

Modernity and the Resurrection of the Picture of Dorian Gray

الحدائثة و إحياء رواية دوريان غراي

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Abstract

This paper discusses the so-called incongruity that critics tend to see in Oscar Wilde's aesthetic theory which he celebrates in his prose. Critics have always discussed a kind of contradiction between Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and his artistic views which he celebrates in *The Preface* and in his two essays "The Decay of Lying" (1889) and "The Critic as an Artist" (1891). The first section of this paper analyzes Wilde's artistic theory which was a reaction against Victorian moral aesthetics. Most Victorian aestheticians believed that the function of art is moral. Not only was art related to man's ethical needs but it also had a religious mission. On the other hand, Wilde, like some Victorian poets, sensed the attraction of pure art independent of all moral concerns. Wilde's major works reflect a desire to free art from the moral and social obligations. Writing under the influence of Pater and rejecting the principles of Ruskin at the same time, Wilde became the main proponent of New Aesthetic movement in England in 1890s. The paper presents a detailed study of Wilde's four claims that constitute the New Aesthetics of his age. In addition, it shows the influence of Wilde on modern thought epitomized by Modernists and the proponents of modern objective theory such as Eliot, J. C. Ransom, Brooks, Burke, Ellis and others. The second section of this paper answers a major question: does

The Picture of Dorian Gray expose the defects of aestheticism while *The Preface* defends its virtues? As the paper reviews most of the issues that critics consider to be a source of contradiction. it also shows that the novel presents a coherent philosophical point of view that Wilde wished to emphasize at least indirectly. The novel. when properly understood. is consistent with Wilde's artistic views.

Key Words: aesthetic theory. Victorian moral aesthetics. pure art. Art for Art's sake. New Aesthetic movement. modern objective theory. incongruity. coherent philosophical view.

ملخص

تهتم هذه الدراسة بالتناقض المزعوم الذي يناقشه النقاد عند الحديث عن النظرية الجمالية لأوسكار وايلد والتي تظهر تفاصيلها في شعره وأعماله النثرية. يؤكد بعض النقاد على وجود تناقض واضح بين آراء أوسكار وايلد الداعمة للنظرية الجمالية الحديثة والتي يجسدها في مقالته الشهيرين "اضمحلال الكذب" (١٨٨٩) و"الناقد كفنان" (١٨٩١)، و"الإفتاحية" وتلك الداعمة للنظرية الأخلاقية التقليدية والتي تجسدها رواية *صورة نوريان غراي* (١٨٩١)، كما يرى بعض النقاد. يعالج الفصل الأول من هذه الدراسة النظرية الجمالية الحديثة التي ظهرت كرد فعل للنظرية الأخلاقية التي سادت في العصر الفكتوري والتي تؤكد على أن هدف الفن أخلاقي بالدرجة الأولى وديني على وجه الخصوص. وتفيد هذه النظرية الجمالية الحديثة أن الفن بعيد كل البعد عن الأهداف الأخلاقية الاجتماعية المزعومة، فالفن يُقدر لخصائصه الجمالية البحتة، ومن ثم أصبح وايلد حامل راية الحركة الجمالية الحديثة في إنجلترا في التسعينيات من القرن التاسع عشر. تناقش هذه الدراسة مبادئ أوسكار وايلد الجمالية وعددها أربع، وما تركت من تأثير على الفكر الحديث في القرن العشرين وعلى نقاد محدثين أمثال البيوت، رانسوم، بروكس، بيرك، إليس وغيرهم. أما الجزء الثاني والأخير من هذه الدراسة فيعرجُ إلى برهنة أن التناقض المزعوم بين رواية وايلد ومقالته وافتتاحيته لا أساس له. قالرواية تؤكد على ذات المفاهيم الجمالية التي شكلت جوهر النظرية الجمالية الحديثة في القرن العشرين.

We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely.

All art is quite useless.

Preface. The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891).

Although it has earned a great reputation, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) has always been a troublesome book. Critics have always perceived a sort of contradiction between the novel and Wilde's aesthetic views which he celebrates in the *Preface* as well as in his essays. Richard Ellman (1987), for example, argues that "Wilde the Preface-writer and Wilde the novelist deconstruct each other" (Ellman, 1987: 297). While the *Preface*, which Wilde added in response to critical abuse, defends aestheticism, the novel itself attacks it. Ellman believes that *Dorian Gray* is "the aesthetic novel *Par excellence*, not in espousing the doctrine, but in exhibiting its dangers." The novel, he asserts, "exposes the follies of a false and excessive aestheticism." For this reason, Wilde seems to have written what Ellman calls "the tragedy of aestheticism" (297). Similarly, Donald H. Erickson (1977) refers to the incongruity which critics have tended to see between artistic credo presented in the *Preface* and the body of the novel, on the one hand, and the moral significance, or consequences, of the events of the narrative, on the other hand. He adds that the reader likewise is usually "fascinated by the characters, the mysterious portrait, and the only hinted at sins of Dorian's life, but he is usually puzzled if not repelled by the tenets of the New Hedonism espoused by Wilde's characters" (Erickson, 1977: 96). Then, does Wilde's novel present New Aestheticism in a negative way while the *Preface* and his critical essays give it affirmation? It is the main objective of this paper to show that when properly understood, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* does possess a philosophical consistency. Behind the apparent contradiction which critics harshly attack lies Wilde's artistic message that is more implicit than explicit. This message, which has developed into theory, has had its influence on modern criticism.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first three sections discuss Wilde's artistic theory, which was a reaction against Victorian moral aesthetics. Special emphasis will be given to Wilde's essay "The Decay of Lying" (1889) as well as to the *Preface*. Then, this section will discuss the influence of Wilde on modern thought epitomized by the Modern Critics (Eliot, Ransom, Brooks, Burk, Ellis, etc.) and the proponents of modern objective theory. The last section tries to resolve all points of contradiction that some critics view as shortcomings in Wilde's novel.

