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### Picturing Dorian Gray: Resistant Readings in Wilde's Novel†

From oblique appearances in the youthful storytelling of his earliest artistic projects through the insistent polyphony of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, an aura of ambivalence and ambiguity increasingly mediates relations among Wilde, his writing, and his readers.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the most satisfying interpretations that one can draw from the canon incorporate into readings this uncertainty as an element that enhances our imaginative pleasure. Specifically, these responses cultivate an ability to balance Wilde's flair for representing with graphic clarity the foibles of late-nineteenth-century English society against his ongoing need for public approval and apparent willingness to shape his creative efforts into forms that would earn that approval.

One begins this process by looking at details from Wilde's life that help understand the way that multiple perspectives came to condition his consciousness. A sense of pluralism always informed his public persona. Beginning with his student days at Portora Royal, continuing at Trinity and Oxford, and throughout his triumphal tours of America and Great Britain, one finds Wilde devoting as much energy to garnering society's approval through his charm as he does to breaking down public complacency through outrageousness.<sup>2</sup> The same dual impulses continued to characterize his behavior during the years that he spent establishing himself as London's most exquisite purveyor of discriminating taste.

Over the course of his public life, in fact, Wilde demonstrated a flair for gaining notoriety through extravagant behavior; and until his very last years he always balanced this ability with a sense of knowing precisely how far such conduct could go.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the 1880s and into the 1890s, Wilde's uninhibited, sardonic self-dramatization,

† From *Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Chaos* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1996), 57–74. Reprinted by permission of the University Press of Florida. Bracketed page numbers refer to this Norton Critical Edition.

1. Perhaps the clearest alternative delineations of the ambivalent sensibilities of the Victorian ethos that shaped Wilde's world appear in Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*; Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm*; and Richard D. Altick, *The Presence of the Present: Topics of the Day in the Victorian Novel*.
2. See Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, especially 37–52 and 157–210; Lord Alfred Bruce Douglas, *Oscar Wilde: A Summing-Up*; H. Montgomery Hyde, *Oscar Wilde: The Aftermath and Oscar Wilde: A Biography*; Philippe Jullian, *Oscar Wilde*; and Frances Winwar, *Oscar Wilde and the Yellow Nineties*.
3. For an example of Wilde's sense of the limits of public tolerance, see Ellmann's account of the feuds with James A. McNeill Whistler and Queensberry in *Oscar Wilde*, 270–74, 456–78.

ever suggestive but always comfortably nebulous, delighted many within the British middle class. The indeterminacy that surrounded his life allowed people to sustain a range of possible opinions about him without having to confront any of the implications that would grow out of an indisputable sense of his proclivities. In a complementary fashion, the expectations engendered by the ambiguity of Wilde's public persona disposed Victorian readers and theatergoers to assume the same interpretive freedom in their responses to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and other writings.

Indeed, never losing sight of the power of multiplicity to invigorate his work, Wilde fostered this inclination in his audiences: Time and again one finds his writing stimulating approaches that support disparate methodologies, acknowledge the presence of multiple levels of reading (an aesthetic metasystem), and bind together disparate meanings into a response accommodating their inherent diversities. In a 12 February 1894 letter to Ralph Payne, for example, Wilde neatly summarized the antinomies of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and gently mocked simplistic reactions to it through a series of concise analogies between himself and the novel's central characters: "I am so glad you like that strange coloured book of mine: it contains much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages perhaps" (*Letters*, 352).

The playful ambivalences within these comments point up exactly the disposition for indeterminacy that runs throughout the narrative of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Rather than enforcing the hegemony of a single perspective, Wilde deftly undermines support for any concept of narrowly defined intentionality or even for the sense that any particular point of view can have an implicit dominance or an inherent legitimacy. In their place he offers the example of his personality which embodies the range of valid responses that one could possibly make to his work. Further, by presenting each response as equally valid, Wilde eschews any move toward closure. Instead, he conjoins a broad consideration of the structure of the novel with a sportive indulgence of the particular interpretive impulses of the individual reader.

In addition to this anecdotal evidence of the importance of pluralism within Wilde's writing, a range of intra- and extratextual features specifically associated with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* creates clearly identifiable antinomies within the discourse that resist amalgamation into unified linear interpretations. Within the narrative, for example, frequent references to the mores of Victorian society invite one to judge the actions of individual characters according to the values of the world in which they exist. At the same time, as a number of the cultural studies already cited have noted, the contra-

dictory elements that make up fin de siècle English society call for a great deal of flexibility in any reading based upon general assumptions about these other Victorians of whom and for whom Wilde wrote.

