TAKING RISKS:
A READING OF OSCAR WILDE'S *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*

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> All art is at once surface and symbol.
> Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.
> Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.
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> (Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* 1989: 48)

AS an Irishman, Oscar Wilde had, according to those who met him, the gift of the gab. His brilliant, witty conversation, was enriched by his wonderful ability as a story-teller: everything became, in Wilde's mouth, a tale with which he could entertain his admiring audience. As André Gide remarked, "Wilde did not converse: he narrated" (1969: 26). Wilde himself claimed: "They don't understand that I cannot think otherwise than in stories" (qtd. in Gide 1969: 31). His prose fiction has, like his conversation, the fine quality of a perfectly finished object, polished by the thoughtful care of the aesthete: after reaching the words "The End" in *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* the reader may have the impression that Wilde must have written them (with the same attitude as one of the characters in the novel) ,"with a self-conscious and satisfied air, as if he had summed up the world in a phrase"(*DG* 57). It seems that, as a reader, one can do very little but remain in silent admiration of the beauty of the work, in such a way that Wilde's sentence, "There was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder" (1989b: xii), would come true again. Is the reader, then, alloted in *Dorian Gray* the place of "the ugly and the stupid," who "can sit at their ease and gape at the play" (*DG* 51)? I would like to argue that, far from being so, the novel is very much concerned with the place of the reader, and that it can in fact be interpreted as a study of the

relationships between the art of narrative and the reader, and of the dialectic which emerges from the dialogue between the author, the reader, and the text.

For, in fact, the work of art which occupies the centre of the novel and which gives it a title can be considered to be a narration, a story, as much as a picture. It has already been remarked by several critics (Bal 1985: 102; Barthes 1977: 79) that narrativity is not altogether absent from painting, since its contents include a succession in time as well as a chain of causes and effects that the viewer of the picture must reconstruct in her/his mind. In the case of this particular picture, the narrative quality which surrounds it is even clearer: by means of the transformations it undergoes, it becomes the diary Dorian keeps of his life (*DG* 162). If Dorian was at first afraid that the picture would some day tell him the story of his own past, that it would be , in his old age, the continual reminder of his youth, he soon comes to discover that it is also capable of telling him the story of his present: this portrait "holds the secret of his life and tells his story" (*DG* 116). It is precisely what E.M. Forster (1972: 85) has called (in a very clear reflection of the Victorian division between the public and the private life, a division which was also a central concern of Oscar Wilde) "the secret life" that will constitute the plot of this picture which, refusing to keep its static quality, makes itself into a narrative. It is not difficult, then, to admit that Dorian has become the signified of the portrait, that the story of his life is the content that can be gathered from the picture, and that he is being narrated, told, by Basil's masterpiece. If Wilde felt, as Featherstone (1992: 269) has argued, the need to "aestheticize everyday life" by "turning (it) into a work of art," he made this feeling crystallize in this novel in which the protagonist's life becomes the story told by his own portrait. Early in the novel, Dorian, confused by the chaos of his existence, tries "to gather up the scarlet threads of his life, and to weave them into a pattern" (*DG* 119). A few lines later, he succeeds in his attempt in this rather unexpected way: the course of his life will be hence inseparable from the pattern of the work of art.

It is not so easy to determine whether the picture is simply mimetic, and limits itself to reproducing and representing as accurately as possible the processes which go on in Dorian's mind, in which case he would be unconsciously using it "to symbolize and finally to replicate" himself, as a reader does with a literary work according to Norman Holland (quoted in Selden 1988: 190), or whether, under the powerful spell of the picture, he is being constructed by it, as he seems to believe on the many occasions on which he accuses the picture of having destroyed him and completely changed

