainewright, like his more illustrious predecessors, has passed “into the sphere of art and science” that knows nothing “of moral approval or disapproval” (856). Only the destruction of the body can release the textual author from his dependence on the corporeal writer.<sup>1</sup> Thus, “the death of the author” (or rather, of the writer) becomes not a metaphor but a literal requirement for the perpetuation of the “author-function.”

But the author is not the only phantom subjectivity created by a work of art. A fictional text generates what Mark Currie calls “a structure of multiple voices” (23) whose Gothic potentialities of possession, rivalry, and murder extend from the relationship between the writer and the author to involve the characters and the audience. In Wilde’s short story “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” a literary character wreaks havoc on a group of wealthy connoisseurs, whose identification with him leads to forgery, despair, and suicide. In the story, the young aristocrat Cyril Graham thinks that he has discovered the prototype of the young man of Shakespeare’s sonnets in a pretty boy actor named Willie Hughes. There is no external evidence for Willie’s existence; even his name is derived from the puns in the sonnets. For Cyril, however, Willie becomes a real person, an idealized version of himself whose homoerotic charm constitutes a vindication of Cyril’s own sexuality. But Cyril’s skeptical friend Erskine refuses to accept the reality of Willie and demands material proof. Cyril commissions Willie’s fake portrait but when the forgery is revealed, kills himself. Erskine relates the story to the unnamed narrator, who in turn becomes so persuaded by Cyril’s theory that he attempts to convince the still-skeptical Erskine. Although the narrator succeeds, he loses his own faith in the reality of “Mr. W. H.” Finally, in order to restore the narrator’s faith in Cyril’s theory, Erskine presents his own inevitable death by consumption as suicide. The self-immolation of those “martyrs of literature” (946) indicates the danger of an exclusive identification with a textual persona, in which the wayward dynamics of a living psyche are stabilized by dying into art. Such identification becomes the subject of a far more complex and subtle exploration of artistic creativity in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

## WHO WAS THAT MAN?

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* responds to the acute artistic anxieties of its time. The rise of the artist as celebrity (epitomized by Wilde's own career) was threatened by the challenge to the (male) *auteur* presented by the (female) popular hack. Art was often seen as "unmanly," coded with the pejorative connotations of homosexuality, decadence, and under the influence of Max Nordau, biological degeneration (Hennegan 172). This attempt to read the flaws and vices of the writer's body in the text was countered by those who argued for the autonomy of the work of art. Anonymity, pseudonymity, and ghostwriting were among the strategies used to "purify" the text from the imprint of the writer's corporeality. As Leah Price points out, "only at the end of the century did the English language come to equate the lack of a signature with the absence of a body" (212). Modernism's subsequent insistence on the "objectivity" of the author may be seen as yet another strategy whereby artists tried to cut the umbilical cord linking them to their morally suspect productions.

Aestheticism, however, often acknowledged the ineluctable connection between the textual author and the physical writer while simultaneously being aware of their difference. In the famous words of Arthur Symonds, the goal of aestheticism and decadence was "to be a disembodied voice and yet the voice of a human soul" (151). This paradox registers the twin anxiety of the period, in which the simple Cartesian duality of the body and soul collapsed. As the soul, or the psyche, became splintered and mobile, the body acquired an uncanny and stubborn agency: it ceased to be a simple "instrument" or a Cartesian machine, moved by the ghost inside. Wilde describes both the instability of the psychological self and the material intractability of the body in a passage in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "He [Dorian] used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in a man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with monstrous maladies of the dead" (457).

A human being, as conceived by the new sciences of heredity and evolution, is a "complex multiform creature," a palimpsest of long-dead ancestors scribbled over with half-illegible signatures of the species's animal past. When Dorian finds his own features in the old paintings of his family, he faces the same historical abyss as Hardy's and Wells's characters who realize that their bodies are epiphenomena of the hereditary chain of influences. But if the body is unstable, the soul is even more so. Psychoanalysis is a fin de siècle cultural mythology, expressing the insights of Jekyll and Hyde in the language of science. And one of the main lessons of the "talking cure" is that the psyche exists in, and through, language. This is a lesson that writers of the fin de siècle knew well. Language was a medium through which subjectivity was splintered and disseminated, but it was also a means for gluing subjectivity together. Jacques Le Rider describes "the crises of identity" in fin de siècle writing as stemming from the realization of the irreducible ambiguity of the relationship between language and the self. Artists attempted to stabilize their subjectivities through

the “fiction of the self.” But at the same time, these “self-narrating, self-fictionalizing elements” could become a source of terror and “take the individual to the brink of suicide” (*Modernity* 41).

