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## OSCAR WILDE'S REFUTATION OF "DEPTH" IN *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*: A READING

It was the mask engaged your mind,  
And after set your heart to beat,  
Not what's behind.

W. B. Yeats, *The Mask*

"Those who see any difference between soul and body have neither"  
O. Wilde, *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*

In one of his letters Oscar Wilde admits that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reflects much of himself. This "self", however, is manifold and split. Wilde says, "[...] Basil Hallward is what I *think* I am: Lord Henry is what the world *thinks* of me: Dorian what I *would like* to be – in other ages, perhaps" (qtd. in Sammells 56, italics mine). The self, as spoken about, is thus a matter of conjecture and wish-fulfilment: whether there is any core to it – or any definable individualised depth – is open to question. The author of *The Picture* (characteristically, also of the essay *The Truth of Masks*) speaks of personality as it *appears*, not as it *is*; the conventionally negative association of the notion of "appearance" (or mask) – as the concept contrasted with the idea of truth – is no longer valid. The notion of "truth" is understood as an equivalent of the idea of "appearance" also by Lord Henry, a typically Wildean dandy-esque character. An intellectual mentor to the eponymous Dorian, he challenges the beliefs that equate masking with deceitfulness by asserting that "[i]t is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances" (31). Appearance – or surface – is the truth. Thus, to be truthful means to endeavour not to forget one's obligations towards the surface, socially involved, *persona* in favour of one's pretence to individual depth.

### I Depth vs. surface

#### *The metaphor of odours*

The notions of truth and appearance, the shallow and the deep, or surface and depth, produce intricate relationships in Oscar Wilde's story. The opening paragraph of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not about visual icons, but odours: "The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden, there came through the open door the

heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn” (18). The visual and, subsequently, auditory images follow in the next passages, but even there images appear as flitting shadows and faint gleams, while sounds (distant “dim roar of London” and “[...] the murmur of the bees”) become muffled in the smoke-filled room of Lord Henry Wotton. It is the olfactory sensation that makes the metaphor of uninhibited penetration. Significantly, in a story about a picture shapes and colours have only a secondary appeal; it is the senses of smell and sound whose impact comes first and is most acute. While shapes and colours constitute the attributes of the surface,<sup>1</sup> sounds and smells (though subdued) transgress, in a metaphorical way, the limits of the surface and suffuse the depth.

#### *Musical metaphor*

By referring to sounds and smells, Dorian describes his passing infatuation with Sybil: To him her voice is a melody: “very low at first, with deep mellow tones [...] then [...] a little louder, [...] sound[ing] like a flute or a distant hautbois [...] in the garden scene [...] having] all the tremulous ecstasy that one hears just before dawn when the nightingales are singing” (49). Being like a melody to Dorian, Sybil’s voice resembles also a penetrating smell: it has “the wild passion of violets” (49). Significantly, what stirs Dorian is not what is said to him, when the girl eventually has fallen in love and makes her confession, but the musical qualities of the poetry she brings to the stage. As a professional actress, Sybil is, so to say, an instrument operating within the safe limits of a theatrical performance.<sup>2</sup> (However, such an idea of performative instrumentality is not negative.) Yet, outside the theatre she loses her power to enchant. Suddenly, it becomes painfully clear that her personal impact is no more than merely stirring a sense of elation in the sensation-craving Dorian. She becomes reduced to a different type of instrumentality – the one which is enforced upon her by Dorian’s fear of having no “depth” or of his “nature [being] so shallow” (48). Although Lord Henry manages to temporarily assuage Dorian’s fear by assuring him that he “think[s] Dorian’s nature so deep” (48), he fails to warn him that this “depth” – in terms other than metaphysical – is a concept void of meaning. Such depth has no definable quality.