the course of his life. No matter how much Lord Henry repeats that "Art has no influence upon action," Dorian knows very well that it can powerfully act upon him and recreate him. Literature, painting, even the art of conversation, have the power to transform him. In watching a Shakespearean play, he forgets "that I was in London and in the nineteenth century. I was away with my love in a forest that no man had ever seen" (*DG* 104). He is also radically transformed by Lord Henry's conversational art, to such an extent that the latter can conclude, much to his satisfaction, that "to a large extent,the lad was his own creation" (*DG* 91); in fact, as Sánchez-Pardo (1991: 234) has noticed, "the picture can only be completed (through) Dorian's response to Wotton's rhetorical power." Dorian himself views Lord Henry's aphorisms as norms of life one should put into practice (*DG* 83). He can be transformed by the power of literature, and "poisoned by a book" (*DG* 156) which, not unlike the picture, seemed to him "to contain the story of his life, written before he had lived it" (*DG* 142). Art's action upon Dorian, then, is not something ephemeral, but rather what I. A.Richards would call "the after-effects, the permanent modifications in the structure of the mind, which works of art can produce" (1988: 196). The remark of this critic that "no one is ever quite the same again after any experience; his possibilities have altered in some degree," is perfectly applicable to Dorian, who is never the same after he first faces his portrait.

This initial encounter between Dorian and the picture deserves some comment. The first reaction of Dorian on seeing his portrait is one of fascination: he stands "gazing at the shadow of his own loveliness" (*DG* 67). The fascination, similar to the one he feels when reading the enigmatic book (*DG* 142), is produced by what Aristotle already classified as one of the effects of the work of art, the "pleasure of recognition," or what Laura Mulvey (1989: 17) has recently called "a fascination with likeness and recognition," since the portrait is "a wonderful work of art, and a wonderful likeness as well" (*DG* 66). The newly-discovered pleasure Dorian experiences when looking at this mirror-like picture can be explained by means of Mulvey's theories (1989: 17) about "scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect." Some critics, such as Sánchez-Pardo (1991: 233), have usefully analysed the ways in which Dorian's narcissism, his love for identification and sameness, can be regarded as a hint of his homosexual identity, and therefore a clue to a better understanding of the relationships between Dorian, Basil, and Henry. Here I would like to concentrate on Dorian's narcissism as related to his

personal evolution rather than to his potentially sexual relationships with the other male characters in the novel.

Narcissism, in fact, an attitude which would have been up to this moment unthinkable in Dorian, will now take its place in his life, as highlighted by the text itself when Dorian is presented kissing, "in boyish mockery of Narcissus," the "painted lips" of his own image (*DG* 126). Dorian has, then, discovered his own beauty, but, moreover, he can be said to have discovered, or rather, to have constructed, his own identity. This stage in Dorian's development can be best analysed by resorting to the Lacanian concept of "the Imaginary" (as analysed by Sarup, 1992: 101), which "grows from the infant's experience of its 'specular ego'," that is, the moment at which the child "demonstrably 'recognises' his or her image in the mirror" (Sarup, 1992: 110). Dorian is, at this point of his evolution, inaugurating the field of the Imaginary: "A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time" (*DG* 66). Lord Henry makes the point even more evident by remarking: "The moment I met you I saw that you were quite unconscious of what you really are, of what you might really be" (*DG* 65). But Dorian's recognition of his own image is not only charged with joy and celebration; it is true that he is "in love" with the picture (*DG* 68) and that he knows that "it is a part of himself" (*DG* 68), but, even as he enjoys his identification with his own lovely image, he will also feel aggresssive towards the author of the picture and toward the picture itself: "I am jealous of the portrait you have painted of me. . . . Why did you paint it? It will mock me some day— mock me horribly!" (*DG* 68). Again, these conflicting reactions on the part of Dorian can be explained by means of Lacanian theory: when the child recognizes for the first time her/his own image in a mirror, her/ his look is not only one of recognition, but also one of misrecognition, since the basic relationship between the subject and her/his specular image is one "between a fragmented or incoordinate subject and its totalizing image" (Sarup 1992: 102). As a consequence, the subject experiences, according to Cohan and Shires' reading or Lacan, "the pleasure of being signified as a coherent subject" (1988: 156), but s/he is, at the same time, alienated from her/himself: the result of the mirror stage is "the paradox that the subject finds or recognises itself through an image which simultaneously alienates it, and hence, potentially confronts it" (Sarup 1992: 102). In this light, Dorian's reaction can be easily accounted for: he has been violently pulled to pieces, he has unconsciously discovered, in the midst of his narcissistic joy, that "identification amounts to self-alienation" (Cohan and Shires, 1988: 158). He

