

# “Into the Exquisitely Obscure”: Aestheticism and Fragmentation in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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**Abstract** This paper aims at tracing a link between early literary works, namely via French *Décadence*, the notion of Art for Art’s Sake and the trope of doubleness, concepts that intertwine both independent self-assertion and the defeat of Man by Nature as these come to be represented in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). The dialogue between coeval aesthetical movements and the complexity of such an oeuvre unveils instances of undeniable influence; on the other hand, it also ascertains the uniqueness of Wilde’s provocative take on beauty and life.

**Keywords** Wilde. Aestheticism. Beauty. Decadence. Evil.

**Sommario** 1. Introduction, or, Setting up the Easel: French *Décadence* and Aestheticism. – 2. Double Trouble: Into the Exquisitely Obscure. – 3. Conclusion, or, Laying Down the Brush.



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## 1 Introduction, or, Setting up the Easel: French *Décadence* and Aestheticism

For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds  
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.  
(William Shakespeare, Sonnet 94, ll. 13-14)

English aestheticism has been defined as a reaction against a number of forces in industrial, nineteenth-century England: utility, rationality, scientific factuality, technical progress, middle-class conformity, capitalism, democratic levelling, athleticism, sexual mores and – last but not least – oppressive moralism (Pease 2004, 98). Wilde himself would declare that “today more than ever the artist and the love of the beautiful are needed to temper and counteract the sordid materialism of the age” (Beckson 2006, 35). The need for self-expression regardless of convention and social norms thus emerges as the most cogent feature of a movement that flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century with the publication of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857). In the beginning, then, there was Baudelaire.<sup>1</sup> As was the *dandy*, that quasi-mythical figure embodying the perfectibility of the human, paving his way in society through an aesthetic of (re)invention and performance (Calloway 1997, 45). Like Dorian Gray under the influence of the magnanimous Lord Henry Wotton, the *dandy* is scarcely aware of anything outside himself. It is, in fact, what lies *within* that which proves fatal in Wilde’s novel.

Advocating the rejection of any sense of morality, the Decadents wanted art to produce emotional response, and beauty to become the creed for all creative aspects of life. To Baudelaire, artificiality is art’s essence (see Guys 1986), as the figure of the poet indulges in morbid sensations and post-romantic agony when confronting, through his *flânerie*, the claws of mounting modernity.<sup>2</sup> The artificial enclave of one’s paradise is a subject for poetry, one that rails vehemently against usefulness: “Être un homme utile m’a paru toujours quelque chose de bien hideux” (Baudelaire, quoted in Carassus 1971, 77). Théophile Gautier, his contemporary, would follow the same pattern by asserting the primacy of the beautiful over

1 “À une époque où la littérature attribuait presque exclusivement la douleur de vivre aux malchances d’un amour méconnu ou aux jalousies de l’adultère, il avait négligé ces maladies infantiles et sondé ces plaies plus incurables, plus vivaces, plus profondes qui sont creusées para la satiété, la désillusion, le mépris, dans les âmes en ruine que le présent torture, que le passé répugne, que l’avenir effraye et désespère” (Huysmans [1884] 1977, 231).

2 The concept of *mundus senescit* struck a chord in world-weary Decadent avant-garde paladins across Europe. In this connection, Arthur Symons associated the movement with all the “qualities that mark the end of great periods: an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity” (Goldfarb 1962, 371).

the useful: "Il n'y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien" (1987, 184).<sup>3</sup>