I. Moral vs. Aesthetic Function of Art

Like their eighteenth-century predecessors, most early Victorian aestheticians strove to relate the beautiful to an unchanging truth beyond the immediate object of contemplation. If art was to mirror a larger totality, its function, they thought, must be at least implicitly moral; the picture or the poem, the play or the statue was to teach as well as to delight by its reflection of an immutable design. Not only was art highly related to the ethical needs of man, but it also had a religious mission, for it records a special perfection that would help the soul "to rise towards Perfection Universal" and to turn the mind of man to thoughts of heaven (Buckley, 1966: 144). Indeed, the Victorians agonized over values – family values, religious values, British values, value as use or exchange – which has affected their outlook to literature and the literary value (Gagnier, 1997).

The question of the value of the work of art was the concern of many thinkers of the age who had succeeded somehow in articulating a doctrine of art adapted as no other before to the basic impulses of the generation. One of these was John Ruskin (1886), whose acute social conscience and sensitivity to the moral problems of his age, led him to introduce into his complex studies of aesthetic form (as in *Modern Painters* (1843) and *Fors Clavigera* (1884) many digressions which obscured his analysis. On the one hand, Ruskin could not find value in an art which bore no perceptible relation to the realities of human experience. He believed that the function of art was to interpret and to edify; no work designed as pure ornament was worthy of serious

consideration. While aesthetes who succeeded him proclaimed the autonomy of art Ruskin emphasized its social sources. Art, he insisted, was born of a distinct social milieu, and it served directly and indirectly the society that produced it. The best literature mirrored a complete world with a great objectivity and so suggested to the reader the depth of life and the richness of human drama (Buckley, 1966: 152). The greatest art Ruskin defines as the art which "Conveys to the mind of the spectator, by any means whatsoever, the greatest number of the greatest ideas" (Ruskin, 1986: 1329). Consequently, the spectator should possess a mind sufficiently noble to grasp the moral ideas which art might communicate. As soon as any aesthetic object evokes an impression, it becomes the duty of the spectator (or reader) to evaluate its worth and to distinguish the higher from the lower sensation.

On the other hand, Ruskin (1986) urged the poet or painter to "go to nature" as the only source of adequate subject matter. Yet he was misunderstood as more and more Victorians came to consider the faithful imitation of nature the final goal of art. Therefore, Ruskin found it necessary to shift his whole emphasis because he felt that the artist's highest function was to interpret and not merely to copy natural phenomena. "The picture," he declares, "which is sought for an interpretation of nature is invaluable, but the picture which is taken as a substitute for nature had better be burned. ... All that is highest in art, all that is creative and imaginative, is formed and created by every great master for himself, and cannot be repeated or imitated by others" (Ruskin, 1986: 1356). The artist, he believes, not only observes the natural world but also selects and arranges his/her perceptions, for "the power of assembling" is the essential mark "of the poet or literally of the 'Maker'" (Buckley, 1966: 156).

Nevertheless, Ruskin's earlier principles and the whole Victorian 'morality' of art (or what we may call the moral aesthetics) gave birth to a contradictory philosophy. David Ramsy Hay, the founder of the Aesthetic Society, sought to establish an "objective" science of beauty and to discount the subjective, or psychological attitudes involved in artistic production and appreciation. The ideas of the Aesthetic Society

were accepted by John Addington Symonds, an English physician, who developed his theory in mathematical terms to demonstrate the existence of an intrinsic beauty which is inherent in the art object and independent of the emotion it might arouse in the spectator. The object, he believed, had a life of its own.

A considerable number of Victorian poets such as Tennyson, Arnold, Rossetti, Browning and Pater, had sensed the attraction of "pure" art independent of all moral concerns. It is worth mentioning, however, that their credo ("art for art's sake") bore the stamp of their familiarity with French aestheticism. As a self-conscious movement, French aestheticism is often said to date from Theophile Gautiers' witty defense of his claim that art lacks all utility, and it was also developed by Baudelaire, Flaubert, Mallarmé, and many other writers. A rallying cry of aestheticism became the phrase "L'art pour L'art." This claim also involved the view of life for art's sake with the artist envisioned as a priest who renounces the practical and self-seeking concerns of ordinary existence in the service of what Flaubert and others called "the religion of beauty" (Abrams, 1986: 2). In France the doctrine of "art for art's sake" had served during the fifties and sixties of the nineteenth century as a liberal protest against the reactionary Second Empire. In Paris a generation of painters and poets had discovered the beautiful in worlds beyond and beneath the polite façade of a commercial society; by rejecting a conventional ethic, they had succeeded in extending the depth and breadth of their art (Buckley, 1966: 162).

The doctrines of French aestheticism were introduced into England by Walter Pater (1839-1894). Pater had stressed the significance of the artifice of art and stylistic subtlety as well as a concept of supreme value of beauty and of the love of art for its own sake. In his famous book *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) these ideas are crystallized:

Of such wisdom [of experience]. the poetic passion. the desire of beauty. the love of art for its own sake. has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass. and simply for those moments's sake. (Pater. 1986: 1568)

The literary creed of Aestheticism was much in fashion in the times of Oscar Wilde and he had fully embraced its philosophy of the central importance of art in life. " 'Art for art's sake' implies the autonomy of art and the artist. the rejection of didactic aim and the refusal to subject art to moral or social judgment" (Tindall. 2000: 5). In other words. art should have no spiritual meaning or message; it should be judged by beauty alone (Tindall. 2000: 9).

