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**Art For Morals' Sake Or The Other Way
Around: moral concerns in Oscar Wilde's
aestheticism**

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moral concerns in Oscar Wilde's aestheticism

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Abstract

Oscar Wilde's concerns with ethics and morals seldom dominate discussions around his work, which often focus on his role as a leading English aesthete and on his remarkable appetite for witticism. Such concerns, however, permeate his oeuvre quite extensively and offer a new perspective through which his critical theory might be perceived. The equilibrium achieved between Wilde's most flagrante remarks about literary criticism and his underlying belief that art could add something to life and society have secured him a distinct place in the history of world literature that should not be overlooked.

Aestheticism – Ethics – Morals – Oscar Wilde

Resumo

Considerações sobre ética ou moral raramente dominam a discussão em torno da obra de Oscar Wilde, cujo foco tende primariamente para o seu papel enquanto figura basilar do esteticismo inglês. Contudo, tais conceitos permeiam amplamente a sua obra e oferecem uma nova perspectiva através da qual o seu legado crítico pode ser entendido. O equilíbrio atingido entre as suas observações mais surpreendentes sobre crítica literária e a sua convicção, ainda que subtil, de que a arte pode acrescentar alguma coisa de importante tanto à sociedade como à vida em geral asseguram-lhe um lugar destacado na história da literatura mundial que não deve ser desconsiderado.

Esteticismo – Ética – Moral – Oscar Wilde

Introduction

When describing his first encounter with Oscar Wilde in November 1891, André Gide refers to him in a letter to Paul Valéry as an admirable aesthete who "avait su créer, par devant son vrai personnage, un amusant fantôme dont il jouait avec esprit" (Wilde, 2000, p. 496). In this brief yet poignant remark, Gide succeeded in outlining what would be one of Wilde's most singular aspects, one that can be found not just in his manner as an individual, but in his entire body of work – his artificiality.

As regards his life and work, Wilde remains until this day an intriguing individual, one endowed with a striking wit and a no doubt peculiar tendency to paradox, which have granted him a singular status in the history of world literature. Many times, when writing about him, we risk falling into the habit of taking his words at face value, treating them as a mere play of opposites, with no ulterior signification or motive other than an aesthetic, teasing, and controversial statement aimed at a conservative, moralist society.

In doing so, however, we are but scratching the surface of what these words – "Mere words!" (Wilde, 2008, p. 19) – actually entail. If looked upon closely enough, these sentences which we now so prolifically print on fridge magnets or share across social media, serve as an entryway into what Julia Brown deems "Wilde's most important, [yet] most elusive legacy, his philosophy of art" (Brown, 1997, p. xvii).

Accepting him as this artificially created *fantôme* will prove paramount in our understanding of Wilde, in that this description shall serve as the main light source against which we shall examine his radiograph. Although Wilde can undoubtedly be associated with the French-

born aesthetic movement, this will prove many times a loose-fitting garment, preventing us from grasping the complexity of his silhouette as an artist and theoretician. Indeed, Wilde spent the larger part of his career trying to secure a separate space for his art, one in which he deals not with truth as we commonly know it, but with a Wildean truth, resting on and supported by the very paradigm it creates. A concern with truth (in whichever sense we take it) will, as it is, permeate many of his arguments on life and art, and bring Wilde into close contact with philosophers the likes of Kant and Nietzsche.

One of the greatest obstacles faced by those who dedicate themselves to studying Oscar Wilde's work has to do with his characteristic ambiguity. Even relatively consensual aspects, such as his inclusion in an aesthetic school of thought, inherited from French thinkers of the *fin de siècle*, bring about questions that should be addressed when referring to the Irish-born writer and critic.

If Wilde's ambiguity and tendency to paradox sometimes render his ideas on art and life far from clear or consistent (Quintus, 1980, p. 572), something that we can be certain of is that both concepts permeate his oeuvre and that they are oftentimes counterposed. This conflict stems directly from the very own concerns of the aesthetic movement itself, as it was conceived by Kant and, later, Pater, for example, or of its later stage, the 19th century decadent period.

In Wilde's work, the originating conflict can well be described as a disagreement between ethics and aesthetics, in the sense that Wilde regards aestheticism and Art as the ultimate expressions of individual freedom while ethics acts as a constant reminder that we are not entirely free but subject to the ruling morals and laws.

One of the most notorious Wildean characteristics has to do with this point exactly – his attack on the type of thinking involved in these limiting ethical judgements. At a first glance,

it may seem that aesthetics are his sole concern and that moral is relegated to a secondary plan to which Wilde only refers whenever he wishes to object to it. Morals, however, play a crucial role in his aesthetic theory, as I hope to be able to prove henceforth.

One could even say that the very central problem Wilde faces in his defence of an aesthetic theory of art is similar to that which Dorian Gray will find in Wilde's only novel and by far his most famous work – *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – where he seems to put the validity of his arguments to test.

The main character of the novel, Dorian, follows a profoundly aesthetic code of conduct, aiming to transform his own life in a work of art, as suggested not only by Lord Henry's theorisations of a New Hedonism, but also by Dorian's reading a particularly "poisonous" novel, which Wilde later identifies as the decadent French masterpiece *A Rebours* by Joris-Karl Huysmans¹. Ironically, this very novel was lent to Dorian by no other than Lord Henry himself, which will doubly establish his figure as one whose impact is decisive on Dorian's fate.

Lord Henry's "New Hedonism" is in deep conflict with the ruling society values and Dorian will end up falling victim to this very conflict, not being able to find his place in between these polar opposites.

Similarly, Oscar Wilde will come to face a no less tragic fate than his most famous character's, as he will be convicted of and ultimately imprisoned for "gross indecency" – a direct consequence of his not conforming to the ruling traditional morals. Wilde himself seems

¹ In a letter to E. W. Pratt, a presumed admirer, Wilde says that "the book in *Dorian Gray* is one of the many books I have never written, but it is partly suggested by Huysman's *A Rebours*" (Wilde, 2000, p. 524)

very much aware that pursuing his objective of turning his life into a work of art and dedicating it to defending aestheticism as a cause and remedy for the evils of society will prove incompatible with not just society but also the law. For this reason, he was condemned to be seen as a dissident.

In a long letter sent to Lord Alfred Douglas after his imprisonment in Reading Prison, known as *De Profundis*, Wilde will admit that “I was so typically a child of my age that in my perversity, and for that perversity’s sake, I turned the good things of my life to evil, and the evil things of my life to good” (Wilde, 2002, p. 60). In the very same letter, he will account for the apparent paradox his beliefs have led him to, saying that

“[to] be entirely free, and at the same time dominated by law, is the eternal paradox of human life that we realize at every moment.” (Wilde, 2002, p. 28)

In conclusion, Wilde lets us in on his dilemma between an aesthetic code which he most avidly advocated for and a moral one that he has tried to set himself apart from. Wilde’s path to maturity – achieved in *De Profundis* – is one of constant re-evaluation and readaptation of the arguments of his youth, without ever abandoning them completely. In the letter, Wilde lets Bosie know that he has finally found the humility he had until then missed – a humility that resides exactly in a rediscovered temperance in the most tortuous period of his life.

Wilde’s reassessment of some of his previous statements, starting at a point where the sphere of art seems as distant from morals as possible and ultimately culminating in his will to write about “The Artistic life considered in its relation to Conduct” (Wilde, 2002, p. 80) makes his work entirely innovating and intriguing. It is interesting to see how his moral concerns had always been part of his theories on art. As Julia Brown cleverly points out:

Wilde was never a serious proponent of what [Walter] Benjamin calls the “negative theology of art” (as is, for example, Mallarmé), which totally denies any social function of art. (...) Wilde was too much a student of Ruskin to exclude social context from his theory of art’s place and power. For *l’art pour l’art*, writes Benjamin, “was scarcely ever to be taken literally” (Brown, 1997, p. 75).

Surely, Wilde has claimed to utterly reject morals many times, but he has never gone so far as to be able to abandon them completely. Morals were a constant concern of Wilde’s.