In his Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde shares with his French counterparts a religious approach to art form: "[a]ll art is at once surface and symbol", an end in itself, "the only excuse for making a useless thing" being "that one admires it intensely" (Wilde [1890] 1998, xxiv). The Preface to the novel itself is a manifesto reflecting not only the long shadow cast by the Decadents but also that of the leading art critic and aesthete of the day, Walter Pater. In many ways, Pater's authorial spectre haunts not only Wilde's meditations on the novel, but also the way the latter structures his narrative and character development, voicing Pater's philosophy in Lord Henry's perverse aphorisms. Following Pater's "the end of Art is not action but contemplation" (Pater [1973] 1990, 131), Lord Henry praises "the great aristocratic art of doing absolutely nothing" (Wilde [1890] 1998, 30-1) and admits to his pupil, Dorian, who at this point in the novel is no longer so naïve: "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" (217). Thus, Being opposes and defeats Doing, as Form takes precedence over Content, becoming Art's primary signifier. Wilde himself, in his essay "The Critic as Artist", would postulate that "it is Form that creates not merely the critical temperament, but also the aesthetic instinct, that unerring instinct that reveals to one all things under the conditions of beauty" (Pease 2004, 106; see also Wilde 1961, 109). Aesthetical awareness is, thus, the only ethical stance that matters.

When Wilde and W.B. Yeats met for the first time, the former confessed that Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) was his "golden book": "I never travel anywhere without it; but it is the *very flower of decadence*" (Wilde [1890] 1998, x). This mention of Pater's *Studies* as a golden book may allude to the tradition, much in vogue throughout the 1880s and 1890s, of attributing a yellow(ish) colour to works of lewd content, i.e., manuscripts expressing an interest in sexual dissidence and hedonism, and likely to exert a negative influence on the reader. The very words Wilde utters seem to corroborate the delicate nature of a corrupted - and corruptive - agent: *flower of decadence* prefigures rotteness and the inevitability of tragic ends that stem from immoral conduct.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Curiously enough, while breaking with the past and deeply receptive to the rising Symbolist movement, these poets seem to preserve the *dictum* of John Keats in *Endymion*, Book One: "A thing of beauty is a joy forever | [...] It will never pass into nothingness", vv. 1-3. As if the work of art opened its own way to immortality, trying to capture what Baudelaire calls "l'éternel dans le transitoire" (Baudelaire [1869] 1998, 170).

<sup>4</sup> And yet, "the books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame", expostulates Lord Henry (Wilde [1890] 1998, 218).

One should remember that in Pater's novels too - *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) and *Gaston de Latour* (1888) - books play a key role in the young heroes' actions: Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* to Marius, and Ronsard's *Odes* to Gaston. In a very compelling argument for the incompatibility between the Paterian self-development plot (posited by Lord Henry early on in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*) and the gothic degeneration plot triggered by the portrait, Nils Clausson sheds light on a veiled though consistent theme in such works: that of repressed homosexuality. While admitting that "the self-development novel does not generically require that its protagonist lead a double life" (Pater's heroes do not), "the homosexual theme on Wilde's novel does require that Dorian live a double life" (Clausson 2003, 349). Incidentally, the incompatibility of the novel's double genre mirrors the impossibility of telling "a subversive story of dissidence and transgression leading to self-development and liberation" (Clausson 2003, 363). As we know, tragedy unfolds.

In the 1890s, a famous, though short-lived, quarterly literary journal, *The Yellow Book* (1894-1897), provokingly echoed the weight of decadent fashion among writers. A certain cannibalistic quality pervaded the literary scene, with books preying on books, gradually weakening characters until they became nothing but shadows, not of what they used to be, but rather of what they might have been. Such is the case of Dorian Gray, a character that had all the potential to be the typical hero of the *Bildungsroman* genre and who instead becomes the avatar for the protagonist of Lord Henry's fictional *Künstlerroman* protagonist, embedded in Wilde's survey of the attractions and shortcomings of aestheticism. In Wilde's novel, Pater's lesson reverberates in Lord Henry's teachings that testify to Art for Art's Sake as "a new kind of art untrammelled by social rules, by quotidian concepts of good or evil or by any other concerns extraneous to the central aim of aesthetic experience or the single-minded pursuit of beauty" (Daniel 1997, 37). This represents an escape from the constraints of late Victorian society, a society that would never condone the strategies by which Dorian makes/masks and un-makes/unmasks himself; in other words, a society that would separate master from masterpiece so failing "to treat life in the spirit of art", as Pater maintained. And yet, this ideal of self-development will prove deadly to Wotton's *protégé* by deteriorating into unbridled self-indulgence.

