

Mirroring the Victorian *Fin de Siècle*: Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation*

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*W*ill Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* has been a controversial narrative ever since it was published in 2002, receiving on the whole adverse critiques from reviewers². Nevertheless, some academic scholars have defended its relevance as an innovative “retro-Victorian” reflection on aestheticism from an intertextual viewpoint (Yebra) or as a postmodernist rendering of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* between imitation and self-reflection (Chalupský). In this same vein, Harrison has considered Self's narrative as a homage to, and adaptation of, Wilde's novel, underlining the deployment of satire, aspects that Gingell has wittily expanded with a major emphasis on parody, also discussing the concept of misrepresentation. Other scholars, like Helen Davies—who includes *Dorian: An Imitation* in a comprehensive catalog of neo-Victorian versions of Wilde's “voice”—and Louisa Yates—in a thought-provoking analysis of the process of “re-vision”—have delved more deeply into the comparison between Wilde's book and its appropriation by Self from a neo-Victorian stance, a perspective that Patricia Pulham has applied to her intriguing account of traces of Wilde in both *Dorian: An Imitation* and Craig Wilmann's 2014 drama *The Picture of John Gray*, taking into consideration the balance between history and fiction in each text and providing the first academic analysis of Wilmann's play.

Referring to its main literary model and point of departure, Will Self narcissistically stated in an interview that his novel is “a homage.

And a complete and professed rewrite of a classic, I think it's unique. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the prophecy and *Dorian* is the fulfilment" (McCrum). Is Will Self's piece of fiction a fulfilment of Wilde's? How does he trace and rewrite the Irish genius's classic? How does the text retrieve and transform the cultural and the sexual politics of the model on which it is based? Throughout this article I shall endeavour to answer these questions, dealing with the way(s) in which *Dorian* mirrors *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from a contemporary perspective which, at the same time, together with many present-day narratives in the English language, tries to recover the late Victorian past, establishing significant relationships between the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* and that of the twentieth century. In this respect, I subscribe the determining words of Heilmann and Llewellyn when they emphasize the fact that the neo-Victorian standpoint focuses on the oscillating nature ("Going forward, looking backward") of this essential and culturally productive trend: "As Victorianists we are fascinated by the ways in which contemporary culture seeks to return us to, develop us from, and connect us with our Victorian precursors" (32). And, unquestionably, Will Self's attempt at rewriting Wilde's narrative masterpiece has proved to be a bold experiment to revise and 'update' it from a contemporary approach. Self's novel has been considered outmoded and far from the sensibility of present-day readers by some reviewers who have not interpreted it within the historical framework in which it is included (beside not taking into account its indubitable literary merits): that of Margaret Thatcher's Britain, in which its most representative political leader was precisely enthralled by the trace of the Victorian period³, and the subsequent 1990s.

As the subtitle of Self's bizarre narrative emphasizes, *Dorian* aims at being 'an imitation' of Oscar Wilde's well-known and myth-making *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. According to Neil Bartlett,

Self's *Dorian* subtiles itself "an imitation", and that it is exactly what it is, in the full Wildean sense. It flatters its original by taking both subject and style entirely seriously. The locations, characters, plot and epigrams are all transposed from the 1890s to the 1990s, chapter by inexorable chapter. Little is materially altered, but everything is reused — sharpened, blackened and intensified by Self's idiosyncratic remix of Wilde's combination of wit and rage, extravagant debauchery with clinical introspection.