#### *The “deep” in Dorian*

The apparent surface/depth dichotomy, as related to the concept of selfhood, takes the shape of a clash between clandestine thoughts -what’s “in the brain, and in the brain only”, “passions, day-dreams and sleeping dreams” – on the one hand, and his juvenescent appearance – “rose-red youth and (his) rose-white boyhood” (29) – on the other. The alluring boy is easily seduced by music and by the words of Lord Henry,<sup>3</sup> though he misses their sense as it not the logic but the magic of language to which Dorian responds. Accidentally, Lord Henry is right in stating that Dorian is not “shallow”, but “deep”. However, his judgement of Dorian has a negative meaning that Lord Henry might have not intended: there is actually a “depth” in Dorian where words resonate with an echo, but there is no mature social (which is surface) *persona* that could modify the impact of Lord Henry’s

teaching. Dorian never questions or debates what Henry Wotton says; at most, he feebly resists it, only to yield the more eagerly to his influence. If seen in terms of the musical analogy, Dorian's self can be compared to a musical instrument with no surface membrane to modify the sounds, but with a deep resonance box to intensify their echo. His life, though apparently abounding in multifarious experiences, is always about intensifying only one experience – that of consumption.

*The consumerist self: philosophical parallels*

In the sense of being a fussy connoisseur and a voracious consumer, with his thirst for novelty and a taste for changing costumes, Wilde's protagonist is a *fin de siècle* counterpart of our contemporary (Richard Rorty's) intellectual, though Dorian's adventures are not of a cerebral but of a corporeal kind. Similar to Dorian, Rorty's intellectual "ironist" is a *persona* to whom any essence is denied, whose self is being constantly re-written in the changing vocabularies 'she' encounters in 'her' picaresque-patterned intellectual life, and whose aim is uninhibited self-realisation through continual transferring from one intellectual position to another. While Rorty's concept of selfhood as purely contingent<sup>4</sup> is radically exclusive of any essence (and, with necessary culture- and epoch-relying alternations, may be exemplified by the novel's eponymous character), the concept of the self as rendered in the philosophy of Richard Shusterman seems closer to the stance represented by the novel's author as it is indicated by the story's subtle ironies.<sup>5</sup> It seems more pertinent to see Dorian in the light of Shusterman's criticism of excessive individualism<sup>6</sup> and consumerism than in the light of Rorty's apology for incessantly changing selfhood. Although Wilde expressed the desire to be like Dorian, his protagonist is eventually too much of a failure to raise a desire for identification. Though a connoisseur of increasingly extravagant sensations, Dorian does not become any more sensitive for that. His senses are gradually being dulled so that he cannot relish simple pleasures and has to feed his emotional void (or assuage his fear of emptiness) with what is new and exotic. Such consumerism – actually, because of its desperate character, a far cry from Hedonism – is sharply contrasted with pleasure (also aesthetic delight) as viewed in the context of Shusterman's somaesthetics.

Somaesthetic equally connotes both the cognitive sharpening of our *aisthesis* or sensory perception and the artful reshaping of our somatic form and functioning; not simply to make us stronger and more perceptive for our own sensual satisfaction, but to render us more sensitive to the needs of others and more capable of responding to them with effectively willed action [...]. (Shusterman 2000: 545–546).

Having replaced disinterested curiosity with a consumer's interest, Dorian – empty and hungry for sensations – is oblivious of any sense of social solidarity as well as denied the pleasure of actively shaping his body. (He is no longer a creator but merely a connoisseur.) He compensates for the latter deprivation, by

fastidiously choosing costumes, inspecting the changes that occur on the canvas, and examining the contrast that grows between his mirrored and painted shapes. These two surfaces, the mirror and the picture, are also suggestive of Dorian's rending apart of the truth and appearance or, in the language of the story's character, the body and the "soul" (i.e. the picture),<sup>7</sup> as if his wish to stay eternally young deprived him of a realisation that one is one's body.

