

On Being One's Own Heir: British Portraiture, Metaphysical Inheritance, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Look at the portrait of a man in black, by Titian There is a tongue in that eye, a brain beneath that forehead. It is still; but the hand seems to have been just placed on its side; it does not turn its head, but it looks towards you to ask, whether you recognise it or not? It was there to meet me, after an interval of years, as if I had parted with it the instant before. Its keen, steadfast glance staggered me like a blow. It was the same — how was I altered!

— William Hazlitt¹

In speaking of portraits, there is never much to say.

— William Thackeray²

Abstract: Much scholarship on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has focused on its possible textual sources and its place in literary traditions. This article demonstrates that by contextualizing the novel in the history of art and the tradition of British portraiture, we are able to answer significant yet overlooked questions such as why Wilde chose “picture” rather than “portrait” for his title and are better prepared to appreciate the serious themes underlying the fantastical tale. The magical portrait of Dorian is most readily identifiable as a literary gothic motif, yet, in developing his central plot device, Wilde also draws on metaphysical and mystical theories of portraiture current in the British tradition and from throughout the history of art. These, in turn, are rooted in wide-ranging superstitions and other cultural attitudes toward imagery that have proven both influential and enduring. The philosophical symbolism of Wilde’s portrait contributes to a narrative of metaphysical inheritance and an allegory of arrested development through which Wilde is also able to test certain aesthetic doctrines which, however cherished, are seen to fail in Dorian’s case.

Keywords: *portraiture in literature, imagery and superstition, anti-bildungsroman, uncanny*

In the great discrepancy between these two comments on portraiture, Thackeray is the outlier. His statement is uncommonly short-sighted and uncharacteristic of British art criticism, which was deeply invested in portraiture, holding it up as a point of national pride and arguing in its defense as an underappreciated genre capable of embodying and inspiring serious philosophical thought and of exhibiting ethereal aspects of the self and interpersonal relations.

¹ Hazlitt, *Notes*, 46.

² Thackeray, “Second Lecture,” 130.

When confronting an exceptional portrait, just as an exceptional novel, there is always much to say, as Hazlitt's example demonstrates. And of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, an iconic work self-reflective of both art forms, there is still more to say. While criticism on Dorian Gray has traditionally been concerned primarily with the literary context and identifying the novel's sources or textual relatives, this article also contextualizes the novel in the history of art, particularly the tradition of British portraiture, along with relevant superstitions regarding imagery. When we look beyond the gothic magic portrait to the actual history and theory of portrait painting, we find significant points of overlap. Wilde skillfully draws on these in creating his unlikely yet unsettling tale, demonstrating that, outside of the shilling shocker, serious philosophical themes can be associated with the animated portrait.

Dorian Gray is deeply concerned with various types of heredity and inheritance.³ My focus here is on the metaphysical inheritance suggested by the supernatural portrait, wherein the self is heir to its own past. This idea builds on metaphysical and mystical theories of portraiture and is reinforced by a conceptual link between portraits and progeny. Wilde's tale, though, is one of darkness, inverting the conventions of art history and of fiction as well. Traditionally, it is the ancestral portrait which follows one with its gaze, moans, speaks, and even steps out of its frame. Here, it is one's own portrait which haunts one, or, as the case may be, which one haunts. Dorian's self-disinheritance is ultimately a portrait of failed *Bildung*, yet through Dorian's self-experimentation, Wilde tests several of his own ideas on aesthetics and morality with a seriousness of purpose which for some readers has been belied by the supernatural aspect of his tale.

Portraiture in England

Portraiture led something of a double life in England, considered both the nation's pride and its disgrace. Historical narratives on the subject often begin with the lack of a native school of painting and the failed attempt of Henry VIII to entice Raphael to his court. As William Hazlitt wrote, "all that Englishmen had done was to copy, and endeavour to imitate, the works of eminent men, who were drawn to England from other countries by encouragement, which there was no inducement to bestow upon the inferior efforts of the natives of this island."⁴ Henry was eventually able to employ Hans Holbein the Younger, whose portraits, for many, became a gold <p. 160> standard. Portraiture in seventeenth-century England was likewise

³ Dorian's is not the only significant portrait in the novel—like most aristocratic families at the time, he has a gallery full of ancestral portraits which give clues to the biological and moral heredity that determine his fate. Wilde's use of biological theories of heredity are discussed in the book manuscript from which this article is drawn, tentatively titled *Heredity and the English Novel in the Nineteenth Century*.

⁴ Hazlitt, review, 89.

dominated by foreign artists such as Anthony Van Dyck, Peter Lely, and Godfrey Kneller, but in the eighteenth century a local tradition emerges and produces such luminaries as William Hogarth, Joshua Reynolds, and Thomas Gainsborough. By this time, portraiture was thought to be a particularly “English” custom. Richard Steele writes in *The Spectator*: “No nation in the world delights so much in having their own, or friends, or relations pictures . . . And accordingly in fact, face-painting is no where so well performed as in England . . . I have seen what is done abroad, and can assure you, that the honour of that branch of painting is justly due to us.”⁵ As for quality, so for quantity. Horace Walpole wrote in 1759 that “a very few years ago there were computed two thousand portrait-painters in London,” and though the figure may be exaggerated, as Walpole suspects, it gives a good indication as to the focus of British art at the time.⁶

For the artist, portraiture was profitable but not always prestigious. This was primarily due to the traditional hierarchy of genres, which held the highest type of painting to be history — large-scale works with narrative subject matter (*istoria*) drawn from mythology, the Bible, or national history. Portraiture fell below history, as it did not require any invention from the artist and did not instruct the viewer. The hierarchy, founded in antiquity and refined in the Renaissance, was further developed and dogmatized in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the establishment of European academies. Beyond the hierarchy of genres, three further threads of critique beset portraiture: first, that the market for portraits was distracting artists and hampering the development of a British school of history painting; second, that it belittled artists by compelling them to indulge the whims of sitters; and third, that it reinforced vanity in the sitter and society at large. This last charge is acknowledged by Samuel Johnson:

That the painters find no encouragement among the English for any other works, than portraits, has been imputed to national selfishness. It is vain, says the satyrist, to set before any Englishman the scenes of landscape, or the heroes of history; nature and antiquity are nothing in his eye; he has no value but for himself, nor desires any copy but of his own form.