This incorporation of simultaneous multiple responses into an overview of the work relies upon an openness to subjective approaches akin to the reception of history outlined by critics as divergent as Carlo Ginzburg and Hayden White.<sup>4</sup> In readings of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, such a method starts from the dual premises outlined above: The novel emerges as very much a product of the Victorian era, yet no fixed or single image of that period—no Platonic ideal—exists as a unified and consistent vision within the consciousness of either the author or his readers. As a result, any notion of the age projected by the narrative of Wilde's novel will necessarily incite a multitude of different visions.

The diversity inspired by Wilde's discourse goes well beyond the class stratification of late-nineteenth-century English life embodied by the cultural differences among the aristocrats with whom Dorian passes most of his time, the working poor represented by Sibyl Vane and her family, and the denizens of the Limehouse district where Dorian debauches himself. These groups in fact exemplify fairly stable elements of the narrative. The real antinomies within the discourse emerge when one examines the metaphysical assumptions behind the social institutions that define the Victorian world of the novel. In particular, the ability of characters to sustain a multitude of conflicting moral values without any sense of disruption or contradiction within their consciousness enforces the idea that to understand these individuals one must come to grips with the concept that a breadth of contending principles guides their behavior without any one holding primacy.

In chapter 14, for instance, Dorian articulates a range of responses during the hours immediately following the death of Basil Hallward, with different—and, in some cases, conflicting—ethical precepts informing each expression. His initial reaction to recollections of the murder shows a mixture of anger, self-pity, and revulsion over the circumstances; but he displays no regret over committing the act itself: "Gradually the events of the preceding night crept with silent blood-stained feet into his brain, and reconstructed themselves there with terrible distinctness. He winced at the memory of all that he had suffered, and for a moment the same curious feeling of loathing

4. For a good example of a sophisticated response to a complex and distant social system, see Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. Ginzburg's study shows how one can write against stereotypical responses to a familiar historical event (in his case, the Inquisition) yet retain the ability to reach conclusions and initiate investigations based upon concepts of the event that the writer and the reader share.

for Basil Hallward, that had made him kill him as he sat in the chair, came back to him and he grew cold with passion" [135]. Later, when he must blackmail Alan Campbell into agreeing to dispose of Basil Hallward's body, Dorian feels genuine regret for what he must do: "The same look of pity came into Dorian Gray's eyes. Then he stretched out his hand, took a piece of paper, and wrote something on it. He read it over twice, folded it carefully, and pushed it across the table [to Campbell]" [142]. Finally, as Dorian contemplates the image of Campbell confronting the body of the murdered man, the inane social concerns that come to mind underscore a chilling detachment from all that is happening: "He began to wonder if [Alan Campbell] and Basil Hallward had ever met, and, if so, what they had thought of each other" [145]. No one of these views seems a more valid representation of Dorian's feelings than any of the others, yet each in an important way contributes to the reader's full sense of Dorian's nature.<sup>5</sup>

Because the narrative repeatedly lends equal support to such contrasting points of view in an undifferentiated fashion, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* inevitably blurs the boundaries that define the novel's social repertoire (in the sense that Wolfgang Iser has given to the term). This gesture toward indeterminacy in turn recasts the reader's assumptions about the way that one experiences meaning, underscoring the tenuousness of any premise that we use to form a text. Up to this point, of course, the multiplicity that I have identified in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* seems little more than a range of linear, cause-and-effect options for generating meaning. The hypostatic quality of these perspectives, however, gives the narrative its unique pluralistic character. This ability to create characterizations that sustain multiple perspectives in an imaginative equilibrium stands as the defining feature of Wilde's emergence as a mature artist. (Likewise, the ability to recognize and sustain these variant points of view in an interpretive response becomes the decisive trait of a mature reader.) This characteristic dominates the narrative of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from the opening pages of the novel, and nowhere does one find it more evident than in the protean representation of the central character.

Over the course of Wilde's novel, the narrative gradually shifts its attention from Dorian Gray's striking physical appearance, made so much of in the opening episodes, to the methodical, horrific metamorphosis of his portrait throughout the middle and final chapters. This is not, however, a simple plot displacement that accommodates Dorian's unfolding story. The ambivalent feelings that sweep across

5. For a more detailed examination of the way that moral values shape our interpretation of the novel, see Michael Patrick Gillespie, "Ethics and Aesthetics in *Dorian Gray*," in Sandulescu, *Rediscovering Wilde*, 137-55.

his consciousness as he experiences the changes in his nature and assesses the alterations in his portrait render a linear perspective inadequate. One instance of Dorian in a moment of reflection, midway through the novel, perfectly conveys this condition of flux. "[H]e would sit in front of the picture, sometimes loathing it and himself, but filled, at other times, with that pride of individualism that is half the fascination of sin, and smiling, with secret pleasure, at the misshapen shadow that had to bear the burden that should have been his own" [117-18]. Once the discourse has foregrounded Dorian's oscillating moral, psychological, and spiritual perspectives, monologic explanations begin to lose their efficacy.