Wilde not only depicted these paradoxes but lived them as well. Far from concealing the artist, Wilde’s art has put him on permanent display. Hardly any other writer has been the subject of so many biographies, novels, films, and plays. But on the other hand, the connection between “Oscar Wilde,” the cultural icon, and Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde, son of Jane Wilde (who called herself Speranza) and father of Cyril and Vyvyan (who eventually called themselves Holland), remains problematic, to say the least. The drama of Wilde’s trials, incarceration, and premature death has all the elements of a good story, which somehow suggests its being *scripted*. Wilde once famously quipped that he put his genius into his life and only his talent into his work. In his review of the astonishing number of books that came out at the centenary of Wilde’s death, Thomas Wright suggests that a major part of the Wildean mystique is his multiple, protean subjectivity that is easily refracted into endless textual incarnations: “We think of Wilde now as a man who had so many different personalities that he could only ever be true to himself when he was inconsistent” (3). If this has the distinct ring of the Wildean paradox, this is no accident. Not only is Wilde’s elusive subjectivity dispersed in his various texts, but it can only be “read” by imitation (which, as Wilde once noted, is the sincerest form of flattery). “Like his personality, [Wilde’s style] seems to resist summary; it can only be repeated or, in some way, reperformed” (Wright 3). Anybody who writes about Wilde risks the kind of textual possession that Neil Bartlett (re)performs in his *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde*, which is part novel, part personal memoir, part literary criticism. Writing *about* Wilde, Bartlett suddenly realizes that he is writing *as* Wilde: “His words began to ghost my writing” (26). In the hall of mirrors that is Wildean scholarship (the phrase itself seems a kind of oxymoron), the multiple “Oscars” are reflected *ad infinitum* in their multiple readers, whom they construct in their own images.

However, at the core of this wild(e) carnival of constructed subjectivities lies the tragic fate of Wilde’s own body, whose sexuality and suffering constitute the one constant of “the multiple life-in-death he has been granted” (Wright 5). This fate cannot be apprehended aside from its reflections and refractions in textual practices. But the desire to answer the question “Who Was That Man?” propels the reader’s quest, ultimately mutating into the “desire for knowledge of that body and its secret” (Brooks 8). That this quest is futile does not detract from its urgency.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* may be read as Wilde’s prescient commentary on his own posthumous transformation into a cultural icon. The novel dramatizes the dangers of pursuing an ideal self to the exclusion of all the complexities and divisions of a living psyche. It shows what happens when the artistic “fiction of the self” turns against the body. In the novel, Wilde complicates his own notion of the cultivation of the “personality” through art by showing its morally dangerous and socially irresponsible side. As opposed to Symonds, who defends decadence on artistic grounds while acknowledging its morbidity, Wilde uses “morbidity,” the pain and vulnerability of the body, to set limits to art.



### THE ARTIST'S BARGAIN

Many critics consider Dorian to be what a Soho prostitute derisively calls him: "the devil's bargain," a new version of Faust, selling his immortal soul for the sinful pleasures of the flesh. However, the very same prostitute has another name for Dorian, one that he prefers: Prince Charming. He is not an aged doctor pursuing knowledge and power but a bland fairy-tale stereotype. Faust does; Prince Charming is. Faust tries to conquer the world; Prince Charming charms it. For all the talk about his nameless sins, Dorian is singularly passive. In the same Soho scene, he walks out of the opium den, rejecting both offers of sex and pleas for compassion. But when he finally acts, his action is the gross, sordid knifing of his best friend. Dorian's distaste for what he calls "the crude violence of disordered life" is matched only by his attraction to it. This attraction hinges not on the search for pleasure but on the hunger for reality. Literally as pretty as a picture, Dorian longs for the ugliness of everyday life, which is "more vivid . . . than all the gracious shapes of Art" (481).

By exchanging places with his own portrait, Dorian becomes an image pretending to be a man, a "gracious shape of art" that assumes the appearance of life. Even though the novel is about painting rather than writing, "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." shows that for Wilde different kinds of art are essentially similar in their underlying dynamics of production and consumption. Whether as the literary stereotype of Prince Charming or the pictorial image of a lovely young man, the character that acts in the novel under the name of Dorian Gray is a textual construct that takes over the identity of a human being. Dorian's initial aspiration is to "write" himself into the portrait, and thus to achieve the immortality and immutability of the *objet d'art*. His tragedy is that he succeeds.

According to the Lacanian notion of the mirror stage, a growing infant identifies with its reflection in the mirror and thus acquires a unified self, based on the visual matrix of an image. Similarly, Dorian identifies with his own "ideal self," presented to him by the painting. That self is both unified and incorporeal, free from the gross materiality of the body and the instability of the human psyche. Read as an allegory of artistic creativity, the novel minimizes the difference between a painting and a literary text by focusing on the dynamics of subjectivity and the clash between the corporeal and the ideal selves of the artist, the character, and the audience. This clash is dramatically represented in the last scene of the book, in which Dorian stabs the picture and regains his body, now somewhat the worse for wear but individual and unique, indelibly marked by a misspent life: "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" (503).<sup>2</sup> But the picture is not destroyed: flawless once again, it smiles down at Dorian's corpse. This indestructibility is characteristic of writing rather than painting. The major difference between a picture and a literary text is the latter's reproducibility: what Walter Benjamin called "the aura" of authenticity clings to an original picture but not to a book. A unique painting may be destroyed with a knife, but a literary text is reincarnated in every new printing. Dorian's invulnerable picture is the immortality of discourse, freed from the taint of materiality that returns to the discarded, loathsome corpse.