Consequently, *Dorian* constitutes a neo-Victorian rewriting of Wilde's influential incursion into the Gothic mode, clearly connected with former paradigms of the fantastic introducing the figure of the double. Both Self and Wilde are haunted by the Narcissus myth, narcissism, the *Doppelgänger* motif and, ultimately, mirror images⁴. The plot of *Dorian: An Imitation* begins in 1981, and the number itself is chiasmic with respect to the year in which *Dorian Gray* was published in one volume by Ward, Lock and Co., after having been issued in *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1890. Mirrors trace the multiple reflections of selves, a theme that is recurrent and almost obsessive in both books, which are the product of the inner and outer conflicts of their respective ages. Duality is a persistent element in Victorian literature, and especially in nineteenth-century English Gothic and fantasy, teeming with ominous doubles, Frankenstein's monster, Bertha Mason (the 'madwoman in the attic' of Thornfield in *Jane Eyre*), Edward Hyde and Dracula being the most evident examples. Similarly, both Wilde's narrative and Self's imitation mirror a period of decadence and dissipation, of consumerism, of social and political crisis, of sexual ambiguities and reinventions, of projections of disease, of disenchantment and escapism, of psychological confusion. Will Self's *Dorian* and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) are among the books that best fulfil and represent in an explicit way what is ambiguously suggested in Wilde's narrative, which is masterfully subtle and vague as far as unconcealed details about Dorian Gray's crimes are concerned, leaving mostly aside Basil Hallward's murder.

The comparison between Wilde's novel and Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886)—which exerted a clear influence on the former, haunting the Irishman's imagination—constitutes a relevant case in point in this respect due to the fact that both narratives show an obsession with mirrors within an unmistakable Gothic atmosphere, Jekyll's cheval glass being the equivalent symbolic element of Dorian Gray's picture, and Hyde's evil behaviour providing a chiasmic counterpart to that of the dazzling ephebe. If both Wilde and Stevenson had plainly and visibly reflected their protagonists' misdeeds and transgressions, they would probably be perceived now, in an age of extreme fetishism of violence, backed up and brought forward by many films and television series, as outdated and scarcely shocking. In this regard, Victorian subtlety and ambiguity have been substituted in present-day times—in our neo-Victorian context—by grim explicitness, undoubtedly attenuating the uncanny effect

that Victorian Gothic narratives produced in their coetaneous readers. *Fin-de-siècle* literary monsters — vampires, ghosts, psychopathic characters like Edward Hyde and Dorian Gray himself — are now ‘disenchanted images’, utilizing the sagacious term applied by Theodore Ziolkowski to those icons that bring about terrors and anxieties within the very heart of a social and psychological milieu, and which are accordingly de-semanticized, devoid of their power to produce a feeling of disquiet and defamiliarization. In this line of argument, it would not be implausible to envisage Self’s *Dorian* as a neo-Victorian ‘disenchanted’ rewriting of its model.

Be that as it may, in Wilde’s view, as he asserts in the famous “Preface” to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” (3). It can be affirmed that both *Dorian Gray* and *Dorian: An Imitation* are ambiguously moral; and both are very well written. *Dorian* is the fulfilment of *Dorian Gray* because it makes overt what is behind Wilde’s novel, among other relevant issues: the veiled promise and seed of a revolution in sexual and social manners. Not in vain, the great Irishman endured two years in prison after the two infamous trials of 1895 in which part of the evidence for his alleged guiltiness of “gross indecency” was the citations of passages from his notorious book.

Will Self’s *Dorian* replicates to the very verge of hyperbole the satire of late Victorianism revealed in Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*. Maybe this is because the last two decades of the twentieth century were, debatably, more extreme and frantic than their nineteenth-century correlates. Or, simply, the English writer deliberately wanted to emphasize in sharp terms the perverted nature of the diseased society of Thatcher’s Britain and the increasing sensation of *ennui* generated by capitalistic dissipation and dehumanization in the 1990s. Self rewrites and imitates his model with acerbic irony, corrosive satire and grotesque exaggeration, mirroring and distorting the late Victorian past in a narcissistic narrative (Hutcheon 1984) structured in three parts, adding a disturbing and ambivalent epilogue. In describing the progression of Dorian and the rest of the characters throughout the plot of his novel, the English author reflects the excesses of the turn of the century in a decadent London where there are no deeply-rooted certainties. The vices and the profligacy of the Victorian *fin de siècle*, that other side of the splendours of Imperial Britain, are mirrored by what Self depicts as the utter mayhem of Thatcher’s England, where the Prime Minister herself and the Conservative government

implemented a nostalgic vision of the purported greatness of Victorian times (Samuel; Evans).

