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"The Trees Seemed to Sweep Past Him in Spectral Procession": Nature's (Un)sympathy in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Abstract:

Employing an ecological-awareness framework, this article investigates *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) by expanding on a panoply of descriptive scenes, actions, mental attitudes, and allegorical allusions that inform the text. Attention is paid to how Dorian Gray falls prey to a self-deception that, in his greedy struggle for existence and sensory gratification, causes him to ignore his entanglement with an underlying order of things and a networked system of interdependence. By considering himself unique and capable of halting the transformative process of growth, Wilde's anti-hero goes "against nature" in a broader sense than that envisioned by Joris-Karl Huysmans in his landmark 1884 novel *À rebours*. The article shows how, as Dorian deludes himself into thinking he can reduce both human and non-human habitats to pliable commodities, a natural world infused with animistic and prophetic forces tends to respond to his deviant behaviour in kind.

Keywords: Biological Laws, Decadence, Egotism, Nature's Sentience, Sympathetic Connections

1. Introduction

As Richard A. Kaye observes in his introduction to a recent edited volume that brings together fourteen new essays on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, encompassing topics such as its sources and thriving afterlife, as well as a range of philosophical, cultural and queer resonances, Wilde's novel "remains a deeply mysterious, stirring, and elusive work" (2025, 1). Fitting with a typically Wildean paradoxical logic, this holds true despite both the book's status as a canonical text and its popularity (or notoriety) with the general public. Beyond Britain and the United States, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was in fact quickly translated, receiving critical

acclaim and international recognition shortly after its initial publication. Kate Hext and Alex Murray similarly underscore the polysemic legacy grounded in the “dizzying variety of Wildes”, confirming how disparate the author’s “interests were and how generative his work and life have been, both within and beyond academic studies” (2025, 2). If we assume that every “generation has selected a version of Wilde that reflects its own anxieties, interests, and aspirations” (*ibidem*), one can certainly count today’s ecological attunement and non-human turn among such repurposings.

Taking cues from the alluring opacity of Wilde’s novel, the present article concentrates on the ways in which Dorian Gray’s narcissistic personality and progressive degeneration prevent him from recognising the value of plurality, constructive interactions and co-evolving diversity. By regarding his surroundings as a mere resource for hedonistic self-assertion and egotistic self-complacency, Wilde’s dark hero dramatically alters a balance that pivots on a dynamic interrelatedness of components: a sentient, hauntingly receptive order of things that informs the very habitat he moves in. While seeking to reduce both human and non-human nature to a commodity or, in the best of cases, a work of art, Dorian becomes the main agent of his own alienation and ultimate annihilation.

As Christopher Nassaar remarked in the early days of Wilde scholarship, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a strange book, “a partly supernatural tale in which the characters are not individuals but symbols that move in a shadowy world of wit and terror” (1974, 37). Our analysis intends to reveal facets of this enigmatic world, which seems to be filtered through an ever-darkening lens and to have Dorian cross the threshold into a “demon universe”. Indeed, one can hardly forget that the character’s Faustian bargain entails “sell[ing] his soul in a fit of rebellion against the laws of God and *nature*” (38, my emphasis).

2. *Dorian Gray’s Bio-ontological Quandary*

“How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. It will never be older than this particular day of June.... If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that – for that – I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!” (Wilde 2000 [1891], 27–28)

Echoing in readers’ minds for nearly a century and a half, Dorian Gray’s fateful wish has continued to strike deep chords across generations. Regardless of detracting criticism and acerbic accusations of triteness or plagiarism, irrespective of whether the wish simply reanimates a Horatian/Faustian *topos* or cleverly reworks the *hubris* archetype, Dorian’s pronouncement powerfully typifies an ancestral, deep-seated fear of aging and physical deterioration as opposed to a transhuman ideal of eternal youth and immortality. One can, of course, interrogate this fear through a variety of interpretive lenses, from that of a survival instinct woven into the very fabric of life to a reservoir of ancient rituals and religious/philosophical beliefs, from the deep anthropological structures of mythopoiesis to thanatology, from the Jungian sphere of the collective unconscious to Freudian/Lacanian delusions of omnipotence and even transhumanism’s notions of enhancement and life extension, to cite some relevant domains. Should we identify a correlation with Irish mythology, it might be argued that, similarly to Oisín, the Fianna hero who is to suffer the cost of sudden aging and marginalisation upon his return from the realm of Tír na nÓg (the Land of Youth), Dorian is cursed to pay dearly for his self-centred fantasies of agelessness and fanatical devotion to the cult of youth and beauty. At the same time, it must be emphasised that, while Oisín leaves his homeland in the wake of his encounter with a beautiful woman from Tír na nÓg but ultimately goes back, driven by an overwhelming longing

for Ireland and his people, Wilde's contemptuous English aristocrat is fuelled by a narcissistic fixation on the image of *his own* youth and would willingly remain forever removed from the mortal world, as though spirited away by the fairies in the manner of the changeling tradition¹. Differently put, Dorian earns no greatness via heroism, moral fortitude, or emotional attachments. Caught up in a halo of otherworldly magic and sham Hellenic glory, as much as in the greyness implied by his surname, he loses himself in the blind alleys of self-conceit and coldness.

If increasingly enwrapped in a solipsistic aura, Wilde's "overreacher" is however not alone in his aspiration to both transcend the organic boundaries of life and break through societal laws and constraints. In the novel's fictional universe, Basil Hallward's rapturous, sublimated projection of homoerotic impulses into a form of "curious artistic idolatry" (Wilde 2000, 14) directed at his model, along with Lord Henry Wotton's Mephistophelean rhetoric, serve as essential catalysts for Dorian's inner awakening and immersive journey into hedonism. The picture itself, emerging from a unique interpenetration of entrancing and hypnotic energies – from the painter's complete absorption in his compositional craft to the Mona Lisa-like subtle expression of the boy-sitter and his "mesmerizing" (Powell 1984) by the demonic dandy – embodies a "magical artefact", an enchanted object that

literally "recreates" life, renewing Dorian's fading body and absorbing into itself the processes of biological and moral decay that would otherwise engulf the living man. The picture substitutes for Dorian's mortal body so that the biology of aging is expressed not in the man but in the image. The immortality of art – its arrest of time and change – is transferred to the flesh that in normal circumstances would droop and wither as the body made its inexorable way toward death. (Raitt 2017, 164)