has constructed his own image only to feel immediately alienated from it and from himself. This alienation has one more effect upon him: he is "filled with a wild desire to know everything about life" (*DG* 85), since "a subject can desire only in terms of the division that occurs through a symbolic representation of the desired object": Dorian had never known desire till this moment, since he had not been alienated from himself yet; from now on, though, and since "desire admits of no full satisfaction or it is not desire" (Cohan and Shires, 1988: 161), desire will "come to meet [him] on the way" (*DG* 89).

To return to the argument that the picture can be viewed as a narrative which constructs Dorian rather than simply represent him, it can be suggested that this narcissistic identification is made possible precisely by his unmistakable feeling that it is him that the picture "talks" about, that, if there is a story to be told, Dorian himself will be its protagonist: he is constructed as "the subject of the narrative." Now, as Cohan and Shires (1988: 150) would express it, "because this text addresses you explicitly as the subject of narration, it foregrounds, as conventional narratives do not, the extent to which your subjectivity as a reader depends upon identification with the signifier you," a signifier which is to be equated, in the case of this novel, with Dorian's portrait. From this moment, Dorian will passionately identify with "the pronoun you," with the protagonist of the story told by the picture, in order to be "signified as a coherent subject" (Cohan and Shires 1988: 156), but will, at the same time, "lose autonomy from the discourse in which that pronoun appears." As any reader who is directly addressed as "you," therefore, Dorian has to renounce a part of himself, and let the text construct him. In doing so, he tries to cling to his ideal ego, that "essentially narcissistic formation," which corresponds to "what he himself was" (according to Sarup, 1992: 102) and from which he feels he has already been forever alienated, as he reveals when he says, for example, that he is jealous of the portrait because it is already "a whole month younger than I am" (*DG* 89).

As opposed to Dorian's construction of his portrait as his ideal ego, Basil will offer a different interpretation. Far from seeing in it, as Dorian does, an invitation to pleasure, an intimation that the youth should not cease in his attempt (forever frustrated) to fulfil desire, Basil regards the picture as "the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists" (*DG* 132); it is the representation of Dorian's unspoilt youth, of his innocence and purity. Rather than interpreting the picture as the imaginary instance of the ideal ego, he chooses to see it as the symbolic formation of the ego ideal

(Sarup 1992: 102), concerned, not with the unconscious, not with the desires of the narcissistic ego, but with a moral ideal. The painting comes to represent for him a morally perfect Dorian, whose physical beauty is but a reflection of his inner beauty. His reading of the picture is influenced by his own moral standards, by what Dorian calls his "Philistinism." He is projecting his own ideals on his work, as he himself notices at several points:

> The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my soul . . . .
>
> I will not bare my soul to their shallow, prying eyes. My heart shall never be put under their microscope. There is too much of myself in the thing, Harry- too much of myself! (*DG* 52, 56).

