

CALIBAN IN A GLASS: AUTOSCOPIC VISION IN  
*THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

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"It is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place."

-- Oscar Wilde<sup>1</sup>

Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), is well recognized as a modern variation on the Narcissus myth and the age-old story of the mortal who contracts with the devil and forfeits his soul. There is something in it also of Eden and the Fall from grace--and even more of proto-Freudian psychology and late-century cultural malaise. Dorian begins in pagan innocence. He has sat for the artist Basil Hallward in the romantic character of Greek gods and ancient heroes (*DG* 114), and his first appearance in the novel, at Basil's studio, links him with an idyllic pastoral. When the artist enters from the garden with the decadent Lord Henry Wotton, he catches his model unaware, "seated at the piano with his back to them, turning over the pages of Schumann's 'Forest Scenes.' 'You must lend me these, Basil,' he cried. 'I want to learn them'" (14). The boy turns and blushes to see a stranger, but his shyness gives way to Lord Henry's insidious charm. Basil is painting him now in his own character, and the paint is still fresh when Dorian faces his image for the first time and muses: "How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. . . . If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! . . . Yes, . . . I would give my soul for that!" (25-26).

No character of Oscar Wilde's should ever be taken at his word; yet, somehow, it seems Dorian is. His part in the bargain is quite unlike that of Faust, who swore with intent and knew the consequences. Faust was on speaking terms with Mephistopheles. But Dorian, the fair-haired child of a worldly age, is only talking to himself and unaware a pact is being made. Wilde flirted with religion in his writing and his life, and this novel is characteristically unconcerned with the nature of whatever agency may be granting Dorian's wish. Dorian is more prone to rationalize than to wonder about it. He is never sure why the portrait ages and grows more and more terrible in its aspect and expression while he stays young and beautiful through a nearly twenty-year career of moral depravity. He spends countless hours furtively comparing his face in the mirror with the face in the frame. He grows adept at the seductive philosophy Lord Henry teaches, but only briefly does he speculate about

the mystery behind his strange secret. Not once does he think of the devil. Ultimately, "the reason was of no importance. . . . If the picture was to alter, it was to alter. That was all. Why inquire too closely into it?" (106). Though Wilde revised heavily in at least three versions of the novel, he made no attempt to expand description of the painting or define an animating force. On the contrary, as Donald Lawler proves in his painstaking analysis of the author's revision strategy, Wilde concentrated on character development, particularly that of Dorian Gray whose speech and manner were fine tuned to focus on his increasing psychological complexity (Lawler, *Inquiry* 1-3, 39-41, 115-31). The emphasis in the work is not on what may drive the changes in the sinister portrait, but on its reflection of Dorian's conscience and soul.

Responding to the novel's secular tone, its commentators over the last hundred years have naturally assumed that some vaguely pagan "magic," or "supernatural" not specifically of Satan makes the portrait ghastly with debauchery while Dorian remains superficially unspoiled. The magical aspect was elaborated for modern audiences in 1945, when Albert Lewin's Academy-Award-winning film adaptation interjected into the plot a mysterious feline sculpture and a pointed rejoinder from Lord Henry Wotton: "You oughtn't to express such a wish in the presence of that cat, Dorian. It's one of the seventy-three great gods of Egypt and is quite capable of granting your wish!" In the film, the sleek cat statuette (a likeness of Bastet) is eerily and prominently displayed whenever attention turns to the infamous portrait. Lewin's black-and-white translation is further assisted by some lurid Technicolor inserts showing the portrait in progressive stages of corruption. Wilde's novel has inspired few, if any, works of art other than the sequence of paintings by Ivan Le Lorraine Albright commissioned for the 1945 film. These works depict a standing full-length leering image of Dorian Gray (*and* the surrounding background and props) all enveloped in a riotously colored kind of hallucinogenic slime, within which the malevolent cat-stature glows vividly green. A number of paperback book covers have followed Albright's lead in representing the eponymous portrait as an horrific and monstrous apparition, and critical interpretation has tacitly accepted this rendering.

To dwell visually on the picture's transformation or dismiss it as an act of magic distances the painted image from the mental anguish that Dorian undergoes and diminishes the psychological effectiveness of the novel. A more meaningful reading is possible if we consider that the disturbing changes Dorian sees in the portrait originate not in the painting

itself, but in his own mind, as increasing social estrangement and conflicting attitudes of self-love and self-revulsion induce recognizable signs of mental disorder, including paranoia, pathological self-love, erratic and violent behavior, dissociative identity (multiple personality), and the phenomenon clinically termed *autoscopia*: "visual hallucination of the physical self" (Rogers 14). Indeed, through a pattern of suggestive stylistic and thematic devices and a reiteration of pertinent detail, Wilde invites until the very end an ongoing suspicion that it is Dorian's perception of the painting that changes, rather than the painting itself.