Bolstering the framework of scientific connections, Suzanne Raitt gives weight to the thesis that Wilde was familiar with the field of biological sciences concerning cell theory, physiological waste-and-repair processes and metabolic efficiency as a cornerstone of longevity, not to mention Darwinian and Spencerian tenets. She thus contributes to widening the hermeneutic horizon and better contextualising Dorian Gray's "mad wish", namely his morbid will to arrest corporeal decay and his destructive tampering with the natural flow of life. In the novel's possible world, Art is singled out as a means for "compensat[ing] for the limits of biology" until, by the end of the story, "this substitutive economy is exposed as a fantasy" (2017, 165). As "master" and "disciple", a devilish mentor and an overly suggestible acolyte, Lord Henry and Dorian might both be cast as "scientist/artist figures" (168) committed to applying an immoral experimental method of manipulation and corrupting influence on those they pursue. Their coldhearted causal analysis of human behaviour, carried out through an unflinching dissection of their preys' thoughts and reactions, turns them into maliciously inquisitive spectators detached from the shared bonds of humanity. Their harmful intrusion ends by jeopardising any healthy, integral balance across the organic and spiritual realms, so that they must cope with "the effects of an experiment gone horribly awry" (169): an experiment

¹ Wilde's connections to Irish Celtic folklore and oral culture have been investigated by a significant number of critics. Among the earliest, in-depth surveys related to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, see Upchurch 1992; for an updated scholarly contribution on the motif of ageing and gerontophobia in the novel, see Ingman 2018. In a wider sense, one can provocatively assert that "[i]f the English used Ireland as a laboratory in which to test their society, Wilde was happy to use England as a testing-ground for Irish ideas and debates: for, in his mind, the two could not be separated [...]. Wilde had discovered that an Irishman came to consciousness of himself as such only when he left his country. Wearing the mask of the English Oxonian, Wilde was paradoxically freed to become more 'Irish' than he could ever have been back in Ireland" (Kiberd 1998, 21).

of vivisection that, especially in Dorian's case, is primarily and voyeuristically performed on himself, in addition to other victimised subjects².

To date, numerous approaches to examining *The Picture of Dorian Gray* have been proposed which either highlight Wilde's dialogue with what we would now call "pseudosciences" (such as physiognomy, animal magnetism, paranormal sensing), or tap into actual scientific theorisations. Regarding the latter, it is hardly surprising that the broad spectrum of biological inquiry should take centre stage, since the focus on the structure and evolution of living organisms, comprising their systemic interactions, is bound to antiphrastically call attention to Dorian's parable of corrosive infringement upon the intrinsic processes sustaining life. Together with chemistry, medical diagnosing and clinical pathology – the disposing of Basil's body through chemical substances by a blackmailed Alan Campbell, in Chapter 14, soon comes to mind – the biological perspective triggers thoughts on life-driven forces as well as the cycles of birth, growth, illness and decay, this announcing the final stage when tissues and organs can no longer be repaired and must face their inevitable downturn³.

Defying for too long the reality principle linked to transience and organic decomposition – which his painted double does not fail to remind him of, along the uncanny lines of a resurgence of the repressed that also encompasses ugliness and sin – Dorian finds himself locked, so to speak, in a condition of *lusus naturae*, temporarily frozen in the state of an "anomalous specimen" speculating about his exceptional bio-ontological status⁴. But this is not all. Besides his becoming an eccentric embodiment of crystallised youth bereft of soul and divorced from good, he can be said to exemplify an odd phenotype by dint of his family lineage and unique blending of inherited traits. Drawing on Terri A. Hasseler's analysis of the novel from the point of view of Victorian debates on evolutionary theory and physiological determinism, Dorian "is not only the storehouse of a million molecules and fibers, but also the amalgamation of a million ancestors' genetic influences [...] the culmination of thousands of molecules all preformed and predetermined by his ancestors' genes" (1993, 34). Capitalising on the passages from the text where stress is placed on Dorian's nervous system under strain, and the feverish vibrations and throbings of his nerves and tissue strands, Hasseler ventures as far as to compare him to a "Huxleyan predetermined automaton" (31) propelled by "animalistic appetites" (34).

² Raitt further comments: "[Dorian] views himself as having unwittingly unleashed a complex scientific process, toying with the notion that his relationship with the picture is owing to some strange quirk of biochemistry [...]. Lord Henry's self-styled 'experiment' in influencing Dorian transforms flesh into art, body into marble, but Dorian's 'scientific' undertaking works the other way: he exerts an influence on art that turns it into flesh, the painting into his own body [...] the portrait, which was designed to absorb the decay of Dorian's depraved flesh, begins to remind him of what he had sought to repress. It becomes the embodiment of the waste his body has expelled but not destroyed, and thus becomes dangerous to the organism that paradoxically relies on its processes" (2017, 169-170; 174).

³ In this connection, one may also recall the publication, in 1884, of "the British bacteriologist Emanuel Edward Klein's *Micro-organisms and Disease*, a study of 'the relation of micro-organisms to infectious diseases' emphasizing the importance of cultivating micro-organisms 'artificially in suitable media, i.e., outside the animal body,' in order to make them observable and accessible to experimentation" (Weir, Desmarais 2022, 1). Weir and Desmarais underscore that "[l]iterary decadence was clearly identified with the scientific discourses of the day, especially those deriving from the fields of medicine, biology, zoology, and psychiatry" (2). Benjamin Morgan also highlights a trend in decadent fiction exhibiting a "willingness to engage with scientific accounts of nature as declining rather than stable" (2016, 620).

⁴ The following passage is indicative of people's wary reaction to such a black-swan singularity: "He had always the look of one who had kept himself unspotted from the world. Men who talked grossly became silent when Dorian Gray entered the room. There was something in the purity of his face that rebuked them. His mere presence seemed to recall to them the memory of the innocence that they had tarnished" (Wilde 2000, 124).

While conceding that this approach reflects a possibly too rigid focus on scientific materialism and mechanistic agency, it is undeniable that a deterministic thread runs through the narrative. This can be easily detected thanks to a web of ominous and fatalistic undertones that guide the story in various ways, from an interplay of coincidences, premonitions, curious turns and mirrored reversals, to a thick pattern of allusive echoes and symbolically charged scenes. With specific reference to Dorian's "case study", doomed to unfold as a veritable "clinical case", Lord Henry Wotton's initial inferences are worth citing. One will recall that, in Chapter 3, Lord Fermor (Henry's uncle) tells him about the strongly opposed and gossiped-about marriage between beautiful Lady Margaret Devereux and penniless, plebeian Mr Gray, who was killed after a few months in a duel with a Belgian mercenary sent by Margaret's father. In a year's time, this heartbreaking event led to the tragic passing away of the young woman, too. Dorian was thus left an orphan and placed under the care of Lord Kelso, his cruel grandfather. Captivated by this sensational account, Wotton meditates:

So that was the story of Dorian Gray's parentage. Crudely as it had been told to him, it had yet stirred him by its suggestion of a strange, almost modern romance. A beautiful woman risking everything for a mad passion. A few wild weeks of happiness cut short by a hideous, treacherous crime. Months of voiceless agony, and then a child born in pain. The mother snatched away by death, the boy left to solitude and the tyranny of an old and loveless man. Yes; it was an interesting background. It posed the lad, made him more perfect as it were. Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic. Worlds had to be in travail, that the meanest flower might blow [...]. Talking to him was like playing upon an exquisite violin. He answered to every touch and thrill of the bow [...]. [Lord Henry] 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 2000, 37-38)

While stepping into his notorious role as a scheming experimenter and mesmeric influencer, Lord Henry is quick to grasp the potential inherent in the Eros/Thanatos dyad, to the point of compellingly foreshadowing Sigmund Freud's key tenets – first articulated in his foundational work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) – regarding the conflicting drives that govern human behaviour, namely the creative, life-sustaining force of the libido and a destructive compulsion toward death. When thinking of Dorian's parched, atrophied body at the instant of his death – "He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage" (Wilde 2000, 213) – one is indeed tempted to align that iconic image with a primal urge to regress to an inorganic, inert state. Dorian's once full commitment to the pleasure principle dramatically cedes ground to brutal self-erasure: if illusorily aimed at a final eradication of conscience (and the soul), his terminal act of violence seems to be no longer within the individual's control, inescapably bringing about the dissolution of *both* mind and body. The depraved living self on the canvas and the crystallised corporeal self are thus reunited – or, more fittingly, extinguished – in the numbing silence of death, without any metempirical or fideistic hope for revitalisation beyond the earthly.

As we know, Dorian's catabasis is to transcend Wotton's fascination with the hazy possibilities prefigured by a marvellous "romance". Considering again coeval theories of heredity – such as Gregor Mendel's laws of inheritance, or Sir Francis Galton's landmark studies on psychometrics, hereditary genius and the cultivation of the race, i.e. eugenics – there appears to be more at stake in connection with Dorian's ancestry. As a matter of fact, Lord Fermor's allusion to the protagonist's genetic line being populated by romantic and beautiful women and far less deserving men finds a concrete instance in Chapter 11. In this ornate ellipsis and riveting centre of gravity of the text, written in an ultra-refined style and condensing eighteen years of the protagonist's dedication to transforming Life into Art, we learn that, concurrent

with his travels, his captivation by the “yellow book” and whimsical, endlessly expanding collection of aesthetic rarities and philosophical creeds, he could not stay away for too long from the locked room hiding his picture. That musty and forsaken schoolroom, where he used to be confined as a child by ruthless Lord Kelso, is now transmuted into a Gothic chamber of horror, a heterotopic realm in which he continues to confront himself with repressed, excruciating psychic contents, deriving a sadomasochistic pleasure from observing the contrast between his unblemished semblance and the senescent, misshapen body and face seeping through the canvas. These feelings are intensified by brooding thoughts on the ego’s nature, genealogical affiliations and adverse racial legacies, in an escalation of somberness that gestures toward degeneration and possibly teratology, instead of civilised advancement:

He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead. He loved to stroll through the gaunt cold picture-gallery of his country house and look at the various portraits of those whose blood flowed in his veins. [...] Had some strange poisonous germ crept from body to body till it had reached his own? [...] And his mother with her Lady Hamilton face, and her moist wine-dashed lips – he knew what he had got from her. He had got from her his beauty, and his passion for the beauty of others. She laughed at him in her loose Bacchante dress. There were vine leaves in her hair. The purple spilled from the cup she was holding. The carnations of the painting had withered, but the eyes were still wonderful in their depth and brilliancy of colour. They seemed to follow him wherever he went. (137-138)

The prescient psychological subtlety that informs the definition of man as “a complex multiform creature” actually goes in tandem with a decadent tinge harking back to the “monstrous maladies of the dead”, in a sort of Gothicised overstatement of Walter Pater’s famous passage – in his essay on Leonardo da Vinci in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873) – relating to Mona Lisa’s strange beauty, weary eyelids and fantastic reveries, as well as her vampiric assimilation of world-experience and the *maladies* of the soul⁵. Covering the length of two pages, Dorian meticulously goes through his pedigree, dreading the possibility that his dreams might be those from which his wicked progenitors had shrunk, along a spiralling path that causes him to hyperbolically wonder whether his own life might consist in a “recapitulatory” synecdoche for the whole of history⁶. For its part, the portrait of his mother, immortalised in

⁵ If crucial, such discernible parallels have often been pointed out and need no detailed illustration here. The same applies to other echoes in the text (still in Chapter 11 and, notably, in Chapter 2) shaped by Pater’s influential “Conclusion” to the first and third editions of *The Renaissance*. For a discussion of Wilde’s re-elaboration of Pater’s aesthetic views and style from the angle of their darker implications, see Riquelme 2000 and Clausson 2003.

⁶ It is likely no accident that, again in Chapter 11, Dorian’s intellectual development temporarily courts “the materialistic doctrines of the *Darwinismus* movement in Germany” (Wilde 2000, 128). This may remind of the pioneering role played in that context by zoologist and embryologist Ernst Haeckel, who first familiarised with Darwin’s principles through Heinrich Georg Bronn’s 1860 German translation of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859). An energetic Darwinian advocate, Haeckel gave credit to the recapitulation theory, according to which the growth of an individual organism (ontogeny) would partly replicate the evolutionary history of its species (phylogeny). Thus, other echoes may linger beyond the Paterian framework in Dorian’s postulation about “the whole of history [being] merely the record of his own life” (Wilde 2000, 138). Importantly, Haeckel coined the word ‘oekologie’, that is to say, ‘ecology’, the current branch of biology that systematically maps out and assesses the interrelations between organisms and their physical environment. From this point of view, Wilde’s protagonist – an “avatar of Narcissus” (Riquelme 2000, 610) – blatantly runs counter to that mapping, setting out to *dismantle* any relational link, in an ultimately destructive gesture against himself.

a moment of Dionysian, ecstatic frenzy, speaks volumes about the mysticism of the senses and its obscure drifts. With her wine-dashed lips resembling those of a *femme fatale* or a female vampire, Margaret's figure is hued with purple in more than a literal sense, her flashing, piercing eyes also reminiscent of Gothic tradition and magic-portrait tales, as is the case with John Melmoth's facing the terrifying gaze of his painted satanic ancestor in Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), one of the multiple hypotexts that undergird *The Picture of Dorian Gray*⁷.