Also Stanley Weintraub notices that “‘Art for art’s sake’ may have been a splendid contemporary watchword, but Wilde expected art to provide some revelation of human life. Now and then the mask slipped.” (Quintus, 1980, p. 559) These slips happen exactly when Wilde lets his effective concern with morals and ethics shine through, oftentimes disagreeing with arguments he himself had given in previous instances. This is what Julia Brown calls Wilde’s “reassociation of sensibility” - being able to overcome the contrast between ethics and aesthetics, not through means of synthesis, but instead by demonstrating that the two are, in fact, not just correlated but interdependent (Brown, 1997, p. 51).

This correlation will see its maximum representation in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, in which Wilde will build upon his previously stated ideas and elevate them into a political pseudo-manifesto.

The way in which I aim to present these Wildean concerns will be organised, fundamentally, in three different chapters: primarily, I will try to give a precise account of Wilde’s aesthetic theory as it is presented in his foundational essays “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist”; secondly, I hope to be able to demonstrate how a moral dimension is introduced in both these essays and, additionally, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; finally, I will try to bring

together these two aspects – aesthetics and ethics – by discussing Wilde’s pseudo-political essay “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”.

I

In what might be considered his most ambiguous and controversial work, “The Decay of Lying”, Wilde introduces some of his most famous and counterintuitive arguments on how life and art are related, namely his thesis that “life imitates art far more than art imitates life” (Wilde, 2002, p. 171).

The essay takes the shape of a dialogue, possibly inherited from Plato, to whom several references are made, however veiled they may seem. However, Wilde’s dialogue will not follow the exact same structure of Plato’s, being much more of an expository kind. Nevertheless, by its means, “the thinker (...) can both reveal and conceal himself” (Wilde, 2002, p. 226), a possibility much appreciated by Wilde. By choosing to “conceal himself” under the guise of one of his characters, the author is somewhat free to “reveal” his arguments. After all, “man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth” (Wilde, 2002, p. 225). This decision lets us in on Wilde’s personality as he can be seen practically boasting about his inflammatory theory.

Throughout the essay, Wilde’s character Vivian will take a firm stand lamenting the fact that the art of lying is becoming extinct. From a moral standpoint, one could even think that this was for the better, as truth telling is, actually, an admirable virtue both in nowadays’ and Wilde’s society. Wilde, however, is not so much concerned with truth as we commonly perceive it – as accuracy – but rather with the way truth has been slowly penetrating the realm of art, in which, according to Vivian, it most definitely does not belong:

If something cannot be done to check, or at least to modify, our monstrous worship of facts, art will become sterile, and beauty will pass away from the land. (Wilde, 2002, p. 145)

Vivian believes that if facts do indeed infiltrate the artistic territory, and art becomes too representative of reality, it might lose its power of revealing new impressions and of stirring imaginations. If no difference is to be found between art and life, then why should one bother to produce art in the first place, since there will be nothing in it that life is not already able to provide? This is one of the reasons why, “as a method, realism is a complete failure” (Wilde, 2002, p. 153).

It should not follow, however, that the concept of truth in art is of no interest to Wilde. As he puts it, art should be true indeed, but true in the only way a work of art can be true, not true as a newspaper article must account for the real facts exactly how they happened.

It might be of help to look at what Wilde says about this artistic (or aesthetic) truth in *De Profundis* before delving deeper into the essay at hand:

Truth in Art is not any correspondence between the essential idea and the accidental existence; it is not the resemblance of shape to shadow, or of the form mirrored in the crystal to the form itself: it is no Echo coming from a hollow hill, any more than it is the well of silver water in the valley that shows the Moon to the Moon and Narcissus to Narcissus. Truth in Art is the unity of a thing with itself: the outward rendered expressive of the inward: the soul made incarnate: the body instinct with spirit (Wilde, 2002, p. 65).

Alluding to chapter X of *The Republic*, Wilde makes it very clear that he is not dealing with truth in the Platonic sense of the word – “it is not the resemblance of shape [object] to

shadow [ideal]”. Art is not to be placed against anything other than itself in order to assess its truthfulness. For instance, it would prove rather worthless that one took Francis Ponge’s poem “Le Pain” and held it against an actual piece of bread in order to assess its accuracy. Truth in art is not to be assessed by the resemblance it bears to a particular object, or, to that extent, life itself.

True art, as Wilde conceives it, depends on its “unity” with no other than itself, which is quite a curious remark to make, because it is hard to think of a situation in which we could say something is true without relying on an outside referent. And yet, if truth in art is nothing but the “unity of a thing with itself”, then everything would be true in that everything is itself. But Wilde means something a little different than this, and he will indeed rely on a particular type of referent – the imagination.

Describing truth, Wilde indicates that the proximity of an “outward” something with its “inward” manifestation is a valid enough criterion to validate its trueness. If the outward and the inward of something are one, then it should be true. While the outward corresponds to the object itself, its material shape, the inward will be made to correspond to the artist’s ‘spirit’. If we follow this line of thought, a true work of art depends only on its correspondence with the artist’s imagination – that is, the collection of his or her impressions. This transfers truth into a very particular, solipsistic sphere – truth is a private, individual experience that needs no exterior sanctioning. In “Critic as Artist”, one of Wilde’s characters will ask “what is truth?” only to retort that “in matters of art, it is one’s last mood” (Wilde, 2002, p. 227). When it comes to art, there are as many *truths* as there are artists, provided that they rely on their imagination and not on mere imitation of reality.

The first argument Wilde makes in favour of his new theory of aesthetics is then that “Art never expresses anything but itself” (Wilde, 2002, p. 167). It is both self-sufficient and self-

representative in that it depends on nothing but the artist's spirit and its resemblance to this spirit is the only validation or sanction it requires.

The extreme importance Wilde places on individual experience (and also his opinion that reality does not have a place in art) can be traced back to Walter Pater's arguments in *The Renaissance*. In its "Conclusion", Pater writes that:

At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp and importunate reality, calling us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of action.

But when reflexion begins to play upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence; the cohesive force seems suspended like some trick of magic; each object is loosed into a group of impressions—colour, odour, texture—in the mind of the observer. And if we continue to dwell in thought on this world, not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them, it contracts still further: the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind. (Pater, 1980, p. 187)

The above quotation makes it clear that Pater would concur with Wilde that reality, "importunate reality", is outside the scope of art, which depends highly on the impressions "of the individual mind". This is, in fact, the sole thing able to make art original – originality, as opposed to imitation, having become an important characteristic of artistic labour since romanticism.

Nevertheless, Pater's "Conclusion" seems to offer a milder version of what will become Wilde's aesthetic theory. While Pater's aestheticism dwells in the realms of impressions and

contemplation alone, Wilde takes his arguments a step further and actually suggests that “lying” – that is, representing a thing according to one’s own subjectivity as opposed to reality – is much necessary to salvage art (and even society) from falling in the dullness of realism. In his later works, Wilde will imply that it is necessary that we “beautify” reality, that we improve nature and, ultimately, that we live aesthetically, or beautifully, transforming our own lives into works of art.

The great importance Wilde attributes to the artist’s subjectivity stems in part from his belief that it is one with the artistic temperament and it is the only source of inspiration for art. Aware that his conjecture goes directly against what Matthew Arnold had established as the standard for criticism years before, that it relied in seeing “the object as in itself it really is” (Arnold, 1865), Wilde takes it upon himself to correct Arnold saying that “no great artist ever sees things as they really are” (Wilde, 2002, p. 166).

We have, however, to be able to admit that this subjectivity might also be put to use in the realm of ethics. If art owes nothing to reality then, it is only logical that it owes nothing to morals, so they are as liable of getting distorted as is any other object or concept. Just as art should not be judged by its verisimilitude to life, so must it not be judged by its conformity to ruling morals.

So, in saying that “Art never expresses anything but itself”, Vivian is also making a powerful ethical comment – that just as art deals with a truth that is artistic, so it might deal with a different type of morals, one which allows no judgements about art to be made. Relying on this characteristic of art, Wilde is then perfectly at ease to praise actions that are usually condemnable, such as lying. Richard Ellman draws our attention to this point, when he says that

Each of the four essays that make up *Intentions* is to some degree subversive, as if to demonstrate that the intentions of the artist are not strictly honourable. The first and the last, “The Decay of Lying” and “The Truth of Masks,” celebrate art for rejecting truths, faces and all that paraphernalia in favour of lies and masks. Wilde doesn’t do this in the romantic way of extolling the imagination, for while he uses that word, he is a little chary of it; the imagination is itself too natural, too involuntary for his process of art. He prefers lying because it sounds more wilful, because it is no outpouring of the self but a conscious effort to mislead.