Even so, Self goes consciously beyond Wilde's elegantly sinuous descriptions and highly elevated rhetorical style in painting a portrait of weariness, overindulgence, drugs and dissolute homosexual relationships. Andrew Smith has aptly and captivatingly read Self's text as a paradigm of the queer Gothic. The most relevant characters in the book, the same as those in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in a more restricted manner, are gay. This is obviously the case of Dorian himself, the same as that of Baz Hallward and, of course, Henry Wotton, who is the real protagonist of Self's narrative, becoming even its intradiegetic author, a narrative double of the writer himself. Dorian is perceived from the very beginning as an icon of gay beauty, being compared with Adonis and, most of all, with Narcissus, as in Wilde's narrative, in which Henry Wotton responds to Basil Hallward's avowal of having put too much of himself into his portrait of the youngster in the following terms:

I really can't see any resemblance between you, with your rugged strong face and your coal-black hair, and this young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and roseleaves. Why, my dear Basil, he is a Narcissus (6).

Like Narcissus, Dorian is loved and worshipped both by men and women, and the recognition of his beauty is provided by the portrait-mirror-pond in which he falls in love with himself, infatuated with his own image:

When he saw it [the picture] he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time [...]. The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation. He had never felt it before (24).

Will Self turns the portrait into a protean video installation called the *Cathode Narcissus*: nine television monitors showing the body of Dorian in different postures and attitudes. On the whole, it is a monument of voyeurism, nine mirrors instead of one, in which the young man can contemplate his multiform image potentially *ad infinitum*. From the very beginning, it arouses Dorian's desire of immortality:

‘How long will these tapes last, Baz?’ he asked.

‘It’s hard to say... Certainly years, if not decades, and by then they can be transferred to new tapes, and so on— for ever, I guess’.

‘So these’ —Dorian gestured— ‘will remain young for ever, while I grow old, then die’? [...] I wish it was the other way round’ (22).

Uncannily enough, as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian’s wish becomes true, and, like the portrait of his Wildean counterpart, the video installation —“an alternative me”, the young man says (51)—, will suffer all the transformations caused by Dorian’s wicked behaviour whilst he, obsessed at the beginning with the passing of time, remains young and beautiful, in spite of his criminal and murderous deeds. The *Cathode Narcissus* is the equivalent of Dorian Gray’s portrait, reflecting Self’s Dorian transformations when being involved in an evil action. Shortly after Herman—a character I will comment on later—commits suicide by overdose, there is a change in the monitors that Self describes with palpable irony, stressed by the apparently incongruous simile:

Then Dorian saw it: the faces on the screen had all changed—and for the worse. An exaggerated moue twisted his formerly flawless mouth. A distortion of a perfect symmetry such as his was far worse than a harelip on an ordinary face (70).

Dorian remains a mystery for most of the novel, and his ending increases this sense of not being able to cope with his changeable multiplicity. In a way, unlike Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as has already been pointed out, Self’s narrative focuses mainly on Henry Wotton, following the general impression of many critics and readers—and that of Will Self himself—that he impersonated Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in spite of the Irishman’s well-known refutation in this sense written in a letter to Ralph Payne (February 12, 1894): “Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps” (in Hart-Davis 116).

The plot of Self’s novel covers a span of sixteen years and, unlike Wilde’s narrative—together with the evolution of Wotton and of a chameleonic, elusive Dorian—, it breaks down in impressionist glimpses the incidents of history, commencing with the Brixton riots, and going back and forth in time to refer, for example, to the Gulf War and the Balkans conflict. As Jerusha McCormack has wisely detected, “Sequence, or history, is destroyed by myth, which Wilde understood to be more enduring

than history” (112); conversely, from a neo-Victorian standpoint, Self pays more attention to history rather than to myth in *Dorian*. The elongated shadow of Thatcherism inevitably lurks from the backstage of the narrative, and Self is always willing to debunk and expose it through his hyperbolic and corrosive style, even from the very beginning of his novel:

But such was the particular correspondence between the year our story begins, 1981, and the year of the house’s construction, 1881, and such was the peculiarly similar character of the times—a Government at once regressive and progressive, a monarchy mired in its own immemorial succession crisis, an economic recession both sharp and bitter... (3).