Opening with a reference to the perduring influence of one of Lord Henry's poisonous gifts on Dorian's sensibility – the already mentioned yellow-covered book written in a charmingly jewelled style and centred on a wondrous “young Parisian, in whom the romantic and the scientific temperaments were so strangely blended” (Wilde 2000, 123) – Chapter 11 emblematically closes with another homage to the “hero of [that] wonderful novel” (138). Although the book's title is never revealed, there is little doubt that the French neurotic aesthete consumed by *ennui*, and destined to reach the height of despair after years of voluntary isolation spent cultivating sensory experiences and extravagant fantasies, is a literary cousin of Jean des Esseintes in Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours*. Quite significantly, Huysmans's narrator introduces Duc Jean noting how “[b]y a singular, atavistic reversion, [this] last descendant resembled the old grandsire”, across generations marked by an “impoverished constitution”, the “effemination of the males” and “consanguineous unions” (Huysmans 1922 [1884], 16).

Both drawn to the layers of ancient (Greco-Roman and Renaissance) history as opposed to the meagerness of the present, and ill-advisedly assuming that “Nature had had her day” (47), Jean and Dorian are burdened by an ancestral make-up that impairs their free will. Being implicitly invoked are here categories that dovetail with, say, Lombrosian/Nordauian discourse, Lamarckism, French alienists' research on degeneracy and, pertaining to the English context, the dissertations of mental pathologist Henry Maudsley, who published “articles on ‘Heredity in Health and Disease’ in the *Fortnightly Review* (1886), the same journal in which a number of Wilde's own essays appeared” (Mighall 2000, xxxiii)⁸. To put it concisely, the prismatic *Weltanschauung* that characterises *The Picture of Dorian Gray* invests the fidelity to one's nature with ambivalence, intertwining it with a dual thread: on the one hand, individual uplifting and unrestricted self-realisation – be it in a Paterian and psychological sense, or in the biological terms of an optimisation-driven differentiation of cells – and, on the other, “sociobiological reversion”, with Lord Henry emerging as a “specimen of over-cultivation” and Dorian “as one of devolution” combined with “malign nurture” (Foster 1993-1994, 336-337).

⁷ It must be remembered that Maturin, Wilde's maternal grand-uncle, had fashioned his plot around a Byronic-Faustian character – the titular Melmoth the Wanderer – who obtains forbidden knowledge and a prolonged life, while preserving an unnatural youthful appearance thanks to a pact with the Devil. As has been largely established, Wilde's more or less glaring thefts and inspiring sources for the composition of his novel are innumerable, encompassing Walter Pater's *Renaissance* and *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), E.A. Poe's “The Oval Portrait” (1842) and “William Wilson” (1839), R.L. Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), Honoré de Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin* (1831), among several others. Wilde simultaneously built on classical myths and a subterranean epistemology of male homoeroticism hinging on “Greek love” and “spiritual procreancy”. He also relied on the *Doppelgänger* motif, the Gothic and fantastic modes, Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, and folkloric material. Concerning this remarkably polyphonic background, I have offered a comprehensive survey in a previous study (Giovannelli 2007, 44-64). For a specific analysis of the references to nineteenth-century stories pivoting on magic-prophetic pictures, see Powell 1983.

⁸ Apropos Dorian's inherited taint, Mighall adds: “[Dorian's] criminal tendencies derive from his grandfather (from a long line of debauchees), while his intention to marry the lower-class Sibyl Vane suggests that he is in part reverting to maternal type [...] it can be suggested that heredity provides a key to his actions and a scientific alternative to the ‘moral’ emphasis which Wilde complained was too ‘obvious’ in the 1890 version of the novel” (2000, xx-xxi).

If ostensibly the antithesis of a “residual phenomenon” or an evolutionary throwback, Dorian must come to grips with a degenerative predisposition that would aprioristically shift his *Bildung* into a kind of *Rückbildung*, a form of regression (Giovannelli 2007, 17). Considering Charles Darwin’s propositions on the governing principles of the transmutation of species and the factors involved in this non-teleological process, such as chance and conflict, favourable changes and flexible diversifications, one could argue that natural selection played a mean trick on the son of Margaret Devereux and Mr Gray, actually diminishing – rather than increasing – his ability to survive and compete. While Darwin’s lay “myth of beginnings” had already been challenging a series of historical and cultural premises dealing with questions “about the relations of the personal and the social to the natural, about origins, about progress, about endings, about biological and social organicism” (Levine 1988, 2), Wilde’s concurrent reintroduction of predestination and “numinous intelligence” in the trajectory of his character’s life gives rise to an unresolvable paradox.

Might Dorian, at one and the same time, be blessed by the gods and cursed by a natural order “red in tooth and claw”, in the famous Tennysonian phrase? Is he truly adapted to the environment he is born into, so as to successfully navigate the struggle for existence, or has Fortune been conspiring against him since (and even before) his birth? Echoing throughout the novel, these queries suggestively foreground what the mature protagonist will recognise as “Nature[’s] wonderful irony” (Wilde 2000, 126). Stuck in a bio-ontological quandary, Dorian is constantly torn between a pull toward self-overcoming and the burden of congenital abnormality, his “mad hungers” (124) for experience and human finitude, a forged chrysalis of youth and the devastating effects of aging. When taking into account that, on top of this, he has bargained away his soul, the idea of a healthy balance and integrated selfhood is soon ruled out.

3. The “real moral of the story”

One need scarcely point out that the motif of a fractured equilibrium – coupled with a rhetoric of health vs decay, manly neatness vs sickening effeminacy – figured prominently in the initial critical reception of the novel, starting with its earliest 1890 version published in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*. The imbalance was variously ascribed to the text’s uneven structure and clumsily assembled, derivative, vulgar or dull elements; to the characters’ lifeless, puppet-like or “unmanly” demeanour; to a flamboyant indulgence in poisonous excess and prurience, in the style of the French *Décadents*; to a voluptuous, heedless surrender to vice and transgression for its own sake; and, last but not least, to the triggering of a dangerous breach between art and morality. Bearing on this cumulative effect of heterogeneity were also, to this day, the hybrid generic affiliations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which, besides anchoring itself in the novel-romance continuum, incorporates formal or thematic features from the novel of talk, the Gothic-fantastic tradition, the supernatural fairy-tale, the psychological story, and the moral/allegorical fable.

Against the backdrop of outraged and venomous responses from British reviewers and sermonising journalists – in newspapers such as *The Pall Mall Gazette*, the *St James’s Gazette*, the *Daily Chronicle*, and *The Scots Observer* – a minor chorus of voices did grasp the essence of the ethical parable in Wilde’s novel. Yet, the poignant moral lesson linked to the consequences of Dorian Gray’s sinful conduct resonated especially in the English Christian press and among the reading public in the United States, while most journalists at home launched a torrent of censorious critiques⁹.