(Ellman, 1969)

It is likely that Wilde is aware of the dichotomy that he has just created between art and ethics, and that he himself is divided between an attempt to justify the validity of his own art and, at the same time the consciousness that what he is doing is highly subversive from a 19th century ethical standpoint. In other words, Wilde’s thesis might be subversive from an ethical point of view, but as an exaltation of individual freedom it is perfectly justifiable. Wilde’s arguments imply that an artist should be free to sculpt, paint or write about anything he so pleases without heeding to any kind of external validation. But what this also means is that an artist is not bound by any societal rules or codes of conduct for “the aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure” (Wilde, 2002, p. 156) and not to indoctrinate or teach.

Vivian is thus placing art at an independent level from, as opposed to subordinate to life and morals. This placement is not only evident in the “Decay of Lying” but also in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as we shall see further ahead. Wilde’s character finds his justification in claiming that

Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external resemblance. She is a veil rather than a mirror (...) Hers are the 'forms more real than the living man,' and hers the great archetypes of which things that have existence are but unfinished copies. (Wilde, 2002, p. 157)

Although Vivian seems to imply that art actually precedes life, we should take it in the sense that art is always ahead of life, and that life's "unfinished copies" are always behind the "great archetypes" that art creates. Previously in the article, Vivian had already conceded that life might serve as "rough material" (Wilde, 2002, p. 152) for art, which it will mould into a most perfect shape. The process through which art transforms life into a more perfect version of what it really is, is best described in "The Critic as Artist" and has to do with the artist's critical spirit of selection. When dealing with such a rough material as life, the artist will carefully select but the parts of it which are beautiful and worth presenting. This is the reason why art might resemble life in a way, given that it has been its rough material, but will always be better than life.

By showing life what it could be, and due to life's natural imitative instinct, we will inevitably adopt an artistic point of view when looking at our surroundings. In a sense, art might attribute meaning to life, even. Take the following example:

Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and their master, do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and turn to faint forms of fading grace curved bridge and swaying barge? The extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of

London during the last ten years is entirely due to a particular school of art. (Wilde, 2002, p. 162)

The particular case of the London fog can be extended to a series of different situations. It is through art that we learn to give meaning to reality. Further on, Vivian summarises his point saying that “things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the arts that have influenced us.” Vivian’s argument is not difficult to support. Think of how we all have looked at a particular scene and, because of the light arrangements, because of the particular disposition of the objects or the nature of the actions we are testifying, said that “it’s just like a movie”? The only reason why we are able to make such a statement is because at least one film director has had the sensibility to transpose his impressions into a film scene and our instinct imitates that very impression when we witness something similar. When we do it, we are exercising our own critical spirit, selecting from the scene just what makes it beautiful and worthy of being transformed into art. This is how art can teach us about life and why “life is art’s best, art’s only pupil” (Wilde, 2002, p. 158). From here follows Wilde’s doctrine that “life imitates art far more than art imitates life” (Wilde, 2002, p. 158) – because we tend to interpret life according to what art has given us. But what to say of morals?

Vivian is also aware that art can also influence our code of conduct, but this is a path to be treaded carefully. In the essay at hand, Vivian will indeed give some examples of people whose conduct was deeply affected by the reading of a particular novel.

The most obvious and the vulgarest form in which this is shown is in the case of the silly boys who, after reading the adventures of Jack Sheppard or Dick Turpin, pillage the stalls of unfortunate apple-women, break into sweet-shops at night, and alarm old gentlemen who are returning home

from the city by leaping out on them in suburban lanes, with black masks and unloaded revolvers. (Wilde, 2002, p. 159)

These are, of course, exaggerations, and such imitations are even discouraged, but these examples are enough to sustain that he recognised the extent to which art could have an effect on human action.

This particular concern will resurface in *De Profundis*, where Wilde shows interest in eventually elaborating on the subject of “The Artistic life considered in its relation to Conduct” (Wilde, 2002, p. 80), which seems ironic given that his own artistic life has led him to prison, as he so notes:

As regards (...) the relation of the artistic life to conduct, it will no doubt seem strange to you that I should select it. People point to Reading Gaol, and say ‘There is where the artistic life leads a man.’ (Wilde, 2002, p. 84)

Wilde accepts, then, that an artistic life might be synonymous with subversion and that the main problem this represents is related to a conflict between ethics and aesthetics - an artistic, aesthetic life leads a man to be unethical and wind up in prison. Wilde’s solution to this problem will be to say that if life is a reflection of art, then it should be best to look at it from an aesthetic point of view rather than an ethical one.

Aesthetics are able to give life something that ethics cannot. This is also posited in “The Critic as Artist”, when Gilbert concludes that:

To be good, according to the vulgar standard of goodness, is obviously quite easy. It merely requires a certain amount of sordid terror, a certain lack of imaginative thought, and a certain low passion for middle-class respectability. Aesthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere. To discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to

which we can arrive (...) Ethics, like natural selection, make existence possible. Aesthetics, like sexual selection, make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms and give it progress, and variety and change. (Wilde, 2002, p. 242)

This derives in part from the fact that aesthetics are more perfect than life and ethics as they are the result of an artistic temperament, which has carefully selected from life and ethics just what was good in them. Ethics “make existence possible”, but aesthetics make it beautiful. Gilbert then makes aesthetics superior to ethics by saying that the capacity of recognising beauty is the highest achievable objective, not “middle-class respectability” or moral virtue, for that matter. Ethics are too dependent on social codes and paradigms, which are ever-changing, whereas aesthetics, depending on nothing but the individual and speaking to that which is common amongst all, are universal.

Now, what seems to be implied here is that the ultimate source of conduct codes and laws in human nature should be, invariably, art. Without it, it would feel as if our surroundings were in a state of chronic disorder and it is art’s aim – because it is born of a restructuring process of the impressions the artist is subject to – to structure that very chaos and to provide life with a sort of order. To Jonathan Dollimore, “life is at best an energy which can only find expression through the forms which art offers it” (Dollimore, 1996, p. 11). Wilde’s aestheticism is thus both an aesthetic theory and a will to reorganise the world according to an improved version of itself.

II

The improved version of the world Oscar Wilde was constantly after might have been attempted at his writing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, first published in the June 1890 edition of the *Lippincott's Magazine* and then again in April 1891 in its book form, with additional chapters and a preface.

During the time between the novel's first appearance in *Lippincott's* and its publishing in 1891, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was the object of several unflattering reviews by many a literary critic who deemed it an immoral, disreputable work of art. While most of these reviews were not given any credit or reaction, in a letter dated 26th June 1890 to the Editor of the *St James's Gazette*, Wilde admits to "taking public notice of only three" (Wilde, 2000, p. 447). In these three occasions, Wilde took it upon himself to both correct and educate his reviewers on what concerned their views on his novel, especially from a moral standpoint.

