WILDEAN FRAGMENTED PERSONALITY: THE EGO

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Abstract

In the present article we focus on Oscar Wilde's novel The Picture of Dorian Gray, employing in our analysis Freud's theory of personality that brings to the foreground the separation of the psyche into id, ego, and super-ego. The Wildean character we concentrate on is Lord Henry Wotton, the tempter advocating decadent hedonism as the principle of life lived as art.

Keywords: decadent hedonism, temptation, persuasion, creation, self, otherness

In his writings, Oscar Wilde dealt with "the Classical concept of Eros throughout the phases of his aesthetic development", employing variations on the nature of this theme (Flanagan Behrendt, 1991: 119). It was precisely this approach to Eros and aesthetics that his life outside the written discourse mirrored and which the Victorians used as a gravamen against the one who had challenged their canons.

In his 1891 novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde dives into the written world of pleasure, temptations and sin, to finally reveal the outcome of such an understanding of love and art. The publication of the novel gave rise to contradictory reactions, but the predominant attitude towards it was negative criticism, the novel being publicly condemned, considered as offensive and a threat to the Victorian morality. "Gloating study of the mental and physical corruption of a fresh, fair and golden youth", not showing "a single good and holy impulse in human nature", "false art" – these are but few of the 'labels' attached to the novel, quoted by Dr. Joseph Bristow (Wilde, 1992: V) in the introduction to the 1992 edition.

Despite the criticism it gave rise to, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* remains a literary work which combines the autobiographical and the fictional, offering the reader different levels of interpretation and displaying Wilde's mastery of language.

Our analysis of the novel makes use of Freud's theory of personality that brings to the foreground the separation of the psyche into id, ego, and super-ego. The characters in the novel come to be seen as the separate facets of Wilde's own fragmented personality (also in Kohl, 2011: 168, Roditi, 1986: 124): Basil, the artist, is Wilde's super-ego (Wilde's/Dorian's conscience; focus on moral duty), Lord Henry is his ego (mediating between super-ego and id; the tempter advocating decadent hedonism), whereas Dorian represents Oscar's Id (the instinctual side; 'temptee' and tempter; victimizer and victim of his choices rooted in self-love). Nevertheless, as Ellmann asserts, Wilde cannot be reduced

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to these three characters which are but "distortions or narrowings of his personality" and do not reflect his generosity, humour and creativeness (1988: 320).

Lord Henry Wotton, Wilde's *ego*, is the character who is perceived as being the least vulnerable. Dorian and Basil reveal their personalities in relation to him, his influence bringing to the surface their hidden ambitions, their secret desires. He is the psychoanalyst, the *observer* and the *critic of human nature*, and as the story unfolds, he becomes the '*mastermind*' that intermittently moves the plot with him and generates action. He is the character that does not take anything upon himself, the selfish cynical whose emotionlessness is the outcome of a life lived to the full: "You don't understand what friendship is […] or what enmity is, for that matter. You are like everyone; that is to say, you are indifferent to everyone" (*TPDG* 10), says Hallward, drawing attention on Wotton's inability to feel.

Lord Henry's perception of the others (friends included) is a sardonic, detached, calculated one and his way of expressing his perspective on the world is one of ironizing precisely the moral principles and conventions of the Victorian age, as well as the flaws of human nature.

Seen then as one that generates psychological motion that brings about changes in the others, Lord Henry becomes a creator himself advancing the image of the artist fundamentally different from his creation's, Dorian Gray being perceived, in our opinion, as a partial representation of Lord Henry, the product of his influence: the young man in the picture is the image of beauty, whereas the image of the artist, if we were to follow Lord Henry's ironical words targeted at the Elizabethan society, is that of the intellect which, by its nature, opposes beauty: "real beauty ends where an intellectual expression begins" (*TPDG* 6). His philosophy promotes all that his age ostracized — insincerity, beauty to the detriment of intellect, aesthetics to the detriment of ethics, marriage seen as a monologue, lacking communication and feelings, opposing the imposed on respectability (echoing, to some extent, Wilde's own marriage) — a mere façade, even a failure. Lord Henry's theory of individualism and the standard of one's age is framed in terms of morality versus immorality: modern morality implies accepting the boundaries/standards imposed by the society of those times, and for that reason it is in fact immorality that it promotes.