Dorian's nature, then, is deep in the ominous sense of this word. Even if Dorian craves depth – popularly understood as a metaphor of refinement and authenticity – he voices an instinctive apprehension of "depth" when he realises his fear of music: "Music had troubled him many times. But music was not articulate. It was not a new world but rather another chaos, that it created in us" (29). As related to the idea of selfhood, metaphorical depth means "chaos"; it cannot be explored since all meaning is always exposed on the "surfaces" which, in the words of Gilles Deleuze, "we thought we knew so well that we never explored them. Yet it is on these surfaces that the entire logic of meaning is held" (295).<sup>8</sup> In Dorian's case, however, this meaning has been transferred from his corporeal surface to his (portrait's) canvas surface as a result of an inadvertent wish to swap his identity with the picture's, the wish which turned into a curse ("If the picture could change, and I could be always what I am now" (34).) Articulating the desire to exchange his human shape with the portrait's permanent beauty, Dorian enlivens the picture and, in a sense, commits suicide by turning his ever-changing biological body into an immutable artefact. If life is about change, and if youth is defined by curiosity and the power of adaptation, then the eternally "youthful" Dorian is already a dead automaton, having replaced disinterested curiosity with a consumer's interest. A victim of a wish that was thoughtlessly *expressed*, the beautiful boy is subjected to situational irony. In the episode which follows Sybil's suicide, when refusing to talk about the girl, he parrots one of Lord Henry's lessons – "It is simply expression [...] that gives reality to things" (85). Irony deepens when Dorian, again without much understanding, echoes another one of Henry's statements: "It is only shallow people who require years to get rid of an emotion. [...] I don't want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use and to dominate them" (85). The ultimate irony is that Dorian's emotional range is nil; he experiences but a thrill with which he hopes to feed his boredom.

## II The refutation of depth: Surfaces

The tension that is evoked by the *surface/depth* dichotomy is not the only contradiction that structures the story: the tensions evoked by juxtaposing only *surfaces* are of no less importance. Merely contrasting the apparently deceitful mask of carnal beauty and the ugly conscience, the appealing exterior and the dangerous interior, is facile. Rather the story should be considered as an interplay of surfaces: the blank face of the boy who inadvertently rids himself of the visible record of his life written on (and authenticated by) the ageing body, and

the withering, but nevertheless meaningful, face of the picture, which becomes his life and personality writ large.<sup>9</sup>

The story's replacement of the selfhood's *surface/depth* dichotomy with the interplay of *surfaces* can be observed, for example, in the almost emblematic scene in which Dorian scrutinises his surface (or *sur-face*), whilst the youth alternately watches his face as it appears in the mirror and on the canvas. He pities the protagonist of the scandalous "yellow book", who (in contrast to Dorian) cannot bear having his face reflected in any polished surface for fear of seeing the signs of ageing:

He [Dorian] never knew – never indeed had any cause to know – that somewhat grotesque dread of mirrors, and polished metal surfaces and still water, which came upon the young Parisian so early in his life, and was occasioned by the sudden decay of a beauty that he had once, apparently, been so remarkable. [...] Often, on returning home from one of those mysterious and prolonged absences [...] he himself would creep upstairs to the locked room, open the door with the key that never left him now, and stand, with a mirror, in front of the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him, looking now at the evil and ageing face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his sense of pleasure. He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. (*The Picture* 97–98)

What he calls his "soul's" reflection is only delusion. One of the story's ironies is that, repulsive though its object may seem, Dorian confuses self-reflexivity with aesthetic contemplation. The boy, whose beauty has never been marred by intellectual effort, is watching masks whose significance he does not comprehend.

#### *The knife scenes*

However, this is not to say that there is no depth beneath the visual, verbal and behavioural surfaces, but that this depth is not accessible in the sense that it does not yield to ethical concepts and cannot be actualised (though it can be approximated) as an aesthetic realisation. In *The Picture's* knife-scenes, the metaphorical attempt to pierce the surface is fatal. The scenes of stabbing appear three times. In the first scene (p. 34), the act of wielding "the blade of lithe steel" against the picture is qualified as attempted murder.<sup>10</sup> While, early in the novel, ripping the canvas is prevented, later in the story stabbing living bodies is executed, and curiously so, by the same person that saved the portrait. The two deaths, though, reveal no metaphysical depth; both remain a horrifying mystery. What connects the victims – Basil and, ultimately, Dorian – is the fact that they both suffered exposure in the form of the same picture. The portrait is not only a pictorial caricature of Dorian's bad conscience, but also a testimony to Basil's