⁹ For a careful overview of the novel’s immediate reception, see Lawler 1988, 327-353.

One of the favourable exceptions was Walter Pater's review of the 1891 book edition, commending Wilde's epigrammatic style, verbal agility, and treatment of both supernatural themes and natural science. All the same, Pater did not fail to find fault with "a certain amount of the intrusion of real life and its sordid aspects" into the text and with the endorsing of "a kind of dainty Epicurean theory" ("A Novel by Mr Oscar Wilde", *The Bookman*, I, 1891, qtd. in Lawler 1988, 352). Employing the adjective "dainty" with deliberate understatement, and possibly out of concern for repercussions on his own arguments in works like *The Renaissance* – in terms of a conflation of his voice with Lord Henry Wotton's cynicism, and of his artistic-philosophical revalorisation of paganism with the latter's new Hedonism¹⁰ –, Pater further clarifies:

A true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism. To lose the moral sense therefore, for instance, the sense of sin and righteousness, as Mr Wilde's hero [...], is to lose, or lower, organisation, to become less complex, to pass from a higher to a lower degree of development. (352-353)

Contradicting common assumptions, Pater claims that it is not so much Lord Henry or Dorian, but Basil Hallward – the artist endowed with a profound sensibility and attunement to impressions – who aligns more closely with "a true Cyrenaic or Epicurean doctrine of life" (353). By way of this clarification, readers were encouraged to distinguish between the malevolent elucubrations of Wilde's idle *poseur*, a corrupter of young men promoting the reckless pursuit of sensual delights, and the superior notions of "eudaimonic" pleasure, *ataraxia* and *aponia*, seen as ciphers of a genuinely purposeful and fulfilling existence, in which physical satisfaction must never go to the detriment of one's peace of mind and alleviation of anxiety. Without this harmonious interpenetration, the proper "development of man's entire organism", in Pater's formulation, may not be accomplished.

Galvanised by Lord Henry's proddings, but incapable of attaining the level of adult judgment and compassionate maturity that would allow him thorough insight, "Mr Wilde's hero" might ultimately be bracketed with *underdeveloped* subjects, hovering on the edge of the beast, rather than the angel, as Basil vividly conveys by comparing the picture's grotesque features to "the face of a satyr" (Wilde 2000, 150). Revelling in every new sensation only to abandon it in boredom – or struggling to consign it to oblivion, as happens with Sibyl Vane's grim suicide and the murder of Basil –, Dorian is indeed condemned to sink into moral sordidness, apathy and nihilistic despair, until all is taken from him. His egotism is matched by a form of vacuous curiosity that "becomes the driving force of his life, and to satisfy it he must continue to play rôles" and "shape the lives of others" (Spivey 1960, 167) in perversely random sequence. Alongside this unfolds, of course, the purple thread of Decadence, with its semantic and figurative background steeped in the intense thrills and introversion of the delicate, neurotic personality

¹⁰ Suffice it to say that, in Dorian's musings on Wotton's ideology, the aim of new Hedonism "was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience" (Wilde 2000, 126), in an unmistakable Paterian inflection. Citing Norbert Kohl's lucid remarks on Lord Henry's instrumental, shrewdly crafted "speech of temptation" in the second chapter of the novel – which heralds the awakening of Dorian's impulses toward transgression –, new Hedonism functions as "an ethical alternative to puritanism. It is based on the Epicurean and Cyrenaic schools of philosophy, in which pleasure [...] is the only good in life. In the moral and philosophical debate of the 1870s and 1880s in Oxford, led by F.H. Bradley (*Ethical Studies*, 1876) and T.H. Green (*Prolegomena to Ethics*, 1883), hedonism played an important part, but only as a negative counterpart to the neo-Hegelian, idealistic teachings of 'school' philosophy. Lord Henry's concept of 'self-development' is substantially identical to Bradley's central idea of 'self-realization', which he sees as 'the most general expression for the end in itself'. But Bradley's answer to the question of whether self-realization can consist in 'pleasure for pleasure's sake' is an emphatic no" (1989, 158).

lost in a labyrinth of infinite self-projections. In this perspective, the “voyager becomes a voyeur; unable to encounter the real world, he endures or lives an echo or a reflection or its visual counterpart”, exacerbating his “aesthetic orphan” status (Gordon 1979, 33, 45).

This said, one should not disregard the fact that Wilde did take part in the debate, energetically making his case against scornful or puritanical attacks through a series of letters addressed to the editors of some of the newspapers featuring the reviews. At that stage, before focusing on the expanded version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – published by Ward, Lock and Company in 1891, with the addition of six chapters, a softening of the homoerotic innuendoes and, quite tellingly, the casting of Dorian as unrepentant sinner from start to finish – he underscored that the moral of his story was anything but latent, even sounding too obvious, at the expense of the artistic and dramatic effect:

[It] is a story with a moral. And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment. The painter, Basil Hallward, worshipping physical beauty far too much, as most painters do, dies by the hand of one in whose soul he has created a monstrous and absurd vanity. Dorian Gray, having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure, tries to kill conscience, and at that moment kills himself. Lord Henry Wotton seeks to be merely the spectator of life [...]. Yes; there is a terrible moral in *Dorian Gray* – a moral which the prurient will not be able to find in it, but which will be revealed to all whose minds are healthy. (Oscar Wilde, “To the Editor of the St. James’s Gazette”, 26 June [1890], qtd. in Lawler 1988, 339)

I think the moral too apparent. When the book is published in a volume I hope to correct this defect. [...] The real moral of the story is that all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment. (Oscar Wilde, “To the Editor of the Daily Chronicle”, 30 June [1890], qtd. in Lawler 1988, 345)

In actual fact, the author was to amend that “defect” in the more richly layered narrative of 1891, having Dorian rebel against conscience until the very end. Wilde, then, wilfully presented his negative hero as unable to temper the extremes of “excess” and “renunciation”, to wisely mediate between curing the soul by means of the senses and vice versa. Dorian is hampered by a failure of connection that, on a larger scale, causes him to ignore his ingrained entanglement with various forms of communal existence and a networked system of interdependence. In the next section, the focus will shift away from the protagonist’s individual anarchism and ensnarement in a hall of mirrors, in favour of shedding light on how an inscrutable higher order – a natural world more infused with animistic and prophetic forces than Darwinian attributes – seems to answer his deviant behaviour in kind.