Wilde's complex notion of subjectivity is paralleled by the complexity of the subject positions represented in the novel. Rather than simply focusing on the dichotomy of the author/writer, he indicates that there are at least three distinct subject positions involved in artistic creation: the artist (or the writer), the model (or the character), and the audience (or the reader). The three main characters of the novel—Basil Hallward, Dorian Gray, and Lord Henry Wotton—symbolically represent these three positions. The interaction among these characters and Dorian's eventual takeover of the painting to the exclusion of the others indicate both the inevitable fragmentation of identity in the process of artistic creation and the ever-present seduction of illusory unity that the textual "ideal self" offers to actual human subjects.

The fateful portrait is painted by Basil Hallward, modeled by Dorian Gray, and observed by Lord Henry Wotton, whose words produce the special "look" on Dorian's face that allows Basil to complete the picture. All three contribute to the final product, and their rivalry over the possession of the painting reflects the problematic of its dominant subjectivity. Whose true image is it: the painter's, who puts the colors on the canvass; the model's, who lends his beauty; or the connoisseur's, who interprets and thus completes what he sees? Wilde's paradoxical answer is to deny the legitimacy of the question by representing the ideal self of the work of art as an illusion created by the dynamic interaction of its multiple creators.

After completing the picture, Basil signs his name "in long vermilion letters" on the canvas and gives it to Dorian, who instantly identifies with it to such an extent that Basil, shocked and jealous, attempts to destroy his own handiwork (390). He is foiled by Dorian, who cries "It is part of myself!" At this point, Lord Henry demands the portrait as well: "You had much better let me have it, Basil. This silly boy doesn't really want it, and I really do" (392). This contest reflects the way in which the ostensible unity of an artwork covers up its structure of multiple subject positions. The perfect, serenely self-possessed image in the picture is an unstable projection upheld by the precarious balance between the subjectivities of the painter, the model, and the viewer, each of them further fissured by cross-identification and desire.

Despite the fact that the painting represents Dorian, Basil claims that "there is too much of myself in the thing" (382). Like the writer who identifies with a character (Flaubert with his "Madam Bovary, c'est moi," for example), Basil paints himself into another's image. As he explains to Dorian, the picture is an expression of his own aesthetic vision rather than an attempt to render his friend's personality: "You became to me that visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream" (441). In his capacity as Basil's muse, Dorian is merely a sign for the painter's own dreams and desires. "He is never more present in my work than when no image of him is there," says Basil to Lord Henry (382). Basil himself is perfectly aware of the distinction between Dorian-in-the-painting and Dorian-in-the-flesh. When Dorian abandons his friend for the more fascinating company of Lord Henry, sulky Basil, still in the possession of the picture, declares he is staying with the "real Dorian." But twenty years later, when Dorian shows him the corrupted portrait, Basil unhesitatingly chooses the man over the image and offers to destroy his creation. And it is his desire for the man that prevents his own complete identification with the portrait. Desire drives a wedge between the self of the artist

and the erotic Other whose image both is and is not that of its creator. Since he is able to dissociate himself from the painting through his love for its model, Basil saves himself from the total immersion in the image that ultimately destroys Dorian. This throws an interesting sidelight on the creation of semi-autobiographical characters in fiction and the puzzling fact that such characters are often cross-gendered (Madame Bovary being only one example). That women writers project themselves through their male characters and vice versa may be due not only to social constraints but also to the psychological need of the writer to detach herself from her textual doubles.

Lord Henry's stake in the picture is equally circumscribed by desire. He views it as a fetish or a token of sexual possession. He is as curious about the hidden painting as he is about Dorian's hidden life, which mirrors his own. All three characters are homosexual, and in the era of the Labouchere Amendment, that alone is a sufficient reason for mutual identification.<sup>3</sup> Dorian begins by emulating Lord Henry but soon outstrips his mentor, who can only watch enviously as his erstwhile disciple gets away with scandal and eventually murder. Lord Henry's bid for the picture is limited to a game of erotic communion, which finds shelter in the *objet d'art* without fear of the police. But Lord Henry, the painting's only audience, can never completely identify with the image of the man who initially attracts him precisely because of their difference, the difference between an older cynical wit and a lovely and naïve young boy. He alone emerges from the involvement with the picture emotionally marked but physically unscathed, as the reader may emerge from an encounter with a gripping text that ultimately fails to impinge upon real life.

Of the three, Dorian is the one whose investment in the picture is absolute, recognizing no insurmountable boundary between imagination and reality, desire and identity, self and the Other. Both Basil and Lord Henry want to *have* the picture; Dorian wants to *be* the picture. The reason for this desire strong enough to bend reality is that Dorian sees in the painting his own ideal self: an image of Prince Charming, a fairy-tale character impervious to change, mutability, aging, and death. Not sophisticated enough to grasp Basil's aesthetic message, Dorian "reads" the picture naively as a representation of the man he wants to be. And equally naively, he strives to become this man, not realizing that in the process he ceases being a man at all. His search for identity has led him to misperceive the real nature of art, which is based on a balancing act between the author, the subject, and the audience; further, it has led him to misperceive the real nature of individuality, which is based on the interaction between contradictory and contingent drives and desires.