Oscar Wilde's major works foreshadow the desire to free art from the moral and social obligations. Writing under the influence of Pater and rejecting the principles of Ruskin at the same time Wilde became the chief proponent of the New Aesthetic movement in England in the 1890s. He started by acknowledging the wisdom of the master (Ruskin) and yet. he reacted against Ruskin's social aestheticism. "The master." Wilde says. who "[has] taught us at Oxford that enthusiasm for beauty which is the secret of Hellenism ... would judge of a picture by the amount of moral ideas it expresses; but to us the channels by which all noble work in painting can touch. and does touch. the soul are not those of truths of life or metaphysical truths" (Wilde. *Miscellanies* in Buckley. 1966: 159). Indeed. Wilde has developed an artistic format that "rejects narrow ideological dispositions and embraces a pluralistic response to reality" (Gillespie. 1996: 36).

II. New Aesthetics of Wilde's Theory of Art

Wilde's aesthetic ideas are best discussed in critical dialogues which were published as essays and which indeed reflect Wilde's artistic development. The first of these is "The Decay of Lying" (1889) in which Wilde makes four claims that constitute the New Aesthetics. The first doctrine of New Aesthetics is that:

Art never expresses anything but itself. It has an independent life, just as thought has, and develops purely on its own lines. It is not necessarily realistic in an age of realism nor spiritual in an age of faith. So far from being the creation of its time, it is usually in direct opposition to it, and the only history that it preserves for us is in the history of its own progress. ... To pass from the art of a time to the time itself is the great mistake that all historians commit. ("Decay of Lying", 991)

In other words, art is not a reflection of history, of realism or life for in literature we require "distinction, charm, beauty and imaginative power," but not facts.

Consequently, Wilde argues that:

All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals. Life and Nature may sometimes be used as part of Art's rough material, but before they are of any real service to Art they must be translated into artistic conventions. The moment art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything. As a method Realism is a complete failure. (991)

This second doctrine views nature as so "imperfect" and monotonous. The notion of "infinite variety" of nature is nothing but a "pure myth." Variety is not to be found in nature herself but it resides in "the imaginative, or fancy, or cultivated blindness of the man who looks at her" (970). Similarly, art is not an imitation of life because art does not mean to moralize or to edify. Art takes life as part of her material; it "recreates" life, "invents, imagines, dreams," and, more important, art keeps between herself and reality "the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment" (978).

Furthermore, Wilde believes that modern novels are quite unreadable because most novelists go to life for their personages and boast of them as copies. "The justification of a character in a novel," Wilde argues, "is

not that other persons are what they are. but that the author is what he [she] is. Otherwise. the novel is not a work of art" ("The Decay of Lying". 975). For this reason Wilde accuses the modern novelist of presenting "dull facts in the guise of fiction He [she] has his [her] tedious document humane. his [her] miserable little cain de la création. into which he [she] peers with his [her] microscope ... shamelessly reading up his [her] subject. ... If something cannot be done to check. or at least to modify. our monstrous worship of facts. Art will become sterile" (970).

For instance. Wilde finds R.L. Stevenson guilty of "robbing a story of its reality by trying to make it too true." and Rider Haggard. who had once had "the makings of a perfectly magnificent liar." of lapsing into seeking "cowardly corroboration" for his inventions. Turning to Henry James. Wilde observes that he "writes fiction as if it were a painful duty and wastes upon mean motives and imperceptible 'points of view' his neat literary style" ("The Decay of Lying". 971-2). Nor was Wilde less critical of French novelists. It was in France that the new pseudo – scientific or positivistic doctrines of literary realism had been elaborated and applied most consciously (Roditi. 1947: 100). Wilde dismisses Maupassant rapidly as an artist who wastes "a keen mordant irony ... and hard vivid style" on petty themes. He finds that Zola's characters "have their dreamy vices. and their drearier virtues." and he observes that Bourget forgets "what is most interesting about people in good society." that is to say. "because we are all of us made of the same stuff ... the mask that each one of them wears. not the reality that lies behind" ("The Decay of Lying". 977).

On the other hand. Wilde finds in Balzac "a most remarkable combination of the artistic temperament with the scientific spirit." Balzac "created life. he did not copy it"; his characters have "a kind of fiery-coloured existence" and "defy skepticism." But he also "set[s] too high a value on modernity of form ... a huge price to pay for a very poor result" ("The Decay of Lying." 981). Edouard Roditi argues that Wilde does not mean by "modernity of form" any modernistic structural or stylistic innovations such as those proposed by Proust. Gide or Joyce; Wilde

seems rather to have been thinking of a sort of journalistically documentary or scientific quality which he finds "always somewhat vulgarizing" in that it tends to make art serve the purposes of some propaganda: "The public imagines that because they are interested in their immediate surroundings. art should be interested in them also. and should take them as her subject-matter. But the mere fact that they are interested in these things makes them unsuitable subjects for art." And Wilde concludes: "To art's subject – matter we should be more or less indifferent." In a conversation with a friend. Wilde expands this doctrine and insists that the novelist should "never have any intention other than to tell a story." and especially never. as Dickens "who means so well" so often did. "snap the thread of the story to explain what he means" (qt. in Roditi. 1947: 101).