Yet, he continues, “I should grieve to see Reynolds transfer to heroes and to goddesses, to empty splendour and to airy fiction, that art which is now employed in diffusing friendship, in reviving tenderness, in quickening the affections of the absent, and continuing the presence of the dead.”⁷ Among the most influential detractors was Shaftesbury, who said portraiture was

⁵ Steele, *Spectator*, 332.

⁶ Walpole to David Dalrymple, 25 February 1759, *Letters*, 480.

⁷ Johnson, “Portraits Defended,” 123.

“not so much as a liberal art nor to be so esteemed; as requiring no liberal knowledge, genius, education, converse, manners, moral-science, mathematics, optics, but merely practical and vulgar. Therefore not deserving honour, gentility, knighthood conferred.”⁸ In his *Inquiry into the Beauties of Painting* (1760), Daniel Webb suggested that the English preference for portraiture is a hereditary legacy from ancient “British ancestors” who daubed their faces with paint, modern portraiture being in “the same spirit, a little varied in its operations.” The failure to evolve to the higher genre of history painting, he suggests, is due to “a kind of wilful and Gothic rudeness.”⁹ And the artist Benjamin Haydon lamented that “wherever the British settle, wherever they colonise, they carry and will ever carry trials by jury, horse racing, and portrait painting.” So much the worse, as “portraiture is always independent of art, and has little or nothing to do with it.”¹⁰

Such critical voices notwithstanding, portraiture continued to gain in popularity and prestige, even if the Royal Academy, and its first president, Reynolds, had to affirm the hierarchy of genres. The first half of the nineteenth century saw several exhibitions featuring mostly, or exclusively, portraits.¹¹ Three exhibitions from 1866-1868 featured 2,842 portraits in all. Henry Wheatley noted that “never before had been seen such a collection of fine portraits, and the reputation of many portrait-painters, almost forgotten, were revived.”¹² Of the popular approval of portraiture there was no doubt. Several intellectual defenses were mounted as well. Walpole had given an early philosophical justification: “a real portrait we know is truth itself: and it calls up so many collateral ideas, as to fill an intelligent mind more than any other species.”¹³ Others promoted portraiture’s use in biography and history. Hazlitt went so far as to say he had “a higher idea of Donne from a rude, half-effaced outline of him prefixed to his poems than from any thing he ever wrote.”¹⁴ The figure most associated with the use of portraiture in biography and history is Thomas Carlyle, who said that for the biographer and historian, it is “one of the most primary wants to procure a bodily likeness of the personage enquired after.”¹⁵ In a letter to David Laing, he writes: “Often have I found a portrait superior in real instruction to half-a-dozen written ‘biographies’ . . . or rather, let me say, I have found that

⁸ Shaftesbury, *Second Characters*, 135. Shaftesbury’s comment is aimed specifically at Kneller, who was knighted by William III in 1692.

⁹ Webb, *Inquiry*, 35-36.

¹⁰ Haydon, *Autobiography*, 351-352.

¹¹ These are detailed in Wheatley, *Historical Portraits*, 114-125.

¹² Wheatley, *Historical Portraits*, 118.

¹³ Walpole, “Walpoliana,” 357.

¹⁴ Hazlitt, *Table Talk*, 429.

¹⁵ Carlyle, *Works*, 405.

the portrait was a small lighted candle by which the biographies could for the first time be read, and some human interpretation be made of them.”¹⁶

In response to those who proclaimed the superiority of history painting, arguing that it educated spectators and inspired them to emulate noble virtues and deeds, apologists for portraiture began making the very same claims. These ideas as such were not new — Thomas More, for example, wrote that in Utopia, statues “to great men who have done conspicuous service to their country . . . [are] set up in the market place . . . to stand as a record of noble exploits and, at the same time, to have the <p. 161> glory of forefathers serve their descendants as a spur and stimulus to virtue.”¹⁷ But the frequency of such statements greatly increased in response to attacks on portraiture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and ideas were increasingly put into practice. The culmination of the rise of portraiture in England is the foundation of the National Portrait Gallery in 1856 — by then an institution more than fifty years in the making. Carlyle also had a hand in the formation of the Gallery, both directly, in submitting his own proposal, and indirectly, when Lord Palmerston read excerpts of his letter to Laing in Parliament. The Gallery’s official mission of housing portraits of “eminent persons in British history” put into circulation a phrase that went some way in combatting that widespread collocation, common since the seventeenth century, of “mere portraiture.” In Lord Palmerston’s speech on the Gallery proposal, we find several of the qualities and functions of portraiture¹⁸ which apologists had been using in the genre’s defense: “There could be no greater incentive to mental exertion, to noble actions, to good conduct on the part of the living than for them to see before them the features of those who have done things worthy of our admiration, and whose example we are more induced to imitate when they are brought before us in the visible and tangible shape of portraits.”¹⁹

Many writers and artists also saw in portraits qualities less tangible and put forth metaphysical or mystical theories of portraiture, in which the painter takes on the role of psychologist, detective, and even clairvoyant. In the writings on portraiture by those sympathetic to the genre, we find the refrain that the true portrait painter is able to see “into” his subject and render not what he sees but what he intuits. Jonathan Richardson, Reynolds and Hazlitt all had something to say on this notion, but novelists were particularly fond of it as well. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Braddon has Alicia say: “I think that sometimes a painter is in a manner

¹⁶ Carlyle, *Works*, 405.

¹⁷ More, *Utopia*, 113.

¹⁸ Portraiture, of course, has many functions, and among the foremost purposes of the National Portrait Gallery was that of bolstering a certain conception of nationhood and race. I restrict my examination here to those functions and aspects of portraiture most relevant to *Dorian Gray*.

¹⁹ 6 June 1856, *Hansard’s*, 1120.

inspired, and is able to see, through the normal expression of the face, another expression that is equally a part of it, though not to be perceived by common eyes.”²⁰ In discussing John Singer Sargent, Henry James wrote that “the artist sees deep into his subject, undergoes it, absorbs it, discovers in it new things that were not on the surface, becomes patient with it, and almost reverent, and, in short, elevates and humanizes the technical problem.”²¹ A more personal example comes from Thomas Hardy, who, remarking on the portrait of him by Augustus John, reportedly said, “I don’t know whether that is how I look or not — but that is how I *feel*.”²²