In line with this *anxiety of influence* on the part of Wilde, the book that indeed matters for the purpose of the present analysis is J.K. Huysmans's *À Rebours*, published in 1884. To Huysmans, a French author who owed much to Baudelaire and Gautier - and mentioned by Arthur Symons in his seminal study *The Decadent Movement in*

*Literature* (1893)<sup>5</sup> – is allotted the “vigueur de créer un mythe où s’accomplit le *mal du siècle* de René” (Huysmans 1977, 24).<sup>6</sup> Huysmans elevated the concept of the Decadent (anti)hero in his account of a man – Duc Jean de Floressas des Esseintes – dotting on metaphysical pessimism, a willing prisoner of the inner world he builds for his own (dis)comfort, in a solitary quest for an ideal that cannot (must not?) be reached, while shrouding himself in a sort of Kierkegaardian existential Angst. Considered to be the unquestionable breviary of Decadent *Zeitgeist*, fostering a rhetoric that opposes the threats of Naturalism, *À Rebours* was surely set to “fix the last fine shade, the quintessence of things; to fix it fleetingly; to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul” (Goldfarb 1962, 371). Its almost inexistent plot concentrates on the eccentric tastes of a reclusive bibliophile, his contempt for the bourgeois society, and the endeavours to create, at a microscopic level, his own constellation of (half) living beautiful things. Things that only he, drowned in lethargic self-consumption,<sup>7</sup> can admire.

Crucially, the book’s title fosters the acknowledgement of a programmed ontological and epistemological meditation: *Against Nature*<sup>8</sup> privileges an appropriation of artificiality as the real thing, a tour through the aesthetical solipsism of a compulsive art collector (unsurprisingly obsessed with the ambiguity and unattainable lustfulness of Gustave Moreau’s paintings) who takes monastical refuge from a past life of debauchery in Paris in the only terrain where he is no longer exposed to civilization’s declined, and declining, values: the countryside. It is not, one gathers, a specific kind of natural setting he escapes from, but rather his own natural tendencies, informed by the urban *loci* where sinfulness and spiritual degradation thrive. By indulging in the invention of luxurious perfumes, the consumption of exquisite teas, and the collection of artificial flowers that *look* real (among other pleasures), Des Esseintes is a model for Dorian, a vehicle for the defense of man as object of art to be looked up to and gazed upon – his ultimate aim being that of replacing reality itself with its dream:

<sup>5</sup> In fact, Arthur Symons called the movement a “new and beautiful and interesting disease” (quoted in Goldfarb 1962, 371; emphasis added), in a sympathetic approach to the general spleen-like attitude of its followers.

<sup>6</sup> The reference is to François-René de Chateaubriand’s *Génie du Christianisme* (1802).

<sup>7</sup> Des Esseintes’s resolution of shunning, in his self-embowerment, any contact with the outer world dramatically repeats Pascal’s *dictum* of “demeurer en repos dans une chambre”, taken up by Baudelaire in his text “La Solitude” (Baudelaire [1869] 1998, 80). This is in stark contrast to Dorian’s approach who, rather, locks his surrogate self in a secret room and finds no peace.

<sup>8</sup> As a watershed work in Huysmans’s corpus and in French literature at the time, *À Rebours* was intended to be “a critique of literary naturalism (à la Zola) in favour of what he later called ‘naturalisme spiritualiste’” (Shea 2014, 121).