So. Wilde challenges the traditional concept of reality as "the truthful treatment of material." as William Dean Howells (2010) defines it. The main objective of art is no more than "the representation of Reality. i.e.. of Truth" (Howells. 2010: 3). In other words. the simplistic theory of art as merely truth-telling which implies a certain directness. simplicity and unadorned artlessness. a theory which prevailed in the mid nineteenth-century. is what Wilde rejects because the artist treats his/her subject-matter with a "beautiful style" and "decorative or ideal treatment" in an attempt to "recreate" life and escape the realists' forwardness which serves their mimetic purposes to present a one-to-one correspondence between the subject and its representation ("The Decay of Lying. 978).

Wilde's third doctrine is that Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life. This results not only from Life's "imitative instinct" but also from the fact that "the self-conscious aim of life is to find expression." and that Art offers it certain "beautiful forms through which it may realize that energy" ("The Decay of Lying" 992). External nature also imitates Art. The only effects which nature can show us are effects that we have already seen through poetry. or in painting (992).

The last doctrine is that "Lying." "the telling of beautiful untrue things." is the proper aim of Art (992). "Lying" or what Wilde describes as the "imaginative medium" is an art in itself (979). Thus. the artist is a

liar because through his/her imaginative power. he/she recreates life and nature. In addition. the artist. just as the poet. is never born but made. Thus art and poetry are not the off-spring of “casual inspiration”; rather. they require the most careful study and disinterested devotion because both have their own techniques.

In his second essay. “The Critic as Artist” (1891). Wilde tackles almost the same issue. He begins by stating the critic’s first requisite and that is “a temperament exquisitely susceptible to beauty and to the various impressions that beauty gives us.” Art is an intensification of personality. and personality in the critic will therefore be a revelatory. not an intrusive. element. The true critic will be sincere “in his [her] devotion to the principle of beauty” and shall never resort to the faculty of reason because it is not the faculty to which art appeals. “If one loves Art at all. one must love it beyond all other things in the world. and against such love. the reason. if one listened to it. would cry out” (“The Critic as Artist.” 709). Moreover. the critics’ “elect spirits” should “grow less and less interested in actual life. and will seek to gain their impressions almost entirely from what art has touched” (709). This is because art offers expressive form while life offers merely chaos. This seems to be an exaggeration of Pater’s suggestions in the *Conclusion* of *The Renaissance* and a logical extension of his remark that art is “a sort of cloistral refuge from a certain vulgarity in the actual world” (qt. in Ruskin. 1986: 1568). We should “go for art for everything.” Wilde declares. because “Art cannot hurt us” (“The Critic as Artist.” 711).

As in “The Decay of Lying.” “The Critic as Artist” stresses the principle of “Lying.” Criticism. far from confining itself to commentary on the work of Art. can “lie” and “rewrite history” no less than art can. and may. indeed. be more creative than Art (708). However. Wilde’s most significant point here is that criticism stands to Art as Art stands to Life: the sophisticated arranger of relatively raw materials.

In the *Preface*. published two years after “The Decay of Lying.” Wilde again rejects the tenets of the Victorian moral aesthetics. He denies the moral value of a work of art: “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written. or badly written. That

is all." So, the artist "desires to prove nothing"; he/she is detached from his/her work (*Preface*, 1974: 138). "No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style" (139). Art as well does not imitate Life, for it is "the spectator, and not life, that Art really mirrors" (139). The moral life of man is nothing but "part" of the raw material that the artist recreates and reshapes: "The moral life of man forms part of the subject matter of the artist" who is "the creator of beautiful things." The artist's major concern in this sense is "the beautiful" that he/she reveals in his/her art while he/she conceals his/her own impressions, his/her identity or his/her "ethical sympathies" because these are not the aims of a work of art. "To reveal Art and conceal the artist," Wilde argues, "is the art's aim" (138). The critic, on the other hand, is the one who "can translate into another manner or a new material his/ [her] impression of beautiful things" (138).

III. The Influence of Wilde on New Critics

These ideas which constitute what came to be known the New Aesthetic theory have influenced modern thought. The New Critics and the modern proponents of the objective theory embrace many of Wilde's ideas. New Critics believe that a poem should be treated qua poem, that is to say as an object in itself or, in Eliot's words, "primarily as poetry and not another thing." John Crowe Ransom (1971) says that the first law of criticism is "that it shall be objective, shall cite the nature of the object" and shall recognize "the autonomy of the work itself as existing for its own sake" (qtd. in Abrams, 1971: 109). The work must be approached as something which stands free from the poet, audience, and the enviroing world. Therefore, New Critics warn the reader against such temptations as the intentional fallacy (interpreting or evaluating a work by reference to the intention of the author in writing the work), the affective fallacy (evaluating a work by its emotional, psychological or moral effects upon the reader), or analyzing the work by referring to the biography of the author, to social conditions at the time of its production, or to the history of literary genres and subject matter (Abram, 1971: 109).

Thus the literary product is a self-sufficient object which is to be analyzed and judged by "intrinsic" criteria such as ambiguities (multiple

meanings). complexity. coherence. equilibrium. integrity. and the interrelations of its component elements. This distinctive explicative procedure the New Critics follow in reading the text is known as “Explication de text” or close reading of the text. The emphasis is on the language of the text itself. meanings and interactions of words. figures of speech. and symbols. In other words. the poetic language does not refer beyond itself but only functions contextually within the structure of the poem. For this reason. K.M. Newton (1988) asserts that New Criticism “is sometimes called. perhaps confusingly. contextualism” (Newton. 1988: 39).