4. *A Break in Sympathetic Connections: Counter-Responses from a Sentient World*

In her 2021 study *Environment and Economy*, Molly Scott Cato subverts canonical approaches by inviting us to graphically assess ecosystemic imbalance, a hotly debated phenomenon in nowadays’ scientific and political spheres, through Wilde’s “picture-in-the-attic” image:

[Professor in Social Science] Mary Mellor’s description of the capitalist economy as being like Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* is another helpful illustration. In the story, Dorian Gray is a beautiful young man who engages in a variety of unspeakable and dissolute acts, but nonetheless remains physically uncorrupted. The twist in the tale is that he has a picture in his attic, which manifests the physical consequences of his dissolute lifestyle. Mellor argues that the apparent success of our economy in generating luxurious lifestyles and clever gizmos is actually bought at a price extracted out of sight and out of mind – a price that is paid by the world’s poor countries and the planet itself. (80)

This passing nod to Wilde's novel is tailored to blend into a discussion aimed at reorienting global market economy by paying heed to the complexity and delicate internal regulation of natural systems. Hence the exhortation to "reverse our thinking about the environment", which should not be treated as a "problem" but as "the source of everything that we value": as a home, "rather than a treasure chest of resources to be raided and a bottomless pit for our wastes" (6).

Although he does not cite Dorian Gray's flawed schism within the self, ecocritic Harold Fromm similarly alludes to "the dream world of the mind in relation to the ineluctable materiality of the body" (2009, 2), underlining that "the movements to 'save the environment' are not as selfless and magnanimous as might at first appear – we're not doing the 'environment' a disinterested favor – because the distinction between the environment and us is wholly illusory [...] the urgency of the environment is just one more aspect of Darwinian survival" (4). In sum, human *hubris* is bound to reckon with the hard truth of our compatibilities – and responsibilities – within the life environments contiguous to us, since, in the final analysis, one cannot "negotiate with the *données* of human existence" (45).

Applying this epistemological framework to Wilde's text, such *données* can be seen as dramatically enforcing their victory over the "freak variation" symbolised by Dorian's circular obsession with himself and rejection of biological laws. As anticipated, when registering the presence of a larger-than-human sentient world, the narrative seems to juxtapose a materialistic, Darwinian blurring of boundaries – whereby all living things come across as "quite literally related" and "graduat[ing] into each other" (Levine 1988, 17) – with a stronger animistic conception positing non-human entities as somehow conscious and "spirited". Indeed, the motifs of cosmic agency and ineffable intentionality, along with those of fatalism, paranormality and predestination, hold a special place in Wilde's imaginative vision, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* follows the lead. Set against Romantic beliefs buttressing an alchemy of sympathetic connections, affinities and "emotional contagions" that strengthen the bond between the anthropological realm and that of a pantheistic or Christianised *Natura naturans*, Wilde's novel hints at a more secret, wily covenant that might both draw in and mercilessly cast out the human subject, wavering between the poles of benevolence and retributive justice, the Over-Soul's transcendent spirit and Nemesis' punitive force, as it were.

We will now look at a selection of turning points and passages from the text where such a fading flow of cosmic *sympatheia* for egotistic Dorian is detectable. As he advances deeper into hedonistic self-complacency and degeneration, the non-human domain seems to entrench itself and keep its distance as though no longer connected or cooperatively interacting with him. One is tempted to assert that the more Dorian's sympathetic nervous system grapples with his blood pressure, racing heart or adrenaline release, the more the surrounding biosphere gets on the defensive, becoming sullen and judgemental. Apparently, this corollary of semantic subtleties traversing the novel has not been fully explored by critics. Within a limited body of contributions, John J. Pappas's article, published about half a century ago, certainly deserves mentioning. In "The Flower and the Beast: A Study of Oscar Wilde's Antithetical Attitudes Toward Nature and Man in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*", Pappas touches on the motifs of non-anthropological nature, and man's place in it, as they surface in Wilde's work through flower and animal imagery. He thus offers an overview of a sequence of increasingly gloomier transmutations from an ostensibly joyful, lovely or tameable environment – epitomised by sunlight, breeze, colourful flowers, butterflies and birds – to a weird, dark, grotesque or hellish scenery, evoked through references to nightfall, clouds and mist, spiders and flies, barking dogs, screaming seagulls and the predatory world in general. Pappas observes how "Wilde, capitalizing the first letter of the word, suggests at different times that 'Nature' is the ultimate power

determining man's fate; that it is the essential standard of truth by which a man's actions are judged; and that it is a teacher instructing man in how to live" (1972, 37). Notably, the novel's rhetorical nuances would signal that "the perceivable phenomena – the birds, the breezes, the flowers – are the function of an immense, impersonal, and ineluctable process, and that this process is the ultimate reality of nature" (*ibidem*).

Expanding on Pappas's commentary¹¹, I would suggest that the "ineluctable process" of Nature's counter-responses to Dorian's behaviour evolves in three stages, in an intensification of postures that range from "lurking indifference" to "malicious scrutiny" and "frightening manifestations". It is a familiar observation that, from the very outset of the plot, alluring descriptions are instrumental in generating an ecstatic, hypnotic atmosphere and synesthetic alchemies which, in differing measures, are interlaced with Preraphaelite, Paterian, and Baudelairean symbolism (Giovannelli 2007, 78-81). The memorable opening of the novel – with its stress on "the rich odour of roses", "the heavy scent of the lilac", and "the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn" (Wilde 2000, 5) – conveys an ensemble of olfactory perceptions preannouncing the opiate intoxication that Dorian will experience via Lord Henry. Qualities like the sensual beauty of the rose, and the fertility associations of the lilac (also symbolising youthful innocence) and the hawthorn (the "fairy tree" acting as a gateway to the spirit world), can of course be read as allegorical indexes of the characters' traits, in a compelling interplay of plant lore and Victorian floriography. All the more so for the honey-coloured, flower-laden laburnum, "whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flame-like as theirs" (*ibidem*), and whose lush, radiant beauty made sharper by poisonous blossoms is a clear objective correlative for Wotton's "yellow" insidious presence.