Despite their indisputable rhetoric merit, Wilde's retorts offer invaluable insights into the author's own understanding of *Dorian Gray* as a moral novel, or, at least, a novel with a moral. To those who accused him of writing an immoral novel, Wilde replies saying that quite on the contrary, *Dorian Gray* is a book with, if anything, an all too apparent moral, one which anyone "whose minds are healthy" (Wilde, 2000, p. 431) will be able to find in it:

It [*Dorian Gray*] is a story with a moral: And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment. (Wilde, 2000, p. 430)

Such a remark is hardly expected to be attributed to a 19th century aesthete, certainly not to one as Wilde. Considering this citation in itself, it would not be too wide a leap to infer that *Dorian Gray* is, in the end, a cautionary tale aimed at teaching said moral to its readers. Wilde himself seems to have caught on this possibility and so he made haste to justify his argument in more aesthetic terms, this time to the Editor of the *Daily Chronicle*:

This moral is so far artistically and deliberately suppressed that it does not enunciate its law as a general principle, but realises itself purely in the lives of the individuals, and so becomes simply a dramatic element in a work of art, and not the object of the work of art itself. (Wilde, 2000, p. 435)

Wilde does his best to make his critics believe that he had no intentions of writing a moral novel, and that above all, he was not himself a moral author, despite whatever moral can be found in his book. To the editor of the *Scots Observer*, Wilde writes several days later that his critic “commits the absolutely unpardonable crime of trying to confuse the artist with his subject-matter” and he lets him know that

one stands remote from one’s subject-matter. One creates it, and one contemplates it. The further away the subject-matter is, the more freely can the artist work. Your reviewer suggests that I do not make it sufficiently clear whether I prefer virtue to wickedness or wickedness to virtue. An artist, sir, has no ethical sympathies at all. (Wilde, 2000, p. 439)

Wilde’s defence so far is in accord with what he had written before on such essays as “The Decay of Lying”, namely that “art never expresses anything but itself”, and that whatever meaning could be attributed to *Dorian Gray*, he could not be held accountable for it. However, pondering that he had failed in “keeping the extremely obvious moral subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect”, Wilde proposes to correct these “defect[s]” (Wilde, 2000,

p. 435) in the soon to be printed book edition and, as he believed that “the artist ha[d] to educate the critic” (Wilde, 2000, p. 447), he makes the decision of condensing most of the arguments cited above in the preface to 1891 edition, which acts not only as a summary of Wilde’s views on art and aestheticism, but also as an *a priori* defence to further possible criticism.

The circumstances under which the preface - “probably the best-known statement of Oscar Wilde’s aesthetic position” (Quintus, 1980, p. 560) -, was written could well account for the assertive, authoritative even, tone Wilde adopts in it. He reminds his critics that as an artist he has no moral pretence of any kind as “no artist desires to prove anything” (Wilde, 2008, p. 3) and that books cannot be moral or immoral because making judgements of that kind is outside the scope of literature. Literature is free to use morality as a material, but it should not declare what is or is not moral. Wilde was a trenchant critic of didactic or pedagogical pretences in literature, and he most certainly would not want his book to be described as part of the lot.

As one moves past the preface and further into the novel itself, one will find that Wilde puts the validity of his theories on art and life to test, making the book not just fiction, but an essay on art’s relation with life. Through Dorian’s character, Wilde examines to what degree art and life are interdependent, as we shall be able to see.

The figure of Dorian is essentially that of a work of art masterfully crafted by the words of Lord Henry. Dorian will be influenced to such an extent as to alienate himself completely from standard moral codes and to lead a life ruled by nothing but aesthetic experience.

One of the most striking themes to surface in the novel is that of the influence exerted over the main character, which might well be the cause of his ultimate decline. In fact, influence seems to be a recurrent concern in Wilde’s work, having been dedicated some lines in his

critical essays and studied thoroughly in the novel, where the first reference to the subject reads that “all influence is immoral” (Wilde, 2008, p. 18). The phrase, attributed to Lord Henry, is peremptory in its condemnation of the practice of influencing someone. The basis for influence’s immorality lies in the assumption that, when influencing someone, we are in fact depriving them from their own individuality, causing them not to think according to their own thoughts or passions but, instead, according to our own.

That influencing somebody to such an extent as to deplete them from the capacity to exercise their judgement anymore seems, indeed, indecent and immoral. This suggests, however, that there is a moral – right – thing to do, which one would think would be Lord Henry’s course of action towards Dorian. Despite proclaiming to be an individualist and an advocate for personal freedom, Lord Henry will, however, fail to comply with his own views and let himself be lured by the possibility of “moulding” Dorian Gray to his own image.

When Dorian Gray is first introduced to Lord Henry, he is described as a god-like, unspoiled figure, one who “had kept himself unspotted from the world” (Wilde, 2008, p. 17), much like a child who still preserves the naive gayety of his early years. This unspottedness, however, is not one to last long and Basil Hallward seems to be well aware of this possibility. Conscious of Gray’s naivety, Basil repeatedly insists that Lord Henry should not make Dorian’s acquaintance lest he shall be the one to spoil him. Dismissive of the painter’s concerns, Lord Henry will indeed become acquainted with Dorian and be much responsible, however unintentionally, for his descent into corruption and decadence.

Lord Henry’s witty remarks and paradoxical aphorisms will find in Dorian the perfect home, much as a parasite which has found the perfect host in which to accomplish its most primal objective of surviving and reproducing. No sooner does Dorian listen to Lord Henry than he feels that “fresh influences were at work within him” (Wilde, 2008, p. 19). Forces which

he had not known possible to be carried through words were now stirred inside him but “yet they seemed to him to have come really from himself”, and not from the speaker.

What seems to be at work here, more than the obvious power play of which Lord Henry is well-aware (Dorian being an impressionable young man), is an almost perfect example of Wilde’s doctrine that “all art is at once surface and symbol [and that] those who read the symbol do so at their own peril. It is the spectator (...) that art really mirrors” (Wilde, 2008, p. 3). What Dorian is doing here, and will continue to do throughout the novel, is reading whichever symbols he interprets in Lord Henry’s words – “Mere words! How terrible they were!” (Wilde, 2008, p. 19) – and finding in them a meaning that was not necessarily intended by the speaker. The terrible words Dorian hears are no longer Lord Henry’s but his very own interpretation of them. Whichever way Dorian will decide to act upon them will be his own responsibility, fruit of his arguably poor judgement. Lord Henry “had merely shot an arrow into the air” (Wilde, 2008, p. 20), although not without a somewhat malicious intent. Lord Henry never actually tells Dorian what to do, but he exerts his influence in an ever more subtle way. “Poisoned” by Lord Henry’s rants on how life can only be fully conquered if lived beautifully rather than righteously, Dorian will quickly cast his morals aside in a quest for ever-lasting pleasure and debauchery.

Lord Henry becomes deeply interested in exploring the enchanting power his words can exert over Dorian:

Yes; he would try 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 – had already, indeed, half done so. He would make that wonderful spirit his own. There was something fascinating in this son of Love and Death. (Wilde, 2008, p. 34)

It would be well to remember that Basil was extremely apprehensive of showing the painting exactly because he had put too much of himself in it and was afraid others could read in it some sort of secret he had accidentally revealed. What Dorian meant to Basil then, one might speculate, was a means for Basil to reveal himself. According to this logic, Lord Henry would then aim to be a means for Dorian to reveal his true self in turn.

Dorian Gray will thus become similar to a work of art sculpted out of Lord Henry's amoral aphorisms, one that is purely aesthetical and deeply alienated of traditional moral codes of conduct. This will allow us to look deeper into *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* as an aesthetic experience in which Wilde will test the limits to his own theories on life and art, the outcome of which I will pursue further in this study.

We have seen how words play a crucial role in the novel. What Julia Brown says of Wilde's plays – that “everything here is determined by language” (Brown, 1997, p. 89) – might well be said of the novel. No doubt, Lord Henry's language had already produced an effect on Dorian as he filled him “with a wild desire to know everything about life” (Wilde, 2008, p. 43) and led him on a never-ending quest for the pleasures and sensations of life, but there is yet another fundamental moment in which language will exert its influence on Dorian. This time, by means of “the yellow book that Lord Henry had sent him” (Wilde, 2008, p. 107). Having become enamoured with the book, Dorian will forever be haunted with an uncontrollable desire to emulate the main character's experiences:

For years, Dorian Gray could not free himself from the influence of this book. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he never sought to free himself from it. (...) The hero, the wonderful young Parisian, in whom the romantic and the scientific temperaments were so strangely blended, became to him a kind of prefiguring type of himself. And,

indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it. (Wilde, 2008, p. 108)

One might say that the book's influence on Dorian will grow until the moment of his death, and the reason why he could not free himself from it was probably due to the fact that he found in it the validation of his inherited doctrine that:

The true nature of the senses had never been understood, and that they had remained savage and animal merely because the world had sought to starve them into submission or to kill them by pain, instead of making them elements of a new spirituality, of which a fine instinct for beauty was to be the dominant characteristic. (Wilde, 2008, p. 110)

But what the oblivious "world" did not know was that "the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it" (Wilde, 2008, p. 19). Instead, this middle-class-equivalent "world" is too deeply rooted in Victorian conservative morals to know what only the few elect did – that the aim of life is to live beautifully. Dorian could now see beyond this restraining way of life – he was to discover the New Hedonism Lord Henry so often talked about and to which the main character of the yellow book dedicated his whole existence.