In his essay. “The Formalist Critics.” Cleanth Brooks (1988) places the greatest emphasis on the poem as an objective structure. “Literary criticism.” he says. “is a description and evaluation of its object” (Brooks. 1988: 45). Other speculations on the mental process of the author or of the various readings which the work has received take the critic away from the work into biography and psychology. The central concern of criticism; however. is “cutting it [the text] loose from its author and from his/ [her] life as a man. with his/ [her] own particular hopes. fears. interests. conflicts. etc.” (45). Furthermore. “the reduction of a work of literature to its causes [the forces that have produced it] does not constitute literary criticism; nor does an estimate of its effects” (48). that is to say. its influence on the readers. Brooks denies the moral effects of a literary work. In this respect. he quotes Allen Tate: “... as Allen Tate says. ‘specific moral problems’ are the subject matter of literature. but that the purpose of literature is not to point a moral.” Therefore. “literature is not a surrogate for religion” because it does not teach morality (45).

Kenneth Burke (1988). likewise. emphasizes the importance of “internal” analysis which depends on a close study of the text or texts written by the author (Burke. 1988: 49). He suggests a sort of textual reading of “all the available contexts (both poetic and extra poetic) in which the poet employs a given term” to mean something specific. Burke believes that each poet has his/her own “dictionary” and the study of the recurrence of certain terms in the poet’s different texts may “throw

additional light upon their nature as a special nomenclature" (49). He adds that "no biographical reference would be admissible" and that the work would be judged "not by tests of 'truth,' 'scientific' or 'factual' accuracy. but on the basis of 'verisimilitude.'" For instance. only verisimilitude. not truth. can engage a reader who does not believe in hell. but who derives aesthetic pleasure from Dante's *Inferno* (Burk. 1988: 50).

John M. Ellis (1988) is a more recent theorist who defends fundamental new critical concepts. He finds literary texts as different and special because "they are not to be taken as part of the contexts of their origin; and to take them in this way is to annihilate exactly the thing that makes them literary texts" (Ellis. 1988: 54). To take a poem back to its original context (biographical. social. or historical) is to make it more specific and to bring to the poem "something additional." But "that specificity." Ellis emphasizes. "is a loss. not a gain; what is taken away is the level of generality possessed by the text as a literary text" (Ellis. 1988: 54). In addition. Ellis agrees with W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley who have coined the term 'Intentional Fallacy' and held that the intent of the author is first of all not available to us (or perhaps not even to him) and that even if it were. it could not form an adequate basis for judging and interpreting his/her work (Ellis. 1988: 53). Yet. Ellis introduces a very interesting argument in this field. He asserts that even when the author's intentions are available. they are to be sought inside the text itself. thus affirming the significance of textual reading:

Whatever his [/her] plans may have been. the text is the only evidence we can have of the modification that any previous intent underwent. Even if we grant the intentionalist thesis that the meaning of the poem is what the poet intended. it would still be true that the only reliable evidence of that intent is the poem ... (Ellis. 1988: 55).

Similarly, the objective theory of literature shows a great affinity with New Aesthetic theory. The earlier rejects the doctrines of mimetic theory which asserts that poetry and the arts are essentially imitations of this world. The poem according to the mimetic theory is an "image," a "reflection," a "feigning," a "copy" or a representation of the world. Also, the objective theory denies the pragmatic theory which sets the poem in a means-end relationship, regarding the matter and manner of imitation as instrumental toward achieving certain effects in the reader (Preminger, 1965: 641). The objective theory also renounces the expressive theory of literature which refers the major excellence of a work to its genesis in the author's mind. In other words, the poet moves "into the center of the scheme and himself becomes the prime generator of the subject matter, attributes, and values of a poem" (Preminger, 1965: 643).

One of the defenders of objective theory of literature is W.B. Yeats. In his essay "The symbolism of Poetry," Yeats seeks a philosophy of poetry in the doctrine of symbolism. He believes that poetry moves us because of its symbolism and such a theory would change the "manner of our poetry" because it would cause:

A casting out of descriptions of nature for the sake of nature, of the moral law for the sake of the moral law, a casting out of all anecdotes and of that brooding over scientific opinion that so often extinguished the central flame in Tennyson, and that vehemence that would make us do or not do certain things ... (Yeats, 1988: 34)

This new "manner" of looking at poetry emphasizes the importance of the text itself because what matters is the language of the poem which should be symbolic and subtle enough that it would even "escape analysis" (34).

T.S. Eliot (1988), in "The Function of Criticism," asserts that "criticism is an autotelic activity," i.e. contains within itself its end or purpose (Eliot, 1988: 78). Art in this sense does not serve any end beyond itself: "I do not deny that art may be affirmed to serve ends

beyond itself; but art is not required to be aware of these ends. and indeed performs its function. whatever that may be. according to various theories of value. much better by indifference to them" (78). He adds that the interpretation of a work must emphasize the text itself: "It is difficult to confirm the 'interpretation' by external evidence" (82) and that the facts about the author should not control the critic. "We assume. of course." he says. "that we are masters and not servants of facts. and that we know that the discovery of Shakespeare's laundry bills would not be of much use to us ..." (83). Rene Wellek (1988) also. in "Literary Theory. Criticism. and History" defines the role of the critic as an "objective" judge because. like a scientist and a scholar. he/she must "isolate his [/her] object ... the literary work of art. to contemplate it intently (Wellek. 1988: 560).