Basil, therefore, interprets this pictorial text according to the critical stance that Stonehill (1988: 4) has called "autobiographical criticism." In the opinion of this type of critics, a text is seen as a "revealing expression of its author's subconcious." He cannot abandon his authorial (and authoritarian) position in the interpretation of his work, precisely because he will always regard the painting as a "Work" and never as a "text" (for a critical discussion of both terms, see Scholes1970: 170f.). For him, there is only a point of view from which the work can be regarded, that of the author, and never that of the reader, which would give rise to a different critical stance, that of rhetorical criticism (Stonehill 1988: 4), which regards the texts as "a verbal machine constructed so as to create a specific effect upon its reader," and which will be the attitude adopted by Dorian, as will be shown later on. (Although, of course, "the specific effect" it will produce on Dorian will be very different from that intended by the author, very distant from the purpose for which it was constructed.) Even though Basil himself denounces the current practice of autobiographical criticism (as when he says angrily that "We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography," *DG* 57), he, nevertheless projects his own life, his own dreams, on the picture: for him, it is a work about the ideal Dorian he has constructed in his mind. That he considers any other interpretation impossible is made clear by the feeling of possession of his work he shows at many points: the satisfaction with which he contemplates his newly-finished masterpiece and writes his name "in long vermilion letters on the left-hand corner of the canvas" (*DG* 66), the "most wonderful frame, specially designed by himself" (*DG* 89) with which he accompanies his gift to Dorian (as if indicating by framing the portrait in such a markedly personal way, that there is only one point of view, one

perspective, one "frame" from which to look at it), the surprise with which he asks Dorian: "Not look at my own work! You are not serious!" (*DG* 131), are all revealing in this sense. As he has admitted, however, it is not his property, but Dorian's (*DG* 67). Soon, he comes to suspect that there may be more to the picture than he had intended to put into it, and will anxiously ask Dorian: "You didn't see anything else in the picture, did you? There was nothing else to see?"(*DG* 134). He will be reassured, on that occasion, that the "something curious," that "something that probably at first did not strike you, but that has revealed itself to you suddenly" (*DG* 132), is nothing but the projection of his own feelings, of his own soul which he has, he believes, poured out on the painting. With the passing of time, however, he will realise that someone (Dorian) has, in a rather mysterious way, contributed his own share of the painting: Basil can hardly identify it as his own when he is finally allowed to contemplate it again:

> An exclamation of horror broke from the painter's lips as he saw in the dim light the hideous face on the canvas grinning at him. . . . Yes, it was Dorian himself. But who had done it? He seemed to recognize his own brushwork, and the frame was his own design. . . . He seized the lighted candle, and held it to the picture. In the left-hand corner was his own name, traced in long letters of bright vermilion. (*DG* 163)

In spite of its bearing all the marks of Basil's authorship, this image of Dorian does not correspond any longer to the old ideal cherished by the painter: the story it tells Basil does not admit the reading of Dorian as a morally perfect being; it is no longer the ideal beauty which can be looked at as an expression of inner light and purity. Basil's reading does not apply to the pictorial text any more. His efforts to make the picture conform to his own moral standards will all be to no avail, since, as Menand (1987: 86) has noticed, although the artist can, from the Wildean perspective, "say what he likes," "he has effectively relinquished control over what he means." His attempt at moral interpretation is typical of his Victorian ideology. But *Dorian Gray,* which has adequately been labelled by Moya (1991) "an epitaph for Victorian civilization," and which combines in a surprising way the Victorian and the postmodern (Menand 1987: 79), cannot easily endorse Basil's views. It is rather Dorian's reading which can now throw some light on the picture. For Dorian is to be seen not only as the signified of the text, as the one who is being narrated, told by the picture, as the "you" addressed by the

text: he has also become an interested reader of his own story as written by the picture. Dorian has lived that magic moment at which, as Lord Henry says,

> Suddenly we find that we are no longer the actors but the spectators of the play. Or rather we are both. We watch ourselves, and the mere wonder of the spectacle enthralls us. (*DG* 123).