infatuation with Dorian's beauty and youth – though it seems debatable which quality is ranked as higher. Having admitted his “curious artistic idolatry” (24), Basil confesses that “there is too much of (himself) in the thing [...]” (24). Both Basil and Dorian retain a particular relationship with the picture's alleged depth: Basil – fearing that it would reveal his “heart” to “shallow prying eyes” (24); and Dorian – scrutinising the corporeal manifestations of ugly deeds with which he tried to stifle his sense of void.<sup>11</sup> Now, when Dorian attempts to destroy the picture, its surface – though in the most uncanny way – remains intact, testifying to Basil's and Dorian's blind worship of juvenescence. The meaning, thus, is to be read on the flat surface, whilst the bodies, even if treated as a metaphor of enclosure for their three-dimensionality and alleged depth, having been rendered open by stabbing, reveal no deep essence of their lives: Basil's body, having literally disappeared, and Dorian's, having shrunk to an unrecognisable, hideous shape, communicate, if anything at all, both men's vapidness. When the beauty is restored to the portrait's surface, what is behind (or beneath) it – the painter and the model – is consigned to oblivion. Whether the former hideousness of the picture had been a wonder straight from the Gothic story convention, or Dorian's projecting of hallucination, or Basil's yielding to his model's persuasiveness, remains an open question. The transformation is a mystery, its result, however, is apparent: the surface stays intact; the “depth” is passed by. If the latter remains inscrutable it is because, as made manifest by results, interest in too much exploration is fraught with danger.

### III An ethical reading

(Modernism: depth as delusion; Postmodernism: surface personality)

The conclusion of the pre-modernist story easily yields a postmodernist reading: there is no deep essence, nor any essential depth to explore, let alone define. Curiously enough, Neil Sammells, the author of one of the most recent critical books on Wilde, defines the Wildean self as “surface personality”. He claims that “The novel deconstructs the surface/depth model of individual identity, which posits the ‘real’ self as the kernel in the nut, defining it instead in terms of multiformity” (3). In this, he depicts personality as indeterminate. As noted by Sammells, “Wilde can be seen as performing an unlikely, yet strangely elegant historical leap-frog” as he “anticipates [...] radical postmodern version of dispersed and decentred subjectivity” (Ibid.). The surface in Wilde – as well the mask in Yeats' poem – is not a device of deceitful concealment for what self really is, but a device revealing the truth.<sup>12</sup>

At this point, the motto I chose from Yeats should be reinforced by the following lines that voice a warning against too much inquisitiveness. Yeats' masked *persona*, by gently declining the demand to take off “[t]he mask of burning gold / With emerald eyes”, discourages the rejection of the beautiful surface and refuses to yield to excessive enquiry about the depth: “O no, my dear, let all that be; / What matter, so there is but fire / In you, in me?”. The fire, the archetypal antago-

nist of water and its functional double, besides being a conventional emblem of passion becomes, like water, an image evocative of shapelessness; also of selfhood's inscrutable dimension, about which Dorian was so apprehensive initially.

Though facial exteriority is beautiful, it takes courage for a person to persevere in remaining an unknown surface to others, rather than seek their understanding for faculties, feelings, motives, apprehensions, intentions, beliefs (etc.) that cannot be promptly understood. Praise for such courage, as briefly indicated by Frances Nesbitt Oppel, is also stressed in Nietzsche, who knew the value of the visible: "Oh those Greeks [...] they knew how to *live!* For that end is necessary to remain bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin, to worship appearance" (qtd. in Oppel 211). The death of Sybil, Dorian's female foil, which follows the episode in which the girl rejects all theatrical masks without having developed any integral social *persona* – if considered exclusively in the light of Nietzsche's statement – seems the only structurally possible outcome of the preceding episodes. Having abandoned her surface theatrical personalities, and seeking in Dorian understanding of the depth of passion she could not master herself – an attempt that was doomed to failure – all she knew was how to *die*.