Now, parallel to Lord Henry's influence over Dorian, there happens a most decisive event right at the beginning of the novel, the one it is best known for: Dorian's utterance of a wish that the painting would grow old instead of himself will unfold the major event leading to his decline – the very accomplishment of this wish. There happens a metempsychosis-like process between Dorian and the painting, in which both entities exchange qualities. If, like we stated above, Dorian's life will correspond to art, art shall correspond to life in return.

When Dorian first sees Basil Hallward's painting, the metempsychosis pact is sealed. Once Lord Henry had made him aware of the evasiveness and preciousness of his beauty, Dorian

becomes extremely anxious about losing it and becomes jealous of the agelessness of the painting:

It will never be older than this particular day of June... if it were only the other way. If it were to be 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, 2008, p. 25)

No sooner does he finish his sentence than he strikes the very bargain he has wished for. Just as one sells their soul to the devil in exchange of a miraculous gift, so does Dorian sell his to art, so that he may remain forever young and be spared the witnessing his beauty's decay.

Selling one's soul is a fairly common trope in literature, and the transaction usually involves an ambitious buyer and an ill-intentioned, demonic at times, seller - in this case, art. Wilde seems to be implying that there is something demonic about art, that it has the power of trapping one's soul and make one do something immoral. This suggestion seems to be in accord with Plato's theory that there is a property in art capable of both seducing us and conditioning the way we behave.

What's more, Wilde also appears to be hinting at the idea of "original sin". While Dorian is blissfully ignorant of his beauty, he is happy and remains "unspotted". As soon as he is given the "apple" of aestheticism to bite, he becomes aware of the ephemerality of the real world and begins to yearn for immortality and eternal splendour. Figuratively speaking, the tempting demon of Eden has been replaced with art. Dorian might not ever be cast out of the Garden and instead get to know further exquisite pleasures and joys, but the pact he sealed will come at a cost, nonetheless.

Although we have already documented Lord Henry's influence on Dorian above, it might be well to look further at his role as Dorian's architect. If "to influence a person is to give him one's own soul", then Dorian ceases to be an individual and becomes a reflexion of Lord Henry. His part as a creator of a living work of art is further emphasised through his wish to "dominate him – had already indeed, half done so. He would make that wonderful spirit his own." Essentially, Dorian embodies an effort on the part of Lord Henry to generate an ideal which will demonstrate something "far richer than the Hellenic ideal." Dorian himself is well aware of this Pygmalion-like relationship between them, as he tells Henry that he had filled him "with a weird desire to know everything about life. For days after I met you, something seemed to throb in my veins." (Wilde, 2008, p. 43)

Indeed, after this transformation, Dorian will become an inhabitant of a sort of aesthetic utopia of pure beauty and sensation, as far away from reality and its conventions as possible.

Dorian is not, however, the only character to live in such an alienated state. Julia Brown suggests that "Sybil, James, and Mrs. Vane all live out their personal lives in the thrall of either melodrama or tragedy" (Brown, 1997, p. 82). They all become the embodiment of works of art of some sort. Mrs. Vane is a completely hollow character, devoid of any personality traits other than the histrionic mannerisms she has so often performed on stage; and James, despite not being an actor himself, ends up reduced to a literary cliché of the "Avenging Brother" representative of the "working class *resentiment*", whose death is nothing short of comically meaningless.

As to Sybil, "she performs the role of Juliet in her own life, as she has on stage, when she kills herself". Analogously to Dorian, Sybil – of all Vane family members – also inhabits a world of pure artistic illusion – in a fairy-tale-like dimension, even. Sybil lives in a utopian fantasy in which she has been nothing but the characters she has performed on stage, much like Dorian embodies the characteristics of his portrait.

Unlike Dorian, however, Sybil seems completely oblivious of the fact, whereas he will remain aware of the circumstances that led him into that very world. It will not be until she falls in love with him that Sybil will wake up from this trance-like state only to realise that “acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. I thought it was all true” (Wilde, 2008, p. 74). Now that she had seen “reality”, there was no going back, as she explicitly tells Dorian:

I knew nothing but shadows, and I thought them real. You came (...) and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is (...) You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection. (Wilde, 2008, pp. 74-5)

To Dorian, who had decided to completely shun reality, this stark reminder of its existence was to him as hideous a thing as he could imagine. He could not bear to hear Sybil praise reality so much – to him, she was casting away her most precious possession, her art, one Dorian was so fond of and the sole reason why he had loved her in the first place. It doesn't come as a surprise, then, that he scolds her for having murdered his love:

You used to stir my imagination. Now you don't even stir my curiosity. You simply produce no effect. I loved you because you were marvellous (...) and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art. You have thrown it all away. You are shallow and stupid. (Wilde, 2008, p. 75)

In emerging from her illusory world, Sybil becomes a mere fact, something that doesn't produce any effect, as boring as life. She will, however, feel the pangs of reality deeply as she learns that Dorian does not love her anymore. She awoke to a crude world of agony, too painful to bear, and she feels that the only way to escape from it is to embody art one last time and put an end to her life just like the Juliet she had so often performed. In doing so,

Sybil re-enters the fantastic world of artistic illusion from which she had emerged. Art was the only possible redemption, the only way out of such a terrible reality. Sybil's death is narrowly equivalent to the death of Dorian Gray – just as she dies the moment she has arisen from her fictive world, so will Dorian when he so arises.

At first, the kind of transformation that occurs between Dorian and the painting will allow him to inhabit this “fictive world” and go through life almost with complete impunity, being free to exercise Lord Henry's suggestions without much concern. In fact, Lord Henry might even be to one to blame for this metempsychosis, given that had it not been for him, Dorian would probably have never been aware of the fleeting, fragile condition of his beauty and would not have given in to such anxiety as made him sell his soul. The awareness of this condition, however, will never leave him and reality will begin to slowly intrude itself upon him.

It is not until Dorian's temper tantrum with Sybil Vane that he will become aware that something is happening between him and the painting. Upon returning home after their tumultuous break-up and looking up at the picture hanging on his living-room wall, Dorian “started back as if in surprise (...) [because] the expression looked different. One would say that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth.” (Wilde, 2008, p. 78) It is not long until Dorian realises why the painting had indeed changed. It had something to do with Sybil though he did not know exactly what. Sure, he had been faintly mean to her, but according to Lord Henry, such was the pettiness of love and women. There was no reason whatsoever for him to be concerned about her nor his action. He was entitled to have treated her the way he did because she had been the one spoiling his fantasy.

Yet, the painting reminded him that something had indeed happened, and Dorian lacked Lord Henry's nonchalance not to worry about it. At this precise moment, he realises that there had occurred a division inside him. It's as though his soul had left his body to incarnate

the picture and the picture's agelessness had come to inhabit his body. Interestingly enough, Wilde seems to signal this very division by resorting to a play of opposites to describe the painting's "beautiful marred face and its cruel smile" (Wilde, 2008, p. 79).

Now, "marred" and "cruel" are both moral attributes. The portrait would not just bear sign of the passage of time. It "would be to him the visible emblem of his conscience" (Wilde, 2008, p. 79). As Julia Brown puts it, "Dorian's new life is not etched on his face but mirrored in the physiognomy of the portrait" (Brown, 1997, p. 79).

Dorian's first reaction is to repent:

He would resist temptation. He would not see Lord Henry any more – would not, at any rate, listen to those subtle poisonous theories that in Basil's Hallward's garden had first stirred within him the passion for impossible things." (Wilde, 2008, p. 79)

For a short period of time, Dorian is determined to make of his picture a guide to life, one that would show him exactly whenever he had been "bad". In this particular case, art acts as a sort of morality standard against which Dorian will compare his actions in order to properly evaluate them. Again, life is learning about itself directly from art.

This attitude, however, does not last long. Dorian's guilt after he has committed something condemnable is similar in a way to what psychologists call Post-Coital Tristesse – a sudden feeling of guilt that follows the orgasm and leads people to think that they will never masturbate anymore, for example. In many cases, people will indeed masturbate again, as soon as they are feeling aroused the next time round.