There is a critical consensus that in the process of exchange with the portrait Dorian gives up his "soul." But if "soul" means a spiritual principle opposed to the body, this is not what happens at all. Rather, it is the body that Dorian relinquishes when he becomes his own painting, while the portrait itself assumes the burden of his corporeality. It is true that when he shows the corrupted picture to Basil, Dorian derisively invites the latter to look at his "soul." But the ambiguous use of the word "soul" in the novel and in Wilde's oeuvre in general points not at the Cartesian duality but at a more complex model of subjectivity, in which the portrait represents Dorian's corporeal self, mind *and* body together, influencing and influenced by each

other. This is the model informing the nineteenth-century popular “sciences” of physiognomy and phrenology, which made a direct connection between the psyche and the physique. It echoes in the novel’s descriptions of the faces of Dorian’s ancestors, which bear the signs of their passions and crimes. Dorian longs to escape their fate by escaping the psychological and physical mutability that will inevitably scar his psyche and disfigure his face. In the key scene in which he makes his wish, “If the picture could change, and I could always be what I am now!” (391), Dorian repudiates not morality but mortality. By having his wish granted, Dorian saves himself both from the depredations of age and from the consequences of experience. Wrinkles, gray hairs, and sagging flesh are transferred to the portrait as faithfully as expressions of cruelty, callousness, and moral corruption. The portrait becomes the real, physical Dorian, while Prince Charming is the image passing itself off as the man, the signifier pretending to be the signified. And since the two can never be identical, the distance between Dorian and Prince Charming grows so vast that Basil can only recognize the changed painting because of his own signature, an ironic reminder of the portrait’s real authorship.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a novel about the perils of identity. While Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes it as one of the key texts “that have set the terms for a modern homosexual identity” (49), I would argue that it in fact disrupts the emerging connection between (homo)sexuality and self-definition. The true scandal of the novel lies in the opposition Wilde so presciently establishes between hunger for identity, achieved through an identification with an external model, and corporeal desire, of whatever kind, that ruptures this narcissistic self-presence by admitting the Other. All desire in the novel, whether homosexual or heterosexual (as in the case of Sybil), is placed in opposition to the sterile pursuit of the ideal self that denies the human commonality of the flesh. Wilde’s position is far more radical than defense of “the love that dares not speak its name,” because it is a defense of the body that requires no names to speak its love. To escape into art as Dorian does is immoral not because it unleashes forbidden desires but because it kills desire altogether and freezes his ideal self in a sterile and solitary perfection.

In identifying with the picture, Dorian initially believes that he can collapse the sexual and the textual, having the fullness of desire without the inconvenient and burdensome flesh that always falls short of the imaginary consummation. He sees his transformation as the liberation from the shackles of puritan morality that would allow him to dedicate himself to pursuit of pleasure. Once protected from the ravages of corporeal existence, he seeks to embark on the career of an *homme fatale*. But his frantic pursuit of sensation is accompanied by a progressive emotional and physical anesthesia. The more Dorian strives to experience anything at all, the less he is capable of it: “But I seem to have lost the passion, and forgotten the desire” (492).

Desire turns out to be the function of time and loss. Both are impotent to touch Dorian’s immaterial existence. His existence *is*, in fact, immaterial, for Dorian feels himself invulnerable even to the ordinary wear and tear of inorganic objects. He has conquered time, only to be faced with an infinity of boredom. In a striking passage, he pities the transience of the pretty baubles he collects, indicating once again that his existence is closer to the potential immortality of discourse than to the limited en-

duration of a painting: "he was *almost* saddened by the reflection of the ruin that Time brought on beautiful and wonderful things. He, at any rate, had escaped that. . . he was unchanged. No winter marred his face or stained his flower-like bloom. *How different it was with material things!*" (454 emphasis mine). The chilling "almost" emphasizes Dorian's anesthesia; always at a remove from the physical world of emotions, experiences, and passions, he feels nothing. By giving up his material "thingness," he becomes unable to experience desire that is generated, frustrated, and fulfilled in/through the matter. Dorian becomes a textual construct, a discursive formation, impotently craving the intoxication of the real but unable to touch it. Of course, he has been a textual construct all along, like everybody else in the book, but he alone is aware of the fact and damned by it.

Having given up his body, Dorian receives a soul in return: the ready-made soul of art. In their last meeting, the aged Lord Henry asks Dorian, still young and beautiful, the scriptural question: "what does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul?" He immediately answers his own query with the denial of the soul's very existence: "Art had a soul, but . . . man had not." But Dorian responds: "The soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought, and sold, and bartered away" (498). Both are right. Art produces souls, which then can be "bought, and sold, and bartered away," and copyrighted too. Lord Henry, aging, disappointed, and publicly humiliated by his wife's elopement, has no soul because the artificial identity he has striven for, that of a party Mephistopheles, has eluded him. Dorian, however, who is everything that he has ever wanted to be—unchangingly young, beautiful, desirable, and unattainable—finally realizes that in identifying his soul with art, he has bartered away his humanity.