Thus, the story of Dorian Gray is not only an intellectual game of dissembling dichotomies, but also offers the possibility of an ethical reading, even a decipherment of a certain moral code as may be pertinent for a novel that verges on the fable. A provisional interpretation renders it – like the plea of Yeats' masked *persona* – an admonition against both physically and intellectually braving the "depth". The "depth" is seen not as the source of meaning but as "the ultimate fantasy".<sup>13</sup> A corresponding idea of depth as delusion appears in both modernist and postmodernist anti-essentialist (also performative) concepts of selfhood too. Postmodernism's refusal to attribute meaning to the 'depth' and Wildean (*fin de siècle*) aestheticism's reverence for the surface can find their literary analogies not only in Yeats' theory of the masked persona but also in the way many modernist literary selves are presented. For example, Conrad's powerful Kurtz (*Heart of Darkness*) yields to the temptation of exploring the limits of the human: an overly mad attempt to define the essentially human quality that ends in nothing but death. His apparent opposite, the epitome of both modernist and decadent self, a feeble Eliotic Prufrock (*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*), both desires and fears the descent into the depth, but dreams of the "mermaids" singing. None of them has the wisdom and resolve of the mythological (also of Joyce's) Ulysses, who tied himself to the mast of his ship in order not to follow the Sirens, who mesmerised the voyagers and lured them into the depth.

Viewing these authors and their concepts against the contemporary philosophical discourse would require a thorough investigation and reformulating of the concepts of beauty<sup>14</sup> and youth, and of the mask and the face as read from the perspective of present-day aesthetics (R. Shusterman for the most part), ethics (E. Levinas's concept of the "naked face"), as well as anthropology (e.g., the mask's ritual functions). The scope of this sketch, however, allowed for little more than a brief mention of some modernist and postmodernist examples that

may support the concept of personality as it features in Wilde's story: as the self whose only intelligible meaning remains on the surface. The above analogies from the realm of literature and philosophy, alongside *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, do not deny the "depth", yet they attest to the futility of exploration. A resolve to stay on the surface, especially in terms of formulating the idea of selfhood, may be not a choice but the only solution, the one that is promoted also by the contemporary American pragmatism of Richard Rorty and Richard Shusterman, though they differ in using linguistic and somatic contexts respectively. Even if there is some depth to the self (a view that weak anti-essentialism does not deny),<sup>15</sup> this depth is not to be defined, least of all tampered with; or, as stated in *The Picture's* preface, it must be acknowledged that, "[t]hose who go beneath the surface do so at their peril" (18).

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> An interesting analogy to the opposition of surface attributes and depth-penetrating factors may be found in a comparative essay which, as put by its author, Gilles Deleuze, discusses the differences within the languages of "the grotesque trinity of child, poet and madman" (277). Deleuze exemplifies his investigation into what he calls the languages of depth and of surface with the case of a schizophrenic man for whom, so to say, various personalities co-habit the same corporeal space. Likewise, owing to their sonorous similarities, languages blend in the patient's verbal space. This blending, for example, allows him to convert the word "tree" into "tere" (in that it has similar tonic qualities to French "aRbRe" and Russian "dEREvo", "t" having been replaced with "d"); or to establish equivalence with the French "suR Le champs", English "eaRLy", and pseudo-German "uRLich". In the *in-depth* language of a schizophrenic, "sounds [...] [are] confused with the sonorous qualities of things, with the noisiness of bodies, with their actions and passions [...]" (284). In the healthy, i.e. surface-preserving condition, "what makes language possible is that which separates sounds from bodies, organises them into propositions, and thus makes them available to assume expressive function" (284). With a view to promoting what he calls surface, or structuralist, psychoanalysis (in contrast to an in-depth, or anecdotal, psychoanalysis), Deleuze further juxtaposes the surface and grammar-respecting language of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in the Wonderland* with the "antigrammatical" language of the texts Antonin Artaud produced in the lunatic asylum in Rhodos, an in-depth, purely sonorous or corporeal attempt at artistic communication. The surface/depth opposition as present in the way we conceive of language Deleuze also illustrates by a recourse to the philosophy of ancient Stoics, and to the distinctions they made. In the Stoics' philosophy, the border line divides things or beings on the one hand, and propositions or concepts, on the other. Further analysis focuses on beings and divides them into two categories: bodies, with their inherent physical properties, and incorporeal effects, with "logical attributes" that describe them. Significantly, the "logical attributes" (expressed by a verb, such as, for instance, "being cut") occur on the surface of things (277–295).