Il se procurait ainsi, en ne bougeant point, les sensations rapides, presque instantanées, d'un voyage du long cours, et ce plaisir du déplacement qui n'existe, en somme, que par le souvenir et presque jamais dans le présent.<sup>9</sup> (Huysmans 1977, 94)

Tellingly, Huysmans's book is also believed to be the poisonous novel that leads to Dorian's downfall. Self-development breeds self-indulgence which in turn, and ultimately, breeds evil deeds: "Dorian Gray had been poisoned by a book. There were moments when he looked on evil simply as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful" (Wilde [1890] 1998, 158). Once beauty and evil are intrinsically connected, there is no turning back: suffering the unrelentless impact of Lord Henry's opinions - the serpent in the garden (Paglia 1990, 514) - and haunted by his own inner decay evinced in the painting's external deterioration, Dorian's (un)natural step is to murder Basil Hallward, the man whose existence confronts him with a reality he is set on ignoring. The friend who, by crying out "I want the Dorian Gray I used to paint" (Wilde [1890] 1998, 109), condemns not only himself but also Dorian as a consummate instrument of evil, and ruined soul past salvation. It is difficult not to concur with Camille Paglia when she says that Basil is, in truth, punished for being under the spell of Dorian's beauty - which he is, from the start<sup>10</sup> - whereas Dorian is punished for being under the spell of his own portrait, his mirror-image, in a perverse and erotically charged interplay of signifier and signified (Paglia 1990, 518).

After Sibyl Vane and Alan Campbell commit suicide, it is still to the yellow book that Dorian turns to in order to justify his own corruption. In which case, one can never dismiss *À Rebours* as light influence (Shea 2014, 117), unless not filtered by Lord Henry's heavy postulations. Nevertheless, even Lord Henry will have to come to terms with the uncontrollable dissipation of his work of art, his boy turned into a man turned into a monster. Quite simply, a lily that festers.

<sup>9</sup> "He procured, without any effort, the quick, almost immediate, sensations of a long journey, and such pleasure of displacement that does not exist, after all, except in recollection, and almost never in the present time" (Author's transl.).

<sup>10</sup> "As long as I live, the personality of Dorian Gray will *dominate* me" (Wilde [1890] 1998, 12; emphasis added).

## 2 Double Trouble: into the Exquisitely Obscure

For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,  
 Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.  
 (William Shakespeare, Sonnet 147, ll. 13-14)

The trope of doubleness in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is strikingly obvious in its initial pages, when Dorian is posing for Basil while Lord Henry watches the progress of the painting, musing upon the degree of influence his unconventional idea(l)s might have on the beautiful youth. Here, before the reader, is a sort of art/love triangle where a double movement is key to the perception of what is in store for the main character: on the one hand, the subject/object of art (Dorian) influences the vehicle of art/artist (Basil) into the perfect materialization of the spirit of his youth and beauty; on the other hand, another "artist" (Lord Henry) devises the best way to (de)compose upon the subject ways of making it/him blossom, as the most dedicated gardener would (see Wilde [1890] 1998, 17, 35).

The mere act of composition is double already, gradually accomplished both through Basil's sessions with the young man and the long conversations held between the latter and the older bachelor, who sets to the self-appointed task of trying to be to Dorian Gray "what, without knowing it, the lad was to the painter who had fashioned the wonderful portrait. He would seek to dominate him" (Wilde [1890] 1998, 36). Dorian himself, in spite of "all the candour [...], all youth's passionate purity" (15), yields to the power of revelation: "He was dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him [...] The few words that Basil's friend had said to him [...] had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before" (18). All very promising indeed. Except that, just as Basil's first encounter with Dorian had brought him a bittersweet taste of dreadful things to come (6) so too in Dorian's eyes was "a *look of fear* [...]" such as people have when they are suddenly awakened" (20; emphasis added), as he contemplated, via Lord Henry's utterances, the sense of his enormous potential.