Throughout the narrative, one finds numerous other instances that encourage us to sustain simultaneous, multiple, diverse readings. Lord Henry's exposition on New Hedonism [19-23], for example, seems at first glance to offer clear-cut alternatives for interpretation: One might accept it with the same credulity that Dorian expresses, modify its tenets to compensate for Harry's inclination toward extravagant language, or simply dismiss it as mere cant. At the same time, because each choice enriches our sense of New Hedonism, it becomes difficult to suppress any alternative in favor of just one. Indeed, if one follows the logic that supports New Hedonism, one can hardly justify such an exclusionary gesture.

The manner of Lord Henry's presentation further underscores the efficacy of a pluralistic response. His aura of insouciance compounds one's sense of the appropriateness of ambivalence, and this feeling in turn intensifies one's inclination to defer any sort of interpretive closure. The casualness that surrounds his discourse leaves readers unsure of his attitude toward New Hedonism. Does he see it as a legitimate form of behavior, a transitory inspiration created on the spur of the moment to justify one of his verbal flights of fancy, or a random and meaningless response to a random and meaningless universe?

Each point of view provides the basis for a logical interpretation of Harry's disquisition, and the narrative offers no compelling reason to prefer one over the others. Moreover, as the novel progresses, one finds that each of these points of view contributes to a more detailed illumination of the discourse and in doing so blunts inclinations to privilege any one of these perspectives over the others. New Hedonism in fact defines itself only through the symbiotic support of multiple systems of values, and any effort to view it in isolation would prove reductive.

The narrative also encourages perceptions of multiplicity through numerous representations of characters reforming their values to meet evolving conditions, yet at the same time the discourse still relies upon the counterforce of existing attitudes to define events

and disrupt any sense of stability that one might acquire by completely abandoning an old system of belief in favor of a newer one. Later, I will take up in greater detail Dorian's final conversation with Lord Henry [172–80] to illustrate this point, but for now a more general reference to it will support my argument.

Tension runs throughout the scene, which dominates the penultimate chapter of the novel. To a large degree the strain grows out of the reader's need to come to grips with Dorian's ambivalently presented views, which are thrown into relief by the consistently cynical outlook of Lord Henry's commitment to New Hedonism. A full and balanced impression of this exchange cannot emerge unless one accommodates these multiple perspectives. That is, we strive to achieve what I referred to in the introduction as Burke's idea of a "compensation for disunity." In other words, paraphrasing Hugh Kenner's advice on how to approach the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound, one privileges coherence over correctness.

In this fashion, the structure of the novel's discourse reconfigures habits of interpretation with or without our awareness or assent. A reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* grows out of individual experiences mingled with the diverse perspectives projected throughout the narrative. The pluralism of the consequent discourse must inevitably resist the prescriptiveness that one associates with a single, dominant perspective.

This privileged position of multiplicity becomes apparent as soon as one calls into question the assumptions that would ordinarily begin to narrow one's perception of the novel. I have already touched upon the different ways that Dorian manifests his character throughout the narrative. One can apply the same considerations to the way that one perceives the painted representation of Dorian. One might, for example, resist the impulse to see the title—*The Picture of Dorian Gray*—as identifying a single representation of a particular character and instead develop concepts of pluralism that contain far richer implications in their suggestion of the range of possibilities inherent in the gesture of portrayal. A definite article (*the*) seems to single out the next word in the title (*picture*) as a specific object. With a sense of multiplicity, however, one can no longer assume that the portrait acts as anything more than an invocation to any one of a number of subjective images of Dorian Gray. To read the title less idiosyncratically would invite a false sense of objectivity that would in turn distort all subsequent contact with the work.

From this assumption, one inevitably moves to embrace the relativity of broader responses to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The ambiguity within the title has significance not only in its immediate context but also in terms of the expectations that it introduces into the reader's consciousness. Once one accepts its both/and ambiva-

lence as a guiding attitude, the entire process of interpreting the novel takes on new significance. (Acknowledging a relativity among various readings does not, of course, automatically relegate all interpretation to a program of unrestrained, eccentric free association. For example, the social repertoire alluded to earlier in this chapter takes on great significance as alternative and at times conflicting interpretations that one must consider in any effort at articulating meaning. At the same time, incorporating a sense of relativity into one's horizon of expectations does point up the broad imaginative parameters within which one can operate to determine meaning.)

One finds just as much diversity in the pictures of Dorian's consciousness composed by Basil Hallward, Lord Henry, Dorian himself, and the reader. We can readily see that each character's apprehension of Dorian's nature functions kinetically. Each does not simply see Dorian; each constructs a comprehension of him.