In the last stages of his existence, Dorian hates both what he was and what he has become. Craving reality, he learns to despise the emptiness of his ideal self: "Why had such a soul been given to him?" (428). At the same time, he abhors his decaying portrait, which pitilessly shows him the way of all flesh. Both hatreds converge in his murder of Basil, which appears to be unmotivated, almost psychotic in its blind fury. But in fact it is doubly motivated, for Dorian kills both Basil the painter and Basil the man. Blaming Basil for seducing him with the ideal self of the painting, Dorian is nevertheless jealous of his authorship. As long as the painting's creator exists, Dorian's exclusive identification with the picture may be contested. By killing Basil, Dorian punishes his artistic seducer and eliminates his artistic rival. And at the same time, he kills a person who dares to want him as a man rather than an image. This is the continuation of the pattern established earlier, for despite the critical penchant for treating Dorian's "sins" as (homo)sexual, they are in fact anti-sexual: he destroys the two people who are in love with him, driving Sybil Vane to suicide and murdering Basil. Both are crimes of violence and both are attempts to sever the bond between his ideal and his corporeal self. He rejects Sybil when she prefers the real Dorian to the fairy-tale Prince Charming; he kills Basil when he speaks his desire. Dorian cannot bear to be seen as anything other than "the gracious form" of the painting. After the murder, he blackmails his chemist lover into eliminating the corpse without a trace, as he would want his own painted body to be eliminated. And this is what he does in the final scene of murder-suicide: like Dr. Jekyll

striking at his own second self, Dorian stabs the portrait, attempting to expunge every reminder of himself as a physical, temporal being, tied down to the sordid history of violence. But the only way to close the gap between the textual and the real self is to die, which is exactly what happens when Dorian's knife finally severs all connections between the body and the text by eliminating the body.

Peter Brooks argues that narrative desire, "the subtending dynamic of stories and their telling, becomes oriented toward knowledge and possession of the body" (8). But in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* narrative desire becomes oriented *away* from the body. The desire to possess a work of art clashes with the possession of an individual body. Authorship is the immortality of a discursive ghost, the paper underworld of signification. And in this schism between the slippery dynamics of representation and the solid desperation of mortality, the act of artistic creation is taking place.

If Dorian's identification with his representation destroys him, what about Wilde's own relationship with his own text? The temptation to see the two as parallel has been irresistible to many critics. Jerusha McCormack, for example, claims that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* exemplifies "the strategies by which [Wilde] made and unmade himself" and that the author eventually took the novel "as a script for his own life" (112–14). How else is the critic to interpret the astonishing fact that Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde's lover and nemesis who brought about Wilde's disgrace and imprisonment, insisted on meeting the writer because of his obsession with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Ellmann 306)? But before pontificating on the amazing correspondence between art and life, it is worth noting that this meeting does not fit the "script" of Wilde-as-Dorian because it is Lord Douglas who, quite knowingly, casts himself in the role of the novel's protagonist. Like Dorian, Lord Alfred was beautiful (which Wilde was not); and like Dorian, he lacked any artistic abilities of his own. His claim to artistic fame lies in writing himself into another man's story, in the same way in which Dorian appropriates another man's painting. The conflation of Wilde and Dorian is precluded by the same triangulation and deflection of desire that produces the tangle of identities in the novel. It is Wilde's critics and readers who have seized upon the easy identification between the gay writer and his gay character, flattening the complexity of the novel into a one-dimensional foreshadowing of Wilde's own self-destruction. If the novel has "shaped for posterity its image of Wilde" (McCormack 114), it is only through reading it in the same way in which Dorian "reads" his portrait: by ignoring its inevitable self-division in favor of spurious unity. Sedgwick sees the novel as embodying "the economy of the Same" (160), but she fails to point out Wilde's critique of this economy, not only in sexual but also in textual terms.

Wilde reputedly said that Dorian Gray was what he wanted to be, Lord Henry Wotton what people thought he was, and Basil Hallward what he was in reality.<sup>4</sup> This witticism maps out a complex set of correspondences between the writer and the characters. Wilde indicates that his own personality is splintered by being written into the novel, and that the splintering occurs along the fault lines of desire—his own and his readers as well, who prefer to see the "real" Wilde as a dangerous corrupter of youth. (The added irony is the fact that Lord Henry is a rather pathetic chatter-

box.) But if all three main characters represent facets of Wilde's personality, none of them encompasses the full authorial position. In different ways, each of them is represented as wanting: Dorian is pitilessly dissected, first in his naivete, then in his cruelty and emotional anesthesia; Basil's goodness is hesitant and ineffectual; Lord Henry's instant repartee becomes tiresome and he is gradually written out of the plot altogether. And seeing the "real" Wilde as some sort of average of the three is untenable, not least because it would involve averaging the moral positions of the murderer and the victim. The "Wilde" of the novel is not the same as the actual Oscar Wilde but neither is he any of the characters: they are all splinters and partial reflections of the writer, scintillating images whose perpetual interplay inscribes the "complex multiform creature" that is a human being.