Self inserts his narrative within the convoluted twists and turns of history, always an essential issue in neo-Victorian narratives. It is illustrative—and ironic—that Victoria Wotton, Lord Henry’s wife, who bears the same name as the charismatic queen, is a historian. And it is even more sardonic that one of Dorian’s doubles throughout the narrative is Princess Diana, who is described in vitriolic and acerbic terms by Lord Henry, who, unlike Dorian, feels no affection whatsoever for the English monarchy: “Anyway, it is absurd, the deference that’s paid to Fatty Spencer; after all, it’s looking increasingly unlikely that she’ll ever be a queen, whereas there’re oodles of them in here” (80). Providing a relevant example of Linda Hutcheon’s concept of “historiographic metafiction”, Dorian and Diana’s narcissistic link is symbolically underlined at the very occasion of the Royal Wedding of the Princess with Prince Charles on 29 July 1981, when some of the main characters of Self’s novel are watching a videotape of the marriage ceremony (“The royal-fucking wedding!” in Wotton’s disrespectful language) “...grouped around one of the *Cathode Narcissus* monitors” (64), substituting Dorian’s iconic body for that of Diana, that “Queen of Hearts”, a figure of contemporary authenticity “hopelessly caught within the representational order of the artificial” (Lea 1). In Wilde’s narrative there is no analogous double of Gray; the portrait only reflects his own image and the metamorphoses on account of his transgressions and misdeeds.

On the other hand, seen from the specific point of view of homosexual history, Dorian and the other characters with the same sexual inclination stand for the first gay generation to come openly out of the closet, a point of departure still conceived as complex in socio-sexual terms, as Baz, the

counterpart of Basil Hallward in Wilde's book, accentuates: "But I want a different kind of relationship. I want truth and beauty and honesty, but the world wants to destroy that kind of love between men" (13). Of course, these sad words evoke the appalling fate of homosexuals in Wilde's time, and the unjust punishment he was compelled to suffer, which turned him into a martyr of the gay cause, among other attributions, as Alan Sinfield has perceptively analyzed.

Unfortunately, this was also the first gay generation to have become, through the use of drugs and—as shown in the narrative—immoderate sexual intercourse, the propitiatory victims of AIDS, the terrible pandemic that decimated the homosexual population (beside that of other groups also susceptible to be exposed to the virus) in the last decades of the twentieth century, until a retrovirus (the HAART) was discovered and applied to patients in order to reduce the devastating effects of the disease on the carriers of the VIH. As a consequence, homosexuality became a curse and a source of supplementary social and sexual exclusion. In Baz Hallward's words,

They say now that those few short years between the Stone-wall Riots and the arrival of AIDS were characterized by a mountings sense of liberation, that we gay men felt the time had come to be ourselves, to express ourselves, to live as we truly wanted to live, free of guilt, free of convention, free of interference. They say now that the disease is a ghastly, one-off, one act play. A piece of incomprehensible dramatic irony, inflicted on us happy Arcadians by a god who doesn't even exist... They say a lot of things, but for those of us who were there it was simple. Simple to observe that for men who were meant to be free, how readily they draped themselves in chains...' (94-95).

In *Dorian* AIDS replaces syphilis, the sexual epidemic of the *fin de siècle* which symbolically underlies the plot of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, lying at the core of most Victorian Gothic narratives, *Dracula* being the most obvious paradigm. In *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag brilliantly examines the symbolic power of the pandemic and what it means for those who suffer from it, illness being always "other", turning the body of the patients into alien entities which "belong and don't belong" to them at the same time, creating oftentimes, and because of social and psychological pressure, a feeling of guilt. Although of a different nature, the current COVID-19 pandemic makes us aware of the vulnerabilities, and the mental and physical transformations and

anxieties undergone by ‘diseased’ groups of people from the various layers of society.