Dorian acts in a similar way – after he has either unleashed his anger or experimented a new pleasure, he will feel a pang of consciousness which will lead him to think he will not do it again, but only up until the moment he experiences the urge to “feel” again.

In such a situation, it is extremely easy for him to dismiss any moral values:

He felt that the time had really come for making his choice. Or had his choice already been made? Yes, life had decided that for him – life, and his own infinite curiosity about life. Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins – he was to have all these things. The portrait was to bear the burden of his shame: that was all. (Wilde, 2008, p. 90)

These feelings of guilt and subsequent dismissal of his consciousness are representative of Dorian’s emerging and then plunging back in the aesthetic utopia we saw above. This exercise, however, will prove most difficult after Basil Hallward’s murder. If in the wake of his horrible act Dorian seems to be completely detached from it, it will not be long until his peace is disturbed by intruding, obsessive moral thoughts that will fill him with anxiety.

As he was reading Gautier’s “Émaux et Camées” in the hope he would forget about the incident, he is suddenly assaulted with memories of Basil. As he reads about the “‘monstre charmant’ that couches in the porphyry-room of the Louvre” (Wilde, 2008, p. 139), the book falls from his hand as if he had been reminded that he was that very monster. His were the most charming looks, and yet, his actions had made him a monster – “a beautiful caged thing” (Wilde, 2008, p. 140), shackled by the consciousness he could not escape from.

For a moment he thought that disposing of the body had put an end to his suffering, and “he himself could not help wondering at the calm of his demeanour” (Wilde, 2008, p. 147), but he soon becomes “irritable, and out of temper” (Wilde, 2008, p. 153). He will find that

the only way to prevent his subduing to the consciousness of the immorality of his actions would be to numb the senses by recurring to opium so as to

‘cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul!’ How the words rang in his ears! His soul, certainly, was sick to death. Was it true that the senses could cure it? Innocent blood had been spilt. What could atone for that? Ah! For that there was no atonement; but though forgiveness was impossible, forgetfulness was possible still, and he was determined to forget, to stamp the thing out, to crush it as one would crush the adder that had one. (Wilde, 2008, pp. 155-6)

For a while, he will be able to return to the aesthetic realm, but immediately after James Vane’s death, Dorian is seen emerging from this utopia and letting himself be influenced by the real world once again, becoming what Oscar Wilde would consider a “bad” work of art. Dorian begins to develop a strong sense of sin and vows to make his life moral as well as beautiful, not realising that this was no longer possible for him. Dorian is constantly incapable of establishing his own values, constantly recurring to Lord Henry for spiritual counsel. When he tells him he will now try to be both “good” and “beautiful”, Lord Henry is dismissive of his aspirations and says that “there is no use in your telling me that you are going to be good (...) you are quite perfect. Pray, don’t change” (Wilde, 2008, p. 176), to which Dorian retorts saying that he has done “far too many dreadful things”.

At this point, Dorian is convinced that he had done the “right thing” by breaking up with a village girl with whom he had had an affair. Lord Henry, however, reminds him that despite his good intentions, he had nonetheless broken the girl’s heart. Now, Dorian had never realised that to be good, it would take more than a simple good intention. After all, what he does to this girl is in no way different to what he had done to Sybil Vane some years before.

He then begs Lord Henry not to let anyone else have access to the poisonous book that he had once lent him, not realising that – as Lord Henry hastes to remind him – “Art has no influence upon action” (Wilde, 2008, p. 183), and that he committed those dreadful acts because he wanted to, not because he was forced to. Just as Wilde had written in the “Preface” to the novel, “it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.” The book had merely reflected something that already was part of Dorian.

Upon this realisation, Dorian begins to long for the “unspotted” beauty of his innocent self – “his rose-white boyhood, as Lord Henry had once called it” (Wilde, 2008, p. 184), as opposed to his previous mad desires to feel each and every sensation life could possibly offer him. He had tried it, and he has come to realise that an aesthetic life had brought him nothing but suffering. His attempts to once again reunite the concepts of “beautiful” and “good” will make the painting reflect “a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite” (Wilde, 2008, p. 186). At this moment, Dorian begins to wonder whether his previous intentions of redemption had actually been sincere or rather the mere indulgence in a newly fabricated sensation and he realises that his redemption rested on nothing but an egotistical, artificially created notion of purity and innocence. He asks himself whether it had been “merely vanity that had made him do his one good deed” (Wilde, 2008, p. 186) and, if so, then this deed was no different than all others. It was not necessarily good, as it was artificial:

Through vanity he had spared her [the village girl]. In hypocrisy he had worn the mask of goodness. For curiosity’s sake he had tried the denial of self. He recognized that now. (Wilde, 2008, p. 187)

He can no longer tolerate the impossibility of atoning for his sins that were “to dog him all his life” (Wilde, 2008, p. 187), so the only solution left is to destroy the bitter reminder of

his soul – the picture itself. By destroying the objectification of his conscience, he is himself destroyed at last.

In light of Wilde's theory of aesthetics, it might seem a bit difficult to comprehend his negative depiction of Dorian Gray. After all, Dorian had been one who put Wilde's "teachings" to practice, and one would expect a more positive outcome so as to validate the theories he had advanced in *Intentions*. In a major turn of events, the novel could actually condemn the very arguments Wilde had put forth.

If, however, morality to Wilde is but a material for his art, he could have told Dorian Gray's story in any way he so pleased without ever having to account for moral or "ethical sympathies". Nevertheless, this does not mean that Wilde did not end up choosing a moral side, and he himself in the preface seems to run counter to some sympathies recorded in the novel. As John Allen Quintus puts it,

if the novel closed with Dorian's clicking his heels at a debutante's ball, it would perhaps have fulfilled the expectations raised by the preface.
(Quintus, 1980, p. 561)

Instead, the reader is presented with a very different ending for a guilt-stricken Dorian who sees no possible escape from his conscience but to take his own life. This hypothesis is corroborated by Wilde himself, who, in the previously cited letter to the Editor of the *Daily Chronicle* had already described Dorian as

Extremely impulsive, absurdly romantic, and (...) haunted all through his life by an exaggerated sense of conscience which mars his pleasures for him and warns him that youth and enjoyment are not everything in the world. It is finally to get rid of the conscience that had dogged his steps

from year to year that he destroys the picture; and thus in his attempt to kill conscience Dorian Gray kills himself. (Wilde, 2000, p. 436)

Putting his main character to rest seems like an ethical sympathy on Wilde's part – trying to make him atone for the atrocities he had committed in the only possible way.

Although morals might not have been Wilde's primary concern, it is undeniable that moral conceptions of "good" and "bad" play a vital role in the plot. Dorian, however, fails to understand by himself just exactly what is good and what is bad, having to rely on the painting's metamorphosis for that distinction, and always *a posteriori*. Dorian fails to make this distinction by himself, just as he fails to realise that art, be it the book or the painting, does not compel him to act in any particular way. In a letter to R. Clegg dated April 1891, Wilde says that "if the contemplation of a work of art is followed by activity of any kind, the work is either of a very second-rate order, or the spectator has failed to realise the complete artistic impression" (Wilde, 2000, p. 478). As Joseph Bristow notes in the "Introduction" to the edition at hand, Dorian Gray seems to suffer from that very lack of realisation, as he subjects the "yellow book" to "a very narrow interpretation" (Wilde, 2008, p. xv). Such a narrow interpretation is akin to that of the "silly boys" in "The Decay of Lying" who had read adventure novels and, subduing to life's imitative instinct, decided to emulate their characters' mischiefs. Knowing very little of this instinct, Dorian believed that the acts he had committed were forced on him by both his listening to Lord Henry's words and his reading of the "poisonous" novel he had borrowed from him.

If nothing else, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* proves that it is impossible for a man to ever live in a purely aesthetic manner. In the end, aestheticism might be a powerful watchword under which to judge and produce art, but it has never been intended as a guide to life. By trying to live by it, and paying no mind whatsoever to moral concerns, Dorian Gray finds his own doom. Oscar Wilde reminds us that we should be as wary of aestheticism

as of any other literary school of thought. Even Wilde himself does not live by it; he simply feigns to. His life is no work of art, instead it is *as* a work of art, in that it is an illusion, an expression of his own subjectivity, and this is, I believe, a most important point to understand it.