"*It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors,*" states the famous Preface to *Dorian Gray* (xxiv), implying the reader interpreting the text as well as Dorian contemplating his portrait, and suggesting a universal concern with human nature and an introspective intent. In keeping with the Preface, the novel's pervasive impressionism asserts the superiority of subjective perception and emphasizes the overwhelming importance of perspective in coloring experience. Wilde's Aesthetic identification with the impressionist style, which is dedicated to the supremacy of perception, is everywhere evident. Wilde is an impressionist in words, and nearly every page bears some varied effect of the altering play of light and atmosphere on ordinary artifacts:

In the slanting beams that streamed through the open doorway the dust danced and was golden. (24)

The darkness lifted. . . . The sky was pure opal now, and the roofs of the houses glistened like silver against it. (88-89)

Shrill flaring gas-jets, dulled and distorted in the fly-blown mirrors that faced them, were ranged round the walls. Greasy reflectors of ribbed tin backed them, making quivering discs of light. (187)

The size of Dorian's portrait with its massive "elaborate" frame (121), and the artist's insistence on painting from life suggest a Pre-Raphaelite inspiration, although Basil, in his initial optimism, projects a new manner in art to commence with this work. Though he is not an impressionist painter, Hallward marks the value of shifting light to the artist: "Do come in," he urges Dorian's return to sitting, "The light is quite perfect, and you can bring your drinks" (23). A quarter hour and the painting is done.

All of the symbolism around this "life-sized" portrait underscores its psychological meaning in the passage of Dorian's life. Its sheer physical weight signifies its burden on his consciousness once it enters his keeping. From the start there is no doubt that the piece, like the mariner's

albatross, belongs with him. Basil puts it facetiously: "as soon as you are dry, you shall be varnished, and framed, and sent home. Then you can do what you like with yourself" (27); but there is ominous foreshadowing in this remark as Dorian gathers the object into his strange new manner of living. At the first barely perceptible change, Dorian hides the painting instinctively, obscuring it with a large screen (92) and later with a rich coverlet of purple and gold whose provenance in an Italian convent identifies it in Dorian's mind "as a pall for the dead" (119), signifying almost too obviously his own death of the spirit, as he proceeds on the course of conscienceless self-indulgence he believes the portrait has freed him to lead. His next move is to internalize the picture symbolically by transporting it from the public area of his home to a private concealment in his dark and musty attic loft. The top of any building naturally suggests the brain. Here the association is intensified by its former purpose as schoolroom, where Dorian grew, a lonely boy, in fear of a stern, unforgiving grandfather venting his resentment of a disobedient daughter on her unoffending son.

The portrait is too large for Dorian to lift, and his immediate need of sweat and muscle provides an interlude of comic relief that again points to the weight of his burden, both literal and figurative. Two men, the short obsequious Mr. Hubbard, "the celebrated frame-maker of South Audley Street, . . . florid, red-whiskered . . . [with] fat freckled hands," and his gawking "rough-looking young assistant" (120), tensely escorted by Dorian, drag the shrouded painting, huffing, up several flights of stairs. "Something of a load to carry, sir," gasped the little man, when they reached the top landing. And he wiped his shiny forehead. "I am afraid it is rather heavy," murmured Dorian" (121), thinking no doubt of the albatross effect. "I don't go in much at present for religious art," he mentions in the course of their inane exchange (120).

*Dorian Gray* is really an odd kind of *bildungsroman*, and thematically it is all about the problem of character formation or individuation, further emphasizing the internal or psychological. "Influence" is a key word, frequently reiterated. "Don't try to influence him," Basil begs Henry when their meeting becomes inevitable. "Your influence would be bad" (14). Soon Henry himself is assuring the boy: "All influence is immoral--immoral from the scientific point of view." "Why?" asks the innocent. "Because to influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. . . . To realize one's nature perfectly--that is what each of us is here for" (17). Some critics have seen the story as a kind of

moral tug-of-war between Basil and Lord Henry over the shaping of Dorian's nature (e.g., Murray x-xi, and Sinfield 99-103). Certainly the dialogue establishes a triangular tension. Henry wrongly blames Dorian's moral superficiality on Basil's painting: "Your portrait of him has quickened his appreciation of the personal appearance of other people. It has had that excellent effect, amongst others" (*DG* 73). Dorian attributes the greater influence to Henry: "I owe a great deal to Harry, Basil. . . . You only taught me to be vain" (108), but later says that Basil had more to do with his ruin (169). It does seem that Henry merely hastens Dorian's development, like a forced blossom. "Premature," Henry calls him (57).

This novel is full of "blurred distinctions" (Gall 55), and even in his original "innocence" Dorian is ambivalent, foreshadowing his imminent breakdown. Wilde derived the protagonist's name as an apparent compliment to John Gray, his "principal young man" during the period of composition (Ellmann 307), but the name was thematically apropos in suggesting Dorian's latent dark side. Lord Henry thinks of him early on as "this son of Love and Death" (*DG* 36), alluding to the tragic *mésalliance* of which Dorian is the orphan offspring, and an extended passage in Chapter Eleven alludes to the peccadilloes of morally tainted ancestors whose blood runs in his veins (143-44). "Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him," cries Dorian at the height of his torment (157).