Under the latter's spell, Dorian is then unaware that, concomitantly with his growing wonder, his "darkening eyes" (Wilde [1890] 1998, 41) prevail, letting us read the novel as a process of (de)construction/fragmentation of personality, a study on the "passion for sensations" (48) that prefigures tragedy (Gillespie 1996, 68). That is, what distinguishes Dorian from Des Esseintes is that the latter sublimates his passions while the former lives them fully, "sucking out all the marrow of life", as Thoreau puts it (Thoreau [1854] 1990, 60) One can also postulate, with C. Michael Shea, that while Wilde's concern is not so much with the pathology of "decay", he takes Huysmans's aesthetics to a new level, "which could aptly be termed one of 'depravity'" (2014, 118). Dorian is, simply and rest-

lessly, "gathering his harvest while it was yet spring" (Wilde [1890] 1998, 57). To be sure, both Lord Henry and Wilde seem to share a common creed: that of envisaging a double nature in every man, as two sides of the same coin alter(nate) according to Dorian's whims. While Wilde declares, in his Preface, that "vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art" (xxiv), Lord Henry ratifies this necessity by proving there was "something fascinating in this son of Love and Death" (36).

Doubleness, which is central in Wilde's aesthetics (see Gillespie 1996, 39), was no novel subject in literature. The self had been understood as a plural entity since August Schlegel's analysis of the spirit containing in itself a multiplicity of spirits, through Walt Whitman's poetry ("I contain multitudes!"), up to the famous and bold assertion by poet Arthur Rimbaud, in a letter addressed to Paul Demeny in 1871: "Je est un autre" – an assertion which proclaimed the full perception of man being already his own double while verbalizing that same thought; not the expectable "I am another" but rather the far more ambiguous "I is another", which is strikingly provocative. According to John Herdman, Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* was seminal to the development of the theme of the double as "a fictional device for articulating the experience of self-division" (Herdman 1990, 1) and to ensure that "the concept of moral evil became associated with the primitive, the savage and the untamed in the human spirit" (Herdman 1990, 11).<sup>11</sup> A connection can, thus, be established between the Faustian myth – reverberating in Gothic tales and German literature through Goethe – and the restless experimentation Dorian goes through, transforming his inner self into a "thing of darkness" (*The Tempest*, Act V, Scene 1, l.8), a servant of the devil. How can one not see that implication when the young man himself utters the following wish upon seeing his portrait for the first time: "If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that – for that – I would give everything. *I would give my soul* for that" (Wilde [1890] 1998, 25-6; emphasis added)?<sup>12</sup>

By being granted his wish, Dorian embarks on a journey that is no less than (counter-) aesthetic experience and experiment. Even

**11** "Soul and body, body and soul [...] There was animalism in the soul, and the body had its moments of spirituality" (Wilde [1890] 1998, 58). This passage is echoed in Richard Ellmann's take on Wilde's dilemma: "He turned sacred things inside out to make them secular and secular things inside out to make them sacred, he showed souls becoming carnal and lusts becoming spiritual" (quoted in Beckson 2006, 49).

**12** Under this light, one cannot possibly exclude Basil's musings upon meeting Dorian as the result of an obscure desire, a perverse wish to be fulfilled: "I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself" (Wilde [1890] 1998, 6). For indeed, "extreme male beauty, like a siren song, lures towards destruction" (Paglia 1990, 522).



more so since it is, literally, through an artistic medium, painting, that darker forces will exert power over his vitality and beauty. It is through the portrait, his shadow-conscience, that he surrenders to self-love, the sin by which he falls from Hellenic grace (on self-love in Huysmans, see Paglia 1990, 436).

Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, published in 1886, seems to loom large in Wilde's novel too. In the tale of a respectable man and his *Doppelgänger*, Stevenson makes use of science to justify the fragmentation and gradual destruction of a man who narrates his own fate. In no more than seventy pages the author uses expressions such as: "duplicity of life", "both sides of me", "duality of man", "separate identities", "second character", "my double", "my second self" and "the horror of my other self" (Stevenson [1886] 1979, 81-2, 86-8, 95). The pattern of repeating *ad nauseam* the state he finds himself in joins forces with the evidence that Jekyll is aware of that process and makes a more violent claim for an irreversible end in which one should not control or appease the bestiality within: "[f]or man is not truly one, but truly two" (82).

