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# THE AESTHETIC REALISM OF OSCAR WILDE'S *DORIAN GRAY*

> But I can't travel without Balzac and Gautier, and they take up so much room.
>
> Oscar Wilde, in a letter from Augusta, Georgia

In "The Decay of Lying," Oscar Wilde makes his most sustained attack on the usefulness of realism for the contemporary artist.[1] Proclaiming that "[a]s a method, realism is a failure," Wilde ultimately attempts to show that "[l]ife imitates Art far more often than Art imitates Life" (303, 307). Wilde's famous equation might seem to be his final word on the subject. However, he was to wrestle with the problem of realism, especially in the dialectical interaction between Realism and Romanticism, throughout his career as a critic and an artist. Although one could make an argument for reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) as a realist novel—at least as we usually think of the realist novel as coming from Flaubert, the great Russian novelists, Eliot, and Dickens—a better approach might be to argue that in order to discuss Wilde's only novel one must come to terms with the ways that it functions within the confines of a realism that combines with, e.g., melodrama. In order to write a novel—especially one that would make money—Wilde had to work within the subgeneric confines of some specific variation on the theme of realism.[2] As experimental as *Dorian Gray* may seem, it is yet very much a product of the novel tradition with which one is familiar. Which specific branch of that tradition—and how Wilde positions his novel both within and outside of it—is what I would like to discuss here.

Wilde's views on realism can perhaps best be described as contradictory. Although he takes realism to task in "The Decay of Lying" and seems to move toward a version of formalism in "The Critic as Artist," in his earlier writings he was often in favor of deploying realism for certain artistic and social ends. Wilde's mentor Walter Pater referred to Attic Greece as "an age clearly of faithful observation, of what we call realism. . . . Its workmen are close students . . . of the living form as such . . ." (*Greek Studies* 301). With Pater, Wilde developed the idea that England's culture should become Hellenic. Greece was seen as the ultimate type of a new Renaissance of the arts. Wilde considered his work to be the precursor of this new style, an aesthetics that would combine the best of the Greek with the best of the new—realism being an important connection between the two. As he says in "The English Renaissance of Art," "to the Greek, pure artist, that work is most instinct with spiritual life which conforms most clearly to the perfect facts of physical life" (248).

Even so, as Wilde's opinion of realism became increasingly more negative, even Pater, in a famous review of his pupil's novel, chastised Wilde for "a whole-

some dislike of the common-place . . . [which] leads him to protest emphatically against so-called 'realism' in art . . ." ("A Novel By Mr. Oscar Wilde" 127). Yet Pater goes on to praise Wilde for managing to write realistically—especially in creating the Jim Vane scenes which Pater judges as showing "real pathos" and as showing Wilde's versatility as a writer. He likewise views Wilde's upper-class "atmosphere" as exhibiting a kind of realism:

> All that pleasant accessory detail, taken straight from the culture, the intellectual and social interests, the conventionalities, of the moment, have, in fact . . . the effect of the better sort of realism, throwing into relief the adroitly-devised supernatural element after the manner of Poe, but with a grace he never reached. . . . (129)

In the end, Pater absolves Wilde of most of these shortcomings even as he seems to distance himself from Wilde's philosophy. Perhaps he thinks that Wilde misunderstands his own writings on Greece—notoriously vague in terms of homoerotic intent. Perhaps, however, we can simply accept Pater's conclusions about Wilde's novel as generally accurate even today. There is much about it that is realistic, but overall it is an attempt at several modes and messages delivered at once.[3]