We find a corollary to this idea in the commonplace that a portrait is “more like the sitter than he is himself.” Such claims, common from the Renaissance onward, are often simply hyperbolic praise of the accuracy of the likeness or the quality of the portrait, but they also came to suggest that the painter had captured the sitter’s inner essence so well that to look on the portrait was to see “the real” sitter. Hegel, for example, wrote that “the painter must set before us by means of his art the spiritual sense and character of his subject. If this is done with perfect success, then we can say that such a portrait hits the mark better as it were, is more like the individual than the actual himself.”²³ Given such notions, portraiture takes on a significance far removed from the vulgar commercial workshop serving to flatter and indulge the vanity of anyone able to pay. Speaking of Millais’ portrait of Carlyle, James Froude saw a spiritual dimension: “this is portraiture as a sacramental act, involving a mysterious and complex transaction between artist and sitter.”²⁴

Superstition and Animated Portraits

In tracing the archaeology of the magic picture genre to which *Dorian Gray* partly belongs, we do not have to dig far from the metaphysical and mystical theories of portraiture to arrive at a wealth of deeply rooted, cross-cultural superstition regarding images. Around the same time *Dorian Gray* was published, James Frazer was compiling ethnographical reports of folk beliefs regarding shadows, reflections, and portraits. The pattern that emerges in Frazer’s presentation is the now-familiar notion that an image or likeness can capture one’s soul, resulting in reduced vitality, ill health, or death. Such beliefs were not limited to the indigenous peoples of far-flung

²⁰ Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, 66.

²¹ James, *Picture and Text*, 115.

²² Hardy, *Life and Work*, 471.

²³ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 866-67. We find a literary example again in Hardy’s *Life*, where he records that someone had told him that Casterbridge is “a place more Dorchester than Dorchester itself” (379).

²⁴ Barlow, “Facing the Past and Present,” 219.

colonies and beyond but were attested in several parts of Europe, including England, Scotland, Germany, Belgium, and Greece.²⁵

Western superstitions surrounding images are not only products of folklore but are rooted in religious traditions as well. We are painfully aware today of the prohibition against depicting the prophet Muhammad and the lengths to which some believers will go to enforce it, but aniconism is general to the Abrahamic tradition. Numerous prohibitions against the creation of idols and images (of any kind) can be found in the Old Testament, including in the Ten Commandments: “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.”²⁶ For our purposes, we might note that the idea that a god might be jealous of a picture suggests, more than a petty god, that belief in the power of images is strong. Frequent injunctions against idolatry attest to the persistence of the practice, and it is not difficult to understand that people would need something visible and concrete as an aid to worshipping an abstract and absent deity.

The taboo was variously observed and ignored in the development of sects of all three Abrahamic religions down to the present. Despite Old Testament aniconism, an abundance of lore developed in Christianity around supernatural [p. 162](#) portraits. Well known are the Veronica Cloth and Shroud of Turin, the former of which might be alluded to by Wilde when Dorian sees “pressed against the window of the conservatory, like a white handkerchief . . . the face of James Vane” which, after he is dead, is again covered by a handkerchief.²⁷ In the early Middle Ages, a legend arose that Mary had sat for a portrait by Luke, resulting in the first icon and the status of Luke as patron saint of artists. The image of Luke painting the virgin and child subsequently became a central motif for medieval and Renaissance painters. Then there are the millions of weeping, bleeding, and lactating icons, pictures, and statues, not to mention cases of pareidolia, where images of holy figures are perceived in everything from weathered glass to pieces of toast. Theodore Ziolkowski notes that animated portraits are a common form of mass hallucination and that William Butler Yeats was among a group of believers who saw a picture of Christ bleed in Mirebeau in 1914.²⁸

The idea of a portrait as a stand-in for the person portrayed is not uncommon in European history, and, again, this has served purposes both sacred and secular. Charles VI of France, for instance, prayed to a statue of St. Peter of Luxembourg and commissioned a wax bust of

²⁵ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 96-100.

²⁶ Exodus 20:4 (New International Version).

²⁷ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 338. Subsequent quotations will be cited parenthetically in the text.

²⁸ Ziolkowski, *Disenchanted Images*, 80.

himself to be placed before it when he died in order to continue his prayers.²⁹ And a popular legend held that after William Congreve's death, his mistress, the Duchess of Marlborough, commissioned a wax or ivory figure of him, to which she spoke, served food, and even gave medical attention. A less fanciful case is that of Queen Victoria, who hung a photograph of Prince Albert above his former pillow and slept with a plaster cast of his hand (with which she was also buried). The conflation, or substitution, of the signifier and the signified, then, is another mystical dimension of portraiture, in both religious and secular contexts, and there is not so great an imaginative distance from the belief that images can act as emissaries or agents on behalf of living persons, or can preserve some form of their existence after death, to the concept of, or belief in, animated portraits.

Belief in the phenomenon is attested in antiquity as well, as we see in the myths of Pygmalion and Talos, the bronze giant created by Hephaestus (who also made golden maidens for himself). The idea that a statue or portrait could come to life was not uncommon in ancient Rome, as suggested by the many prescripts against such thoughts. One practice that likely lent credence to these beliefs was the funeral custom of making a wax death mask, which was then worn to the funeral by an individual of similar build to the deceased.³⁰ Living portraits are to be found in ancient fiction as well. In the *Satyricon*, there are several instances where the narrator beholds paintings and, due to the realism, feels for a moment that he is looking at live people or animals.

Among the foundational myths of the history of Western art is the story, told by Pliny in *Natural History*, of the competition between the painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius. Both were to create wall paintings. When Zeuxis unveiled his work, birds flew down to peck at his painted grapes. When Parrhasius was then told to remove the veil from his painting, he replied that the veil *was* the painting. Zeuxis pronounced him the victor, for whereas he had only fooled the birds, Parrhasius had fooled an artist. Pliny thought that the talent of painters to "deceive" was best applied to portraiture, but artists and critics have not always agreed. In his "Eleventh Discourse," Reynolds considers "why we are not always pleased with the most absolute possible resemblance of an imitation to its original object" and why "such a resemblance may even be disagreeable." He singles out waxwork as a medium particularly able to produce discomfort due to its potential for verisimilitude: "on entering a room filled with wax figures,

²⁹ Walker, *Portraits*, 11.