Yet, when viewing them from a less human-centred or cultural/aesthetic standpoint, one is struck by how Basil's studio and annexed garden – a semi-artificial, semi-natural "paradise" tucked away on the outskirts of London – brim with an eclectic tapestry of vegetal and animal life. The paragraph containing the depiction of the laburnum closes with a note on the "sullen murmur of the bees shouldering their way through the long unmown grass, or circling with monotonous insistence round the dusty gilt horns of the straggling woodbine" (*ibidem*). As evidenced by John P. Riquelme, these are

the first instances of personification (branches that feel; bees "shouldering their way" through grass) in a narrative that includes centrally the terrifying coming-to-life of something inanimate. The crossing of the boundaries between human, animal, and insect in the rhetorical figures of the book's second paragraph anticipates what eventually becomes a matter of animation involving creating and destroying life and a matter of the limits defining the human and civilization. (2000, 618)

On the one hand, the bees may again be cast as prefigurations of Lord Henry's sulphurean, dazzling "pollination" of Dorian's mind, or as the mythologised producers of honey – the "food of the gods" used in ancient ritual practices – and, together with the whispering breeze, as heralds of resurrection, immortality and artistic inspiration. The same could be said of the "fantastic shadows of birds in flight" (Wilde 2000, 5) dancing across the curtains of the painter's studio, which might well remind us of time-honoured auguries interpreted via the soaring of birds, to the extent that the proleptic syntagm "fantastic shadows" is to resurface at pivotal moments in the story, capturing Dorian's psychic turmoil and wrestling with the germs

¹¹ This annotation is pertinent, too: "The references to flowers often suggest that external nature can be lovely, creative and integral, and that human nature partakes of these qualities insofar as it is *in consonance* with the qualities of external nature, or insofar as it realizes *its essential self*" (Pappas 1972, 39; my emphases).

of evil¹². On the other hand, bees and birds, along with other exemplars of flora and fauna, simultaneously participate in *their own* processes of sustenance and biosemiotic communication, prospering beyond the frontiers of cognition related to the pathetic fallacy and further human projections. In brief, in Wilde's novel non-human organisms exceed the function of mere receptacles for anthropomorphised significance.

Some eerie, subterranean vibrations can already be discerned in connection with the garden scenes informing the first two chapters. It is worth noticing that, in this outdoor threshold space, part untamed, part designed, the typical Victorian-style carpet bedding leaves room for a freer layout favouring outgrowth and spontaneous vegetation. The meadow grass and informal mixture of common and more prized plant species bring to mind the naturalistic landscape of the so-called "wild garden", first popularised by William Robinson in his homonymous book, *The Wild Garden*, published in 1870, only two decades before Wilde's novel came out. In other words, this is an environment where the anthropogenic signature is relatively light. And, as humans relent their control, non-human sentience seemingly peers out, as the "tremulous" (Wilde 2000, 8) white daisies in the grass are quick in intimating as soon as Basil and Lord Henry step into the garden on that warm June day redolent of spring, talking about the picture and its sitter. While Wotton proceeds to coax the painter into confessing his love for Dorian, the bio-habitat around them keeps watch and somehow eavesdrops in an ambiguously acquiescent way:

Lord Henry smiled, and, leaning down, plucked a pink-petalled daisy from the grass, and examined it. "I am quite sure I shall understand it," he replied, gazing intently at the little golden white-feathered disk, "and as for believing things, I can believe anything, provided that it is quite incredible."

The wind shook some blossoms from the trees, and the heavy lilac-blooms, with their clustering stars, moved to and fro in the languid air. A grasshopper began to chirrup by the wall, and like a blue thread a long thin dragon-fly floated past on its brown gauze wings. Lord Henry felt as if he could hear Basil Hallward's heart beating, and wondered what was coming. (9)

In a similar vein, no physical resistance is exerted when Lord Henry sets out to pull "the daisy to bits with his long, nervous fingers" (10), an innocence-defiling gesture that notably foreshadows the episode in Chapter 13 when Dorian crushes the flower pinned to his coat before murdering Basil, in a fit of wrathful vengeance (149). Yet, as the painter's and dandy's engagement in conversation intensifies – and, even more, in Chapter 2, when Dorian dashes into the garden in the hope of seeking relief from Wotton's spell – one does catch a subcurrent agency pulsating in the glint of sunlight and atmospheric phenomena, amid the vegetation and wildlife, from the noisy "rustle of chirruping sparrows" to the "blue cloud-shadows chas[ing] themselves across the grass like swallows" (15). If Dorian is deeply susceptible to the lure of flowers – being a blooming *fleur du mal* himself – and one of the most iconic scenes in the novel has him bury his face in a bunch of lilacs and drink in their "perfume as if it had been wine" (23), natural cycles also make him aware of the inevitability of aging and generational change, no matter how feverishly he might yearn for eternal youth. For his part, Lord Henry loses no time in appealing to this inexorable law of Nature in order to add fuel to his *carpe diem* panegyric:

"The world belongs to you for a season [...]. The common hill-flowers wither, but they blossom again. The laburnum will be as yellow next June as it is now. In a month there will be purple stars on the clematis, and year after year the green night of its leaves will hold its purple stars. But we never get back our youth." [...] Two green-and-white butterflies fluttered past them, and in the pear-tree at the corner of the garden a thrush began to sing. (25-26)

¹² See Chapters 7, 13, 16 in Wilde 2000, 87, 148, 177.

In a nutshell, underlying the botanical kingdom are stronger regeneration powers than the human subject could possibly conceive of.

The seemingly lighthearted indifference to mankind's destiny, as conveyed by the thrush's song in the excerpt above, turns more sinister as the story progresses. Skipping ahead to Chapter 7, one recalls that, after callously parting ways with Sibyl and reducing her to the reified state of a "trampled flower" (85) and "wounded thing" (86), indirectly driving her to suicide, Dorian wanders aimlessly through the ramshackle East End at night, visibly stunned. As dawn arrives, on reaching Covent Garden he is confronted with a glorious sky hollowing itself into an adamantine "perfect pearl", and his eye is drawn to bunches of uncannily "nodding lilies" (*ibidem*) stacked in the carts rumbling past. As in the previous garden scene, the flowers create the (false) impression of granting "an anodyne for his pain" (*ibidem*). When finally crossing the threshold of his house and beginning to notice the first disquieting signs of corruption in his portrait, it is the "quivering, ardent sunlight" that unsparingly shows him "the lines of cruelty round the mouth as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing" (88). What is more, the chapter ends with an unsettling reference to Sibyl which both hints at the myth of the unrequited love between the mountain nymph Echo and Narcissus, as recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and encompasses codes of communication in the biological realm that are foreign – and possibly antithetical – to human mythopoiesis: "A faint echo of his love came back to him. He repeated her name over and over again. The birds that were singing in the dew-drenched garden seemed to be telling the flowers about her" (90). Rather than Dorian's delirious perception, what emerges here is a hidden choreography revolving around non-verbal meaning-making and arcane, quietly menacing animistic energies.