This complexity and its relation to textuality is the true theme of the novel. In his discussion of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Mark Currie calls the novel's representation of the self "the shipwreck of subjectivity" (126). This shipwreck, the inevitable schisms and fissures in the narrative construction of the self, is deftly shown by Wilde to be not a simple duality but a far more intricate balance of conflicting desires and partial identification. As opposed to Stevenson, Wilde sees human subjectivity existing only in this perpetual condition of dynamic instability. The shipwreck, in other words, is not a catastrophe but a necessity. The seduction of art lies precisely in the fact that it is capable of imaginary unification of the self that comes at the expense of its complexity and vitality. If the novel is indeed a script warning of the future, this is a warning addressed not so much to Wilde himself but to his critics who persist in writing the writer's own personality into his text in the same way that Dorian writes himself into the "text" of the painting. The three partial "Wildes" that are reflected in the three main characters cannot and should not be unified within the imaginary plenitude of the implied author, a supposedly higher meaning of the text capable of smoothing away all of its contradictions. To the question "Who was this man?" the answer is: Basil and Dorian and Lord Henry, not three-in-one but one-in-three.

The narrative form of the novel, which combines Gothic violence with scintillating aesthetic descriptions, brings out its thematic message. The preface to the novel consists of short maxims, all of them cast in Wilde's trademark modality of the paradox: "The highest, as the lowest, form of criticism is a mode of autobiography" (376). Confronted with a barrage of hostile reviews, he responded with similar paradoxes, writing, for example, to the *St. James' Gazette*, that the novel is highly moral because of its lesson: "All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment" (qtd. in Holland 73). The very form of this statement indicates that Wilde saw artistic morality as poised on the cusp between two contrary statements, neither of which could be chosen over the other. Not "the golden mean" but the acceptance of ineluctable difference and (self-)division makes art "moral" in the sense of true to the human condition. The "morality of art consists in the perfect use of the imperfect medium," claims another maxim in the preface (376). The "imperfect medium" is the human personality itself, whose "perfection" in art can never close the gap between body and soul, desire and fulfillment, creator and creation.

Far from being frivolous, Wilde's paradoxes inscribe a complex critique of the



“economy of the Same” in relation to art and to life, including the refusal to collapse their dichotomy into an easy unity of the author and the writer, the author and the character, the man and the image. Although he protested during his trials the prosecution’s reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as an autobiography, Wilde nevertheless acknowledged in a conversation with Max Beerbohm that its subject was taken directly from his life (Ellmann 305). If this is double-talk, it is true precisely because it is double. Art both is and is not life; writer both is and is not (in) the text. Any interpretation of Wilde-as-Dorian or Dorian-as-Wilde has to contend with the unbridgeable gap between the two, the same gap that separates the dazzling painting on the wall from the dead body at its feet.

### THEORY’S GHOSTS

The textual problematic dramatized in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* penetrates narratology in the shape of Gothic metaphors, all of which cluster around the central aporia of the textual subjectivity, which both is and is not that of the actual writer. Wayne Booth’s famous introduction of the concept of the “implied author” was meant to circumvent the “Intentional Fallacy” by finding a way to talk about the intentions of the author without lapsing into conjectural biography. But the result was a strange duality: occasionally the implied author seemed to absorb *everything* in the text, and occasionally she dwindled to a textual double of the real writer. Thus, the implied author was simultaneously the text’s dominant system of values and “an ideal, literary, created version of the real man” (75). Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, attempting to purge the concept from its anthropomorphic undertones and retain it as a purely structuralist construct, seized upon the psychological quandary implicit in it: “implied authors are often far superior in intelligence and moral standards to the actual men and women who are real authors” (87). In other responses to Booth this contradiction assumed a Gothic cast, in which the implied author’s inexplicable “superiority” was represented in terms reminiscent of Frankenstein’s monster’s hostility toward its creator. When, for example, E. D. Hirsch ridicules the notion that the text “leads an afterlife of its own, totally cut off from the life of its author” (87), he tropes the survival of the work at the expense of the writer as an act of rebellion, if not of parricide.