Lord Henry's interest is in human life, in practicing a surgical eye on the individual's mind and mechanism of feeling, "vivisecting others" after having vivisected himself (47). He is also a strategist that builds his mechanism of persuasion, but at the same time a character who advances thought provoking questions on the meaning of life, on the nature of love, on the dividing line between soul and body:

> Soul and body, body and soul – how mysterious they were! There was animalism in the soul, and the body had its moments of spirituality. The senses could refine, and the intellect could degrade. Who could say where the fleshly impulse ceased, or the physical impulse began? […] Was the soul a shadow seated in the house of sin? Or was the body really in the soul, as Giordano Bruno thought? The separation of spirit from matter was a mystery, and the union of spirit with matter was a mystery also. (*TPDG* 48)

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Exerting one's power of influence on a person implies changing their boundaries of the self by imposing one's own boundaries on the other, altering or alienating the other's self. "To influence a person," says Lord Henry "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 someone else's music, *an actor* of a part that has not been written for him" (*TPDG* 18, emphasis added). Wotton recreates Dorian (whom he sees as "an instrument for his art" [Nassaar in Bloom, 1985: 110]) and 'models' him until he becomes "a perfect external manifestation" of his own soul, as Nassaar puts it (ibidem). His art is then one of persuasion, of intruding on the other's sense of self and perception of the outside reality.

The image of the Victorian individual is sketched by this cynical character: one defined by conventions, by the society's demands and moral principles ("terror of society", "terror of God" [*TPDG* 18]); fear therefore distances the individual from his real self, from his own quest for the self – the identity path centered on the true self is thus ignored, and self-development (introduced as the individual's duty to his self, as well as a matter of courage) is forgotten. The soul remains "starving" and "naked".

It is in fact self-denial, as Lord Henry/Wilde insists on, and we dare say it is the mutilated, suppressed self which takes refuge in self-denial that Wilde presents in his novel as being the characteristic of the Victorian society. Sin is redefined, understood now not as ignoring ethical, religious limits (basically thought of as a means of protecting the individual by imposing outside, more or less rigid regulations), but as being a matter of personal understanding of it, the individual's own approach to conscience.

Yet, one's own definition, or rather interpretation of sin carries within the influence of certain factors that define one's identity path (mutable and/or immutable limits [Liiceanu, 2007: 11-13, 26-27]). The individual's choice of defining sin is, therefore, not his own but one determined by all the influences he has been exposed to. In Dorian Gray's case, these influences of the past (seen as identity roots that tell him of who he is) give Dorian an aura of mystery, as they are presented to the reader in the question - answer exchange between Lord Henry Wotton and his uncle Lord Fermon: "it was an interesting background. It posed the lad, made him more perfect as it were" (*TPDG* 31).

Following Lord Henry's philosophy of hedonism, sin takes place in the mind: the impulses we struggle to silence lead to their "poisoning" us, whereas action brings about purification, "yielding" to temptation in order to escape it and unveiling one of the "great secrets of life":

> Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us. The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure, or the luxury of a regret. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself (18)

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> […] that is one of the great secrets of life – to cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul. (20)

Sin would be "the privilege of the rich" (64), adding colour to their life, whereas the poor are left with self-denial, as Wotton ironically points out. The portrait Lord Henry describes is one Dorian recognizes himself in, the influences he senses are familiar ones, his own, a description of human nature. The facet of the self Lord Henry presents is one he already has within, a latent one he has not been aware of and which now gradually comes to the surface. *The other* and *the self* are again focused on in the novel, the process of influencing the self having already begun: "some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses" (19).

Lord Henry nurtures the desire to turn Dorian into his creation which he would take pride in, something that belonged to him ("he would make this wonderful spirit his own" [*TPDG* 32]), and he himself would be then the 'role model' for Dorian, his source of inspiration. Lord Henry appears as a *narcissist* himself, in love with his power over the others' sense of individuality, in need of an audience to exert his power of influence on, on which to make use of his language of persuasion and strategies of manipulation while promoting his "philosophy of pleasure" and seducing his listeners ("he charmed his listeners out of themselves, and they followed his pipe laughing" [*TPDG* 36]).

