Come Look at Yourself: Orientalist Selfhood in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

> "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors."
>
> – Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

> "It had taught him to love his own beauty. Would it teach him to loathe his own soul? Would he ever look at it again?"
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> "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self."
>
> – Edward Said, *Orientalism*

The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde opens with the spatialities of spectation: a sitting room as setting, a scene arranged to draw attention to the medium of art as mirror, and a structure that subtly portrays the politics of portraiture and personhood in the context of the Orient and Occident. Several elements enter into the frame. First, through Lord Henry Wotton's roving gaze the reader encounters curtains that produce "a momentary Japanese effect"—our gaze stretches first to the East, to "pallid, jade-faced painters of Tokyo" then returns to the West to grapple with the paradox of "the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile seek[ing] to convey the sense of swiftness and motion" (Wilde chapter 1). The aesthetic background established, and the physical backdrop of London mentioned, our gaze is finally transferred to the center of the room. There, the titular character is stood in portrait form. We observe Dorian Gray from the perspective of Lord Henry watching Dorian's artist Basil Hallward consider Dorian's "gracious and comely form" as though looking at a "mirrored" image (Wilde). When gazing at Dorian's portrait, what does Basil see? What does Henry see? And what does Dorian see? By naming and mapping the dynamics of the novel's opening scene and subsequent explorations of portrait-gazing, we arrive at how the effects of an Orientalizing gaze prompts both a certain self-creation and a consequent self-destruction.

Fixed before his self-portrait, is Dorian Gray the self or the other? *The Picture of Dorian Gray* begins and ends with Dorian's portrait at the center of the scene. It is the picture, not the person, that is centered in our gaze, both in the eyes of the other characters and in the minds of the reader. Through rapt descriptions of Dorian's complex self-identification with his portrait and other characters' orientation towards Dorian, Wilde affords the very acts of looking and recognizing with a special spatiality that maps the interplays of subjectivity and objectivity between Dorian and his portrait. Following Ahmed's Queer Pheonomenology, Hegel's lord/bondsman dialectic, Jacques Lacan's Mirror Stage, and Said's Orientalism, both Dorian the person and Dorian the portrait can be said to gain subjectivity through the process of othering and Orientalizing others and to gain self-consciousness through the process of being alienated and Orientalized by a spectator's gaze. Subtle depictions of the Orient permeate throughout the text, and as Dorian becomes aligned with the Orient through sin and departure from respected Western society, the portrait becomes a visual reflection of the dynamics of Orientalism. Thus, in the context of the novel as an Orientalist space, the subjectivity of the Oriental portrait returns a gaze to its Orientalist spectator. Dorian and his portrait are caught in the lord/bondsman dialectic and, ultimately, when the portrait gazes back, Dorian is subjected to self-destruction.

Through the novel, the three central characters Henry, Basil, and Dorian engage in a triangulation of lines and cross-desires that complicate their respective subjectivities and objectivities. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed describes relationships as defined by lines and directions of desire. What does it mean to be an object of desire, and what does it mean to hold another in one's gaze? What does it mean when a figure is both object and subject, as Dorian becomes? It is through orientations and alignments that the subject and object are constructed. For instance, when Basil describes his encounter with Dorian at a society event, he

describes being overpowered by Dorian's gaze, yet it is Basil's gaze that transfixes Dorian to his portrait. Lord Henry, too, exerts his influence on Dorian, holding Dorian as the object of his gaze, yet it is Dorian who enchants Henry to be enamored with him. Both characters recognize something of himself and of distinctly 'not' himself in Dorian, just as Dorian recognizes himself and 'not' himself in his portrait. In the Hegelian lord/bondsman dialectic, self-consciousness is developed to recognize the other as self. In so much that the novel is built upon the relationship between the artist and the self (or the portrait-maker and the portrait), the first two chapters function as a kunstlerroman in which Dorian comes into being through the coming into being of his portrait and the actualizations of his artist. Dorian the person is first constructed as an object of erocticism that then, through his self-consciousness as object, gains subjectivity (Dorian the portrait would follow a similar trajectory in later chapters, with the subjectivity of the portrait pointing to the fall of Dorian the person).