Although decadence is the cultural movement into which Wilde and his work are usually placed, one can plausibly argue that he can be thought of as participating in several other movements. At the very least, his range of reference must be acknowledged as going beyond the French and English decadent traditions. One of the many movements that Wilde was interested in was the Naturalist school of Émile Zola.[4] Wildean parallels with political associations characterizing the Zola school, e.g., its agenda of progressive social reform—can be seen not only in Wilde's "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891) but also in the Christian plots of fairy tales such as "The Young King."[5] Indeed, "Art and the Handicraftsman," which he wrote while on the road during his lecture tour, has as its central theme the plight of the North American worker, especially as regards the importance of bringing the artist and the handicraftsman together, which lesson he claims to have learned firsthand from John Ruskin. In the lecture series "The English Renaissance of Art," Wilde proclaims that "I wish . . . to dwell on the effect that decorative art has on human life—on its social not its purely artistic effect" (274). Thus, construing Wilde as an aesthete necessarily means understanding that to Wilde himself such a designation would not mean a divorce between utility and value as it did, e.g., for Gautier.[6] For Wilde, realism embodied an absolute value for aesthetics, given that only by seeing the world as it really is and appreciating what is beautiful—through the power of one's ability to make choices—can one ever hope to begin the task of making the world thoroughly aesthetic. One's life—life itself—is what must be rendered beautiful. Realism—with its attendant focus on the world as it is in all of its detail—is just another name for the total aestheticization of everything. As

Wilde puts it in his dramatic conclusion to his lecture: "We spend our days . . . looking for the secret of life. Well, the secret of life is in art" (277).

## I

"The nineteenth century as we know it is largely the creation of Balzac," said Wilde ("The Decay of Lying" 309). As with most of his elliptical self-contained epigrams, this one reveals, through its inherent contradictions, two beliefs that he held as truths about realism: (1) since nature imitates art, realism (or naturalness) is a pose like everything else, and (2) the influence of science and rationality, as seen for example in Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine* or Zola's *Les Rougon-Macquart* series, were the forces most responsible for the *moderne* mode. Aestheticisms—such as Rossetti's neo-Medievalism and Pater's escape into the Renaissance—might, therefore, be seen as a reaction to such social and scientific developments. But it is also possible to argue that Naturalism and Aestheticism, though seemingly antagonistic, were in fact bound together, on both sides of the English Channel, in ways that were ultimately more than merely complementary. Aestheticism owed much of its literary technique, if not its philosophy or purpose, to Flaubert and Balzac and to Zola and the rise of socialism toward the end of the nineteenth century. Both Naturalism and Aestheticism can be seen as reactions to a time of uncertainty and on-going change. During an era when people felt that their belief systems were being constantly rewritten or dismantled by science, culture, and technology, Naturalism and Aestheticism were among the many attempts made to get a handle on change in order to develop some kind of ideal program for the future. As Zola proclaims in his manifesto *The Experimental Novel* (1880), "I have already repeated twenty times that naturalism is not a personal fantasy, but that it is the intellectual movement of the century" (655).

Zola's influences on Wilde have mainly to do with questions of representation as Wilde parts ways with Zola over the issue of the purpose of novels. Wilde intensely disliked Zola's moralizing tone. Admittedly, Wilde's own work exhibits an ethical dimension, yet, as in much of his thinking, one finds a contradiction between his desire (*pace* Pater) to absolve artists of the responsibility to moralize and his own tendency to construct much of his prose fiction and poetry as moralizing parables. Similarly, as Robert Keith Miller notes, Wilde believed that "[i]t is essential to avoid direct imitation; great works are inevitably artificial" (142), an argument Miller traces to Arnold ("Preface to *Poems*," 1853). However, Wilde doesn't always hold to this doctrine as his own novel contains much that is "harsh and disturbing." The contradictions contained in Wilde's novel between realism (or Naturalism) and decadence—the finely etched and the broadly stroked, the detailed underside of life and the frivolous surface of the aristocracy—express the paradoxes of his aesthetic doctrine. For Victorian novelists, realism connotes a state somewhere between some direct representa-

tion of life and "a critical practice that [makes] significant referential gestures through language and form" (Levine 146). Wilde's novel similarly functions as an example of the paradoxical nature of his thought expressed through a highly metaphorical version of realist fiction.