Since he has learnt that "To become the spectator of one's own life, as Harry says, is to escape the suffering of life" (*DG* 130), he will live the transformations of the picture, not so much with the passionate involvement of the one who contemplates the dramatic changes his own life is going through, but rather with the mixture of passion and detachment of the spectator, of the reader, of the one who, even as he enjoys the spectacle, knows perfectly well that he is "willingly suspending his unbelief." He can, therefore, "gaze at the portrait with a feeling of almost scientific interest" (*DG* 118), and grow "more and more interested" in the story it tells him, the story of "the corruption of his own soul" (*DG* 143). Dorian has become, therefore, a reader of himself, and his own reading will be, of course, very different from Basil's. It is true that, in its original state, the picture was a reflection of Dorian's unstained purity: it corresponded closely to the intentions of the author. But Dorian's ulterior behaviour will show that he has got to feel hostile towards that interpretation, that he refuses to look at the picture through Basil's eyes. He refuses to keep the position of what Tomashevski has called "the innocent reader": "To read," Tomashevski says, "one must be innocent, must catch the signs the author gives. . . . Because literature is so persuasive, we naturally assume that it should perform the duties of a teacher and have the authority of a preacher" (1965: 90). This is indeed the position favoured by Basil, who (as a Victorian author and critic) firmly believes in the moral authority, not only of literature, but of any art. As opposed to this conception of "the innocent reader," however, Dorian will be what J. Fetterley calls "the resisting reader," the one who refuses to accept the impositions of the text, the subversive reader who reads against the grain. Dorian can also be equated to Barthes's conception of the "perverse reader," a revolutionary notion which inevitably leads, according to this critic, to the "death of the author" (1968). This theoretical concept of the death of the author is dramatically enacted by the novel at the point in which Dorian, the original reader, murders Basil. Once again, the death of the author (at least, of this specific author), can be more clearly seen by applying Lacanian theory. The

author has tried, as has been shown, to make his conception of the ego ideal triumph over Dorian's opposing ideal ego. Now, according to Sarup's reading of Lacan, "The ego ideal is also, according to Hegel's formula which says that coexistence is impossible, the one you have to kill" (1992: 166). By killing Basil, therefore, Dorian has also killed his ego ideal, which leaves him free to interpret the pictorial text the way he likes best. Having got rid of the authoritarian voice of the author, Dorian privileges the concept of the text over that of the work, and the approach of the reader over that of the author. He refuses to accept the idea that the "soul" of a text is necessarily one with that of its author in order to identify it with the soul of the reader.

But can it be argued that it is Dorian who imposes now his own "soul," his own interpretation, on the picture? The question which has already been posited should be asked again: is the picture a merely mimetic phenomenon which reflects Dorian's life? Does it simply admit the structure Dorian tries to impose on it, or is it rather the picture that influences him, that constructs him? Does this perverse reader read and interpret the text according to his own wishes, or is he constructed by the text as the subject of its narrative by its addressing him explicitly as the subject of the narration, as has already been suggested? As Selden would express it (1988: 187), "Does the text or the reader determine the process of interpretation?" To answer these questions is no easy task, since the analysis of Dorian's position as a reader reveals extraordinary complexities: it is not as simple as claiming that the picture as a text has the only function of providing him with the opportunity to liberate himself from all his negative passions, in a cathartic experience, by projecting them on his mirror-like image. On the one hand, his relationship to the text is an active one since, as has been shown, he puts forward an original interpretation of his own. But, at the same time, he is also constructed by the text, for, as Wilde himself thought (according to Alice Wood, 1970: 351), "every reader or beholder is a creator even as it is a creation." I will try and analyse both contradictory aspects more in depth.

As has been said, Dorian is a creative, participative reader, in that he refuses to accept the authorial interpretation of the text and is able to find alternative meanings. In this sense, he enacts Wilde's own ideas about reading and about literary criticism. We may recall at this point Wilde's opinion (qtd. in Wood, 1970: 349): "That is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's own soul," for it "is in its essence purely subjective, and seeks to reveal its own secret and not the secret of another." Similarly, Anatole France remarks:

> To be frank, the critic ought to say: 'Gentlemen, I am going to talk about myself on the subject of Shakespeare, or Racine, or Pascal, or Goethe- subjects that offer me a beautiful opportunity'" (1971: 671).