From the start there are disturbing hints he is not as perfect as he seems. He is "willful" and "petulant" (14), and Basil has noticed an underlying sadism as well (11-12). Dorian is introduced as one of the charity gentlemen of Lord Henry's Aunt Agatha--but not a very conscientious one, as he forgets to go to meetings and readily partakes in Henry's ridicule of the cause (15). His supposed interest "in the East End" (13) takes on ironic overtones later in the novel when Dorian begins to frequent low-life dens in that part of town. After Dorian's perverse epiphany in Chapter Two, Lord Henry's influence seems to Dorian "to have come really from himself" (18). The text makes plain there were responsive chords.

The first instance of change in Dorian's perception of the portrait turns the narrative suddenly sinister. Dorian has jilted Sibyl Vane, and her consequent suicide inspires a remorse that is perhaps his last normal reaction of its kind. It precipitates a descent into psychological devastation, beginning with his original suspicion that the picture has begun to alter. In the course of this first revelation scene, burdened with an overwhelming sense of guilt, Dorian attempts to transfer moral

responsibility for this and future actions to his image on the wall, and believes temporarily that he has succeeded in doing so. Here, as at corresponding later crucial points, details of lighting are significant, both symbolically and literally, because of the uncertainty in the half-light by which the malignant changes are perceived. Dorian's first glimpse of the horror is a dawning viewed in darkness. Returning home at the first glow of morning, he extinguishes the lights in the foyer and passes by the portrait in the shadowy adjacent room: "In the dim arrested light that struggled through the cream-coloured silk blinds, the face *appeared to him* to be a little changed" (89-90; emphasis added). Dorian throws up the blind so that "The bright dawn flooded the room and swept the fantastic shadows into dusky corners" (90), but his first impression is so ingrained that he sees it still, though the author is careful to stress that it is an alteration in expression only, such as an actor might make: "The quivering, ardent sunlight showed him the lines of cruelty round the mouth as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing."

He compares his own face in the mirror and finds "No line like that warped his red lips" (90). Of course one can shape a look in the mirror. If one were searching one's own face for meaning in such circumstances, it might be difficult not to do so. As for the expression in the painting, a face well captured, a Mona Lisa, for instance, can be quite ambivalent, especially if Leonardo, like Basil, has put too much of himself in it (115).

In Dorian's own gallery is another psychically animate picture, of his beautiful, tragic mother, "whose eyes seemed to follow him wherever he went" (144). Dorian examines his portrait once more: "There were no signs of any change when he looked into the actual painting, and yet there was no doubt that the whole expression had altered. It was not a mere fancy of his own" (90). In this three-clause passage the first clause is a clear factual denial, while the second is contradictory but only interpretive (regarding "doubt") and the last is protesting too much. There is no assurance for the reader in this that the picture has changed at all; there is only a climate of uncertainty. Several paragraphs later the plausibility is introduced that: "Suddenly there had fallen upon his brain that tiny scarlet speck that makes men mad" (91). This is the most significant of numerous instances when the words "mad," or "insane," or their variant forms are introduced, occurring with increasing frequency in later chapters.<sup>2</sup> At last: "A sense of infinite pity, not for himself, but for the painted image of himself, came over him" (91). With this emotion, Dorian seals the psychic reality of the harmful split by investing self-pity

in the other self, in the erroneous belief that he has spared himself the retribution, both physical and moral, for the kind of life he means to lead.

Dorian salves his remaining dread by indulging a Faustian power fantasy during which he begins to project the kinds of changes the picture will undergo. What better sign that they originate in him? There were in him, he senses: "dreams that would make the shadow of their evil real" (119). Not only would he retain the strength and beauty of youth far beyond its natural allotment while "the blood crept from [the portrait's] face, and left behind a pallid mask of chalk with leaden eyes"; but also, with the picture before him, he could "follow his mind into its secret places" (106). There is a terrible irony in this naive anticipation, when those places prove to be recesses of horror. The burden of guilt Dorian thought he had shed is still with him, warring in the depths of his being with his compulsion to follow Lord Henry's lavish and insouciant approach to life. In the duration he gets his wish to retain his youth and beauty, but the torment is all his as well. In the next chapter, it is not the picture's example but Basil's that leads him to the first real revelation about the degradation of his being. Basil comes to support him under the news of Sibyl's death and is shocked to find him so little in need of condolence that he is prating about last night's evening at the opera. Afterwards, the very decency of Basil's character in contrast with his own, and this fresh reminder of the recent death so close to him, turn Dorian's projections about the picture morbid and reverse his attitude toward it. This alteration, more momentous than the one he first perceived, comes exclusively from Dorian's inner thoughts; this time the portrait is admittedly unchanged: "What the worm was to the corpse, his sins would be to the painted image on the canvas. . . . They would defile it and make it shameful. . . . *It seemed to him that it was unchanged*; and yet his loathing of it was intensified" (119; emphasis added).