Wilde's critical attitude towards realism was not simply a type of anti-realism or anti-empiricism. Wilde objected to any realism that slavishly copied certain types of pre-ordained subject matter for reasons of mere verisimilitude. For Wilde, an aesthetics based on such a precept risked constraining any and all fantastic, romantic, or other creative and critical impulses. To a large extent, Wilde's arguments on this point were simply a restatement of Baudelaire's precepts in the "Salon of 1859," where he argues that realism is the antithesis of imagination ("The Queen of Faculties"). As if preparing the ground for Wilde, Baudelaire sees aesthetics as a moral or social battle in which one "should be *really* true to [one's] own nature" (628). To oppose certain extreme forms of realism was an important political stance for Wilde and part of a general *fin de siècle* war against Victorian values. For Wilde, there could be both a good realism and a bad realism. His championing of Balzac's (or Flaubert's) "imaginative reality" over Zola's "unimaginative realism" was an attempt to push the doctrine of realism in a certain direction ("The Decay of Lying" 298–99). As he says in "The Critic as Artist," to be successful, any form of realism must ultimately not "copy" life but "create" it: "But what are the two supreme and highest arts? Life and Literature, life and the perfect expression of life" (350). Throughout Wilde's work, figures from Shakespeare to Holbein to Kipling are praised as successful artists because of their ability to convey such a vital type of realism.

Wilde's polemical investment in debates about realism was in part represented as a problem of historical movements. Wilde believed that realism was being superseded by a new type of romanticism. He believed that realism did not reflect the new spirit of the age. In "The Critic as Artist," he does allow that realism or "Caliban" has "clear[ed] the way," but now it is up to Aestheticism to create something new. For Wilde, the earlier realist's mistake was in thinking that to identify an ugliness was to make it disappear. The new realist, Wilde argues, must invent something new to take the place of a gratuitous ugliness (396). His point, however, was to some extent merely an empty gesture, given that Wilde, as early as his school days, recognized that realism always existed in a necessary relationship with romanticism. In his Commonplace Book, he would formulate the relationship in a way that was to remain his true position, more or less, throughout his life:

> The opposition between Idealism and Realism is a shallow one belonging to the onesided method of the understanding: Every true philosophy must be both idealist and realist: for without realism a philosophy would be void of substance . . . without idealism it would be void of form and truth: Realism is the assertion of the claims of the . . . particular, the detail, the

> parts: Idealism is the grasp of the whole. . . . In the rhythm of both the line of dialectic finds its true course of progress. (Smith and Helfand 127)

Although realism was to occupy an important place in Wilde's own art and theories about art, it is rarely the main reason for a work's genesis or in any way an end in itself. Wilde did, however, depend upon the use of realism for "background," plot, and much else, as can be seen not only in the plays and fiction but also in the style and the subject matter of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*—Wilde's closest thing to a Naturalist creation.[7] Much of the notebook he kept at Oxford contains notes on scientific theory, with realism arising as a part of this interest. In "The Critic as Artist," Wilde proclaims that "[i]t was reserved for a man of science to show us the supreme example of that 'sweet reasonableness' of which Arnold spoke so wisely. . . . The author of the *Origin of the Species* had . . . the philosophic temper" (406).[8]

## II

In novels such as *L' Assommoir* (1877) and *Nana* (1880)—dealing respectively with alcoholism and prostitution—Zola became an especially powerful influence on the two writers who seem to have reproduced the Naturalist approach even within novels that might seem most contrary to that approach. J. K. Huysmans in *Against the Grain* (*A Rebours*, 1884) and Oscar Wilde in *Dorian Gray* introduced a sense of fact into the literature of decadence even while promulgating a transcendental view of social life. Unlike other realist writers, Wilde attempts to agitate the reader into social reform ("The Soul of Man Under Socialism") and to represent and subvert the realist form in others (*Lady Windermere's Fan* and his two other "well-made" plays). The influence of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (first shown in London in 1892) and of Pinero's *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1893) left their mark on the social conscience of the leisured public. "New" could now mean not only Ibsen's European influence on drama, but also trade unions and experimental approaches towards the siting of society's margins and center. That Wilde's three plays before *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) are similar to realist plays on the Continent is not surprising given the general context of influences.