³⁰ Bussels, *The Animated Image*, 40-41.

the stillness strikes you with a slight degree of horror, as if death had struck the company motionless.”³¹

Conversely, it is a telling observation that the waxworks of Madame Tussaud’s have been consistently denied the status of art, from her day to our own. In the nineteenth century, this was due partly to their popularity and entertainment value, as well as the sensationalism of the notorious “Chamber of Horrors.” Further resentment can be attributed to the political element of the collection, being a “who’s who” of contemporary society and recent history. But from an aesthetic point of view, people were simply uncomfortable with the degree of realism the figures presented. Writing in *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1864, Frances Power Cobbe distinguishes between art and imitation:

the true artist . . . seems to have taken up the subject’s whole individuality, melted it in the crucible of his own mind, and then given it us cast red hot, and henceforth fixed forever. Either this, and this alone must be the supreme aim and achievement of art, or else, if it be not so, a mirror (could its images be made durable) would be better than any portraits of Raphael’s or Titian’s; and Madame Tussaud’s wax-works superior to a statue of Phidias.³²

The comparison of waxwork and sculpture became a familiar analogy for photography and painting in the debate over whether photography could be a legitimate art form. In 1865, Ruskin wrote that “photography can do against line engraving just what Madame Tussaud’s waxwork can do against sculpture. That, and no more.”³³ And more than a hundred years later, Kenneth Clark remarked that “the words waxwork and Madame Tussaud’s have long been the harshest words that any aesthete could pronounce about a piece of painting or sculpture which displeased him.”³⁴

The distaste among artists and critics for art deemed “too realistic” is a significant theoretical issue, but for the present discussion it is the nature of the discomfort felt by viewers when confronting waxwork that is most relevant. Dickens humorously bridges the critical and visceral response in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Nell, having never <p. 163> seen a wax figure, expects them to be “funny” — something akin to puppets. Mrs. Jarley (modelled on Marie Tussaud) corrects

³¹ Reynolds, *Discourses*, 188. The ideal which Reynolds holds superior to likeness is that discussed above: “To make a coloured map of the human face for the ignorant to wonder at requires but little skill; but to paint the mind and character of the man is the achievement of genius” (188).

³² Cobbe, “The Morals of Literature,” 126.

³³ Ruskin, *Cestus of Aglaia*, 89.

³⁴ Qtd. in Bloom, *Waxworks*, 15.

her: a wax figure, she says, is “calm and — what’s that word again — critical? — no — classical, that’s it — it’s calm and classical.” Drawing attention to their extreme realism, she remarks that the figures are “so like life, that if wax-work only spoke and walked about, you’d hardly know the difference . . . I’ve certainly seen some life that was exactly like wax-work.”³⁵ After seeing them and eventually having to sleep among them, Nell finds that “they looked so like living creatures and yet so unlike in their grim stillness and silence that she had a kind of terror of them for their own sakes.”³⁶ “So like . . . and yet so unlike” is a felicitous definition of the uncanny, and Mrs. Jarley’s comment accords precisely with one of Ernst Jentsch’s examples of the uncanny: “doubt as to whether an apparently living being is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate.”³⁷ Jentsch also singles out the wax figure as an object capable of producing the uncanny and, like the critics cited above, adds that “it is of considerable interest to see in this example how true art, in wise moderation, avoids the absolute and complete imitation of nature and living beings, well knowing that such an imitation can easily produce uneasiness.”³⁸

Animated Portraits in Literature

Although animated statues and portraits in literature are firmly identified with the gothic and tales of the supernatural, examples are to be found in realist genres as well. This is especially true if we consider not only cases of actual animated portraits, but the idea or metaphor of animated portraits. In *Persuasion*, for example, Austen’s narrator remarks that “the portraits themselves seemed to be staring in astonishment,”³⁹ and in Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, we find a gallery of portraits as “a piquant line of spectators.”⁴⁰ A realist (and allegorical) version of the notion becomes thematically central in Zola’s *The Masterpiece*, in which artist Claude Lantier becomes obsessed with his painting of a female nude, neglecting his wife emotionally and sexually. His wife finally manages to “seduce” him back by forcing him to compare her naked body with his painting. After a night of passion, Claude awakes to find himself disgusted by his

³⁵ Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, 208.

³⁶ Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, 223.

³⁷ Jentsch, “Uncanny,” 11.

³⁸ Jentsch, “Uncanny,” 12. These effects observed by Reynolds, Dickens, and Jentsch have recently given rise to a new field of research in robotics and 3D computer animation. First proposed in 1970 by roboticist Masahiro Mori, the hypothesis of the “uncanny valley” states that as robots or animations become more humanlike in appearance, people’s empathic response to them builds, until a point of similarity is reached when it drops dramatically and turns to repulsion. This range between “somewhat human” and “fully human” is the uncanny valley and was clearly a point of concern long before robotics and computers, well known to artists and critics and put to dramatic use by imaginative writers.

³⁹ Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 43.

⁴⁰ Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 440.

wife's physical body and hears "a voice calling to him from the studio."⁴¹ He follows the voice and hangs himself in front of the painting of the woman. His dead eyes gaze on her "as if his soul had passed into her with his last dying breath."⁴²

In a memorable scene from Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Michael Henchard goes to the river intending to drown himself but encounters a floating body: "then he perceived with a sense of horror that it was *himself*. Not a man somewhat resembling him, but one in all respects his counterpart, his actual double"⁴³ We soon learn the "natural solution of the mystery" — the body was in fact the effigy of Henchard which the townspeople had made for their skimmington ride.⁴⁴ Hardy's story "Barbara of the House of Grebe" bears similarity to *Dorian Gray* in its treatment of the marble statue of Edmond Willowes, which Willowes commissions to send to his wife, Barbara, while he is away studying in Italy. Before returning, he is badly disfigured in a fire, and Barbara cannot bear to look at him. Willowes leaves, and Barbara remarries to a persistent aristocratic suitor. Shortly after news of Edmond's death arrives, the statue is belatedly delivered. Barbara, finding that it is a work of "absolute fidelity" fully capturing her first husband's former beauty, falls in love with the statue.⁴⁵ In order to win her back, her jealous husband pays a sculptor to disfigure the statue as Edmond was — a tactic that succeeds surprisingly well.

Just as animated portraits are not limited to the gothic, not all animated portraits in gothic stories turn out to be supernatural. The examples from Zola and Hardy cited above present cases where characters come to believe that a portrait or statue is in some way alive due to their agitated state of mind, which is what we often find in the gothic as well. As William Watt observes, in gothic works "actual animation is rare."⁴⁶ The most well-known example comes from *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, in which Emily is terrified upon seeing a veiled "corpse," which turns out to be "a waxen image made to resemble a human body in the state, to which it is reduced after death."⁴⁷ Radcliffe's narrator adds that "this image was so horribly natural, that it is not surprising Emily should have mistaken it for the object it resembled."⁴⁸ Another instance with close ties to *Dorian Gray* is found in *Melmoth the Wanderer* by Wilde's great uncle, Charles Maturin. Upon visiting his dying uncle, John Melmoth sees a portrait of his namesake, dated 1646, and feels that the eyes "were such as one feels they wish they had never seen, and feels

⁴¹ Zola, *The Masterpiece*, 411.