Consciously or not, the impulse to create and thereby interpret dominates responses of characters at every stage of the narrative. This persistent inclination to privilege subjective perspectives stands as an important illustration of the self-reflexive system that I have been describing. Throughout the novel the delineation of Dorian recurs as a central narrative feature. In consequence, this defining and composing an image of Dorian—actions going well beyond the passive reception of impressions—emerge as the real focus of attention for characters and readers.

What differentiates characters from readers, however, is the ability of the latter to go beyond the individualistic gesture of defining and composing to sustain multiple definitions and compositions. Readers have the benefit of a range of diverse constructions, while each character in the novel remains fixed within the parameters of a single response. In the opening scenes, for example, through his descriptions of Dorian and his painting, Basil Hallward creates an arresting manifestation of physical beauty that takes on an emblematic significance throughout the narrative. In addition, Basil's efforts produce an epiphanic animation of Dorian's consciousness, not simply calling attention to his beauty but making him aware of the temporal relation of that beauty to the way that he sees the world around him: " 'How sad it is!' murmured Dorian Gray with his eyes still fixed upon his own portrait. 'How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day in June' " [25].

For Dorian, Basil's painting operates in conjunction with Lord Henry's doctrine of New Hedonism, which has already disposed the young man's mind to assign paramount importance to sensual pleasure. Readers enjoy a broader perspective. As the narrative unfolds, Dorian's egocentric behavior counterpoints our first perceptions of

his nature, reshaping our sense of his consciousness as it evolves during his continual search for new pleasures. At the same time, the initial representations of Dorian as an ingenuous youth, admittedly embellished by Basil's rapture, remain distinct for the remainder of our reading.

This illumination of Dorian's nature illustrates the ways that the narrative affects a reader's interpretive disposition. From the novel's start, the discourse encourages attentiveness to the multiplicity that initially emerges in the response of individual characters to Dorian's physical presence. Thus, while we see that the completion of the painting marks an awakening in the sensibilities of Dorian, we also note that these early impressions have just the opposite effect upon Hallward. They freeze his sense of the young man.

As a result, when, in chapter 13, Dorian confronts Basil with the transmuted portrait and, by extension, with his own radically altered nature, Basil's allegiance to the past remains unshaken.

"Years ago, when I was a boy," said Dorian Gray, crushing the flower in his hand, "you met me, flattered me, and taught me to be vain of my good looks. One day you introduced me to a friend of yours, who explained to me the wonder of youth, and you finished a portrait of me that revealed to me the wonder of beauty. In a mad moment, that, even now, I don't know whether I regret or not, I made a wish, perhaps you would call it a prayer. . . ."

"I remember it! Oh, how well I remember it! No! [looking at the painting] the thing is impossible. The room is damp. Mildew had got into the canvas. The paints I used had some wretched mineral poison in them. I tell you the thing is impossible." [131]

Even as he comes to acknowledge the horror of the painting before him, Basil disassociates it from his original work and his first impression of Dorian. "There was nothing evil in [the original painting], nothing shameful. You were to me such an ideal as I shall never meet again. This is the face of a satyr."

Although he finally comprehends the behavior that has produced such a change in the portrait, Basil still resists seeing Dorian's condition as anything more than a superficial flaw that one can expunge by supplication to God.

Dorian Gray turned slowly around, and looked at [Basil] with tear-dimmed eyes. "It is too late, Basil," he faltered.

"It is never too late, Dorian. Let us kneel down and try if we cannot remember a prayer. Isn't there a verse somewhere, 'Though your sins be as scarlet, yet I will make them as white as snow.'" [132]

This loyalty to initial impressions brings the past into collision with the present. Because Basil cannot perceive the condition of duality, he cannot revise his perception of Dorian, even when confronted with the horrors of the painting.

Nonetheless, this narrative hypostasis inhibits inclinations among readers to replace one set of assumptions about Dorian with another. Thus, despite the material evidence that we have of Dorian's degeneration, Basil's stubborn adherence to his own idealized view reminds us of the elements in Dorian's nature that run counter to moral corruption. Further, Basil's either/or view, as it supplements our sense of Dorian, paradoxically enforces the both/and idea that one cannot speak of a single Dorian Gray existing in the novel when so many characters see him from so many different perspectives.