Indeed, the idea that *Dorian Gray* might owe something to Zola is understandable when one realizes that Wilde could have absorbed such influence via Huysmans's *A Rebours*. Although both books bear the hallmark of the nascent Symbolist movement, Huysmans also borrows from the unlikely source of Flaubert's *A vau-l'eau* (1882), a novel in which a meek clerk systematically samples life's humbler pleasures, reading realistic novels and collecting prints of Dutch painters. In *A Rebours*, Huysmans's decadent hero, the in-bred bisexual Des Esseintes (based, like Proust's Charlus, on the real-life Robert de Montesquiou), systematically samples "perversions" in an effort to overcome one of the biggest cases of ennui ever produced by literature. Beginning with

"symphonies of flowers," Des Esseintes studies Latin literature, French decadent poetry, asceticism (he is "served" an enema bag for dinner each night), masochism with an American woman acrobat named Miss Urania, and pederasty with a young school boy. Ultimately overcome by his own boredom, he turns to mysticism as a kind of last refuge. Like Zola (whose *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret* Des Esseintes warmly praises), Huysmans is examining decadence in a quasi-scientific way. His interest in slumming or exposing the underside of modern life is common to both decadence and Naturalism. Each of Huysmans's chapters is devoted to one particular experiment on Des Esseintes's part, just as each of Zola's novels deals with one aspect of French culture in the hopes that—after twenty novels dealing with one family—he will have captured all aspects of the modern world.[9]

In the "Preface" to *A Rebours*, written twenty years after the novel's initial publication, Huysmans writes that he wished to take the form of the Naturalistic novel and to "shake off preconceived ideas, to extend the scope of the novel, to introduce into it art, science, history . . ." (xlv). He feels that this is necessary because

> Naturalism was getting more and more out of breath by dint of turning the mill forever in the same round. The stock of observations that each writer had stored up by self-scrutiny or study of his neighbors was getting exhausted. . . . The rest of us, less robust [than Zola] and concerned about a more subtle method and a truer art, were constrained to ask ourselves the question whether Naturalism was not marching up a blind alley and if we were not bound soon to knock up against an impassable wall. (xxxv–xxxvi)

Clearly, the equating of decadence with the idea of scientific degeneration, such as Lombroso's disciple Max Nordau crudely proposed, was both shared and satirized by Huysmans in this novel and in *Lá-Bas* (1891) and *En Ménage*.[10] Various techniques of writing common to the Naturalists also came under his satire. His chapter on Latin texts, believed by scholars of the day to be accurate and to prove Huysmans an expert on such literature, was in fact directly lifted from a library book.

Similarly, various medical and scientific details in the novel came either from printed sources or from discussions with experts. Huysmans employed Zola's technique of rigorously researching the subject one writes about. Although the lurid details of *A Rebours* might seem fantastic, many do come from actual sources (admittedly reassembled for a rhetorical purpose other than realism). The jewel-encrusted tortoise that Des Esseintes keeps as an ornamentation resembles one in the actual Montesquiou's apartment; the discussion of rare hothouse flowers comes from a botanical book. Although *A Rebours* has often been thought to be, along with Pater's *The Renaissance* and Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*, the most important source of decadence in English literature of the 1890s (perhaps the "poisonous book" referred to in *Dorian Gray*), it is also an

example of Naturalistic technique in its fidelity to "objective" sources and its cataloging of details. Included in the latter category would be Huysmans' use of the "inarticulate," i.e., slang, along with jargon from various professions.[11] Such mixing of levels and types of speech is also common in Zola, although Huysmans mixes dictions throughout his book whereas Zola employs slang only within dialogue. In this sense, Huysmans was a bolder or perhaps simply less discriminating Naturalist than the master himself.