The first part of *Dorian* (“Recordings”) ends up with a veritable “conga line of buggery” (68) in which Herman (notice the metaphorical connotations of the name), a drug dealer, transmits the lethal VIH virus to the rest of the participants in a sexual orgy, although Dorian will remain asymptomatic to the inexorable attack of the bacilli in spite of the fact that he contracts the disease. Both Herman (described as a “black Narcissus”⁵; 64) and a girl called Helen play the role of Sibyl Vane in *Dorian Gray*, and Herman’s friend, Ginger, that of James Vane, Sibyl’s brother.

As a matter of fact, Self’s Dorian, who holds relevant intertextual connections with Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, as scholars like Schaffer have suggested—admittedly, to a lesser extent than Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* inspired *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—, will become a homicidal and vampiric character: he not only murders Baz Hallward when he becomes witness to the transformation of his creation, the *Cathode Narcissus*, and contributes to the death of other characters in the book, as is the case of Octavia; he also transmits the VIH conscientiously to innocent people through sexual intercourse. This happens to Helen, who, to make things worse, has become the mother of a little baby. It is striking to observe how characters who are more than thirty are considered old people in Self’s mordant narrative. Ageing is a serious problem in a society which has converted youth and physical beauty into its incontestable deities.

Like Edgar Allan Poe’s pioneering protagonist of “The Man of the Crowd” in the early nineteenth century, and Anne Rice’s main male characters in “The Vampire Chronicles”, leading the way for other postmodern, neo-Victorian “creatures of the night”, Dorian and Henry Wotton are also impenitent *fin-de-siècle* dandies, conceiving of themselves in aesthetic terms, in archetypal Wildean fashion. Wotton, in a sentence which could be applied to the Irish writer, “styled himself as some contemporary dandy, *flâneur*, or boulevardier, and [...] he saw himself as a work of art” (40). Of course, these characters shine mostly in big cities like New York, where Dorian and Basil live for a time, whilst the painter rehabilitates from drug addiction. Lord Henry, adopting the many invectives—however funnily and mildly ironical—against the United States that can be found in Oscar Wilde’s works, “doesn’t do America”; he prefers the familiar urban landscape of London.

As in many Victorian and neo-Victorian narratives (Alan Moore's and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* being a significant example of the latter in this respect), the capital of England constitutes a cartography of moral and physical misery, a hostile repository of thinly-disguised violence and obscure ambiguities. Consequently, the dual London of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* also reflects itself in *Dorian*, although the vision of the city becomes grimmer and gloomier in Self's novel, exhibiting all the vices and ailments of its inhabitants. Actually, from a symbolic perspective, London is another character in Self's novel, as can be seen in many of its passages. For instance, Henry Wotton tells Dorian that

'You, my dear friend [...], are condemned to a seventy-milimetre, windscreen view of the city. You are a mere corpuscle, travelling along these arteries, whereas I have a surgeon's perspective. I float above it all, and see Hyde Park as but a green, gangrenous fistula in London's grey corpse!' (26).

This repulsive vision provides an unpleasant portrayal of the unhealthy city impregnated by centuries of filth, where luxurious cars (reminding of those which the characters of J. G. Ballard's *Crash* turn into emblems of orgasmic sexuality) and virus-like passersby traverse the labyrinthine topography of the former colonial and anonymous metropolis. This is a mirror image of that other London where Wilde's *Dorian Gray* could hide in opium dens, leaving to the reader's imagination the sinful crimes that he committed. Soho, the tortuous Victorian district where both *Dorian* and Hyde loiter and keep their unspeakable secrets, preserves in *Dorian* its atmosphere of blatant exoticism and decadence:

Later the same day Dorian fetched up in Soho. Soho was, at that time, just gay enough but not yet the flagrant village it was to become. Janus the flagellator's boutique, had recently opened, while the Swiss pub was going strong, and other brittle, night-time hangouts clustered like snails beneath the flat, stony sky of the city (45).