- <sup>2</sup> Cf. Wilshire:

As the actor must create a character, so the person must create a *persona*, or *personae*, if he is not to remain psychically unborn. [...] One of the few major differences between the actor's character and the person's *persona* [...] is that the actor is more or less freed from his characters after each performance of them, while the person must die with his *personae* on his head. (204)

In view of the above, Sybil is an actress who has not yet acquired the awareness of her private and social persona outside the theatre. In a limited, and metaphorical, sense of the word "born" Wilshire proposes, Sybil has yet to be completely born as a person, and even her death by suicide is overwhelmingly theatrical; she dies like Julia, the death with which she returns into the world of artifice, and which, paradoxically, endears her back to Dorian, the cold con-



noisseur of artifice. If, prior to her death, Dorian reacted with repugnance to the girl's love confession, it was so also because the emotional insufficiency Sybil admitted reminded him of his own, though incomparably vaster, emotional inadequacy.

<sup>3</sup> Camille Paglia indicates that music's Dionysian quality poses a challenge to Dorian's Apollonian integrity.

The effect on Dorian of Lord's Henry's monologue is immediate: "'Stop!' faltered Dorian, 'stop! you bewilder me.'" He calls both "music" and "words" "troubling", "terrible." Since words and music are Dionysian phenomena, Dorian experiences them as foreign intrusions. Words mar the Apollonian androgyny's glacial unity with internality (Paglia 517).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, ch. "The Contingency of Selfhood", pp. 23–43, where the self is defined as an unlimited set of ever changing vocabularies that Rorty's ironist endlessly appropriates for self-descriptions. Such self is neither complete, nor autonomous; in Rorty's words it is "a web of relations to be rewoven, a web which time lengthens every day" (43).

<sup>5</sup> Shusterman criticises the purely mentalistic concept of the self in Rorty: that which aims at "self-enlargement," "self-enrichment" and "self-creation" by encompassing novel "vocabularies" (246). He perceives a formative role of the capitalist consumerist ideology – "the consumer's quest to maximize consumption" (256–257) – in the shaping of Rorty's eulogies over novelty. This concept of the mentalistic self Richard Shusterman juxtaposes with the concepts of the socially responsible and socially embedded self that are created by aestheticized ethics.

Such ethics, it must be noted, is not only the postmodernist tendency; in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was anticipated by the aesthetic theory of Walter Pater and, subsequently, developed by Oscar Wilde. As Shusterman puts it, this aesthetic theory, together with its social implications, is "an exquisite flower of aesthetic decadence, still capable of growing in our post-modern wasteland of social hope" (251).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. also O. Wilde, *De Profundis*: "People whose desire is solely for self-realisation never know where they are going [...]" (qtd. in Pine 307).

<sup>7</sup> Such treatment of the body as an external object is also repudiated by Shusterman's somaesthetics which, in his words, treats the body "as the living focus of beautiful, personal experience" (Schusterman 1999: 6).