In *Oscar Wilde. Eros and Aesthetics,* Patricia Flanagan Behrendt asserts that in his characters' dialogues, Wilde "dramatically reconstructs a playful vision of the charismatic mechanisms of attraction which can exist between older and younger men" (1991: 111). She then goes on by stating that what attracts the older man in this relationship is precisely what reminds him of his youth, a longing which reflects "a renewed narcissistic vision of himself" (113). Language is the means by which this process of seduction is mediated, yet the language of seduction that Wilde employs in the development of the characters and progress of the plot is in fact an aggressive one due to its manipulative aim and intrusion in the other's process of contouring personal identity. In Flanagan Behrendt's words:

> The rite of initiation which characterizes Wilde's dialogues, however, involves a process which is not entirely noble in all its aspects. The initiation process in the dialogues involves a direct *assault* upon the initiate's own values which by extension results in *an undermining of his sense of personal identity*. (115, emphasis added)

> The self-promoting language of the dandy – which seeks to disconcert, to manipulate, to fascinate, to hold in thrall, to dominate – is, above all else, *a highly aggressive language*. It is a language which epitomizes the paradox implied in "*teasing*"; for teasing both tantalizes and torments. (169, emphasis added)

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Wotton's philosophy is, hence, one of influence, not a philosophy of action but one of undermining the other's sense of self by means of this "aggressive language" and the temptations it mediates. Nevertheless, Lord Henry is not only a tempter, but he too becomes tempted by Dorian's "unspoiled nature" on which he would exert his power of influence, thus playing the role of the creator/artist of human nature, of the other's soul.

On seeing Gray for the first time, Wotton's curiosity is aroused. From his perspective Dorian's appearance suggests trustworthiness, the innocence youth is characterized by, mirroring a self that has escaped the power of the external influences, having been kept "unspotted from the world" (16). Identity cannot be reduced to a matter of being, it is also a matter of becoming; the fact of eluding the influence of the outside world, of the intrusion of the Other, keeps Dorian Gray in a self-sufficient state, an androgynous one. Or it may as well be his self-sufficiency that has protected him against such influence ("all influence is immoral", says Lord Henry [17]). Nevertheless, this androgynous state is utopian, Dorian becomes aware of an unexplored self as he cannot escape the other's influence, but in doing so changes are triggered, bringing together ethics and aesthetics, with the rejection of the former. Identity comes to be focused on as a matter of becoming as well, while the other is not perceived as an intruder who imposes his own boundaries, but as a *mirror* that reflects a hidden, unknown but existent self ("Why had it been left for a stranger to reveal him to himself", Dorian asks himself [20]).

To Lord Henry, Dorian Gray is an *experiment* of the intellect in which he finds delight, a process of creation in which he displays his persuasive skills, avidly following the changes he generates. The *act of creation* as seen so far is reflected in the three male characters in the novel: Basil Hallward, the artist and his creation → the painting ("the painting is Basil's masterpiece," says Nassaar "because Dorian is the flawless manifestation of Basil's lost innocence" [in Bloom 1985: 109]); Lord Henry and the creation of his philosophy, wit and rhetoric → his new Dorian Gray; Dorian Gray and the creation of his actions → his life, his soul as transposed in the portrait on the canvas (thus, his status becomes a double one: creator and creation). "I am so glad," says Lord Henry to Dorian "that you have never done anything, never carved a statue, or painted a picture, or produced anything outside of yourself! Life has been your art" (*TPDG* 172).

Lord Henry has experienced to the full, he is one of the few who have been given a "reward" (47) on having completed this 'journey' of experiencing, having escaped the "sulphurous fumes", the "poisons and maladies" that his hedonistic diving into life exposes the individual to, "troubling the brain, and making the imagination turbid with monstrous fancies and misshapen dreams" (ibid.) The price to pay for such a quest is irrelevant, says Lord Henry, as it cannot be compared to "the logic of passion" and "the emotional coloured life of the intellect"(ibid.) brought together and observed. However, the price will prove too much for his apprentice, Dorian Gray, his irrational plunge into a life defined by sin and his gradual self-awareness turning him into a doomed character whose fall and metamorphosis of the self is Lord Henry Wotton's creation.

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