Situated within the spatiality of desires and fixed within the peculiar triangulation of orientations, Dorian Gray is first introduced before the reader as an other onto which the artist and spectator's self-consciousnesses are marked and mapped. To begin, Dorian Gray is constructed as an erotic-aesthetic image or object through the orientations of Basil and Henry towards him. Wilde constructs Dorian before the eyes of the reader, much like how Dorian's portrait is completed before the very eyes of Dorian, Basil, and Henry. First, Dorian the portrait is discussed by Basil and Henry before Dorian the character makes his entrance. It is a particular phenomenon in that Dorian is placed into the text as an object before he enters into the story as a subject. In *Queer Phenonmenology*, Sara Ahmed describes how the way things are situated in rooms and spaces and the ways in which our bodies are oriented towards things can reveal who we are. The reader's first view of Dorian Gray is a "full-length portrait of a young man of

extraordinary personal beauty" that "st[ands]" "In the centre of the room," "clamped to an upright easel…in front of…[the] sitting the artist himself, Basil Hallward" (Wilde chapter 1). In the context of queer phenomenology, the centering of Dorian the object highlights the gaze that objectifies Dorian, and returns the attention to the spectator who fixes the Dorian the object in place. Indeed, according to Ahmed, "consciousness is always directed 'toward' an objects" (2). As such, the objectification of Dorian draws attention to the spectator's consciousness. To objectify Dorian as an erotic-aesthetic image is to both other and recognize the self in the other, grounding the context for Hegelian self-consciousness.

Not only is Dorian introduced as an object, but he is specifically constructed as an other for the speactor's self-consciousness. Dorian is introduced through Basil's struggle for self-consciousness, effectively as Basil's other. Before Dorian the person enters into the scene at the beginning of chapter two, Dorian and his portrait are treated as one and the same, as objects onto which Basil, Henry, and the reader are oriented towards. Foregrounding the crux of the lord/bondsman dialectic, Hegel identifies the other as having the ability to return the othering:

> The first does not have the object before it only in the passive form characteristic primarily of the object of desire, but as an object existing independently for itself, over which therefore it has no power to do anything for its own behalf, if that object does not *per se* do what the first does to it. (549)

That is to say, Hegel points to how when faced with the other, even as an object of desire, the other tries to "sublate" and "supersede" the person before the other (549). Basil speaks of Dorian like an object that he is oriented towards and fixes him into place as an object. Yet, in the sense that Basil "come[s] face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if [he] allowed it to do so, it would absorb [his] whole nature, [his] whole soul, [his] very art itself", Dorian can be seen as trying to sublate his artist precisely because Basil chooses to recognize himself in Dorian's image (Wilde chapter 1). Coming into being first and foremost as

an other sets up the stage for how Dorian must gain subjectivity and self-consciousness, and problematizes his later alignment with the Orient and his own orientation towards his portrait.

Dorian gains subjectivity through a self-conscious turning towards the spectator. Space for Ahmed is "a question of 'turning,' of directions taken, which not only allow things to appear, but also enable us to find our way through the world by situating ourselves in relation to such things" (6). When Basil and Henry's gazes fix Dorian as an object, it is Dorian's self-conscious turning that frees himself in space, allowing him to gain subjectivity. He returns the gazes of Basil and Henry and becomes self-conscious of himself as an object of desire. As with Basil's objectification of Dorian, fear becomes a key emotion that allows for this return of the gaze that allows him to attempt to sublate his spectator:

> Dorian Gray frowned and turned his head away. He could not help liking the tall, graceful young man who was standing by him….But he felt afraid of him, and ashamed of being afraid. Why had it been left for a stranger to reveal him to himself?" (Wilde chapter 2)

Interestingly, Dorian physically turns away from Henry, yet considers himself attracted to Henry. Despite—or because of—such a turning, Dorian's self-image becomes grounded in another's consideration of him. Here, Dorian is situating himself in relation to Henry. In contemplating the way that Henry 'reveals' Dorian to himself, Dorian establishes himself through Henry's eyes. Dorian becomes self-conscious in becoming conscious of his own beauty, which is shaped by others' desire for him—essentially, it is the orientation of others onto him that arouses his self-consciousness.

In that his portrait "taught him to love his own beauty," Dorian's recognition and identification with his ideal image in the portrait can be read as a manifestation of Jacques Lacan's Mirror Stage, which, in the sense that it is a developmental stage, can function in a kunstlerroman as a newly introduced figure's Hegelian struggle for self-consciousness (Wilde

chapter 2). Dorian's identification with his portrait—the other—is a conscious 'turning' that frees him from only being fixed in place by gazes and gives him an ability to gaze at himself. Here, Dorian turns towards each of the spectators that fix his image in place, first in response to Basil identifying the portrait as "the real Dorian" then asking Henry whether "[he] is really like that" (Wilde). He is also invited to turn towards himself: "It is the finest portrait of modern times. Mr. Gray, come over and look at yourself" (Wilde). It is this turning and self-gazing that allows Dorian to play with the substitution of his identities, of "the original of the portrait" with the portrait itself, resulting in his choosing to identify with his ideal image. Lacan describes this process of assuming one's ideal image in order to see oneself as whole as the Mirror Stage (Wilde):

> ...a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for all the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity… (1114)