In "Poetry for Poetry's Sake." A.C. Bradley (1965) expresses many of the tenets of the objective theory. The words "Poetry for Poetry's Sake" recall the famous phrase "art for art's sake." Bradley emphasizes the importance of considering poetry "in its essence." of thinking of a poem "as it actually exists." The poem is "a succession of experiences. sounds. images. thoughts. emotions" which are the essence of the poem. This "imaginative experience" is "an end in itself. is worth having on its own account. has an intrinsic value" (Bradley. 1965: 4). Nevertheless. Bradley does not deny the ulterior value of poetry as a means to culture or religion because a poem may convey instruction. or soften the passions. or further a good cause. Yet. such an ulterior worth "neither is nor can directly determine its [the poem's] poetic worth as a satisfying imaginative experience." In addition. the consideration of ulterior ends tends to "lower poetic value." It does so because

It tends to change the nature of poetry by taking it out of its own atmosphere. For its nature is to be not a part. nor yet a copy. of the real world (as we commonly understand that phrase). but to be a world by itself. independent. complete. autonomous; and to possess it fully you must enter that world. conform to its laws. and ignore. for the time. beliefs. aims. and particular

conditions which belong to you in the other world of reality (Bradley. 1965: 5).

Poetry “neither is life nor strictly speaking. a copy of it.” Bradley affirms.

IV. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)

So far. we have seen how Wilde’s New Aesthetic theory has influenced. and is supported by. many modern critics. But the question now is to what extent has Wilde’s theory influenced him in writing. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*? Does the novel expose the defects of aestheticism while the *Preface* defends its virtues? On the following pages. I shall review most of the issues which critics considered to be a source of contradiction. and I shall try to resolve them by showing that the novel was actually misunderstood and it does hold a coherent philosophical point of view that Wilde wished to emphasize at least indirectly.

In spite of its success. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* provides many problems of interpretation. Donald H. Erickson (1977) believes that the fundamental difficulty stems from the apparent tendency of the novel to look two ways. “The tone of the novel suggests approval of the New Hedonism. yet the events. particularly the ending. suggest its condemnation” (Erickson. 1977: 113). Dorian never repents his actions; Lord Henry. who tempts Dorian to lead a strange life. never is punished nor regrets his influence.

Lord Henry teaches Dorian the tenets of New Hedonism which Dorian most explicitly puts into practice. The first principle Lord Henry dictates is that “Nothing can cure the senses but the soul” (*Dorian Gray*. 162). The second and main principle is concerned with appreciation of beauty. Lord Henry tells Dorian:

Time is jealous of you. and wars against your lilies
and your roses. You will become shallow. and hollow-
checked. and dull-eyed. You will suffer horribly. ... To
me. beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow

people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible. ... Ah, realize your youth while you have it. Don't squander the gold of your days, listening to the tedious, trying to improve the hopeless failure, or giving away your life to the ignorant, the common, and the vulgar. These are the sickly aims, the false ideals, of our age. Live! The wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing. ... A new Hedonism— that is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol (*Dorian Gray*, 164).

What Lord Henry offers Dorian is significantly interwoven with the possibility of an escape from time, death, and decay by becoming a new Hedonist. Consequently, Dorian's "sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before" (167). To Lord Henry and Basil, Dorian seems to be one of those whom Dante describes as having sought to "make themselves perfect by the worship of beauty" (285). Obviously, moved by Lord Henry's strange doctrine, Dorian expresses his willingness to give his soul if only the picture would grow old and he could remain forever young: "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! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!" (229) Erickson discusses how Dorian, under Lord Henry's tutelage, pursues a secret life of pleasure and crime while the portrait reveals the progressively greater corruption of his soul (Erickson, 1977: 98). For example, when Dorian cruelly rejects the love of Sibyl Vane who, as a result, commits suicide, he notices a touch of cruelty in the portrait. When visited by Basil, who urges him to give up his evil ways, Dorian shows him the now-hideous portrait and then in a fit of anger stabs him. To conceal the crime, Dorian blackmails Alan Campbell, a student of chemistry whose life he has ruined, and forces him to destroy the body. When Dorian decides to reform his life, he looks at the portrait and sees only a new look of cunning and hypocrisy. With a

cry of anger he plunges the knife into the monstrous portrait only to kill himself.

Richard Ellman (1987) also argues that the life of mere sensation that Dorian enjoys is uncovered as “anarchic and self-destructive” (Ellman, 1987: 297). Dorian fails because life cannot be lived on such terms. Self-indulgence leads him to vandalize his own portrait, but this act is a reversal of what he intends and he discloses his better self, though only in death. Dorian tries to give up the causality of life and to live in the deathless world of art, only to commit suicide (298).

Moreover, Peter Raby (1988) discusses the passages which describe Dorian’s soul (“He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul” (*Dorian Gray*, 310) and shows how these convey a “psychological conviction that validates Dorian’s experiments in Hedonism” (Raby, 1988: 76). Raby’s words suggest that Dorian’s hedonist behavior is acceptable only if Dorian is viewed as a psychologically disturbed character; otherwise, his conduct is illogical.