⁴² Zola, *The Masterpiece*, 413.

⁴³ Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, 293.

⁴⁴ Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, 294.

⁴⁵ Hardy, *A Group of Noble Dames*, 67.

⁴⁶ Watt, *Shilling Shockers*, 26.

⁴⁷ Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, 662.

⁴⁸ Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, 663.

they can never forget.”⁴⁹ He later thinks that he sees the eyes move — a common phenomenon in life and especially in literature, and a likely source of explanation for the origin and endurance of the idea of animated portraits.

Though not all gothic animated portraits are supernatural, there are a great many which cannot ultimately be rationally explained. In *The Castle of Otranto* (which also features a bleeding statue) a portrait utters a deep sigh, heaves its breast, steps out of its panel and walks away in disgust of its living descendant. Another prominent example is Gogol’s “The Portrait,”⁵⁰ in which a portrait of a mysterious money lender exercises a malignant influence on its possessors, at times stepping out of its frame, as it is given away, sold, and re-sold down the generations. Perhaps more influential on Wilde was the work of Hawthorne, whose “The Prophetic Pictures” bears several similarities to *Dorian Gray*. The story tells of a young couple who visit a celebrated painter whose portraits are said to capture hidden aspects of the sitter and turn out to be prophetic of their future. <p. 164> Mysteriousness aside, Hawthorne’s characters for the most part express the commonplace metaphysical and mystical theories of portraiture which we have already seen:

“Are you telling me of a painter or a wizard?”

“In truth,” answered he, “that question might be asked much more seriously than you suppose. They say that he paints not merely a man’s features, but his mind and heart. He catches the secret sentiments and passions, and throws them upon the canvass, like sunshine — or perhaps, in the portraits of dark-souled men, like a gleam of internal fire.”⁵¹

Although it is not the main feature in this magic portrait tale, we also find the idea of animated portraits. When Walter and Elinor enter the painter’s studio, they see several portraits: “They knew, indeed, that the whole assembly were but pictures, yet felt it impossible to separate the idea of life and intellect from such striking counterfeits.”⁵² There is also a clear statement of the conceit central to *Dorian Gray*. Admiring a picture of the Madonna, Walter observes, “How singular a thought . . . that this beautiful face has been beautiful for above two hundred years! Oh, if all beauty would endure so well!” Hawthorne, though, is quick to offer admonition: ““Do you not envy her, Elinor?’ ‘If Earth were Heaven, I might,’ she replied. ‘But where all things fade, how miserable to be the one that could not fade.’”⁵³ After their portraits are finished,

⁴⁹ Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, 17-18.

⁵⁰ Originally published 1835; reworked and extended in 1842. I refer here to the extended version.

⁵¹ Hawthorne, “The Prophetic Pictures,” 127-28.

⁵² Hawthorne, “The Prophetic Pictures,” 129.

⁵³ Hawthorne, “The Prophetic Pictures,” 129.

Walter is unsettled at the expression of his fiancée and swears that “he could fancy that the portrait has changed countenance while [he has] been looking at it.”⁵⁴ Elinor is unnerved as well and, like Dorian after her, decides to hang a purple cover over the portraits. The ending to Hawthorne’s tale is abrupt and sensational: Walter attempts to stab Elinor, only to be stopped by the artist, who, alongside the portraits, had made a “prophetic” drawing of the two — presumably of this scene. Basil Hallward, of course, does not fare so well in *his* stabbing scene.

The Picture of Dorian Gray

There were many animated portrait parodies in the nineteenth century, but these would likely find no audience today, separated as we are from the once-vibrant tradition of the “magic picture story.” This distance can be seen in the tendency of readers to reject or resist the supernatural element of Wilde’s novel. Françoise Meltzer, for example, finds the novel “too contrived to be convincingly unsettling” and therefore does not include it in her study of portraits in literature.⁵⁵ Others try to force the novel into the Radcliffean tradition by applying the *supernaturel expliqué*. Ziolkowski supposes that the supernatural plot “can be explained as the unusually good physical preservation of a young man . . . combined with the projection of his personal guilt onto a defective portrait of his earlier innocence.”⁵⁶ Similarly, Esther Rashkin believes that “the entire story is based on a sustained hallucination.”⁵⁷ Contemporary reviews of the novel, on the other hand, found little to object to in the fantastical elements of the plot and focused their disapproval on its alleged moral perversions. The *Saturday Review* commented that the novel, in mixing realism and the supernatural, “belongs to a perfectly legitimate class of fiction.”⁵⁸ The reviewer for the *Athenaeum* observed that “the idea of the book may have been suggested by Balzac’s *Peau de Chagrin*, and it is none the worse for that,” yet “for the rest, the book is unmanly, sickening, vicious . . . and tedious.”⁵⁹ And *Punch* saw the magic portrait as the novel’s only redeeming feature: “The central idea is an excellent, if not exactly novel, one; and a finer art, say that of Nathaniel Hawthorne, would have made a striking and satisfying story of it.”⁶⁰

One reason that the novel’s first readers were apparently so comfortable with its fantastical aspects is that, as well as the more general romance revival, they were in the midst of a “deluge” of magic picture stories. Discussing this in his 1983 article, Kerry Powell significantly

⁵⁴ Hawthorne, “The Prophetic Pictures,” 132.

⁵⁵ Meltzer, *Salome and the Dance of Writing*, 111n.

⁵⁶ Ziolkowski, *Disenchanted Images*, 129.

⁵⁷ Rashkin, “Art as Symptom,” 76.

⁵⁸ “Novels,” 450.

⁵⁹ Mason, *Oscar Wilde*, 125.

⁶⁰ Mason, *Oscar Wilde*, 98.

re-contextualized *Dorian Gray* and found new grounds on which to praise the novel, standing out as it does among its forgotten peers. Powell suggests that after its appearance in gothic fiction, the magic portrait was transformed by Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Nikolai Gogol, in whose hands it became “more than just another appliance in the Gothic chamber of horrors. It was these three who made organic to the picture itself an examination of the duality of art and life, the myth of Faust, the theme of the pariah, the dream of eternal youth, the clash of puritan morality and unbridled hedonism.”⁶¹ Powell concludes that *Dorian Gray* is the most complete compendium of motifs from the magic picture tradition. I add that it is also a compendium of art historical anecdote and theory surrounding portraiture. Wilde thus builds his “impossible” tale on multiple foundations — native superstitions and folklore, literary tradition, and art history.