III

In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, published in the February 1891 issue of the *Fortnightly Review*, Wilde advances both his notion of what individualism is and the necessary political changes to take place for this temperament to develop. It would be best to note, however, that while Wilde does engage in some political thinking, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” is not a political essay with a clear political intent of leading the country into a reform. According to Lawrence Danson, “the real achievement of ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’ is not as a theory or manifesto but as a realization and demonstration.” (Danson, 1998, pp. 157-8) As a rhetorical exercise, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” is extremely successful: Wilde’s arguments are clear in that they identify a problem and readily offer a solution. According to Wilde, English individuals spend too much time worrying about other people’s problems to focus on developing themselves. The only way to alter this paradigm would be to eradicate other people’s problems once and for all. According to Wilde, English society is trapped in a sort of vicious circle that could be more or less described as such: a problem exists (i), men worry about that problem (ii), they try to find a solution (iii), the solution is ineffective, and the problem persists (iv), so men continue worrying about it (i), etc.

To Wilde, the only possible solution to this problem would be to “try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible”, starting with the abolishment of private property. According to Wilde, not only is the ownership of private property a nuisance for those who have it, it is also the fuel that maintains an oppressive system from which those

who do not own it cannot escape. These are the ones condemned to “live like a badly fed animal” and to work like “beasts of burden” (Wilde, 2002, p. 250), only to perpetuate their suffering.

Abolishing private property would make it possible for every man to partake in a communal wealth, and this would bring about numerous benefits, spanning from the eradication of poverty and starvation to the eradication of crime. This system of property-holding is, however, too deeply rooted in English society. So much so, that “the English law has always treated offences against a man’s property with far more severity than offences against his person.” (Wilde, 2002, p. 253) What English society should be able to realise, though, is that “the true perfection of man lies, not in what man has, but in what man is” (Wilde, 2002, p. 252), but the underlying problem is that society as it is does not permit men to realise himself:

One’s regret is that society should be constructed on such a basis that man has been forced into a groove in which he cannot freely develop what is wonderful, and fascinating and delightful in him – in which, in fact, he misses the true pleasure and joy of living. (Wilde, 2002, p. 253)

Another hindrance to men realising their full potential is directly related with the type of labour they are forced to undertake. Manual labour is, in Wilde’s view, both “degrading” and “morally injurious to man” (Wilde, 2002, p. 260) simply because he is not to find pleasure in it. It follows, then, that for society to achieve this perfect state of individualism, it would be necessary for men to stop working. But how could a society in which nobody produced any manual labour sustain itself? Again, Wilde has the solution at the ready: “All unintellectual labour, all monotonous, dull labour, all labour that deals with dreadful things and involves unpleasant conditions, must be done by machinery” (Wilde, 2002, p. 260).

One would be wrong, however, to judge Wilde's ideas for their practicality. Not unlike the characters of his previous dialogues, Wilde envisions a society that needs no external sanction from practical, political, life. Just as art might sometimes make use of life as its rough material, Wilde's theory of Socialism is a theory about the creation of the necessary conditions for men to become individualists. As a critic, Wilde is not interested in evidencing all the nuances of a political school; instead, he takes only whatever is good about it so as to fit his purpose: "Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to individualism"; it is simply a means to an end and not an end in itself. That end, as we will see, is primarily artistic. Wilde's socialism is the realization of a social utopia where politics would no longer interfere in any matters of thought and result instead in a society in which each and every one is free to reveal their own personality.

Not only is Wilde interested in creating a space where no individual should ever suffer from economic difficulties, he is, most importantly, securing a place where individuals are free to realise their entire potential without expecting sanctions from the "outside", non-utopic, world: "what is outside of him [man], should be a matter of no importance" (Wilde, 2002, p. 253). In the same logic, whatever is "inside" of man, should also be a matter of no importance to those outside.

What Wilde first refers to in abstract, obscure even, terms, such as man's "potential" is later identified as man's capacity to not just create but, especially, to perceive and enjoy art. If, like we have seen above, good art is the product of the most personal expression of an individual mind, it comes as no surprise, then, that Wilde identifies art as "the most intense mood of individualism that the world has known" (Wilde, 2002, p. 262). Art is indeed the perfect example of something that is done without any interference from the outside world and for sheer pleasure. At this point in the essay, Wilde draws an analogy between art and individualism, using both terms rather interchangeably. It is not exactly clear how Wilde

reaches this point in which the individualist and the artist are one, as, his introduction of the analogy is quite abrupt. It might be that, for him, this transition is only logical and to be expected, given that politics, for Wilde, is in itself a matter of art. If politics should aim at preserving the individual, and if art is the best means for an individual to realise his full potential, then art is directly implied in politics; aesthetics are a means to achieve the individual. As Julia Brown points out:

Art's inherent but precarious immunity from the tyrannizing of the spectator is synonymous with human spiritual freedom and is truly possible only in a society that has passed beyond socialist materialism, a reconstructed society no longer preaching utilitarianism, nationalism, or the Christian ideal of self-realization through pain. (Brown, 1997, p. 82)

With regards to art, however, the problem in English society lies in the fact that a “badly brought-up” (Wilde, 2002, p. 262) public constantly tries to exercise some type of influence over it. Wilde criticises English audiences for trying to dominate art, and transform it into a utilitarian instrument of entertainment:

They [the public] are continually asking art to be popular, to please their want of taste, to flatter their absurd vanity, to tell them what they have been told before, to show them what they ought to be tired of seeing, to amuse them when they feel heavy after eating too much, and to distract their thoughts when they are wearied of their own stupidity. (Wilde, 2002, p. 262)

This is a similar situation to that which Wilde had already alluded to in “The Decay of Lying”, saying that, in the current situation of men’s relation to art, “life gets the upper hand and

drives art out into the wilderness” (Wilde, 2002, p. 152). In both cases, outside forces are meddling in the artistic realm in which they do not belong.

This meddling is also partly political in the sense that a conservative public is both aware and afraid of art’s subversive nature. In constantly demonstrating new relations and creating new forms, art will necessarily break up with traditional paradigms. It is because of this characteristic that the uneducated public will try to tame it.

Instead of trying to exercise their dominion over art, men should instead be receptive to it and allow it to exert its influence over them instead. How this change might be brought about is not exactly clear, but Wilde rests on a number of evolutionary references to imply that this process is, indeed, part of our nature:

[individualism] comes naturally and inevitably out of man. It is the point to which all development tends. (...) it does not try to force people to be good. It knows that people are good when they are left alone. (...) When man has realized individualism, he will also realise sympathy and exercise it freely and spontaneously. (Wilde, 2002, pp. 276-277)

Most importantly, Wilde seems to admit that there is also a moral benefit to achieving individualism, in the sense that it offers a way towards happiness, not only because man will be able to be fully in touch with his subjectivity, but (in an unexpected utilitarian twist) also because “sympathy with joy intensifies the sum of joy in the world” (Wilde, 2002, p. 278).

This moral effect can, in a way, be attributed to art as well. If art is the perfect mood of one’s individualism, and if individualism, when achieved, will in turn cause people to “be good”, then it might be said that art helps people to be good. Another hint at art’s possible effect on morals is to be found in *De Profundis*, where Wilde portrays Christ as the perfect individualist, likening him to a true artist. Both are deeply individualistic, and in the same way

that Christ “sought to become eyes to be blind, ears to the deaf and a cry on the lips of those whose tongue had been tied” (Wilde, 2002, p. 75), so does the artist show to those who are so predisposed things that they might have always possessed but were oblivious of, much like Hamlet who gave name to the melancholy men had always felt but had never been able to identify.