In the classic statements of the postmodern theory of authorship by Barthes and Foucault, the choice of metaphors betrays the violence of these theorists’ concepts of creativity. The work of art is its creator’s murderer. “The work, which once had the duty of providing immortality, now possesses the right to kill, to be its author’s murderer” (198), says Foucault in “What Is An Author?” But since the work cannot be completely dissociated from the writer, there is a strange slippage between murder and suicide, comparable to Dorian’s frenzied attack on the painting, which may be read either as self-defense or self-destruction: for Foucault too, “the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality” (198). Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” describes the beginning of writing as “the author enter[ing] into his own death” (168), thus representing the text as a perilous House of Usher,



daring the visitor to confront her mortality. On the one hand, Barthes's idea of writing emphasizes the dissolution of identity in the text: "Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (168). But on the other hand, "the identity of the body writing" haunts the writing of the body with echoes of its violent elimination. In the House of the Text, the body of the writer is not so much distilled into words as dismembered into chunks of rebellious flesh. "The modern scriptor" does not believe anymore that his hand obeys his thought; on the contrary, "the hand, cut off from any voice . . . traces a field without origin" (170). This shocking metaphor imports the Gothic plot of a solitary hand, severed but supernaturally alive, acting out the stubborn perversity of the flesh unsubdued by reason or intention. If in writing "all identity is lost," it is not lost without a material trace.

For Foucault, writing becomes martyrdom. Moreover, the writer does not only court death but in some sense must *already be dead* before embarking on her career: the writer "must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing" (198). The uncanny nature of the "author-function" derives from its hostility to the writer, a hostility predicated on their incomplete dissociation. Thus, the author and the writer become hostile twins, a Jekyll and Hyde locked in the circle of mutual dependency and mutual animosity. In his explication of Foucault and Barthes in *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, Mark Currie emphasizes their Gothic undertext by using *The Strange Story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as a model for the generation of "unreliable identities" in the process of narration. And to illustrate the doubling of subjectivity in the process of even harmless academic writing, he luridly represents himself as a voice from beyond the grave: "I pretended to discover a truth which I had at least partially invented. I lied, my lie caught up with me, and now, as I write, I am lying dead" (134).

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* indicates that the source of this Gothic strain in narratology lies in the charged relationship between the irreducibly individual physical body and the infinitely reproducible artistic persona, between the writer and the author. In *Body Work* Peter Brooks describes how the body enters the text by being "signed" (3). But equally, the text has to be signed by a body: authenticated by presumption of a specific and individual authorship. The writer's body is positioned in a paradoxical relation to the text, both necessary and necessarily absent. On the one hand, this body is the very ground of the text, whose uniqueness and coherence derive from the uniqueness and coherence of the particular human being(s) responsible for its production. In *S/Z* Barthes claims that the text's symbolic field "is occupied by a sole object, from which it derives its unity. . . . The object is the human body" (qtd. in Brooks 6). But on the other hand, the text as a linguistic construct, open to endless readings, interpretations, and (mis)appropriations, always points away from the body. Thus, in Brooks's words, the "body appears alien to the very constructs derived from it" (8). This alienation generates uncanny plots, in which the materiality of the body is conveyed through its annihilation.

Violent imagery that clusters around the process of writing acts as a knife, attempting to cut the discursive identity of the textual author from the physical body of the writer. Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* indicates that writing is always in-

volved in an ambiguous attempt to escape the body while acknowledging its ineluctable presence. Discourse produces the phantom figure of the author, majestic and omnipotent, paring his fingernails behind the magic show of the text. But the *possibility* of generating such an ideal self and identifying with it is precisely what sparks the writer's desire. Like Dorian, craving the permanence of a picture, the writer wants to be the author, to lose herself in the text. The loss of corporeal identity in the process of writing may become temptation rather than fear. Foucault suggests as much in a personal aside:

What, do you imagine that I would take so much trouble and so much pleasure in writing, do you think I would keep so persistently to my task, if I were not preparing—with a rather shaky hand—a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself, finding overhangs that reduce and deform its itinerary, in which I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again. *I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face.* Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write. (*Archaeology* 17 emphasis mine)

But the process of artistic creation inevitably implicates the body. Even the choice of metaphors that narratology uses to figure “the death of the author” cannot escape corporeality. Only a corporeal being can die; only a once-living person can become a ghost; only a victim of violence can be forcibly divested of his body. Representing the author as the text's ideal self implies an alternative corporeality, rather than no corporeality, since it is impossible to imagine a self with no material vehicle. Ghosts are (semi)material entities, announcing their illegitimate and transgressive existence by knocks, sighs, smells, touches, and sights. Their horror stems not from their spiritual nature but precisely from their physical “manifestations.” The authorial ghost, appearing to the eyes that it “will never have to meet again,” must clothe itself with an imaginary flesh. By being in perpetual flight from the writer's body, the author can never be free of it.

The loss of identity that Foucault seeks in discourse becomes assimilated to the erotic imagery of dissolution, Bataille's “expenditure,” the ecstasy of non-being. The mortal body of the writer is recalled in its very disavowal. Foucault's labyrinth of freedom and desire becomes a dungeon, in which the author plays hide-and-seek with the writer, only to end up as Mr. Hyde, having to bury, again and again, the corpse of his unwanted double.

Wilde's narratology captures this complex dynamics as few writers have done ever since. His treatment of the issue of art differs from the simplistic view, common in his own time, that sees the writer and author as identical. Arthur Symonds's famous definition of his contemporary literature as “a new and beautiful and interesting disease” (136); Max Nordau's diagnosis of impressionist painters as suffering from eye disorders; and ironically, the use of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as evidence in Wilde's own trials: all three point to the belief that the text is directly informed by the

writer's body. Nor is this belief absent from criticism today: Martin Gliserman's recent book argues that "through the writer's style we find the body. . . . [T]he body is encoded in the language, expressing itself and resonating with the reader" (6).