Hereafter the picture offers him no diverting psychological study, but only cruel recrimination. In his mind he tortures himself by imagining the aging figure gradually taking on the aspect of his detested grandfather (122). He is so appalled at what he feels that he turns to self-deception, symbolically hiding his accusing other self and thus excluding for intervals of time its relevance to the conduct of his life. Still he lives in private agony. When his pity for this second self turns to loathing, its nature alters drastically. It gains a kind of autonomy in spite of their mutual identity and from this point onward it is adversarial evil, exerting a measure of control and drawing him wordlessly to it for hours of anxious contemplation. The worse the picture's aspect becomes, the less

he can remain out of its odious presence, partly from fascination and partly from fear of discovery. "There is something fatal about a portrait," Dorian tells Basil: "It has a life of its own" (117). It should be noted that Dorian has more separate identities than just this one, however.

There is a lesser counterpart as well in the nameless epicurean hero of Dorian's almost sacred yellow book, given him by Lord Henry and patterned after Huysmans' *A Rebours*. So obsessed is Dorian with this volume that he orders nine copies and has them bound in different colors to suit "his various moods." He regards its hero as "a kind of prefiguring type of himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it" (127). Furthermore, when Dorian leaves his plush surroundings, as he grows more and more in the habit of doing, and descends into the London underworld for days or weeks at a time, he becomes essentially another person, "under an assumed name, and in disguise" (128). This is no usual pastime for a young man of wealth and fashion, and Lord Henry would not recognize him here. The strong suggestion that Dorian is addicted to opium, with its attendant psychoactive effects, adds an additional layer to this manifestation of his personality (183-85). In Chapter Sixteen, in the aftermath of murder, he flees to the opium dens to escape the pangs of remorse. The otherwise cryptic comment, "In three days he would be free" (186), refers to the complete oblivion of this altered state.

Dorian's anxiety that someone else will see the dreadful changes in his portrait turns early into mounting paranoia. A mere two days after noticing the first barely perceptible alteration about the mouth, during which time the painting has been covered and presumably undisturbed, and well before any real transformation in its appearance begins, Dorian becomes fraught with the dread of discovery. His suspicion focuses on his French servant, though Victor is utterly guileless and, like the servants in Wilde's plays, stolidly unmoved by any eccentricity on the master's part: "When his servant entered, [Dorian] looked at him steadfastly. . . . The man was quite impassive. . . . Dorian lit a cigarette, and walked over to the glass and glanced into it. He could see the reflection of Victor's face. . . . It was like a placid mask of servility. . . . Yet he thought it best to be on his guard" (117). A short while later, when Victor announces Mr. Hubbard and his assistant, come to move the portrait--"The persons are here, Monsieur"--he is the very picture of a man innocently doing his job. But Dorian feels that he "must be got rid of at once. He must not be allowed to know where the picture was being taken to. There was something sly about him, and he had thoughtful,

treacherous eyes. . . . It was a horrible thing to have a spy in one's house" (120, 124). Eventually, Victor is let go, and in a healthier frame of mind Dorian tells Basil, "I never liked him, but I had nothing to complain about. One often imagines things that are quite absurd. He was really very devoted to me, and seemed quite sorry when he went away" (149). He has the schoolroom door secured with "elaborate bars," but often in the midst of festivities at his country estate will pick up without warning and fly off to London to make sure the door has not been tried (141).

Dorian embarks on a rigorous, empty pursuit of beauty and pleasure for the sake of forgetfulness, behaving more and more like a madman--hallucinatory, paranoid, even violent. Sudden changes in behavior may signal mental disorder, and Dorian's narrative is a whirlwind of these. A former icon of mindless beauty, he surprises Basil early on by generating specious philosophy after the manner of Lord Henry, then taking up precipitately with an actress and forgetting her just as soon. He deserts his former companions for opium dens and other low haunts for weeks at a time and shocks the *beau monde* as rumor after sordid rumor reaches them. In an obsessive quest for sensation, he goes in for perfumes one day, jewels another, rare fabrics after that. Even Lord Henry, that sharpest observer, is sure that Dorian could never commit murder (213), but murder he does--in the most shocking aberration of all. Dorian compulsively reveals the hidden painting to Basil and irrationally blames him for all that has happened, as "the man who had painted the portrait that was the origin of all his shame" (153). On a fog-murky night, in the near darkness of the attic room, Basil sees, or is induced to see, the ghastly nightmare that Dorian is living with. But once the secret is out, Dorian must kill his confidant. The act is one of sheer insanity, which the painting itself, in a mechanism of guilt transference, seems to dictate: "suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred . . . came over him, as though it had been suggested to him by the image on the canvas. . . . The mad passions of a hunted animal stirred within him. . . . He rushed at him and dug the knife into the great vein that is behind the ear" (158). The next day, after the body has been cleanly disposed of, Dorian keeps a polite dinner engagement then drives out into the London underworld. Away from the usual demands of society, his demeanor again becomes chillingly lunatic. In his frenzy for opium, the cab cannot go fast enough for him: "his delicate hands twitched nervously together. He struck at the horse madly with his stick. The driver laughed, and whipped up. He laughed in answer, and the man was silent" (185).