Before encountering his portrait, Dorian holds 'a fragmented body-image' in the sense he is introduced as an object defined by Basil and Henry's desire for him. In turning towards himself as an object of desire and actively othering and subsuming his portrait as with taking on 'the armour of an alienating identity,' Dorian gains subjectivity. As such, the relationship between the spectator and the portrait, the self and the other, mirrors Dorian's Faustian contract in structure: that only by taking something from the other, sublating the other, can the self gain self-consciousness. Here is the interplay of subjectivity and objectivity that Dorian holds: he is first other to Basil and Henry, and for Basil that otherness is located and manifested in his portrait (something that Basil creates in order to recognize himself in), but with Dorian's self-conscious identification with the portrait, he others the portrait and gains self in the process,

and is thus both other and self. This is the first part of the lord/bondsman dialectic, and as Dorian's turn towards hedonism directs him towards the Orient and away from Western Christian morality, Dorian's character becomes aligned with an Oriental underground self.

In that orientation of and positionality ground Dorian's coming-into-self, his turn towards self-consciousness is reflected in an Orientalist turn towards the underground self of Victorian society. Prior to Dorian's turn to hedonism, the Orient has appeared peripherally as objects that prop up wealth and status, such as the Persian divan and Japanese screens that ascribe an aesthetic air to Lord Henry. Phenomenologically and sociopolitically, Oriental objects are connected with spatialities of desire, aesthetics, and selfhood because the Orient is an "alien" self onto which the West projects its desire and asserts its superiority (Said 207). To illustrate, in *Orientalism* Edward Said draws a connection between the West and the exoticized settings of lack situated in the Orient:

> …the Orientals were viewed in a framework constructed out of biological determinism and moral-political admonishment. The Oriental was linked thus to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien. (207)

Said's use of the word 'alien' is especially potent, as a connection can be drawn to Hegel and Lacan's use of alienation, which relate to othering the self or sublating the other as self. Dorian's alignment with the Orient is both an external and internal form of alienation: as he commits sin and tarnishes his reputation in Victorian aristocratic society, he also grows apart in appearance from the portrait whose ideal self image and 'alienating identity' he wears as his own. Dorian's turning towards the Orient is accompanied by structural shifts in settings and atmosphere. Textually, the presence of "Malays crouching by a little charcoal stove, playing with bone counters and showing their white teeth as they chattered" at the opium den Dorian visits ground the connection between sin and the Orient (Wilde chapter 16). Dorian physically enters into such

spaces as Whitechapel, where Christian campaigns are waged against poverty and criminality. Much like Whitechapel and in the case of the Malay characters, "Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen…as problems to be solved or confined or…taken over" (Said 207). Even as Dorian extracts hedonistic gain from his alignment with the Orient, he does not embrace the Orient for it is in maintaining the alienation of the Orient that the West retains power over the Orient. Yet, just as the Mirror Stage does not offer a permanent ideal self to one's identity and that the Hegelian dialectic suggests that the master ultimately fails in his self-consciousness, Dorian risks being subsumed by the Orient. Consequently, Dorian projects his sins and Oriental activities onto his portrait; he Orientalizes his portrait in order to remain as Occident.

Dorian's Orientalization is further structurally reflected in the Orientalist interplay between the narrative backgrounds and foregrounds. Ahmed defines background as "not simply in terms of what is around what we face, as the 'dimly perceived,' but as produced by acts of relegation: some things are relegated to the background in order to sustain a certain direction; in other words, in order to keep attention on what is faced" (31). In the context of Dorian's Orientalism, Dorian and his interactions with Oriental objects are foregrounded and his portrait, a perpetual presence and full-fledged figure, is backgrounded. Considering the text itself as a phenomenological space, the portrait also hangs at the background of the narrative in the sense that Dorian's thoughts, his very orientation, always turn to his portrait. Therefore, that portrait is relegated, that it is kept hidden from sight yet always exudes a directional presence, is significant because it is an Orientalizing process to relegate the Orient to the shadows, the background that props up Western societal respectability, desire, hedonism, and identity. Dorian exploits and appropriates the Oriental objects, then Orientalizes his background to retain his ideal image. In

gathering certain objects to construct a special foreground that is then projected onto his background, Dorian is further constructing and completing a sense of self.