Initial impressions prove to have an equally tenacious hold on the consciousness of Lord Henry. During their first meeting, Harry entrances Dorian by creating a psychological model that the young man seems anxious to adopt: "Ah! realize your youth while you have it. Don't squander the gold of your days, listening to the tedious, trying to improve the hopeless failure, or giving away your life to the ignorant, the common, and the vulgar. These are sickly aims, the false ideals, of our age. Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you" [23]. Nonetheless, Lord Henry proves as susceptible as his listener to the power of his own language; and despite minor adjustments, his felicitous description of the young man that he has met in Basil Hallward's studio remains forever associated with his conception of Dorian Gray: "You have a wonderfully beautiful face, Mr. Gray. Don't frown. You have. And Beauty is a form of Genius—is higher, indeed, than Genius, as it needs no explanation" [22].

Early on, of course, Lord Henry seems to enjoy a precise sense of the elements constituting Dorian's personality. After Dorian falls in love with Sibyl Vane, for example, Harry explains to him the full implications of those emotions. When Dorian expresses regret at revealing his feelings, Lord Henry smugly replies: "You could not have helped telling me, Dorian. All through your life you will tell me everything you do" [47]. At the time, Dorian's slavish devotion affirms, for both Harry and the reader, the accuracy of the statement.

As Dorian becomes more worldly, however, Harry proves to be as unwilling as Basil to acknowledge changes in his friend's nature. Late in the novel, with Dorian again on the point of unburdening his conscience to his friend, one finds the relationship subtly altered. Lord Henry no longer seems to have confidence in his own ability to cope with the vagaries within Dorian's nature, and he retreats from hearing a revelation that would call his own convictions into question.

"What would you say, Harry, if I told you that I had murdered Basil?" said the younger man. He watched him intently after he had spoken.

"I would say, my dear fellow, that you were posing for a character that doesn't suit you. All crime is vulgar, just as all vulgarity is a crime. It is not in you, Dorian, to commit a murder. I am sorry if I hurt your vanity by saying so, but I assure you it is true. Crime belongs exclusively to the lower orders. I don't blame them in the smallest degree. I should fancy that crime was to them what art is to us, simply a method of procuring sensations." [175–76]

For a man who has given experience a privileged position over all else, this relegation of crime to the lower orders has a disingenuous ring. Ultimately, of course, maintaining the integrity of his initial impressions means much more to Harry than maintaining a consistent philosophical position or attaining any genuine insight into Dorian's character. Nonetheless, his attitude raises crucial questions for us as we try to assess both Lord Henry's and our own perceptions. I am not, of course, suggesting that one could deny the fact that Dorian has actually committed murder. Lord Henry himself seems careful not to make such a statement. On the other hand, Harry conceives of murder as an act completely out of character for Dorian, an aberrant gesture alien to his true nature. If we accept Harry's views as even partially valid—that a "true nature" exists to which Dorian, despite any atypical behavior, will invariably return—then the picture of Dorian's linear degeneration cannot remain unqualified.

Alternately, if we supplant Lord Henry's opinions with our own—in the same way that his have supplanted Basil's views in the narrative discourse—then we end up in the same tenuous position that Lord Henry has occupied, speaking as an authority yet without the interpretive latitude necessary to have full confidence in the accuracy of our views. From these contradictory viewpoints emerges the principle that the discourse here—or elsewhere in the work—does not enforce the validity of one interpretation over another. Rather, it consistently undermines the notion of certitude that informs any single view and instead invites incorporation rather than stratification.

As we read through *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it becomes evident that an insistent nostalgia continually informs the images of Dorian created in the minds of both Basil and Harry. Each retains a retrospective view of Dorian's nature remarkably close to the judgments reached in Basil Hallward's studio on the June day described in chapter 2, counterpointing the sense of change that surrounds the later stages of the novel. Furthermore, each reflects, in a limited way, the

problem facing anyone who tries to read the novel from a single, exclusionary point of view. Each man thinks he sees a complete individual, yet each sees only the picture that he created from the single perspective that he has adopted and validated.

Of course, the narrative does not represent the points of view and the attitudes of each character quite as neatly as I have indicated. As individuals within the novel seek to trace the nature of Dorian, however, the inescapable consideration emerges that each character places extraordinary emphasis on his perception of the human figure as reflecting a particular aspect of Dorian's personality. Readers adopting the same sort of monocular perspective—Dorian's, Lord Henry's, Basil's, or some other's—will limit themselves to any one of a number of equally valid interpretations ranging from very sympathetic to extremely harsh.

Impressions, in fact, develop according to a number of diverse attitudes, all demanding recognition. Consequently, while readers may acknowledge Dorian's beauty as an essential feature of the environment of the novel, they continually face the question of what value to apportion to it as any sort of prescriptive standard for judgment. While everyone who meets Dorian praises his appearance, what that beauty means as an influence on or reflection of his character changes from chapter to chapter. As a result, the reader sees diverse attitudes within the narrative that fall short of a clear articulation of its significance: Basil Hallward's naïve conjunction of beauty and goodness, Lord Henry's narrow perception of beauty as a sole source of gratification, and Dorian's reductive view of beauty as a source of power. This in turn means that the limitations of pursuing only a direct interpretive approach—of assigning a single or even a primary hermeneutic significance to his beauty—become increasingly apparent.