Critics ever since Walter Pater have treated *The Picture of Dorian*

*Gray* as a remarkable example of the *doppelgänger* or doubling motif,<sup>3</sup> which has an apparently infinite potential for creative manipulation and has been the basis for works by Mary Shelley, Hawthorne, Poe, Twain, Dickens, Stevenson, Kipling, Wells, Dostoevsky, Hesse, Barth, and Borges, to cite only a few of the best known. The *doppelgänger* theme has roots in myth and legend worldwide and has been especially prevalent in western literature since the German romantic writer E. T. A. Hoffmann coined the term early in the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Pater calls it "that very old theme, old because based on some inherent experience or fancy of the human brain, of a double life" (38); it is true that the form has always been closely allied with psychology, with writers drawing on the research and speculations of the psychologists, and psychologists in turn citing the fictional instances. The story of *Dorian Gray* can be approached from the psychological point of view as a synthesis of two rare but clinically recognized personality disorders: the phenomenon of multiple (divided, or dual) personalities, and the previously mentioned visual hallucination of encountering one's self, referred to as "autoscopia" or "autoscopy."<sup>5</sup> This narrative exemplifies a subcategory of autoscopic vision sometimes called "portrait-imaging" as *Dorian's* second self manifests from within the painting, but his case is also one of divided personality because the second self is a fragmented part of his identity rather than a mere duplicate. It is important to note, incidentally, that Wilde's novel is not a simple allegory between evil and good. The self in the portrait is an abomination more despicable than his peripatetic counterpart, but the *Dorian* who goes out in public at both extremes of the social scale is also a conscienceless, self-serving wretch with only the most feeble will to reform. It is only his personal charm and lost innocence, and the occasional flickering of better instincts, that keeps him at all sympathetic as a character.

The prototypical doubling story behind *Dorian Gray* is the Narcissus myth, which gives its name to the Freudian complex of morbid self-love. Much twentieth-century psychoanalytic thought confirms the novel's persistent implication that *Dorian's* preoccupation with his own person and his own essence is the source of his problems. As might be expected, paranoia typically arises from the narcissist's exaggerated sense of self-preservation (Rank 74), and we have already seen how *Dorian* suffers from it. However, the narcissist's curse is not merely that he loves himself too much but that he can only love himself. His incapacity for outward love is heard in *Dorian's* lament: "I wish I could love. . . . But I seem to have lost the passion, and forgotten the desire. I am too much

concentrated on myself" (205). The creed of individualism and, ultimately, selfishness which Lord Henry teaches and Dorian embraces only encourages his view that everything and everyone is secondary to his needs and wishes. When he learns of Sibyl's suicide, a large part of his reaction is relief that, as she and her acquaintances never knew his name, it is unlikely he will be found and questioned. Still he mourns that now "there is nothing to keep me straight. She would have done that for me. She had no right to kill herself. It was selfish of her" (99). This childish affliction grows until, years later, we are told: "he would think of the ruin he had brought upon his soul, with a pity that was all the more poignant because it was purely selfish" (128).

The autoerotic nature of narcissism makes it comparable in origin to the phenomenon of autoscopia, which is believed to arise from a deep-seated psychosexual impasse within one's own conflicting feelings and thoughts (Rogers 5, 15-16). Some psychological treatments of this novel view Dorian's central conflict as relating to his homosexual desires (e.g., Rank 71-72, and Dawson). I see little evidence of such difficulty in the novel, however, other than the obvious one Wilde faced in writing it for publication in an era so homophobic.<sup>6</sup> As R. D. Laing has noted: "What we call 'normal' is the product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection and other forms of destructive behavior on experience" (27); certainly Wilde was aware of this truth during the period of composition of *Dorian Gray*, when he was coming to terms with his own non-traditional sexuality (Ellmann 312). Many critics have observed how much of his personal preoccupation comes through in this novel, which was itself divided enough to offer evidence at Wilde's trial for both the defense and the prosecution.

Wilde could not of course have known about Freudian theory when he was writing *Dorian Gray*, but French psychiatrists were publishing on the problem of multiple personality in the 1880's (Tymms 93-94), and it seems likely Wilde was aware of that disorder. In one of the rare instances where the authorial "I" enters this text, he asks: "Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities" (*DG* 142-43). There is frequent mention, especially in revised passages, of "psychology" and "psychologists," generally respectful and suggesting a more than passing interest in their research (e.g., 36, 58, 132-33, 190). F. A. Mesmer's romantic views on animal magnetism and new provocative evidence of the submerged consciousness during hypnotic trance had been highly influential in nineteenth-century fiction (Tymms 26-27), particularly in the gothic

tradition, of which *Dorian Gray* partakes. The plot of Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), for instance, hinges on the notion that the subconscious can be induced to recall events enacted during a drugged state by re-invoking that identical state. Episodes of somnambulism or even drunkenness were often considered in a similar light.