Wilde was willing to learn from someone else. We see this, for example, in the Huysmans-like chapter 11 of *Dorian Gray* where Dorian studies jewels ("He would often spend a whole day settling and resettling in their cases the various stones that he had collected, such as the olive-green chrysoberyl . . . the cymophane . . . the pistachio-coloured peridot. . . ." [167]) and tapestries. He found some of these details in sources such as Lefebure's *History of Lace* or the handbook to the South Kensington Museum. Like Zola, Wilde was detailing the physical reality of his time, combining externalities of the real world in a list-making, encyclopedic way, just as he had seen in Huysmans. Dorian goes through many of the same changes as Des Esseintes, including an interest in mysticism and in science: "and for a season he inclined to the materialistic doctrines of the *Darwinismus* movement in Germany . . . delighting in the conception of the absolute dependence of the spirit on certain physical conditions, morbid or healthy, normal or diseased" (164). Like Wilde himself, Dorian seems to exhibit both an aristocratic horror of mercantilism and a total dependence on it in his mania to acquire property and belongings. Wilde makes it clear via Dorian that you are what you own and what you can feel; one's body, as the novel's ending makes clear, is one's only limiting or determining condition. For Dorian, like Zola, history cannot really exist since one can confront only the present. In "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young," Wilde claims that "it is only the superficial qualities that last. Man's deeper nature is soon found out." His faith in the visible world as the object of his study is an essential aspect of his brand of materialism. Only in the visible world can be joined together the tropes that will continually reappear within his shifting *oeuvre*, tropes such as the body, social relations, and desire.

These tropes had first converged in Wilde's creation of an earlier epigrammatic persona. When Wilde has Lord Henry muse that a cigarette represents the "perfect type of a perfect pleasure . . . and leaves one unsatisfied" (107), he has insinuated an epigrammatic structure within a realistic novel. By disrupting the narrative of the book, the non-linear structure of the epigram makes the reader critically self-conscious of the surrounding narrative structure. However, Lord Henry's witticism is also a commentary on commodity culture, as is, in some ways, the self-consuming epigrammatic form itself. By commenting on the ways in which society functions, Wilde is actually achieving some of the same ends as the Naturalist writers. Even so, by eschewing their seriousness of tone and lack of conscious self-parody, he is able to extend the form into a type of meta-

realism that draws the reader into a debate on language itself.[12]

Although Naturalism and Aestheticism were not the only movements of the period, their overlapping was more than mere coincidence. The anxiety brought about by rapid change gave rise to various attempts either to explain what was happening or at least to chronicle it. Zola's unrelenting quantification and Wilde's constantly qualified skepticism are just two famous attempts to deal with the real. Dorian Gray's blackmailing of Alan Campbell and his subsequent sojourn into the naturalistic world of the docks in the book's concluding chapters are an attempt to represent an actual gay world that Wilde knew, one in which the linking of criminality with sex was itself a means of erotic fulfillment. The numerous tableaux of male-male desire that are shown here are distinctly different from the earlier flirtations and manipulations of Lord Henry. The book's central metaphor, the society portrait, moves from a symbol of idealism to one of realism. Like Pater's idea of Greek portraiture, Dorian's representation is ultimately all too life-like. The game of representation becomes one where that which is not named must be found in the details.

## NOTES

1 For example: "He [the modern novelist] is to be found at the Librairie Nationale, or at the British Museum, shamelessly reading up on his subject. He has not even the courage of other people's ideas, but insists on going directly to life for everything, and ultimately, between encyclopedias and personal experience . . . can he thoroughly free himself" (293–94).

2 Cf. Rita Felski: "*Dorian Gray* remains closest to the conventions of realist narrative and Victorian melodrama; yet here too an acute linguistic self-consciousness manifests itself in elaborate descriptions, in parodies and borrowings from such texts as *Against the Grain* and Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, and above all in the aphorisms and paradoxes that implicitly subvert the novel's ostensible moral ending . . ." (1099). The feminine, Felski argues, creates a "counterdiscourse" that is "antinaturalist."