Dorian will eagerly agree with such opinions: by refusing to accept Basil's view of the picture, by regarding it in a new light, by making it indeed into "the record of his own soul," he acts according to the standards which define, according to Wilde, the work of the aesthetic critic, who

> rejects those obvious modes of art that have but one message to deliver, and having delivered it become dumb and sterile, and seeks rather for such modes as suggest reverie and mood, and by their imaginative beauty make all interpretation true, and no interpretation final. (qtd. in Wood, 1970: 351)

Basil's picture indeed belongs to the latter category, and, although, due to his strict moralising attitude, the painter sought to turn it into a work belonging to the former, Dorian manages, by doing away with the myth of authorial interpretation, to multiply the imaginative messages which can spring from the text. He is, therefore, enacting the creative function of the reader in which Wilde so firmly believed (Wood 1970: 352).

Dorian's reading of the text is indeed a violent one, from the point of view of the author: the resulting modifications which take place in the narrative picture are such that the painter considers them to be an attack against his work, and he will try to reason away the transformation it has gone through: "The room is damp. Mildew has got into the canvas. The paints I used had some wretched mineral poison in them" (*DG* 164). He even refuses to admit that it is his own picture that he is looking at; it is, instead, "some foul parody, some infamous, ignoble satire" (*DG* 163). This identification of Dorian's new interpretation of the text with an attack can be related to the Kristevan conception of reading as "aggressive participation" (in Worton and Still 1990: 11): the reader should refuse, according to her, to compromise with the interpretation that, by means of the text itself, the author calls for. It can also be viewed as an attempt on the part of Dorian to free himself from what Bloom has called "the anxiety of influence" (in Worton and Still 1990: 8): an attempt which has led literary critics and readers of all times to produce readings "grounded in an almost boastful forgetfulness" of the author and of the intentions the author may have entertained in creating her/his work (Worton and Still, 1990: 8). It is not surprising that Dorian should often feel this anxiety of influence, since the concern with alien influences operating on

a subject is very much at home all through *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* and is perhaps best summarized by the following words pronounced by Lord Henry early in the novel:

> All influence is immoral . . . because to influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of some one else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him . (*DG* 61)

Dorian will therefore try to liberate himself from such dangerous influences in order to preserve his own individuality. He cannot avoid the knowledge that the text was originally Basil's, that the picture was his own creation, but, by re-interpreting it, by reducing it to his own terms and translating it into his own language, he acts as an innovative reader. His reading, or rewriting, of Basil's text, is not a mere repetition of the purposes with which the author originally created it, but, as "original imitators" of all times, such as Cicero and Quintilian, have always done, according to Worton and Still (1990: 7), he establishes a relationship with the text which is not one of dependence (not, at least, one of dependence on its author), but one which at the same time liberates him from "over-investment in admiration for past masters" (in this specific case, Basil), and "reveals and actualises the inner principle of proliferation," by revealing some further possibilities of interpretation of the text.

Even though Dorian has managed to declare his independence from the author, even though he can in some ways show his mastery over the text itself by providing it with fresh interpretations, it is not so easy to affirm on this basis that it is he who constructs the text, and not the other way round, since, in his own words, "there is something fatal about a portrait. It has a life of its own." (*DG* 135). The portrait is indeed so powerful that it can seemingly act with a certain degree of independence from Dorian's mental processes: it gets to know about Sibyl's death, for example, earlier than Dorian himself (*DG* 125), in such a way that it seems to be challenging Stevenson's conviction that "no art . . . can successfully compete with life. Life goes before us, infinite in complication..." (1985: 216). Dorian is often afraid that it is in fact the picture that makes his decisions for him. Under the influence of the picture, Dorian will actually change: "He would often adopt certain modes of thought that he knew to be really alien to his nature" (*DG* 146). The experience Dorian goes

through at this point is one which is common enough for any reader. G. Poulet expresses it in the following way:

> Now what happens when I read a book? . . . Whatever I think is a part of my mental world. And yet here I am thinking a thought which manifestly belongs to another mental world, which is being thought in me just as though I did not exist. . . . This thought which is alien to me, and yet in me, must also have in me a subject which is alien to me. . . . This I who 'thinks in me' when I read a book, is the I of the one who writes the book. (1988: 201-2)

This is, except for one thing, a perfect description of Dorian's relationship with the picture; it should be noticed, however, that the "I" who thinks in Dorian is not, as Poulet would have it, that of the one who "writes the book," or, in this case, of the one who "painted the portrait": it is not, obviously, Basil's spirit, that, thinking through Dorian, thinking "in him," leads him to attitudes and deeds that Basil would most probably consider "wicked." The "I" who thinks in Dorian and who is alien to himself is to be identified with what Gibson (1980: 1) would call his "mock reader personality." In any reading experience, Gibson says,

> we become a new person —controlled and definable and remote from the chaotic self of daily life. . . . We are recreated by language. We assume that set of attitudes and qualities which the language asks us to assume.

This is the reason why Dorian, when he becomes a reader of his own story, radically abandons his former self, his "real reader" personality, and lets himself be recreated by the changing language of the portrait. As he now spends the whole of his life reading himself, he discovers "the terrible pleasure of a double life" (*DG* 178) and finds out that "perhaps one never seems so much at one's ease as when one has to play a part" (*DG* 177). The many different personalities he adopts, the disguises he frequently uses, his changeable poses can all be seen as a product of his realization that, as Gibson has said, "he is many people as he reads many books and responds to their language worlds" (1980: 5). One book, the never-fixed text of the book of his life as presented by the many different appearances the portrait adopts with the passing of time, is enough for Dorian to continually enlarge, as experienced readers do, according to Gibson (1980: 5), his "mock possibilities." He has learnt from Lord Henry that, to the question "What are

you?," one should never answer anything but "to define is to limit" (*DG* 193). He has come to agree with the view that the ideal aesthete should "realize himself in many forms, and by a thousand different ways, and . . . be curious of new sensations" (Shusterman 1988: 2-3). He has also found out that "Insincerity (and it should be remembered here that, significantly enough, insincerity was for Wilde a quality which was never very distant from artistic creation) is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities. He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing permanent, simple, reliable, and of one essence" (*DG* 154).

When reading, therefore, everything is all right as long as one agrees to adopt the different mock reader personalities required by the text. Otherwise, the balance, the perfect understanding between the reader and the text, is broken. As Gibson expresses it, "a bad book is a book in whose mock reader we discover a person we refuse to become" (1980: 5). A good example of a subject abandoning her mock reader personality in favour of her real reader views is Sibyl, who transforms *Romeo and Juliet,* by means of her dreadful acting, into a boring, altogether unconvincing play. The excuse she offers Dorian when trying to make up for the artificiality with which she has played her part is the following: she has suddenly found out that

> the words I had to speak were unreal, were not my words, were not what I wanted to say. . . . I have grown sick of shadows. . . . What have I to do with the puppets of a play?" (*DG* 112)

And, with the passing of time, the same feeling will get hold of Dorian, although, throughout his life, he has accepted without much resistance any mock reader personality put forward by the pictorial text he so asiduously reads. One day, towards the end of the novel, he asks himself the question which, according to Gibson (1980: 3), is the necessary step before one abandons her/his real reader personality in favour of a different, mock personality, "Who do I want to become today?" On any other occasion, Dorian would have unhesitatingly replied that he wanted to become absolutely anything: any new mock reader position dictated to him would have done well enough. This time, however, he seems to have got tired of the game: he does not show any desire to adopt one more of the "corrupted," "wicked" personalities he used to be so eager to take up. He is seized instead by a desire to forget all about the picture and be able to lead a normal, real reader experience; he cannot bear any longer the impositions of the picture, and, moved by his willingness to free himself from its influence once and for