In Dorian's case, the experiential, physical faculty of the body seems to be shifted to the portrait, but only temporarily so, as the portrait does not share in Dorian's death experience.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. G. Deleuze:

Carroll and Artaud are worlds apart. We would not give one page of Antonin Artaud for all of Carroll; Artaud is the only person to have experienced absolute depth in literature, to have discovered a "vital" body and its prodigious language (through suffering, as he says). He explored the infra-meaning, which today is still unknown. Carroll, on the other hand, remains the master or the surveyor of surfaces we thought we knew so well that we never explored them. Yet it is on these surfaces that the entire logic of meaning is held. See also note 1. (294–295)

<sup>9</sup> Significantly, speaking of the picture and referring to it as "you", its painter, Basil Hallward, confirms that Dorian gave his life in exchange for the lifeless icon of youth and, from that moment, can be regarded as objectified: "Well, as soon as you are dried, you shall be varnished, and framed, and sent home" (34, italics mine).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *The Picture* [...], p. 34.: "'Don't Basil, don't!' he (Dorian) cried. 'It would be murder.'"

<sup>11</sup> The moment the portrait is finished, Dorian loses his sense of completeness; a part of him remains beyond his control, submitted to aesthetic exposure. As put by C. Paglia,

The narcissistic beautiful boy is emotionally undeveloped and self-contained to the point of autism. His senses are solipsistically sealed. It is the apprehender, the aggressive eye, who brings him into existence. Dorian is unconscious of his beauty, even while it is being painted. Lord Henry, the serpent in the garden, infects him self-consciousness. *Dorian Gray* is unique in permitting the beautiful boy to develop an inner life, which is immediately deflected onto his copy. (514)

The realisation that he loses his emotional self-containment releases Dorian's anxious quest for heightened excitement which he confuses with internality. This quest for illusionary depth can never be completed as Dorian is simply incapable of achieving a standstill, or an empathetic fusion with others. Instead, he endlessly uses others for intensification of experience.

However, such experience has no affective and transformational power. It has merely an accumulative effect: multiplied signs of ageing on the canvass surface.

- <sup>12</sup> Both authors provide an interesting context for a reading of Keats' famous and enigmatic equation from *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty [...]".

<sup>13</sup> Cf. N. Kaye:

Like the minimalist object, such performances resist the effort to penetrate the surface of the work, frustrating the reading of structure, sequence, pattern and image. In doing so, they mark out a fundamental opposition to the desire for depth, for the discovery of a "centre" from whose vantage point the various elements which are presented may be understood. For [Richard] Foreman [a commentator of Wilson's performance] such 'depth' is, unequivocally, 'the ultimate fantasy'. (69)

- <sup>14</sup> For instance, Shusterman considers the example of Socrates who, as he puts it, "through his inspired self-discipline [...] could cast a seductive spell of beauty despite his old age and ugly facial features, thus enabling him to argue that he was more beautiful than the famously Critobulos in Xenophon's *Symposium*" ('Somaesthetics and the Care of the Self: The Case of Foucault' 547).

Still another view of beauty, understood as unhampered expressiveness, is represented by Louis Arnaud Reid: as there are no objects which do not seem expressive to at least one mind, there is no real ugliness. This view allows Reid to accommodate "trashy poems, pictures, tunes, suburban villas" within the realm of aesthetic objects. If beauty is an ideal – it is an ideal of expressiveness, or, as Reid forcibly puts it, "Beauty is perfection of expressiveness, and Ugliness is failure of expressiveness [...]" (212).

However, even within the context of this all-encompassing definition, Dorian's beauty seems dubious; the expressive powers he once had became transferred to the picture.

- <sup>15</sup> The attitude Shusterman terms as weak anti-essentialism does not negate the possibility that there exists a trait that is essentially human, yet the assertion must be made that this essence is not to be defined. Although anti-essentialist, Richard Shusterman does not exclude words such as "essence" and "universal" from his philosophical vocabulary, yet their deployment is subordinated to purely pragmatic purposes. For instance, in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* Shusterman asserts that he understands "essence" as "non-ontological but still transhistorical, cross-cultural human essence: some sort of amalgam of linguistic, cultural and biological universals" (241–242).

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