Perhaps surprisingly, works of fiction that feature painted portraits often contain little ekphrasis, as is the case with *Dorian Gray*. All that we know or can assume from the few details given is that the portrait is full-length, oil on canvas, in the style of realism, signed by Basil in vermilion letters, in a frame designed by Basil, and features Dorian in his own dress.⁶² Wilde pays much more attention to the making of the portrait and the status of portraits generally in laying the groundwork for his supernatural conceit. He demonstrates an awareness of the traditional hierarchy of genres and recent challenges to it in the progress of Basil’s work with Dorian, who was his model long before his sitter. Basil paints him in a succession of mythological and history scenes — as Paris, Adonis, Antinous, and Narcissus. It is only later that Basil decides to paint Dorian “not in the costume of dead ages, but in [his] own dress and in [his] own time” — i.e. a portrait — and only then is the fullness of Dorian’s beauty and personality revealed to Basil and, in turn, to Dorian himself (264).⁶³ If Wilde is sparing in descriptive detail, he makes sure to include two significant aspects — “the <p. 165> realism of the method” and the “wonderful likeness” — attributes essential to animated portraits (264, 188). Most importantly, he relies on the metaphysical and mystical theories of portraiture discussed above which hold that a gifted artist can capture a sitter’s true essence and create an

⁶¹ Powell, “Tom, Dick, and Dorian Gray,” 149.

⁶² The self-designed frame and vermilion letters are among the few remnant details pointing to James Whistler as a model for Basil. Kerry Powell makes an intriguing argument for the London-born painter Frank Holl (1845-1888) as an inspiration for the character of Basil in “Who Was Basil Hallward,” *English Language Notes* 22 (1968): 84-91.

⁶³ This progression from history to portrait, and the great praise given to the portrait of Dorian — “one of the greatest things in modern art” (189) — also reflects, and contributes to, the contemporary challenge to the hierarchy of genres by artists such as Watts, Millais, and Whistler in England, and Cezanne, Van Gogh, and Matisse on the Continent. Regarding Basil’s decision to put Dorian “in [his] own dress and in [his] own time,” Wilde may have taken a cue from Hegel: “If today a portrait is to be made of an individual belonging to his own time, then it is essential that his clothing and external accessories be taken from his own individual and actual environment” (*Aesthetics*, 748).

image “more like” him than himself. There is already a suggestion that the portrait’s creation had brought about a psychological unveiling and a metaphysical transfer. After Dorian’s tantrum that follows his Faustian bargain, Basil says, “this is your doing, Harry,” to which Lord Henry replies, “it is the real Dorian Gray — that is all” (190). Later, when Basil decides not to accompany Henry and Dorian to the theater, he remarks, “I shall stay with the real Dorian” (192). Thus, as Basil stays home to nurse his jealousy, we also find the motif of the portrait as a stand-in for the original.

An important question asked too infrequently is why Wilde chose to title his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* rather than *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*.⁶⁴ Etymology is little help — *picture* and *portrait* have basically similar roots (from Latin “to paint” and “to draw,” respectively), both words were used interchangeably, for a wide range of subjects, in various media, and both words had acquired a full range of metaphorical association by the seventeenth century. Perhaps Wilde wanted to distinguish between a painted portrait and a literary portrait, emphasizing the visual work of art at the center of his narrative and, given the association of portraiture with realism, distancing his novel from what Eliot in *Daniel Deronda* calls “literary photographs” — novels that feature “coarse selfishness, petty quarrelling, and slang.”⁶⁵ More significant, though, is the distinction that had grown among critics and art historians. As we have seen, portraiture fell beneath history painting because it lacked grand narrative subject matter. The concept of *istoria* has been variously defined in the history of art, and a number of conventions have come and gone in the effort to achieve it. The basis of *istoria* is the creation and embodiment of narrative action and thematic significance through symbolism and the combination of figures, pose, expression, and other pictorial effects. The grandest conception came from Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), who thought it the greatest possible achievement for a painter. Through *istoria*, he theorized, the viewer can be drawn in to the space and action of a painting, entering a new reality in harmony with both art and nature.

The concept of *istoria*, then, was associated with pictures rather than portraits, and by the late nineteenth century, when critics wanted to praise a portrait, they would often do so with the formula of “not merely a portrait but a picture.” Henry James, for example, wrote of Sargent’s portrait of Charlotte Louise Burckhardt that “it is not only a portrait, but a picture, and it arouses even in the profane spectator something of the painter’s sense, the joy of engaging also, by sympathy, in the solution of the artistic problem.”⁶⁶ Likewise, in his *Sententiae Artis* (which Wilde reviewed unfavorably), Harry Quilter wrote that, though the English may be superior in portraiture, “The French beat us when it comes to making a portrait into a picture,

⁶⁴ For some brief instances of critical attention given to the issue, see Novak 136-37 and Pointon 30-31.

⁶⁵ Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 197.

⁶⁶ James, *Picture and Text*, 98.

by which I mean adding to the likeness of the sitter some dramatic interest, or some picturesque adjunct.”⁶⁷ Critics had various theoretical motives for making the portrait/picture distinction, but it usually involved the idea of narrative or of a dynamic quality in an otherwise static medium — aspects which Wilde’s picture of Dorian possesses in abundance. Meditating on his portrait, Dorian thinks that “it held the secret of his life, and told his story” (246), and, speaking of the portrait to Basil, he says, “I keep a diary of my life from day to day, and it never leaves the room in which it is written” (296).

From an art-historical perspective, one great imaginative attraction, or curiosity, of the animated portraits of gothic fiction is that they allow portraiture a sort of *istoria* even history painting could not dream of. Given life and agency, such portraits produce their own narrative. Rarely, though, do their narratives become integral to the narratives that contain them. Wilde’s portrait is among the few that transcend the status of furniture and draw characters and readers alike into metaphysical depths — traditionally the ultimate goal of history painting. Alberti wrote that “the *istoria* will move the soul of the beholder when each man painted there clearly shows the movement of his own soul.”⁶⁸ This is precisely the language used by Basil: “The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul” (172). And after the animation, the portrait “shows the movement” of Dorian’s soul: “This portrait would be to him the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul” (258). In Wilde’s “The Critic as Artist,” Gilbert speaks of yet another “mirror that mirrors the soul” that is intimately related to portraiture in the novel — “the scientific principle of Heredity.”⁶⁹

Portraiture and Heredity

Of particular relevance to my analysis here is the trope of children as “portraits” of their parents and the novel’s twist on it. The convention includes *image*, as when Byron’s Sardanapalus exclaims, “I have loved, and lived, and multiplied my image”⁷⁰; *picture*, as when in *Northanger Abbey* Miss Thorpe comments, “How excessively like her brother Miss Morland is! The very picture of him, indeed!”⁷¹; as well as *miniature*, as when the narrator of *Daniel Deronda* remarks that “the three girls, seated round their mother near the window, were miniature portraits of her.”⁷² Such figures of speech are common and reveal social and cultural assumptions about both portraiture and progeny. Even more relevant here are reversals of this

⁶⁷ Quilter, *Sententiae Artis*, 235.