I would like to be able to say that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is, from beginning to end, about a protagonist who hallucinates changes in what is perhaps a perfectly ordinary portrait and commits accidental suicide attempting to rid himself of an apparition. It could have been a masterpiece if Wilde had maintained it that way, something like Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* (1912), where the young ship captain's communion with his own second self is left so perfectly ambiguous through a compounding of artful devices that by the end what is objectively real and what may exist only in the captain's troubled imagination commingle in an outcome of startling psychological power. *Dorian Gray* would be a better novel, for that matter, had it accomplished something like Poe's "The Telltale Heart" (1843), where the protagonist's madness is slowly but decidedly revealed. Wilde prefigures such an outcome by implanting in a number of ways an ongoing suspicion that the effects of the transformation are largely, perhaps entirely, a product of Dorian's own deluded mind. The author is careful to insure, in the first place, that in the whole course of the narrative no one but Dorian and, briefly, Basil actually sees the painting in its altered form. Two near misses of accidental discovery early on (by Basil in Chapter Nine and Hubbard the frame maker in Chapter Ten) denote narrow escapes for Dorian, but they also encourage the reader to speculate whether there really has been a change, especially considering the problematic nature of Dorian's initial assessment and the author's suggestion as to "that tiny scarlet speck that makes men mad" (91).

Even Basil is not sure of his senses on the one occasion when he shares the horror, in the scene that culminates in his murder. Here as always, the altered picture is viewed in the semi-darkness of its attic room by distorted light, as Wilde invariably takes pains to stress. In this particular instance, while the soon-to-be murderer and his victim climb the stairs, "The lamp cast fantastic shadows on the wall and staircase" (154). Entering the room, the same lamp "shot up for a moment in a flame of murky orange." The two men view the picture only by means of its "dim light" and "a half-burned candle" which Basil lifts to inspect his work (155-56). The artist offers, at once, a natural explanation: "'The room is damp. Mildew has got into the canvas. The paints I used had

some wretched mineral poison in them" (156). Lest this seem like empty denial, Wilde prepares the way for the plausibility of such a cause. "There was a damp odour of mildew," he interjects as Dorian and Basil ascend the attic stairs (155), and he fills the night outside with mist and fog (147). At this point, on the eve of Dorian's thirty-eighth birthday, when the portrait has been in the musty attic for nearly twenty years, Basil's reasoning seems more than likely. Indeed some twenty years earlier the artist pointed out the painting's need for a second protective coat of varnish (112), that he has since had no chance to apply. Basil's shocked reaction in the attic room may even have some basis in psychology. In documented cases the mentally ill have been known to share delusions at least temporarily with a sane intimate acquaintance in an "induced psychotic disorder" known as *folie à deux* (Hollandsworth 70). Under the influence of Dorian's manic derangement, himself tired and overwrought with worry for the welfare of his friend, that such an inducement could have colored Basil's senses is plausible in a novel so much of whose thematic emphasis is on the limitless potential of the mind.

Some of the above mentioned details may have been included for horrific effect, but surely not all, and hardly for that reason alone. With only the possible exception, then, of this murder scene, the supposition of delusion on Dorian's part is allowed to build throughout the novel until its closing three sentences, when a macabre reversal occurs. In a desperate effort to free himself from the accusatory image, Dorian rushes at it with a knife. His servants, hearing an agonized cry and then a crash, breach the fatal room from the roof through its balcony window to find:

hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. 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. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was. (224)

With these last four sentences Wilde undoes whatever fatal means was preserving Dorian's youthful aspect and fulfills the suicidal ending that is practically requisite in doubling plots, but in so doing he blasts the entire elaborate structure of doubt that all the rest of the novel has built. There is, to be sure, a gothic sublimity in the horrible scene that greets the witnesses of grisly death with the serene portrait ironically overlooking it. It is highly effective melodramatic sensationalism, but in the larger context it is a disappointment.

This estimate, I suspect, is another way of accounting for the same sense of dissatisfaction that other critics of Wilde's only novel have felt. Few (again, from Pater onward) have analyzed it without finding it in some way flawed. The most common reason is the book's ambiguous moral ground about which Wilde in his lifetime heard more than he could bear with equanimity.<sup>7</sup> In revising, he did his utmost to minimize the didactic theme, but it remains in competition with the amoral tone and decadent philosophy (Lawler, *Inquiry* 41-53, 141-43). Despite his extravagant claim that "*An ethical sympathy . . . is an unpardonable mannerism of style*" (Preface to *DG* xxiii) and his flippant remark that its moral content "is the only error in the book" (*Letters* 259), the novel's moral undertones cannot be overlooked. They are inescapable because Wilde accepts the received assumption that immorality breeds physical corruption, and this judgmental view is part of what compels him to end the novel as he does. It is Lord Henry who first conjures for Dorian a picture of the natural aging process, inducing the wish that initiates the action (21-23). Lord Henry's argument is hedonistic and not very original: since one will grow old regardless of one's conduct, one ought to gather rosebuds. But as the theme of bodily deterioration advances, not merely in connection with the portrait's worsening features, it grows more sinister with the added threat of the physical effects of vice and hard living. Sibyl's mother (59-61), the "hideous Jew" who manages their tawdry theatre (48, 80), a number of aristocratic relics in the fashionable society scenes (37, 40-41, 176-77), and Dorian's frail housekeeper Mrs. Leaf (118--*Last Leaf?*) all exemplify the inevitable loss of youth and stamina. In every instance but the latter is an added implication that excessive living has speeded the process. As Andrew Morris notes, Wilde had repudiated in "The Critic as Artist" (1890) this notion embraced by nineteenth-century physiognomists, yet it prevails in his descriptions of an iniquitous East-End peopled by "haggard women," "squat misshapen figure[s]," and "reeling" drunks "cursing and chattering to themselves like monstrous apes" (Morris 522-23; *DG* 187, 88). Wilde seemingly endorses the view that body bespeaks character when the servants burst in at the end like Fortinbras, admitting the light of day and with it a symbolic return to normalcy. The corpse in the final image--"withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage"--proves how false Dorian's beauty has been, but exceeds anything that could realistically happen to a man of only thirty-eight, no matter how badly debauched. It may have been the element of magic that Wilde wished to support with this detail, but it serves to exaggerate a moral that he would have

preferred to downplay.