The city has become the quintessence of utter decadence and dirtiness which embodies the moral condition of the book's characters: "Dorian had known that there was squalor like this in London, but never conceived of himself as part of it" (48). Furthermore, the capital, as a living thing, represents the licentiousness of the whole nation: "No, this is not an era for municipal grandeur. The city, feeling itself to be moribund, is simplifying its routines, deaccessioning its most solid and durable

possessions in favour of sentimental trinkets and plastic gewgaws” (62). Like those affected by AIDS, as is the case of Lord Henry Wotton, *fin-de-siècle* London is unavoidably diseased. And so is New York, another urban location in the novel, the cultural center of the new Empire that replaced the British Empire in the western world. The American metropolis is also depicted in extremely negative terms as representing the pinnacle of emptiness and corruption: “New York in the early eighties was at the very peak of a great mountain of depravity. It was *so* extreme, Henry, so totally unconstrained, that it almost had an aura of innocence about it” (83). It is also the site of vacuous lavishness and capitalist consumerism from an artistic and aesthetic perspective: “By the early 1980s the avant-garde was busy being franchised and sold off to a series of designer labels and purposed-designed emporia. Halston, Gucci, Fiorucci⁶. Only somebody as staggeringly ill-informed as Dorian Gray could have imagined that there was still a ‘scene’ to be created in Manhattan” (91).

In tracing and rewriting the late Victorian past in his hyperbolic novel, Wilde’s exquisite aestheticism is parodied by Will Self in his use of an almost brutal and hyperbolic range of vocabulary. Language plays the leading role in both Wilde’s and Self’s narratives. The latter imitates the uproarious and/or satirical witticisms of its model, mainly through the discourse of Henry Wotton. The examples multiply:

“I like bodies better than minds, Baz, and I like bodies with no mind at all better than anything else in the world” (12).

“You should remember, *Mister* Gray, a nude body requires no explanation, unlike a naked intellect” (17).

“My mother cultivated plants before she moved on to humanity” (19).

“I adore destructive spectacles: they are the last refuge of the creative” (26).

“...Being poor would be an absolute tragedy. So poor that you had to be straight...” (59).

“Monogamy is to love as ideology is to thought; both are failures in imagination” (82).

All these aphoristic sentences, and many others, together with some noteworthy allusions to biographical data—like the illustrious Irish writer, Wotton lives in Chelsea; the description of Dorian’s parents coincides somehow with that of Wilde’s... (Self 39) — amount to a patent homage to Oscar Wilde the man, to his masks and characters. However, unlike the great Dubliner, Self is fond of the utterly grotesque and of using startling and aggressive similes, especially when depicting episodes of sexual intercourse:

In one fluid movement Herman rolled forward on to his knees, grasped Dorian by the shoulders, and kissed him. Such suction. They were like two flamingos, each attempting to filter the nutriment out of the other with great slurps of their muscular tongues. Adam's apples bobbed in the crap gloaming" (49).

In Self's neo-Victorian recreation, *fins de siècles* go hand in hand together, reflecting each other in a mirror of excess, in a portrait of frenetic amplification.

On the other hand, both Wilde's and Self's narratives are intertextual books, palimpsests where literature speaks about literature, where texts reflect themselves in narcissistic fashion in the same way as the *Cathode Narcissus* projects Dorian's image forever, making him into an aesthetic object of desire, the emblem of an unbalanced society. *Dorian* is a narrative where canonical literature and popular culture coincide: John Donne (with the emphasis of blending and mixing fluids shown in poems like 'The Flea' — a patent 'epidemic' poem — or 'The Sun Rising'; Self 68, 159) coexists with Huysmans (the French author of *A Rebours*, one of the candidates to be the book that corrupted young Dorian in Wilde's narrative, together with Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*), Proust, Queen (Freddie Mercury being another homosexual icon who fatally died of AIDS) and David Bowie, that recurrent idol of ambiguity, among others. The role played by literature in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is also mirrored in Self's 'imitation' with intentional metaliterary flavour:

Lying on a tubby sofa, in a toweling robe with 'Waldorf Astoria' sewn over the breast, was the lean form of Dorian Gray. He was reading *Against Nature* by Huysmans, the Penguin Classics edition with the portrait of the Comte de Montesquiou on the cover (55).