all, he exclaims: "There is no one with whom I would not change places" (*DG* 199). He prefers to be anything except to become again the mock reader of a text whose reading has already tired him out, and decides to declare his independence from the demanding portrait: "I am going to alter. I think I have altered" (*DG* 201). The cruel picture will show him, however, that it is no longer in his hand to do so. When he tries to liberate himself once and for all from the influence of the portrait by destroying it, the result will turn out to be, contrarily to all his expectations, his own death: the fictional Dorian Gray turns against the real one, and the latter's destruction can actually be regarded as "a consequence of the contradiction between the portrait and himself" (Moya 1991: 110). There is something threatening in this victory of fiction over the purely human; the rebellion of the picture against Dorian has some of the quality of Augusto Pérez's words to Unamuno:

> ¿Conque no, eh? ¿Conque no? No quiere usted dejarme ser yo, salir de la niebla, vivir, vivir, vivir, verme, oírme, tocarme, sentirme, dolerme, serme. ¿Conque no lo quiere? ¿Conque he de morir, ente de ficción? Pues bien, mi señor creador don Miguel, también usted se morirá, también usted, y se volverá a la nada de la que salió... ¡Dios dejará de soñarle! (Unamuno 1978: 153-4).

Augusto, already doomed, will die a few pages after this speech, but the portrait of Dorian Gray will refuse to be killed by Dorian's own knife: it is Dorian himself who dies in trying to get rid of the picture. After Dorian's death, it is only the picture that survives in all the magnificence of its old splendour, and it is, therefore, revealed to be more enduring, more real than the real Dorian. In this way, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* explores, as typical of metafictional texts, (according to Patricia Waugh, 1990: 2) ,"the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text." This is in no way a surprising conclusion for a novel by an author who, like Wilde, boasted of having "treated Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction" (1989: xii). This conclusion, however, may be seen as reassuring as well as threatening; it heals even as it hurts. It is a reflection on the permanence of art through time, as when, in *Twelfth Night,* after a song about the destructive power of time, Feste the fool closes both the song and the play with the following words: "But that's all one, our play is done,/ and we'll strive to please you every day" (1975: 156). The implication is that, in spite of the transience of human life, the spirit of the human will live on by means of art, that supreme human creation...

As a conclusion, the story of the portrait of Dorian Gray may be regarded as a study of both the advantages, the privileges, and the risks, which any reader of fiction is granted. It is not only Dorian who is allowed to hold this creative position: any reader of *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* is granted the same possibility since, according to Wilde, "Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray. What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them" (qtd. in Roditi, 1969: 59). The reader is, therefore, to enter the same game of identification, of development of mock possibilities, that Dorian has played. Wilde, of course, as a reader of his own work, grants himself privileged possibilities of entering the game of identifications: if we are to believe his biographers and the people who met him, Wilde seems to have identified alternatively with different characters in the novel. Like Lord Henry, Wilde "charmed his listeners out of themselves" (*DG* 79); like Dorian, he "dreamt of evolving into a master of sensation, a harp responding luxuriously to every impression" (Jackson 1970: 336), and, to be brief, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is, according to Jackson, a "full portrait of himself," since "Lord Henry Wotton and Dorian Gray represent two sides of Oscar Wilde; they are both experimenters in life, both epicureans and both seeking salvation by testing life to destruction" (1970: 338). Maybe Wilde is, after all, experimenting in reading himself through his works. Maybe he discovered that, as Lord Henry says, we can become the spectators, rather than the actors, of our own lives. To quote Henry once again, "We watch ourselves, and the mere wonder of the spectacle enthralls us" (*DG* 123). Or maybe we can even think of Oscar Wilde, engaged in the writing of his *Dorian Gray*, as Jackson imagines him: a "remarkable man for ever telling himself an eternal tale in which he himself is hero" (1970: 339). a

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