Performance becomes Dorian in a spectacle in which his own unstained beauty, "unspotted from the world" (Wilde [1890] 1998, 127), is at once the "mask of his shame" (94; significantly, Wilde had written an essay entitled *The Truth of Masks - A Note on Illusion*) and the theatre whereupon his play of "eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins" (105) is performed. In his later progression as a self-justified sinner, after the deaths of Sibyl Vane (see Shea 2014, 131) and Alan Campbell, Dorian is both actor and spectator of his own life, in an attempt to escape suffering: "We watch ourselves, and the mere wonder of the spectacle *enthalls* us" (Wilde [1890] 1998, 101; emphasis added).

The transfusion between man and art is completed, and metamorphosis accomplished. The rub, however, lies in the fact that "there is something fatal about a portrait"; this, ironically enough, leads to the conclusion that its deadly nature stems from it having "a life of its own" (117). This perception of the other self is aligned with two previous moments, one in which Dorian first makes the gruesome discovery: "The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth" (90); the other, at the very beginning of the novel, when Lord Henry ominously anticipates Dorian's future double identity, replying to Basil's "You really must not say things like that before Dorian, Harry [...] Before *which* Dorian? The one who is pouring out tea for us, or the one in the picture?" (129; emphasis added). Ultimately, apprehension is ambivalent: it is impossible to see Dorian from a single perspective, because the character becomes fluid, depending on the angles from which it is perceived, and contains, in short, a pluralism that informs the perception of his nature (Gillespie 1996, 70).

Well after discovering the terrible truth that the portrait bears the burden of his sinful actions (Wilde [1890] 1998, 140), Dorian indulges in a sensual life, improving his skills as a refined collector of delicate items such as perfumes, music, jewellery or embroideries.<sup>13</sup> Again, it is a behaviour that emulates the young Parisian's from the poisonous yellow book Lord Henry gave him, *À Rebours*. Parallels can be traced, then, between the description of certain objects (or "material continuities", according to Shea 2014, 127) in both novels and the state of decay pervading the soul of both protagonists. Symbolically, much can be said of the "large purple satin coverlet heavily embroidered with gold, a splendid piece of late seventeenth-century Venetian work" (Wilde [1890] 1998, 118; emphasis added). The symbolism of the colours here described, or the elegance of the fabric, are of paramount importance; but so is the fact that they are associated with Venice, bringing forth the recollection of a once splendid city, the Adriatic jewel, that had long ago fallen prey to the "sudden decay of a beauty that had once been so remarkable" (127).

In mimicking Des Esseintes's hedonism, Dorian goes even further and cannot help keenly feeling "the terrible pleasure of a double life" (Wilde [1890] 1998, 175). Des Esseintes tries to control someone else's life and recreate it anew, projecting his contempt for modern civilization on his resolve. Auguste Langlois, a poor boy he meets on the street, is introduced to the pleasures of the flesh in a brothel and given money and access to luxury goods to which he will become addicted. Hence – such is the logic behind Des Esseintes's formulation – the predisposition of the boy to become a violent, addicted criminal:

la vérité c'est que je tâche simplement de préparer un assassin. [...] En l'amenant ici, au milieu d'un luxe qu'il ne soupçonnait même pas et qui se gravera forcément dans sa mémoire; en lui offrant, tous les quinze jours, une telle aubaine, il prendra l'habitude de ces jouissances que ses moyens lui interdisent. [...] En poussant les choses à l'extrême, il tuera [...] – alors, mon but sera atteint, j'aurais contribué, dans la mesure de mes ressources, à créer un gremlin, un ennemi de plus pour cette hideuse société qui nous ranconne.<sup>14</sup> (Huysmans 1977, 150-1)

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, when Stephen Calloway analyses Wilde's "Pen, Pencil and Poison", the life account of Regency painter, belletrist and criminal Thomas Griffiths Wainwright, he aligns it with the behavioural pattern of both Des Esseintes and Dorian Gray: "This inventory of rare, precious and pleasingly obscure delights of the connoisseur, together with its concomitant implication of a super-subtle artistic temperament to match, might almost serve as a description of any one of a number of the Aesthetes of the 1890s and of their exquisitely contrived rooms" (Calloway 1997, 38).