Dorian himself reinforces the need for readers to embrace multiplicity; for as the narrative unfolds, it shows his increasing resistance to adopting the prescriptive role of a passive archetype. As his appetite for aesthetic pleasure grows more diverse and more sophisticated, he derives his greatest satisfaction not from the recognition of static physical attributes but from a realization of his kinetic power to change the rendition of his nature that appears in Basil Hallward's painting. As a result, a much more complex and critically rewarding exploration of the issue of creativity—the relationship between the figurative ugliness of the portrait and his own power to imbue his nature with a clandestine ugliness—comes to obsess Dorian and shape the discourse.

The changes that the picture undergoes as the novel progresses invite the reader to realign his or her aesthetic sensibilities. In essence, the painting reverts imaginatively to a previous state—from

being to becoming—that reflects evolving creativity rather than immobile achievement. The alterations that Dorian effects present one with the example of a piece of art always open to the diverse creative efforts of its audience. This in turn offers us the opportunity to elaborate upon the pluralistic process of reading the novel itself. The painting's changing image enforces the range of possible responses that one might make to the entire discourse. At the same time, the picture provides multiple possibilities for interpretive protocols without precluding the coexistence of a range of alternative readings.

As I demonstrated in a passage quoted previously (*DG*, 25), when Hallward finishes the painting and gives it to Dorian, he precipitates a crisis. The completion of the portrait disrupts the equilibrium among painter, sitter, and picture. Dorian must now face his own blooming sensuality, and Basil must confront his own arrested emotional development. Neither character clearly addresses these conditions, and the limitations that we perceive in their responses remind us of the larger interpretive need to overcome tendencies toward linear either/or thinking. A reading of the passage must reflect both the homoerotic tensions of the scene and the archetypal echoes of classical mythology; it must also touch upon questions of aesthetic sensibilities, authorship, and the range and the limits of a piece of art. No single consideration stands as more or less important than another, but all demand attention.

Like the Impressionist paintings contemporaneous with Basil's work, his portrait of Dorian serves as a gauge of developing sensibilities rather than a manifestation of passive reception. Early in the narrative, Basil's picture straightforwardly enforces an idea of the painter's talent and sensitivity. Later, as Basil uses recollections of the painting to cling to a nostalgic view of Dorian, the radically changed portrait draws attention to the inherent flaws that limit his ability to see his model from more than one perspective.

For Dorian, too, the painting acquaints us with a range of responses. He develops a far more complex sense of the portrait, but in his own way he also succumbs to a circumscribed point of view. When he slips the restraints of Basil's asceticism, he falls into a state of self-indulgence. As it did with Basil, the picture leaves a marked impression upon Dorian's consciousness; but even though its kinetic features cause him to read the painting pluralistically, it still has an inhibiting rather than liberating effect upon his approach to life: "After a few years he could not endure to be long out of England, and gave up the villa that he had shared at Trouville with Lord Henry, as well as the little white walled-in house at Algiers where they had more than once spent the winter. He hated to be separated from the picture that was such a part of his life" [118].

The irony of the painting's oppressive influence comes to the fore when, near the close of the novel, Lord Henry begins to assess the impact of the painting on Basil: "It was really a masterpiece. I remember I wanted to buy it. I wish I had now. It belonged to Basil's best period. Since then, his work has that curious mixture of bad painting and good intentions that always entitles a man to be called a representative British artist" [176]. Harry then sets this dismissal of Basil's life in contrast with praise for Dorian's mode of living in a manner that emerges as all the more effective for its unconscious irony: "You are the type of what the age is searching for, and what it is afraid it has found. I am so glad 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. You have set yourself to music. Your days are your sonnets" [179].

This monologic cynicism assesses the two characters in a manner too reductive to satisfy readers conditioned, by this point in the narrative, to the polyphony of Wilde's discourse. The picture, on the other hand, underscores for us the unvoiced multiplicity inherent in the natures of both of Harry's friends. It emphasizes Basil's combination of naïveté and fidelity and Dorian's mixture of callousness and tenderness.