Here, Wilde draws close to Shelley’s remark that one of the most important characteristics of poetry is the fact that it shows men “new” connections between things which had never been perceived before. According to Shelley, such realisations can have a deep moral resonance in men’s minds, for:

The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices, whose void for ever craves fresh food. (Shelley & Woodcock, 2002, p. 642)

Wilde admits such moral implications to be possible as well. Art is capable of creating in men such a state of receptivity that it might, in the end, condition the way in which they carry themselves, much because of life’s imitative instinct. The great moral advantage of art, then, would be its capacity to both create and stimulate empathy amongst men. This brings us back to the example of Jesus Christ, one whose influence played a vital role in Wilde’s maturity (as can be seen from his exaltation in *De Profundis*) and one whose “morality is all sympathy, just what morality should be” (Wilde, 2002, p. 80). Sympathy is indeed to Wilde a most important trait in an individualist, but it should not be exercised complacently. It has always been easy to sympathise with suffering, but a true individualist will be able to

sympathise as well with success; this Wilde found to be lacking in the men of his time, whose sympathy could even be regarded as egotistical:

Up to the present man has hardly cultivated sympathy at all. He has merely sympathy with pain, and sympathy with pain is not the highest form of sympathy. (...) It is tainted with egotism. (...) We become afraid that we ourselves might be as the leper or as the blind, and that no man would have care of us. (...) One should sympathise with the entirety of life, not with life's sores and maladies merely, but with life's joy and beauty and energy and health and freedom. The wider sympathy is, of course, the more difficult. It requires more unselfishness. Anybody can sympathise with the sufferings of a friend, but it requires a very fine nature—it requires, in fact, the nature of a true Individualist—to sympathise with a friend's success. (Wilde, 2002, p. 277)

As the perfect embodiment of individualism, Christ was also the perfect example of such a nature, for not only did he have sympathy for the poor, but for all. To him, all men were but personalities that could be developed to their fullness, despite their social condition, which is, of course, determined by external factors and, as thus, should not play a role in the matters of the spirit:

Pity he has, of course, for the poor, (...) but he has far more pity for the rich, for the hard Hedonists, for those who waste their freedom in becoming slaves to things (Wilde, 2002, p. 74)

Here, private property is again seen as an impediment to the development of the soul. In an example provided by Wilde, when Christ tells a young man to “sell all that thou hast and

give it to the poor' it is not of the state of the poor that he is thinking but of the soul of the young man, the lovely soul that wealth was marring" (Wilde, 2002, p. 74).

Contrary even, to what might be a common assumption, Wilde indicates that Christ's creed was not really to live for others, but, instead, to live for ourselves. Focusing on perfecting our own selves would allow us to develop such a personality as would sympathise with all other men in return. It is necessary to look inwards before being able to look outwards. To Wilde, this is basically an exercise of the imagination:

It is the imaginative quality of Christ's own nature that makes him this palpitating centre of romance (Wilde, 2002, p. 77)

This is, of course, part of Christ's extraordinary nature, and Wilde does recognise that common men are not endowed with such powerful spirits, but they can nevertheless aspire to develop their imagination to as Christ-like a degree as possible. To Wilde, art has the power of helping men achieve this perfected state, for "whenever there is a romantic movement in Art [namely, a movement that exalted imagination over everything else], there somehow, and under some form, is Christ, or the soul of Christ" (Wilde, 2002, p. 77). Art lets us partake in men's joys and sorrows, lets us experience the deepest suffering and the highest joy, it makes us "learn how salt is the bread of others and how steep their stairs" (Wilde, 2002, p. 74) by stimulating our imagination. These ideals, though better documented in *De Profundis*, have their germen in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism", where this stimulated imagination is referred to as "the artistic temperament" (Wilde, 2002, p. 270). Similarly, this temperament could be developed through contacting with art, provided it is true in the Wildean sense of the word. Wilde found that

There have been individual artists who have succeeded in creating in their audiences – and every theatre in London has its own audience – the

temperament to which art appeals. And what is that temperament? It is the temperament of receptivity. (Wilde, 2002, p. 270)

The success of the creation of such temperament depends not only on the “individual artists”, but also on “their audiences”. If it is necessary that art be true, “that in which the outward is expressive of the inward” (Wilde, 2002, p. 76), it is also necessary that the audience does not try to exercise any type of authority over what they are presented with:

He [the spectator] is to go to the play to realise an artistic temperament. He is to go to the play to gain an artistic temperament. He is not the arbiter of the work of art. He is one who is admitted to contemplate the work of art, and, if the work be fine, to forget in its contemplation all the egotism that mars him – the egotism of his ignorance, or the egotism of his information. (Wilde, 2002, p. 271)

And though it may seem that Wilde is now far away from his initial political intent, one must not forget that such a political system as Wilde envisaged would be the basis to create in all men the possibility to realise themselves. Free men, who are not bound by any hard and degrading manual labour, are given the freedom to exercise this contemplation. This is the reason why Wilde’s socialism is as political as it is artistic. Politics is a means to (i) make the creation of art possible and (ii) to make men free to spend their lives admiring it, thus developing their personalities and, in turn, becoming better, more empathetic, men.

A life of contemplation is the most commonplace objective any 19th century aesthete could have. To Wilde, however, the function of aestheticism and individualism can be extended to the perfecting not just of the individual but, consequently, of society itself, especially through the development of a critical faculty.

In “The Critic as Artist”, Gilbert remarks that “it is through art, and through art only, that we can realise our perfection; through art and through art only can we shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence” (Wilde, 2002, p. 215).

It is through imagination, stirred by contemplation, and through the exercise of a critical spirit, that “we shall be able to realise, not merely our own lives, but the collective life of the race (...) Criticism will annihilate race-prejudices, by insisting upon the unity of the human mind in the variety of its forms”. If, in which regards his concept of art criticism, Wilde has previously corrected Matthew Arnold, in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, he is closer to his predecessor than ever. In fact, according to Julia Brown:

In much of the standard criticism on Wilde, Pater’s influence has been exaggerated to the point of excluding the influences of the other Victorians (...) Yet Pater himself designated Wilde as Arnold’s true successor; he praised *Intentions* for carrying on ‘more perhaps than any other writer, the brilliant critical work of Matthew Arnold’. Like Arnold, Wilde understood the importance of viewing culture as a whole, as an integral rather than an aggregate. (Brown, 1997, p. 49)

Like Arnold, Wilde regards art as more than simple ornament by virtue of its long-lasting effect on the culture of a nation because art “makes of people sentient, emotional, sympathetic beings whose consciousness of beauty diminishes their capacity for meanness” (Quintus, 1980, p. 571).

In his journey from “The Decay of Lying” to “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” and finally, *De Profundis*, Wilde moved past the Victorian opposition of ethics versus aesthetics and achieved that reassociation of opposites which can be described as his very own ethical aesthetics (Brown, 1997, p. 51). Most of the work Wilde produced between 1889 (“The

Decay of Lying”) and 1891 (the revised edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*) seems to be tied together by a persistent search for an equilibrium between such apparently disparate concepts. Already in his earliest essays, Wilde envisages an ideal world in which art could flourish outside the tight grip of societal constraints. In his earliest, “The Decay of Lying”, Wilde’s dialogic counterpart Vivian prophesises a utopia in which lying is praised and encouraged above all else:

And when that day dawns, or sunset reddens, how joyous we shall all be!
Facts will be regarded as discreditable, truth will be found mourning over her fetters, and romance, with her temper of wonder, will return to the land. The very aspect of the world will change to our startled eyes. (Wilde, 2002, p. 169)

Again in “The Critic as Artist”, Gilbert playfully suggests that life is a failure “from the artistic point of view” (Wilde, 2002, p. 211) and that the only way to correct it would be to live under the guidance of the critic and his art as

It is through art, and through art only, that we can realise our perfection;
through art, and through art only that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence. (Wilde, 2002, p. 215)

In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, these perils take the form of not only poverty, famine and ineffective sympathy with misery but also of a Philistine audience’s wish to exert authority over matters of thought, thus inhibiting the full development of the individualistic spirit, which is, as referred before, innately artistic.

Wilde’s abstract utopianism, such as it is proposed in his essays is then self-critically put to test in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Though Wilde’s utopia might be said to fail in this test environment, as Dorian is finally confronted with and fated by the consequences of his acts,

Wilde's exercise renders his aestheticism much more layered than what his many now celebrated aphorisms might lead one to believe. Wilde does not seem as much interested in completely renouncing society as he knows it as he is in showing how it can be improved through the fostering of the artistic spirit.

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