Thus, do Lord Henry’s aesthetic principles (or “New Hedonism”) which correspond perfectly to Wilde’s expressed artistic credo in his prose works cause the degeneration of Dorian Gray? The answer to this question lies in the correct reading of Wilde’s artistic message in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian’s degeneration can be seen as the result of his failure to remain detached from life. In “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde explains the relationship between Art and Life: “Art takes Life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and fashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact ... when Life gets the upper hand and drives Art out into the wilderness, this is the true Decadence (“The Decay of Lying,” 978). Dorian comes dangerously close to such “decadence.” He becomes dangerously enmeshed in sordid life. He ceases to be a spectator of life and becomes enmeshed in the mundane realities of self-gratification and crime. He confesses to Lord Henry that the personality that he has fashioned under Lord Henry’s tutelage has “become a burden,” and that he seems to “have lost the passion, and forgotten the desire.” He admits, “I am too much concentrated on myself” (*Dorian*

Gray. 381). As a result, Dorian's life and personality cease to be art, and the suspension of time which is art's great gift finally ends. Thus, Dorian's long preserved beauty is replaced by a "withered, wrinkled, and loathsome" visage (391).

To put it simply, by allowing "Life to get the upper hand," Dorian becomes a true decadent. The portrait then is not the record of his sin or his conscience, but of his artistic decadence. Rodney Shewan (1977) in *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* shows how the portrait cannot be merely a "distillation of the visual effects of vice" but "a beautiful art turning mysteriously, and temporarily, into horrible life" (Shewan, 1977: 129). The transition from art to life does suggest the negative influence life has on art. But can the portrait serve as a "record of his [Dorian's] soul's progress," as Peter Raby assumes? Raby argues that the picture, initially functions as a perfect image of Dorian's beauty, "a beauty of soul as well as of feature" (Raby, 1988: 69). But how much do we know about Dorian's "beauty of soul"? It is Dorian's physical beauty that Lord Henry praises and Basil worships. The portrait reflects an "extraordinary personal beauty" of a young man (*Dorian Gray*, 141), of "young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and roseleaves" (142). Secondly, the portrait fails to reflect the positive progress of Dorian's soul as he tries to repent towards the end of the novel. When Dorian commits a good action, sparing the innocent Hetty Merton, he hopes the portrait may reflect his new life, but he is horrified to find no change, "save that in the eyes there was a look of cunning and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite" (385). So, the portrait does not faithfully reflect Dorian's soul.

However, the characters' failure to maintain aesthetic distance or detachment is seen as fatal. For instance, the moment Sibyl Vane values life over art, she loses her capacity to act. Instead of preferring shadows to reality as she once did, she is drawn by love to prefer reality. She believes that "All art is but a reflection" of that reality. She gives up art so as to live entirely artlessly in this world, only to commit suicide. Erickson shows that when Sibyl confesses her love for Dorian, she, in effect, is rejecting art. She turns from life as mirrored by art, to life itself:

“you had brought me something higher. something of which all art is but a reflection. You had made me understand what love really is. My love! My love! Prince Charming! Prince of Life! I have grown sick of shadows. You are more to me than all art can ever be.” she tells Dorian (*Dorian Gray*. 341). Erickson (1977) argues that such words are “treasonous” to any New Hedonist. for “Dorian appropriately though cruelly. rejects her” (1977: 102). Shewan (1977) as well shows how Dorian and Sibyl enter a “pastoral world of art; a real unique world in its combination of the richness of experience with the safety of innocence.” Dorian expresses a wish: “I want the dead lovers of the world to hear our laughter and grow sad. I want a breath of our passion to stir their dust into consciousness. to wake their ashes into pain” (350). When Sibyl breaks from this world. and shows preference for real life. of which she thinks Prince charming a fine example. Dorian rejects her (Shewan. 1977: 125).

Another character who could not keep the aesthetic distance and consequently fails is Basil Hallward. Basil violates his own artistic precept that “An artist should create beautiful things. but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty” (*Dorian Gray*. 151-52). The same principle Wilde emphasizes in his *Preface*: “The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim” (*Preface*. 138). Wilde shows that the moment the artist (Basil) loses the proper artistic stance in relation to his subject. art degenerates to what Lord Henry calls “that curious mixture of bad painting and good intentions” (*Dorian Gray*. 161). The portrait. in other words. represents bad art. just as Wilde maintains in “The Decay of Lying”: “All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature. and elevating them into ideals” (“Decay of Lying.” 991). Basil’s friendship with Dorian develops into a deep fascination and even “idolatry” that Basil reflects in his painting. “I have put into it [the portrait] same expression of all this curious artistic idolatry ... There is too much of myself in the thing Harry- too much of myself (*Dorian Gray*. 151). Basil admits “As long as I live. the personality of Dorian

Gray will dominate me" (153). Basil becomes the worshipping and idealizing artist whose portrait, although is "one of the greatest things in modern art," dislocates his sense of abstract beauty and destroys his artistic objectivity and, by a curious reversal of Pygmalion's story, takes on a life of its own at the price of the artist's life (Shewan, 1977: 116).

The only character who achieves detachment is Lord Henry. He prefers to "become the spectator of one's own life" so that he can "escape the suffering of life" (*Dorian Gray*, 137). He lives vicariously on the emotions and experiences of other people. Such detachment is a necessary condition for art, for the aim of the New Hedonism is "experience itself and not the fruit of experience" (286). Erickson believes that Lord Henry is the true critic and artist. "His personality never becomes a burden to him, for the artistic form Lord Henry created in his own life and personality is held separate from life and consequently never degenerates into chaos" (Erickson, 1977: 116).