In different ways, that inability to face all that the portrait comes to represent destroys both Basil and Dorian. Each man succumbs to a monocular self-regard and a compulsion to maintain stasis. Each confronts the degraded picture as a static object and rejects the kinetic ugliness that it manifests in favor of an ideal, flawless image. Even here, of course, a hypostatic ambivalence insinuates itself. In trying to re-form the surface of the painting in the last moments of their lives, both men embrace contradiction: Basil wishes through prayer to reclaim the aura of homoerotic innocence that first attracted him to Dorian [132]. Dorian seeks through violence to brutalize the artifact whose coarseness now betrays his own lack of innocence [183]. More than just a rejection of ugliness, however, the response of each man foregrounds an attitude antipathetic to evolution and committed to stagnation.

Dorian's case in particular cries out for the intervention of the reader to acknowledge the pluralism informing perceptions of his nature. To a degree, his desire to experience existence to the fullest possible measure justifies Lord Henry's equation of Dorian's life with a work of art. At the same time, for all his interest in new experiences and feelings, one sees most of Dorian's energy consumed by retrograde gestures that seek merely to hoard the sensations that he apprehends. Further, he continually contravenes the most creative aspect of his nature—his capacity to live outside the bounds imposed by society—by seeking to suppress all physical evidence of his

accomplishments. This tendency moves quickly from a simple concern for his appearance to a compulsive abhorrence of any sign of temporality.

Change and exchange of any sort repel him. As a consequence, he becomes de facto a miser. He stops loving Sibyl, for example, when her acting ability fades because of her love for him. "[Y]ou have killed my love. You used to stir my imagination. Now you don't even stir my curiosity. You simply produce no effect. I loved you because you were marvellous, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art. You have thrown it all away. You are shallow and stupid. My God! how mad I was to love you! What a fool I have been! You are nothing to me now" [74]. He cannot interest himself in new aspects of her nature because such a gesture puts at risk the enjoyment of familiar pleasures and involves shared feelings in a reciprocal relationship rather than the exclusive sensations he formerly enjoyed during her performances.

In keeping with the ambiguity that characterizes the entire discourse, the failure of Dorian's experiment with New Hedonism does not affirm the efficacy of the conventional environment that he apparently cannot escape. Indeed, the narrative does everything it can to undermine the impulse toward any form of closure in the novel's putatively moral ending, surrounding Dorian's death with an ambivalence that subverts its apparent finality. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in fact ends with what appears to be an unfortunate accident, the consequence of recklessness and not of considered action. Dorian willfully lashes out at something that reminds him of the consequences of his behavior.

But this murder—was it to dog him all his life? Was he always to be burdened by his past? Was he really to confess? Never. There was only one bit of evidence left against him. The picture itself—that was evidence. He would destroy it. Why had he kept it so long? Once it had given him pleasure to watch it changing and growing old. Of late he had felt no such pleasure. It had kept him awake at night. When he had been away, he had been filled with terror lest other eyes should look upon it. It had brought melancholy across his passions. It had been like conscience to him. Yes, it had been conscience. He would destroy it. [183]

When Dorian sees the knife that he had used to kill Basil Hallward, he seizes it and stabs the painting. "There was a cry heard, and a crash. The cry was so horrible in its agony that the frightened servants woke, and crept out of their rooms" [183]. They find the now-grotesque body of Dorian Gray lying before the painting, which

is restored to the condition it had been in when Basil completed it.

A simplistic response to the scene would say that Dorian pays the price for his self-indulgence and recklessness because his assault on the painting brings about his own destruction. At the same time, the apparent capriciousness of this gesture makes the result seem, if not ridiculous, certainly rather melodramatic. More complex conditions obtain, for one can hardly interpret it as either confirming or refuting the powerful tenets of New Hedonism that Lord Henry has preached in the garden in chapter 2: "Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing. . . . [Wilde's ellipses] A new Hedonism—that is what our century wants" [23]. Throughout his life Dorian has heeded Lord Henry's urging to seek out new sensations, but in his final moments he fails to follow the injunction to have no fear. Thus, even on the brink of death Dorian vacillates between alternative points of view. Choosing a single way of reading the picture leads to self-destruction.

Lord Henry offers a more complex representation of the consequences of failing to accept the full implications of New Hedonism. Throughout much of the novel he embraces pluralism in a particularly uninhibited fashion (for its own sake, not in accordance with a specific ethical disposition), and he seems to behave without reservation no matter what the situation. Indeed, until the penultimate chapter, of all the major characters only Lord Henry seems able to accept change; and his behavior (although not his judgment of others) suggests a model for reading analogous to what I have been advocating. Whether one focuses on his ability to accommodate Dorian's engagement to Sibyl or his equanimity over his wife's elopement with a pianist, this behavior asserts a flexibility that readers find lacking in most of the other figures in the novel: the emergence of an incipient pluralistic sensibility as an alternative to the monocular way of seeing the world.