The weakening of sympathetic alliances is further reflected in the attitude we have termed "malicious scrutiny", that is to say, a counter-response from the non-human environment that assumes the guise of a cold, disapproving stare materialising in the urban context, too. Among the illustrative examples, one can think of the epilogue of Chapter 10, when, as Dorian returns from the depths of his engrossing reading of the yellow book, the prying eye of a wildly colourful, incarnated sky suddenly intrudes upon the scene: "Cloudless, and pierced by one solitary star, a copper-green sky gleamed through the windows" (121). A more dramatic, istic occurrence is to be found in Chapter 13, as, in the turbulent wake of Basil's assassination, Dorian steps out on the balcony and, instead of getting relief, is staggered by a phantasmatic sight nearly impossible to withstand:

The wind had blown the fog away, and the sky was like a monstrous peacock's tail, starred with myriads of golden eyes [...]. A bitter blast swept across the Square. The gas-lamps flickered, and became blue, and the leafless trees shook their black iron branches to and fro. He shivered, and went back, closing the window behind him. (152)

As the atmosphere darkens with Gothic and decadent undertones, a conspicuous succession of "frightening manifestations" ensues, as though bleakly testifying to how Nature "has her monsters, things of bestial shape and with hideous voices" (130). Indeed, one can hardly miss the grotesque and macabre imagery that permeates Chapter 16, where Dorian's odyssey toward the Docks and the opium den is announced by means of a personified, almost Dantesque hellscape. Here, ghastly, demonic energies appear to turn humans into regressed creatures and automatons, as opposed to the quicker, if somewhat rambling, reactions of animals such as horses and dogs, in an alarming upheaval of the hierarchy of existence:

The moon hung low in the sky like a yellow skull. From time to time a huge misshapen cloud stretched a long arm across and hid it. The gas-lamps grew fewer, and the streets more narrow and gloomy. Once the man lost his way, and had to drive back half a mile. A steam rose from the horse as it splashed up the puddles. The side-windows of the hansom were clogged with a grey-flannel mist. [...]

The way seemed interminable, and the streets like the black web of some sprawling spider [...] he could see the strange bottle-shaped kilns with their orange fan-like tongues of fire. A dog barked as they went by, and far away in the darkness some wandering seagull screamed. The horse stumbled in a rut, then swerved aside, and broke into a gallop. (176-177)¹³

In Pappas's words, the whole opium den episode – including the shocking encounters with Adrian Singleton, James Vane, and the woman who exposes Dorian's cover-up as "Prince Charming" – urges us to ponder on how "men are an integral part of nature" and how "their confusing or in any way denying their real relationship to it can be calamitous", potentially leading to "their reduction to a purely animal state of existence and to the most squalid sort of extinction" (1972, 46).

5. Conclusion

Bringing the argument full circle, I wish to conclude with a textual instance adding to the paradigms of both malicious scrutiny and frightening manifestations not from an urban perspective, but through the lens of a countryside scenery that, consistent with Basil's garden, turns out to be tamed and wild in equal measure. Little wonder that, toward the end of Dorian's parable, green surroundings should be divested of any idyllic aura. This time, moreover, the presence of a conservatory showcasing orchids heightens the sensational effect by winking at orchidology (or "orchidomania") among Victorians, for whom these flamboyant exotic specimens not only symbolised sophistication and sensual desire, but also possessed affective sensibility and "almost bestial" traits: orchids were deemed capable of facial mimicry and "inexplicably strange behavior" (Voskuil 2017, 19). Hence Lord Henry's befitting claim to have cut an orchid for his buttonhole, "a marvellous spotted thing, as effective as the seven deadly sins" (Wilde 2000, 185).

As interlude sections meant to convey a sense of (relative) peace in the wake of Chapter 16's underworld storm, and laying the groundwork for the novel's grand finale, Chapters 17 and 18 feature a temporary change of scene, seeing Dorian as master of ceremonies at his rural estate of Selby Royal. In the company of Wotton, he is entertaining some guests at tea-time, including the nimble-minded Duchess of Monmouth, with whom he is flirting, and her elderly husband, intent on describing "the last Brazilian beetle that he had added to his collection" (*ibidem*). All this, comprising the conversation about the commodified insect, is happening within the estate's conservatory, as though an invisible hand were orchestrating the event in the manner of a Chinese-box display. And, indeed, as he withdraws to gather some orchids for the duchess, the whims of fate decree that Dorian be metaphorically transformed into a "flower to look at", in Lord Henry's lexicon. The crucial difference now is that he is not being admired by

¹³ Regarding the urban anthropocene's cluttered scenery and the rendering of a "hyper-sentient city" in Chapter 16, Elisa Bizzotto emphasises Wilde's drawing on the Ruskinian trope of the pathetic fallacy: "The degenerated human underworld of the suburban metropolis mirrors the environmental deterioration conveyed through the characterisation of animal, atmospheric, and architectonic presences in spectral terms [...] an implicit parallel is drawn between human and animal degradation by denouncing the dramatic and de-naturalising effects of progress on animals, which are either deprived of their essence, or whose behaviours signal difficulties and danger. Hence, the dog barks in the dark, the shrieking seagull wanders aimlessly, the horse stumbles and changes pace" (2022, 52-53).

the beguiling dandy, but spied upon by the embodiment of a wrathful, natural(istic) force, i.e. James Vane, set on hunting down “Prince Charming” in order to exact vengeance for his sister Sibyl. James’s inquisitive eyes, fixed on him from behind the glass as if he were an aestheticised botanical specimen, make him faint and collapse like a greenhouse blossom deprived of vigour. Intriguingly, James seems to have left no traceable footmarks on the flower-beds around the building, as if Goddess Flora herself had been conspiring with Justice, craftily sheltering their “retributive agent”. Even the “clear, pine-scented air” (192) of the winter morning misleadingly reinforces Dorian’s illusion of regained freedom.

However, when he understands that the man accidentally killed by Sir Geoffrey Clouston – during the unfortunate hunting expedition for hares and birds – is a sailor, and hurries towards the stables to check whether the corpse is really that of James, all the non-human forms of life he runs across express a willingness to forsake him, starting from a totemic row of trees:

In less than a quarter of an hour Dorian Gray was galloping down the long avenue as hard as he could go. The trees seemed to sweep past him in spectral procession, and wild shadows to fling themselves across his path. Once the mare swerved at a white gate-post and nearly threw him. He lashed her across the neck with his crop. She cleft the dusky air like an arrow. The stones flew from her hoofs. (199)

It will not take long before Dorian realises that such a procession was actually a prelude to his own funeral and unmourned “desiccation”, in consonance with an entirely fitting natural punishment for his indulging in the excesses of solipsism, refusing all the while to acknowledge the import of social responsibility, affective ties, and systemic coexistence.

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