The Picture of Dorian Gray is about the relation between art and life as Wilde represents it in "The Critic as Artist." After dismissing most modern art as "just a little less vulgar than reality," Wilde argues that the critic "... with his/her fine sense of distinction and sure instinct of delicate refinements, will prefer to look into the silver mirror or through the woven veil, and will turn his/her eyes away from the chaos and clamor of actual existence, though the mirror be tarnished and the veil be torn." Many characters in the novel escape vulgarity of their surroundings and sordid reality through art. For example, Mrs. Vane (Sibyl's mother) is portrayed as an unpleasant woman living in meager circumstances. She escapes the sordid reality of her existence by transforming it into a bearable form with melodramatic gestures and lines from old plays, thus reinforcing Wilde's ideas concerning the relationship between art and reality. James Vane, the brother, on the other hand, appears to represent the sordid reality which intrudes on Dorian- a reality that is associated with society and conventional morality. We are not allowed to feel much sympathy for him for he is usually rendered with brutal detail. He reveals no sensitivity, just a sense of justice based on the most primitive revenge morality. He wishes to

avenge the death of his sister. It is interesting that his appearance in the novel coincides with the general revelation of Dorian's own abasement by an increasing fascination with the ugly and the sordid.

The depiction of Mrs. Vane and her son is significant because it emphasizes the lower class origin of Sibyl and her vulgar surroundings which she escapes through art. At a certain point, Sibyl is seen by Basil as a "vile creature, who might degrade his [Dorian's] nature and ruin his intellect" (*Dorian Gray*, 221). On the other hand, Wilde highlights two points about Sibyl. First, the fact that to Dorian, she exists only as an artist who takes what is "coarse and brutal" in her audience and in reality and spiritualizes it in the form of art. Secondly, Wilde stresses the ideal nature of her beauty: "Through the crowd of ungainly, shabbily dressed actors, Sibyl Vane moved like a creature from a finer world. Her body swayed, while she danced as a plant sways in the water. The curves of her throat were the curves of a white lily. Her hands seemed to be made of cool ivory" (*Dorian Gray*, 271). Sibyl seems to be a symbol of beauty that must not be distorted by reality. Yet, when she chooses reality or life over art she pays her life for it.

By depicting the relationship between art and life, Wilde gives a familiar theme, i.e., "The idea of a young man selling his soul in exchange for eternal youth— an idea that is old in the history of literature" a new form (Wilde in Ellman, 1987: 293). The new form comes from localizing this theme in the contemporary controversy of art versus life. Since the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "an aura of ambivalence and ambiguity increasingly mediates relations among Wilde, his writing, and his readers" (Gillespie, 1996: 57). Consequently, the most satisfying interpretation a reader may draw from the literary canon incorporates into reading this uncertainty as an element that enriches our imaginative pleasure.

This idea of imaginative pleasure has provoked the long debate about the relationship between art and life, as we have seen. Wilde believes that art does not primarily "copy" life or nature and he proposes instead that "[l]ife imitates Art" ("The Decay of Lying", 985); a notion which reflects the chief tenet of Pater's aesthetic criticism. Thus, aestheticism insists

that, in Pater's words, "[t]he office of the poet is not that of the moralist" (Pater, 1986: 427). For both Pater and Wilde, the true source of art- its "active principle"- is "imagination" that generates beauty and pleasure (Pater, 1986: 428). We have seen how Wilde adheres to this vision in his essays as well as in his *Preface*. Linda Dowling (1986) argues that Wilde's essays emphasize the "specter of autonomous language"- that is to say, they insist that our words might not correspond to our world or our "intentions" in a harmoniously referential way (Dowling, 1986: xii). The concluding sentence of Wilde's *Preface*, written in part to counter the moral opprobrium the novel's serial appearance first precipitated, confirms this separation of art and life: "All art is quite useless" (*The Preface*, 19). Megan Becker-Leckrone (2002) discusses how Wilde dislocates utility and value, makes them opposites, and then reorders them, so that what is "useful" becomes, paradoxically, what is not to be "admire[d]" (Becker-Leckrone, 2002: 663). Becker-Leckrone adds that art's "uselessness" in turn and inextricably within these terms, becomes its "unique, lofty essence" (663).

As does the "uselessness" argument in *The Preface*, "The Decay of Lying" calls art a distinct enterprise not properly judged according to normative, rational standards of truth. Wilde draws on the Kantian argument that "to judge an art object in terms of use"- or truth value- "is not to make an aesthetic judgment" (Adams, 1992: 659). Then, literature is a "lie" and serves no moral purpose. Thus, Wilde's final revelation declares that "lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of art" ("The Decay of Lying", 992) and that the role of the critic is to "see the object as in itself it really is" ("The Critic as an Artist", 1028). The critic, consequently, deludes himself if he/she believes "discovering the real intentions of the artist is possible" (1029).

This role of the critic connotes the meaning of the catch phrase "the death of the author" and deprives Wilde's works of any identification with Wilde the author and the person, or with the cultural context surrounding his/her works. Nevertheless, this view has been contradicted by other critics such as Paul L. Fortunato (2007) who thinks that Wilde's fascination with the idea of art is derived from his belief in the

importance of appearances and "the value of style". as well as. "the desire to shine" which all mirror Wilde. the aristocratic and interesting individual (Fortunato. 2007: 106). Elana Gomel (2004). likewise. believes that a perceptive reading of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and his last book. *Oscar Wilde from Purgatory: Psychic Messages* (1924) which was published twenty-four years after his death. shows that the actual identity of the writer is important compared to his/her textual persona (Gomel. 2004: 84). This view which resonates with contemporary narratological debates over the issue of authorship deserves further discussion which might be the topic of a future paper.

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