Wilde is aware of how easily what Gliserman calls "the personal signature" (1) of the writer's body can be counterfeited or transferred from one person to another, the ease that eventually led to the tragicomedy of his own fake messages from beyond the grave. However, "Wilde's socially oriented aestheticism" also differs from uncritical celebration of textuality (Gagnier 32). While, as he argues in "The Soul of Man under Socialism," self-creation is necessary, Wilde also points out how dangerous it may become if it disregards the body. Wilde's meditation on authorship prefigures postmodern "narcissistic fictions" that dramatize their own status as an artifact, thus drawing the reader's attention to the textual production of subjectivity. As David Lodge points out, "the more nakedly the author appears to reveal himself in such texts, the more inescapable it becomes, paradoxically, that the author as a *voice* is only a function of his own fiction, not a privileged authority but an object of interpretation" (195 emphasis original). As in Jorge Luis Borges's story "Circular Ruins," in which the main character creates a man, only to realize eventually that he himself is a creation of another demiurge and so on *ad infinitum*, contemporary metafiction emphasizes the narrative construction of *all* subjectivity. And yet it also suggests that the human subject is inescapably anchored in the body and that any attempt to escape its limitations and responsibilities into the freedom of the text may lead to violence. A number of contemporary Gothic texts, such as Stephen King's "Secret Window, Secret Garden" and Barbara Vine's *The Chimney Sweeper's Boy*, rework the plot of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to depict the consequences of escaping the body into the textual "ideal self." In Vine's book, the protagonist, a famous novelist named Gerald Candles, forces his sordid life into a glamorized mold of a fictitious biography, "filtering, adapting, altering, twisting, distorting, flattering, debasing, glamorizing and mutilating" his experience to escape the stigma of his low-class origin and his homosexual identity (199). And yet his writings are haunted by the shameful secret of his homosexual incest. Like Dorian's portrait, they betray his disavowed corporeality through their violent and sexual imagery. In King's novella, on the other hand, the relationship between the writer and the author is figured in terms of demonic possession, with the added ironic twist that Mort Rainey's "ideal self" is not even his own creation. He is a phantom of recycled texts and worn-out formulae, which are Rainey's stock-in-trade. King's story exhibits a cynical awareness of the pressures of celebrity culture, in which the author is used as the writer's trademark. Dorian's nameless sins have become a marketing device. But the consequences of identifying with a textual self are equally as destructive for a dandy as for a hack, since like Dorian, King's character ends up as a murderer and suicide.

The "death of the author" turns out, at a closer look, to mean the death of the writer, the eclipse of the corporeal subject by her textual double generated by the dynamics of discourse. This dynamics becomes the subject of a particular cultural interpretation in any given period. Aestheticism focused on the perversity of writing and both the dangers and the seduction of art for art's sake. Modernism glorified authorial "impersonality," while postmodernism has assimilated the death of the author

to the more general death of the subject. Oscar Wilde's rendering of "the death of the author" stands out by virtue of its artistic, moral, and social complexity, making *The Picture of Dorian Gray* a precursor of both theoretical and fictional explorations of the subject in postmodernism. The novel demonstrates both the inevitable split between the author and the writer, and the impossibility of their complete separation. Haunted by the materiality of its creator, the textual author can never completely escape into the freedom of discourse. But by the same token, the utopian identity of the writer and his ideal self can never be achieved. Like any Gothic monster, the author is perpetually poised on the boundary between self and Other, an interstitial creature, defiantly flaunting its own impossibility.

## ENDNOTES

1. In his discussion of the essay, Stephen Galloway claims Wilde unqualifiedly identifies with Wainewright and admires him as a precursor of his own "amoral theory of art" (37). It should be clear from my analysis that I disagree with this evaluation, which seems, unaccountably, to miss the ironic and detached tone of the essay and Wilde's emphasis on the murders (as opposed to other misdemeanors Wainewright committed). It is central to my argument that Wilde—as opposed to his detractors—distinguished between crimes of violence and the "moral" lapses abhorred by the Victorian prudes.
2. Sedgwick sees in the juxtaposition of the (again) lovely portrait and the terrible flesh "a brutally thin" line between male sexual visibility and violence. But this juxtaposition just as inescapably signifies the brutally tangled link between what might be called textual (or representational) subjectivity and the actual body of the subject, caught in the alienation of Art (Sedgwick 131).
3. Passed by the Parliament in 1885, the Labouchere Amendment criminalized consensual sexual relations between males in private. Until then, the only way to prosecute homosexuality had been through the ill-defined ecclesiastical notion of "sodomy" or as public nuisance. Wilde was sentenced according to this new law.
4. The full quotation from a personal letter is given in Ellmann: "Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian is what I would like to be in other ages perhaps" (301).

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