Dorian's ending plays with the Freudian uncanny — *das Unheimliche* —, and corroborates the ultimate conviction that we, like Dorian, in line with Schopenhauer's quotation preceding Self's narrative⁷, are all fictional characters, constantly reinventing ourselves and fighting with our other personalities, with our multiple selves, trying to make an art of life. Lord Henry remains as a voice, whilst in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* he disappears before the tragic protagonist seals his death sentence by stabbing the haunted picture. The final mystery of Lord Henry's essence cannot be ultimately found out.⁸

In general terms, it could be said that Self's neo-Victorian imitation of Oscar Wilde is a successful one, manipulating its model so as to turn it into something new for the contemporary world, although the passing of time, I am afraid, has rapidly and inexorably turned *Dorian* into an old-fashioned narrative from a technological viewpoint. The apparently sophisticated *Cathode Narcissus* appears to be naïve when contemplating the vertiginous expansion of increasingly highly-developed computers and mobile phones. This technological obsolescence is also replicated in social networks that construct, and contribute to, the creation of our daily "reality", threatened by new pandemics, like the COVID-19, coexisting with older ones, like syphilis and AIDS. Mirrors have multiplied. Portraits proliferate. In our posthuman, neo-Victorian context, they menace to erase past history, which has to be traced back for us to know how to cope with our present time, full of new elusive, eternally narcissistic Dorians. Every age has its own Dorians, the same as, according to Nina Auerbach, it has its own vampires... and other monsters. Beautiful monsters, like Lucifer himself, are always difficult to categorize and destroy.



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- 2 A comprehensive account of the reviews can be retrieved at <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/selfw/dorian.htm#top>. Oscar Wilde provides some consolation to Self in “The Preface” to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where he affirms that “Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital”, and emphasizes that “When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself” (4).
- 3 Margaret Thatcher’s defence of “Victorian values”, even when, as Raphael Samuel affirms, the word “Victorian” was “still being used as a routine term of opprobrium” (1), became a key ideological obsession in the run-up to the 1983 election campaign. The Victorian age became for the Prime Minister a period of decent values, hard work and self-respect. More information about Thatcher’s commitment with Victorian values, beside Samuel’s lecture, can also be retrieved in Evans.
- 4 As I tried to demonstrate elsewhere, the *Doppelgänger* motif is linked to the Narcissus myth from a symbolic and mythological perspective (Ballesteros-González).
- 5 Self may be wittily punning here on the eponymous British film—*Black Narcissus*— released in 1947, starred by Deborah Kerr, Jean Simmons and Sabu, among others, and directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. The film, based on a book by Rumer Godden, displays clear imperial and colonial connotations.

- 6 This sequence of brand names might be an echo of the Chic's 1999 famous song "He's the Greatest Dancer", with its catchphrases like "a guy who stuck out in the crowd / He had the kind of body *who would shame Adonis* / ... He wears the finest clothes, the best designers, heaven knows / Ooo, from his head down to his toes / *Halston, Gucci, Fiorucci*, he looks like a still / That man is dressed to kill" (my emphasis). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this article for this perceptive and opportune comment.
- 7 "There is an unconscious appositeness in the use of the word *person* to designate the human individual, as is done in all European languages: for *persona* really means an actor's mask, and it is true that no one reveals himself as he is; we all wear a mask and play a role".
- 8 Jerusha McCormack believes that Lord Henry, "as the devil himself, is merely the agent of destruction", a point of view based on agency that can understandably explain why he disappears from Wilde's narrative, which she interprets on the whole as "a script for his own life" (114). This identification between the writer and the book is another narcissistic mirror image that, in my view, cannot be traced in Self's *Dorian*, where there seems to be a biographical detachment between the English author and his narrative.



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