⁶⁸ Alberti, *On Painting*, 77.

⁶⁹ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 177.

⁷⁰ Byron, *Complete Poetical Works*, 34.

⁷¹ Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 25.

⁷² Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 343.

trope — when portraits are spoken of, or figured as, children. The connection is easily observed in the <p. 166> idiom of making a “copy” of oneself, which can apply both to portraits and children. In this regard, we might recall Johnson’s remark that the “Englishman . . . has no value but for himself, nor desires any copy but of his own form.” Hazlitt also touched on the issue, writing that “having one’s picture painted is like the creation of another self; and that is an idea, of the repetition or reduplication of which no man is ever tired, to the thousandth reflection.”⁷³

Another aspect to the narcissism that can be found behind both portraits and progeny is expressed by Hawthorne: “Nothing, in the whole circle of human vanities, takes stronger hold of the imagination than this affair of having a portrait painted. Yet why should it be so? . . . It is the idea of duration — of earthly immortality — that gives such a mysterious interest to our own portraits.”⁷⁴ The money-lender in Gogol’s story has this motive for commissioning his portrait: “I may possibly die soon. I have no children; but I do not wish to die completely, I wish to live.”⁷⁵ And Henry James began, but did not complete, a story that takes the theme of portraits as children even further. In “Hugh Merrow,” a childless couple commissions an artist to paint a child for them — “such a one as we *might* have had.” They cannot agree on the sex or which parent the child should resemble, but they are certain that a painting would be superior to adopting a child, which would not resemble them, and better even than having one of their own, which might have “some blot, some defect, some affliction.”⁷⁶

The idea that a work of art can ensure a kind of immortality is famously expressed in Shakespeare’s Sonnets, the first sequence of which bears fruitful comparison to *Dorian Gray*. During the Queensberry libel trial, Wilde pointed to the Sonnets as his inspiration for the idea of a male artist being overpoweringly attracted by the personality of a younger man. Critical attention has focused on queer readings of *Dorian Gray* and “The Portrait of Mr W.H,” but the connection also illuminates the themes of art as a substitute for, or improvement on, life, and of family extinction or dying without issue. In the first fourteen sonnets, the young man bears a marked resemblance to Dorian, given their beauty and their vanity — “contracted to thine own bright eyes,” for example, could be said to either.⁷⁷ Then comes the message that youth and beauty will fade:

When forty winters shall besiege thy brow,
And dig deep trenches in thy beauty’s field,

⁷³ Hazlitt, “Sitting for One’s Picture,” 173.

⁷⁴ Hawthorne, “Prophetic Pictures,” 131.

⁷⁵ Gogol, “The Portrait,” 234.

⁷⁶ James, “Hugh Merrow,” 592.

⁷⁷ Shakespeare, Sonnet 1, line 5.

Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,
Will be a tattered weed of small worth held.⁷⁸

The warning sounds nearly identical to that of Lord Henry, but the speaker of the sonnets provides a definite contrast. While the message of the speaker is to not focus only on yourself, not hoard your beauty, and not live for yourself alone, that of Lord Henry is to focus on nothing but yourself, to explore every feeling, to realize every desire, and that “the highest of all duties [is] the duty that one owes to one's self” (183). It is the “new hedonism” versus what we might call the “old procreationism.”

Yet there is a shift of conceit beginning in Sonnet 15 and culminating in 18 and 19, from the idea of the continuance of the young man's beauty ensured by means of procreation and heredity to continuance by means of art: “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”⁷⁹ Shakespeare, then, offers two modes of continued existence to the young man: “You should live twice: in [your offspring] and in my rhyme.”⁸⁰ In *Dorian Gray*, Wilde similarly explores several alternative methods of multiplying oneself: portraiture and the double produced by the magic portrait; insincerity, “by which we can multiply our personalities” (288); marriage, which makes a double life “absolutely necessary” (171) and which allows certain people to “retain their egotism and add to it many other egos” (232); and the art of acting, which so attracts Dorian to Sibyl, or rather to “all the great heroines of the world in one” (216).⁸¹ And alongside these alternative modes of reproduction, Wilde presents several different conceptions of inheritance.

Portraits are like offspring in the sense that you never get an exact copy, as the image is mediated through the artist, just as in sexual reproduction, wherein the offspring is a blend of two agents who genetically both compete and cooperate in its making. If children are frequently figured as portraits, and portraits can be conceived of as children, then the artist becomes a sort of parent or creator in a larger sense. If we return to art history, the comparison is not as far-fetched as it might seem, given that many portrait painters aimed not to show their sitters as they were at that or any other moment, but as they “truly” were. Coleridge said that

⁷⁸ Shakespeare, Sonnet 2, lines 1-4.

⁷⁹ Shakespeare, Sonnet 18, lines 13-14. Sonnet 16 still hesitates between biological and artistic reproduction, referring to portraiture in particular: “And many maiden gardens, yet unset, / With virtuous wish would bear your living flowers, / Much liker than your painted counterfeit” (7-8).

⁸⁰ Shakespeare, Sonnet 19, line 14.

⁸¹ In “The Portrait of Mr W. H.,” Wilde explores the theory that the procreative sonnets are “Shakespeare's invitation to Willie Hughes to go upon stage and become a player” — that “the children he begs him to beget are no children of flesh and blood, but more immortal children of undying fame” — i.e., theatrical roles (172).

portraits refer “not so much to the senses, as to the ideal sense of the friend not present.”⁸² Unless one believes in the existence of such a Platonic ideal at the core of personhood *and* that an artist can actually represent this ideal in paint, then we can say that the artist has created this ideal person. Hawthorne uses this notion in “Prophetic Pictures” when the artist reflects that “so much of himself — of his imagination and all other powers — had been lavished on the study of Walter and Elinor, that he almost regarded them as creations of his own.”⁸³ Basil is similarly worried that he has put too much of himself into his portrait of Dorian, and Henry responds, flippantly but relevantly, that he “can’t see any resemblance” between the two (170). Basil also remarks to Henry that, with Dorian as his muse, he can “now recreate life in a way that was hidden from [him] before” (177). Wilde’s central motif, however, moves beyond the tropes of children as portraits and portraitists as parents to a novel take on the self-portrait.