That Oriental objects are connected to Dorian's background is further evidence for his being Orientalized, but also his active Orientalizing. In chapter eleven, the setting shifts to Dorian's own quarters and descriptions of Dorian's Oriental jewels or "curious concerts" (Wilde chapter 11). The monstrosity with which Oriental musicians are portrayed, such as the "mad gipsies['s] wild music" and the Tunisians' "monstrous lutes," mirrors Dorian's own loathing at his portrait's increasing hideousness (Wilde). Yet, Dorian's fascination with Oriental music demonstrates that Orientalism serves, according to Said, a specific function in showing to the West an underground, repressed, or alienated self that contains the West's "desires, repressions, investments, and projections" (8):

> The harsh intervals and shrill discords of barbaric music stirred him at times when Schubert's grace, and Chopin's beautiful sorrows, and the mighty harmonies of Beethoven himself, fell unheeded on his ear. He collected together from all parts of the world the strangest instruments that could be found, either in the tombs of dead nations or among the few savage tribes that have survived contact with Western civilizations, and loved to touch and try them. (Wilde chapter 11)

Dorian's aesthetic 'touch[ing] and try[ing]' is an Oriental cosplay much like his donning of "the armour of an alienating identity" (Lacan 1114). It is a projection of aesthetic inspiration onto the Oriental what the West hopes to glean from the Orient and thus what it wants to see in itself. It is only through the East that the West can experience its aesthetic self, its underground or repressed self, much like how it is only through establishing oneself through the other does the lord hopes to gain self-consciousness. It is onto Oriental objects that Dorian maps his desire and hedonistic inspiration. And it is onto the portrait in the background that Dorian actively projects his

unwanted self: “The portrait was to bear the burden of his shame: that was all” (Wilde chapter 8). The portrait was to bear him his sin; it was to become the Orient to his Occident.

Dorian Orientalizes the portrait following a dynamic of Western superiority over the Oriental object. Dorian derives not only pleasure, but a sense of self in retaining his identification with his ideal image, by focusing on the contrast between him and the portrait that now bears his Oriental sins:

> ...he would…stand, with a mirror, in front of the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him, looking now at the evil and aging face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his sense of pleasure. He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. He would place his white hands beside the coarse bloated hands of the picture, and smile. He mocked the misshapen body and the failing limbs. (Wilde chapter 11)

This dynamic of fixing an image in place and using such a corrupted image of oneself to highlight one’s own superiority is a Orientalist technique. There is a certain fetishism to the way Dorian fixates ‘the corruption of his own soul’ on a visual representation of his other. It is only through alienating an inferior but fascinating self that the West convinces itself of its own superior sovereignty and selfhood. Said describes how the West “tries to show that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (3). Thus, in effect, Dorian Orientalizes his portrait to remain superior. Yet, because alienation of the other for the purpose of self-consciousness requires first a recognition of a kind of self in the other, as we have been in the way that Dorian’s subjectivity is gained through a process of returning the gaze that others him as an object—what happens when Dorian’s portrait gazes back?

In Orientalizing and othering the Orient within a dynamic that emerges as one of Hegelian dialectic, the West is like the lord, faced with the sublation of itself by its underground self. In Dorian's case, his portrait gains subjectivity and is able to gaze back. Much like the relationship between the Orient and the Occident, Dorian's relationship with his portrait, the means that allowed him to recognize an ideal image, a self, in his portrait at all, is a certain self denial: "For curiosity's sake [Dorian] had tried the denial of self" (Wilde chapter 20). Much as how Dorian the person returns his gaze to his gazers, Dorian the portrait returns a gaze to his lord and originator: "...in the eyes [of the portrait] there was a look of cunning and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite" (Wilde). Having established that the portrait is Orientalized by Dorian, then that it sublates Dorian and gains subjectivity, the portrait can be said to gain a certain self-consciousness, one that turns and gazes back towards Dorian. Hence, the subjectivity the portrait gains is not an Orientalizing gaze but the Orient's gaze. The Orient's gaze is to see oneself as is seen by others, to recognize the West as an other in response. The Orient is dangerous, but it is also empowered by orientations of fascination, and it gazes back at its maker as in a portrait in a mirror.

The Picture of Dorian Gray concludes in self-destruction as Dorian stabs his portrait but falls dead himself, aged as his portrait has been. In the context of Orientalism, with the Orient being "produced by the West," the Orientalist becomes destroyed in his destruction of the Orient because the Orient is oriented in the Orientalist's imagination (Said 22). Given that the novel is also an Orientalist text, the ending in the context of the Orientalist Hegelian Lacanian Ahmedian dialectic, lends to an examination of the reader-spectator in relation to the novel-portrait. Specifically, a final shift in point of view to the servants that discover but fail to recognize Dorian is an othering device in which the text others its subject, the portrait its titular original. In

the end, we the reader-spectator also others and perform the othering. In constructing the novel as a portrait, a character study, but also using certain narrative devices to other characters, Wilde allows the portrait's demise to linger in reader's minds about what it means to orient a piece of text or a piece of art. Indeed, it can be argued that we are oriented towards the novel in our reader's gaze, that we may recognize ourselves in its characters. When we the reader gaze at Dorian Gray as in a portrait in a mirror, what is shown about ourselves?

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