Other practical difficulties arise in light of the conclusion. If mildew or "poison" was in the painting, what becomes of it in the sudden light? To what extent would Wilde have us believe in the capacity of deranged thoughts to alter matter . . . or art? Is there, as Dorian wonders, "some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms, that shaped themselves into form and colour on the canvas and the soul that was within him? . . . Or was there some other, more terrible reason?" (95). The awkward moral workings and incongruous details of this narrative may after all be yet another instance of the confusion caused by the loss of traditional faith in an age of materialism. Donald Lawler reminds us that at the end of the eighteenth century the gothic genre was created, according to Horace Walpole its creator, in response to a frustrated popular need for belief in something supernatural ("Gothic" 262-63n1). Some hundred years later came a resurgence of the genre, of which Wilde's novel is surely a part, and the same impulse toward belief would seem to be still operative in the mystery in the attic. Now that no one alive in the world of Dorian Gray has seen the portrait looking anything but radiant, what is left to prove that it was ever anything else? Just the vile object on the floor--and only Wilde or his reader can at all account for that. Is the inference of magic, then, the only way to do so? Perhaps there is an answer in the "chemical atoms," suggested by the dynamic opposition of science and belief.

Revolutionary developments in the understanding of the nervous system had interacted with romantic aesthetics and philosophy in the first half of the century to promote a growing awareness of the physiological interrelatedness of all matter, organic and inorganic, humbling anthropocentric conceptions of man's role in the universe and impressing him with his physical limitations (Clarke and Jacyna 1-2). In the 1860's and 70's in England and on the Continent, advances in cerebral localization theory by Gall, Broca, Wernicke, and Ferrier concerted with the evolutionary theories of Darwin and Spencer to reduce all the heritage of civilized thought to natural causes and mechanistic energies (Young 1-8, Harrington). Wilde was a precocious fourteen-year-old, and Pater twenty-nine and a fellow of Brasenose, in 1868 when T. H. Huxley knowingly unsettled "many zealous persons, and perhaps . . . some few of the wise and thoughtful" with his public lecture "On the Physical Basis of Life" (154). Huxley asked his audience:

What hidden bond can connect the flower which a girl wears  
in her hair and the blood which courses through her youthful

veins; or, what is there in common between the dense and resisting mass of the oak, or the strong fabric of the tortoise, and those broad disks of glassy jelly which may be seen pulsating through the waters of a calm sea . . . ? (132)

The answer: "Protoplasm . . . is the formal basis of all life. . . . and . . . all living forms are fundamentally of one character" (142); "the thoughts to which I am now giving utterance, and your thoughts regarding them, are the expression of molecular changes in that matter of life" (154). These and similar revelations, however much they fretted traditional idealists and shocked the zealous, were an inspiration to the Aesthetes. Pater's Conclusion to *The Renaissance* (1873), which Wilde called "my golden book" (qtd. in Ellmann 47), makes prose poetry of them in every line:

What is the whole physical life . . . but a combination of natural elements to which science gives their names? . . . a perpetual motion . . . the passage of the blood, . . . the modification of the tissues of the brain . . . processes which science reduces to simpler and more elementary forces. Like the elements of which we are composed, the action of these forces extends beyond us: it rusts iron and ripens corn. (186)

In its logical extension this pragmatic concept of the interworkings of life was more worrisome to philosophy than the mere reduction of life to tissues and molecules. It introduced the possibility that life, devoid of spirit, was futile. Pater's Conclusion both acknowledges and answers that possibility: "A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. . . . we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. . . . our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time" (188, 190). This existential stance, although elaborated in ways that Pater did not condone, is recognizable in the life view of Lord Henry and Dorian his pupil. The opening of the notorious catalog section in Chapter Eleven detailing Dorian's endless preoccupation with the "worship of the senses" reads like a plagiarism of the "golden book" (130-33).