<sup>14</sup> "The truth is that I am simply trying to nurture an assassin. [...] By bringing him here, amidst such luxury he would never have dreamed of, forever imprinted in his

Dorian, on the other hand, becomes his own creature, eventually escaping Lord Henry's supervision. At the height of his individualism, his conscience knows that he is at the mercy of a "disturbing and *disintegrating* force", as Wilde describes it in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (see Pease 2004, 110; emphasis added). He turns himself into a violent, addicted criminal, under the mask of a well-bred young gentleman, leading women and men into temptation, and in so doing he is following the lead of Lord Henry, putting his delightful, poisonous aphorisms into practice; "as I do everything you say" (Wilde [1890] 1998, 46; emphasis added). Dorian lures friends and strangers to their death and, emotionless, shows no regret: "[h]e knew that he had tarnished himself, filled his mind with corruption and given horror to his fancy; that he had been an *evil influence* to others, and had experienced a *terrible joy* in being so" (Wilde [1890] 1998, 219; emphasis added).

### 3 Conclusion, or, Laying Down the Brush

When Lord Henry tells Dorian: "You are not yourself tonight" (Wilde [1890] 1998, 182), he is declaring the failure of his own plan,<sup>15</sup> a failure of the dandiacal ideal of essence through contemplation, not *praxis*. The young man has not physically altered over the years but the outcome is not what his old friend had expected. Lord Henry's creation is doomed to perish through exhaustion and despair, for instead of making a career out of his own controlled self-construction, he cannot do it without incurring the ruin of others. Paradoxically, it is through Lord Henry's words that the ultimate advice can be given to the readers: when it comes to self-denial, to escape from reality is bound to have a tragic effect: "[w]e are punished by our refusals" (18). Thus Dorian, first seduced, later seducer, walks straight into the abyss of his deceitful beautified life, a life for his rotten entreats to seize.

Oscar Wilde manages to construe a character that meets what Camille Paglia defines in terms of the already mentioned Decadent

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memory; by giving him, every fortnight, such good fortune, he will depend on those little pleasures that his own means forbid. [...] By pushing things to an extreme, he will kill [...] - then, my goal will be achieved, and I will have contributed, within the power of my resources, to create a rogue, yet another enemy to this hideous society that imprisons us" (Author's transl.).

**15** Michael P. Gillespie argues that "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" (Gillespie 1996, 66). This happens because Lord Henry is more of a talker than a doer, and the hypothetical range of his pupil's actions is, to him, aberrant and unacceptable.

erotic principle: "the transformation of person into *objet d'art*" (Paglia 1990, 512). This transformation accompanies Dorian's moral suspension and his constant shift from broad daylight Apollo (reflected already in his own name, Dorian) to night-time Dionysus<sup>16</sup> during his ramblings through London's fashionable high society or the *bas fond* brothels and opium rooms of the modern city. As Paglia puts it, in his madness for pleasure, Dorian represents the ultimate demonization of the Apollonian. It stands also as a reminder of how nature, magnetic and magnanimous, can surge back "into the palace of art" (Paglia 1990, 514) to reclaim what is dutifully hers, a piece of evidence that not even a counter-aesthetics designed to oppose a more unnatural (rather than unnaturalistic) society can unambiguously face. Dorian's self-destruction, in Shea's words, "brings with it a new harmony; it sets the order of nature back into its proper alignment, transforming the portrait to its original state of beauty, and leaving Dorian old, twisted, and lifeless on the garret floor" (Shea 2014, 136).

As Baudelaire wrote, "[m]ais qu'importe l'éternité de la damnation à qui a trouvé dans une seconde l'infini de la jouissance?" ("Le Mauvais Vitrier", Baudelaire [1869] 1998, 42).

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**16** "Voici le soir charmant, ami du criminel; | Il vient comme un complice, à pas de loup ; le ciel | Se ferme lentement comme une grande alcôve, | Et l'homme impatient se change en bête fauve" (Baudelaire [1857] 1999, 147).

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