In essence, an intellectualism based on a receptiveness to numerous systems of values distinguishes Lord Henry from the other characters. In the end, unfortunately, as I have already observed, his ego makes him a prisoner of the same sort of retrograde impulses that have limited the perceptions of others; and his final judgments become as narrow and prescriptive as Basil's or Dorian's. Up to that point, however, his methodology for reaching those choices reminds readers of the aesthetic values that directed the novel's composition.

In the early and middle portions of the narrative Lord Henry combines a range of attitudes found only selectively in others. He refuses to accept received wisdom, yet he keeps in mind the strictures imposed upon behavior by society. As he demonstrates in chapter 3, at lunch at Lady Agatha's, he is fully able to articulate a logic for his New Hedonism; yet, when pressed, he conveniently claims not to

remember what he has said (DG, 42). As an individual comfortable with both multiplicity and ambiguity, Lord Henry enjoys disturbing the complacent assumptions of those who make up society but has no intention or desire to separate himself from their company. If he is *sui generis*, his approach evokes pluralistic attributes familiar to contemporary readers.

In the introduction to her edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Isobel Murray rightly notes the impact of Matthew Arnold's concepts of Hellenism upon the ethos of the work, but I believe that she goes too far in asserting that the death of Dorian in his effort to kill his conscience actually represents a defeat of Lord Henry's propositions (xv–xvi). Murray judges Lord Henry's role reductively by placing too much faith in a moralistic reading of Wilde's remark (quoted in her introduction) that "Lord Henry Wotton seeks to be merely the spectator of life. He finds that those who reject the battle are more deeply wounded than those who take part in it" (xvi). While maintaining the image of Lord Henry as spectator, Murray undermines her own argument by quoting his description of intercourse with Dorian based upon the simile of a musician: "Talking to him [Dorian] was like playing upon an exquisite violin. . . . There was nothing that one could not bring him to do" (xvi). Murray's analogy unconsciously affirms just how active and engaged Lord Henry is. In considering how his detachment from Dorian's dilemma differs from Dorian's detachment from the death of Sibyl and the murder of Basil, one can only conclude that Murray consistently misses the point about the nature of Lord Henry. She brings the narrative down to the level of the morality tale that Wilde's contemporary detractors apparently expected, reverting to the simplistic form of reading that I have been arguing against throughout this essay. Certainly, as I have repeatedly noted, the views of Lord Henry alone do not provide readers with a perspective sufficient to interpret the characters and events of the work. On the other hand, his willingness to take his own ideas seriously and his openness to change in others serve as an excellent guide for the disposition we might undertake for the most complete response to this work.

The discourse uses this oscillation to invite one to return to Lord Henry for some sense of how to read all the characters, but even in this role of paragon he provides ample opportunity for misperception. Ultimately, Lord Henry, like many contemporary critics of the novel, fails in his own efforts at interpretation; yet that, too, seems inevitable. In the end, his refusal to acknowledge the capacity for violence within Dorian's nature shows that he cannot fully appreciate the scope of New Hedonism. His love of proportions (either/or) overbears intellectual playfulness (both/and), stifles the pluralistic impulse, and impels him to impose symmetry on all his views.

The diverse elements within the narrative, however, do not permit the closure that Harry seeks to enforce. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the numerous alternatives for reading disrupt easy categorization. As a work derived from a range of Victorian attitudes, it remains nonetheless dependent for its completion upon the imagination of the individual reader, even as the individual reader must depend upon a range of approaches to exploit the hypostatic multiplicity inherent in the text.

## SIMON JOYCE

### Sexual Politics and the Aesthetics of Crime: Oscar Wilde in the Nineties†

At the center of G. K. Chesterton's *The Man who was Thursday* (1908) is a band of master anarchists, each named for one of the days of the week, all of whom are ultimately revealed in the course of the novel to be undercover detectives. One of them explains what they think they are fighting against:

This new movement of ours is a very different affair. We deny the snobbish English assumption that the uneducated are the dangerous criminals. We remember the Roman Emperors. We remember the great poisoning princes of the Renaissance. We say that the dangerous criminal is the educated criminal. We say that the most dangerous criminal now is the entirely lawless modern philosopher. Compared to him, burglars and bigamists are essentially moral men; my heart goes out to them. They accept the essential ideal of man; they merely seek it wrongly. Thieves respect property. They merely wish the property to become their property that they may more properly respect it. But philosophers dislike property as property; they wish to destroy the very idea of personal possession.<sup>1</sup>

This passage usefully introduces my essay, because I will be arguing that the idea of the criminal as an intellectual or artistic genius (which had seemed so radical when Thomas De Quincey first offered it in his 1827 essay, "On Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts") had become a conservative and reassuring notion by the end of the nineteenth century—quite literally in this case, since there

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1. G. K. Chesterton, *The Man who was Thursday* (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), 25.