Numerous passages from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are cited in a recent article by Terri Hasseler to reveal the deep extent to which determinist attitudes and the vocabulary and concepts of scientific materialism permeate this work. Hasseler's reading is allegorical rather than psychological, but I fully agree with her point that Dorian, in the careening course of a life dedicated to sensation, functions like a creature made up only of the "cells" and "atoms," "nerves" and "veins," "chords,"

"pulses," "vibrations," and "tingling fibres" that constitute his experience of the world. There is a kind of head-on desperation in the determination of these new humanists against the challenges of science. The ultimate goal of Aesthetic indulgence is to free oneself from moral and natural restraints--to go "against the grain." Dorian conquers matter in a number of ways, of which the preternatural continuance of youth is only the most obvious, but he also shows a surgeon's knowledge of anatomy in dispatching Basil by a knife thrust "into the great vein that is behind the ear" (158). Furthermore, the antiseptic disposal of Basil's body by chemical means, leaving only "a horrible smell of nitric acid" is arguably, though it happens offstage, the most appalling thing in the novel (174). There is an absolute awe of science reflected in the capability of this deed. If science can accomplish that much in the context of this fantasy world, then Dorian's crowning speculation with regard to the portrait's central mystery may have something in it:

Might there not be some curious scientific reason for it all? If thought could exercise its influence upon a living organism, might not thought exercise an influence upon dead and inorganic things? Nay, without thought or conscious desire, might not things external to ourselves vibrate in unison with our moods and passions, atom calling to atom in secret love or strange affinity? (106)

These questions are rhetorical, and I suspect Wilde meant the hanging answer to be yes.

As the theme of this anthology holds, the modern literary sensibility finds its worst horrors in the mind. In earlier times, the bestiality of Grendel or Caliban embodied a correspondingly inhuman nature, into the workings of which there was little reason to inquire. Romantic writers are more inclined to empathize with Quasimodo or to humanize the monstrous into the tragic pathos of Dracula or Melmoth, or the fury and agony of the Frankenstein creature. Shakespeare's Caliban is a case in point. He was invariably represented on the stage as a being "barely human," until late in the eighteenth century when as the romantic noble savage he became more often "scarcely animal" (Vaughan and Vaughan 279). His permutations since that time have depended on the political and philosophic winds, but he has remained elementally though unflatteringly human. Wilde invokes him significantly in the Preface to *Dorian Gray* to foreshadow Dorian's own gaze into the mirror of art:

*The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban  
seeing his own face in a glass.*

*The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the  
rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.*

(xxiii)

In Wilde's day, Caliban typically symbolized the dark Darwinian world view, costumed as a scaly amphibian or simian missing link (Vaughan and Vaughan 184-89) to suggest the ancestral beast frighteningly close at hand in the irrational subconscious depths. "Nature, red in tooth and claw," as Tennyson once put it, made Romantic man irrelevant, "who seem'd so fair, / Such splendid purpose in his eyes" (*In.Mem.* 56.15, 9-10). Wilde knew the angst of the nineties as well as any of his contemporaries, blurring the boundaries of life and art, living a double life of celebrity in a repressive society, making duality a recurring theme in his works. "I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age" he wrote in *De Profundis* (151). In his one great novel, he captures the anxieties of a post-Darwinian world confronting modernity. With Shakespeare's brute inside, the nineteenth century, gazing through the eyes of its most refined and handsome young man, sees its autoscopic self in the ghastly picture of Dorian Gray.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Spoken by Lord Henry Wotton in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 18. *DG* in parenthetical references will designate this text.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance: 87, 117, 133, 134, 146, 155, 158, 162, 168, 170, 183, 185, 200, 222.

<sup>3</sup> To my knowledge, no one has noted that Dorian Gray's initials, "DG," correspond to the initial letters of the two words in the compound "*doppelgänger*."

<sup>4</sup> Tymms 29. Tymms treats *Dorian Gray* on pages 107-08. See also Rank 71-73. These two groundbreaking studies and a number of noteworthy studies of the *doppelgänger* that have appeared in the intervening years (Diment, Hawthorn, Herdman, Keppler, Miller, Miyoshi, Rogers) give necessarily brief coverage to Wilde's novel, considering the mass of literary treatments in this genre. I have found no study which anticipates my point, that Wilde deliberately crafted the narration to suggest hallucination on Dorian's part.

<sup>5</sup> Rogers includes an example of clinically documented autoscopia in the case history of "the inimitable Mr. G.," who seeing his image a few feet in front of him, would attempt to baffle it by changing his facial expressions so rapidly that the double could not keep up with him (2). Rogers also relays an incident from the life of the poet Alfred de Musset (1810-1857) that is strikingly similar to Dorian's experience: Musset, who was prone to autoscopic hallucinations (23), after passing through a cemetery on a moonlit night, reportedly "caught sight of a man running towards him. As the stranger drew nearer, the poet saw that his face was haggard, his clothes torn, and his hair dishevelled. The man was drunk; as he lurched past, his face contorted in a leer of hatred. At that instant the poet was overwhelmed with terror for the mysterious stranger was *himself*, twenty years older, with features ravaged by debauchery, mouth agape, and eyes aghast with fear" (qtd. in Rogers 177n7). Goethe and Shelley are also said to have had autoscopic experiences (Tymms 26).

<sup>6</sup> See Lawler, *Inquiry* 20 and 53-67, on the careful revisions implemented to downplay the book's homosexual content.

<sup>7</sup> Wilde's heated replies to various periodical editors reflect the contemporary reviewers' objections (*Letters* 257-72). More recently fault has been found with Wilde's moral abdication as narrator, in Michael Molino's insightful article, and with moral contradictions between the Preface and the novel, in John Herdman's study of the *doppelgänger* theme (137-43).

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