3 Realism is, of course, just one of the many traditions upon which Wilde draws for the novel's morphology. One could say that it was a novel of sensation—a popular type of novel that was highly marketable because of its generic variety. Indeed, one can see the mixtures of genres and literary modes throughout *Dorian Gray*: prose poetry in much of the descriptive sections, playwrighting in the dialogue, and so on. Wilde's desire to make as much money as possible from the book seems plausible in light of the precariousness of his income. Extrapolating from Darko Suvin's discussion of class and readership, one may reasonably conclude that Wilde's own class standing would have been that of a borderline professional, which means he could afford one or two servants, he was educated, but he did not earn much money. The number of readers for his books, likewise, would have been small. His economic instability and sporadic attempts to be successful as a free-lance writer would have placed him in a precarious economic situation after being refused a position at Oxford. Wilde would have necessarily been eager, even desperate, to earn money through his writing. Reaching a large audience—especially the large numbers of female readers of sensation novels—would be a logical goal for Wilde and may explain much about the novel's structure. For more on the fragility of the emerging middle-class identity in Victorian England, see Cohen.

4 I shall use "realism" and "Naturalism" somewhat interchangeably, although I do wish to recognize their difference. Realism as a movement predates Naturalism, although one can argue that some writers practiced both simultaneously. The point at which a useful distinction might be made is in how the two

camps understood social class. For realists, class was part of social forces, politics, and the like; for Naturalists, class was solely a biological phenomenon and, thus, virtually unchangeable.

5 By 1832, the term "Socialism" was becoming widely used in English and in French. Ideas associated with it were beginning to exert influence. William Morris ultimately turned away from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood to pursue socialist aims. Rossetti and Swinburne wrote poetry of topical importance dealing with social reform (much of which has remained largely unstudied). By the time of *Origin of the Species* and *Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Dickens had already published *Bleak House* (1853) and Flaubert had published *Madame Bovary* (1856). Scribe's plays were appearing on the stage, and Lombroso was developing a theory of criminal types. The influence that socialism and the scientific approach to society exerted at the height of Victorianism cannot be ignored. Although coming from widely differing political positions, the realistic portrayal of living conditions and social problems united such figures as Flaubert, Marx, and Rossetti, it paved the way for the more biological programs of Zola and the Naturalists.

6 Wilde's ideas in these lectures are similar to those championed by William Morris. For example, in "The Lesser Arts," Morris argues that "the handicraftsman, left behind by the artist when the arts sundered, must come up with him, must work side by side with him . . ." (18). In "The Socialist Ideal," he urged that just as "socialism is an all-embracing theory of life, and . . . has an ethic and a religion of its own, so also it has an aesthetic: so that to every one who wishes to study Socialism duly it is necessary to look on it from the aesthetic point of view" (317). Given Wilde's similarities to various socialists of his time, it is perhaps not surprising that *Dorian Gray* was one of George Orwell's favorite novels.

7 At the end of his life, Wilde was asked, "You have no leanings towards realism?" He answered, "None whatever. Realism is only a background; it cannot form an artistic motive for a play that is to be a work of art" (Mikhail 250).

8 Although Aestheticism could often be confused with Impressionism, I treat the latter as a separate category here. Wilde often uses the term *impression*, and it is properly a separate movement. However, as Ian Small notes, "impression" was a scientific concept that came out of the work of psychologists like Herbert Spencer as a part of their "systematic investigation into the nature of perception and cognition" (*Aesthetes* xiv). For a full treatment of Small's arguments, see chapter 3, "Aesthetics, Psychology, and Biology," of *Conditions for Criticism*.

9 It is useful to compare this project to the encyclopedic novels of Joyce and Stein. The latter, in *The Making of Americans*, attempts to catalogue every personality type that has ever existed. Of course, she mainly succeeds—as is the case with many totalizing programs—in breaking down the very categories she seeks to combine. Her unifying category, of course, is Gertrude Stein.

10 Zola's *La Curée* (1872), with its incest plot, is one example of the literary concern with sickness that we see in *A Rebours*; even so, it is hardly a subject matter for decadents only.

11 A. E. Carter argues that in *A Rebours* Huysmans "was able to employ Parisianisms, provincialisms, scientific, archaic, classical and foreign locutions, thus joining 'le délicat au populaire.'" He thinks that Huysmans obviously "frequented all types of *milieux*" (135).

12 For more on Wilde and commodity culture, see Gagnier and Bowlby.

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