On Being One’s Own Heir

Among the similarities to be found between *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is a sort of gothic metaphysical inheritance between the protagonists and their doubles. For its initial audience, the mystery of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde began as a legal mystery. Uninitiated readers likely expected another blackmail and inheritance plot as they learned of Jekyll’s strange will and Mr. Utterson’s fears that Hyde might become impatient to inherit. The truth behind the will, of course, proves stranger than expected. In the form of Hyde, Jekyll becomes his own heir in a legal, biological, and metaphysical sense. In the latter two senses, Hyde comes into what lawyers called a *hereditas damnosa* — an inheritance that is more burden than benefit. While Jekyll makes arrangements to ensure that he is his own legal heir, the goal of his experiment, in part, is to avoid inheriting the consequences of his actions. Though the mechanism is different, the same can be said of Dorian and his portrait.

When the adjective is used broadly, “metaphysical inheritance” can be, and has been, applied to the transmission of any number of ideas or phenomena — from the passing down of traditional metaphysical concepts, to the doctrine of the king’s two bodies, to the process by which a character becomes a vampire. I use the term here to mean the transmission of something non-material with no apparent biological basis.⁸⁴ In the age of genetics, it is easier to distinguish what is and is not transmitted biologically (though by no means is the matter settled) and therefore to designate what is inherited in a metaphorical, as opposed to

⁸² Coleridge, *Lectures*, 225.

⁸³ Hawthorne, “Prophetic Pictures,” 136.

⁸⁴ I speak here only of the transfer of conscience and consequence between Dorian and his portrait. Wilde makes clear that there is a biological basis to his behavior and inclinations which he has inherited from his ancestors.

biological, sense. But biological “inheritance” began as a metaphor as well, and while the physiological mechanism of heredity remained unknown (as it would for Wilde’s lifetime), it was far more difficult to distinguish what may be transmitted physically: Temperament? Talent? Memory? “Britishness”? An entry from Wilde’s Oxford Notebook suggests this very confusion. Under the heading “English Thought,” he notes: “hereditary transmission of concepts: Innate Ideas have thus returned to the mind, in Kant on transcendental, in Spencer on Biological Grounds.”⁸⁵

We can approach the inheritance that is transferred from Dorian to the portrait and back again from several different angles, filling in the metaphor that Wilde does not directly use here but which, given the multifaceted investigation of heredity in the novel, is implied. From art history and anthropology, as above, come the notions of images capturing souls and of sympathetic magic. Discussing the latter’s reliance on imitation or reiteration, Frazer frames the subject in the language of biological heredity:

If we analyse the principles of thought on which magic is based, they will probably be found to resolve themselves into two: first, that *like produces like*, or that an effect resembles its cause; and, second, that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed.⁸⁶

In biology, the age-old formula of “like begets like” was, around the turn of the century, being revised as scientists sought a new precision in language to express and reflect the increasing sophistication of their understanding. Scottish biologist and writer J. A. Thomson repeatedly advised that the phrase ought to be “like *tends* to beget like,” as there is a great deal of variation in the resemblance of parents and offspring. Thomson wrote, however, that ultimately “we inherit *ourselves*; the organism and its inheritance are to begin with *almost* one and the same.”⁸⁷ Yet in clarifying what he saw as an inaccurate analogy, he inadvertently hits on another metaphorical extension — that of *inheriting oneself* or of *being one’s own heir*.

The metaphysical extension of the inheritance metaphor I am most concerned with here is to the realm of self-development and self-realization. In conceiving of the continuity of past, present, and future in personhood, we might say that individuals, much as nations are said to do, inherit their own pasts. The notion was well expressed by Frederick Henry Hedge: “Every man is his own ancestor, and every man is his own heir. He devises his own future, and he

⁸⁵ Wilde, *Oxford Notebooks*, 59-61.

⁸⁶ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 52 (emphasis added).

⁸⁷ Thomson, “Biological Facts of Inheritance,” 22.

inherits his own past.”⁸⁸ Husserl wrote that “The ego is heir to itself, and its heritage lies in itself as its persisting ‘character.’”⁸⁹ And Wordsworth implicitly uses the metaphor when he writes that “the Child is the father of the Man.” From our past selves we inherit memories, emotions, beliefs, and opinions; knowledge and experience; personal relationships and the absence of lost relationships; and, perhaps most importantly, the consequences of our actions. How these inheritances shape us greatly accounts for personality change and self-development, for good or ill. But Dorian, in the creation of another heir (his portrait), has disinherited himself.

One further angle from which to view Dorian’s strange heredity takes us back to the literal — to the law — but with a twist. In the rather metaphysical language of Roman law regarding inheritance, there are a number of maxims which, if read literally, apply uncannily well to Dorian and to Jekyll and Hyde alike. Because an heir technically came to exist only after the legator’s death, for example, it was said that “an heir is the same person with the ancestor” (*Heres est eadem persona cum antecessoris*) — a metaphysical conceit that becomes preternaturally true in both cases. Another maxim held that “God, not man, makes an heir” (*Heredem Deus facit, non homo*). Both novels, to different degrees, make use of the mad scientist motif, and this latter notion is suggestive of the transgression of both Jekyll and Dorian/Basil in creating an “heir” by making another self (consider also the saying *Haeres est alter ipse*, “an heir is another self”). Dorian contributes to this reading when he says of the painting, “I am in love with it, Basil. It is part of myself” (191).

Finally, there is the standard term *heres suus*, literally “one’s own heir.” Insofar as Jekyll and Hyde are the same person, <p. 168> Jekyll has become his own legal heir; yet insofar as they are separate, he has severed the metaphysical link by which we are all our own heirs. Dorian, by cutting this link, takes his moral imagination offline. The new heir allows him largely to sidestep the consequences of his actions, and his mask of youth protects him, to a degree, from public disfavor and reprobation. But this involves certain losses as well. Dorian is forever in search of new sensations and experience, but, without conscience and self-reflection, these do not amount to formative experiences. In other words, by arresting his personal growth, Dorian misses out on *Bildung*, and the novel can in many ways be characterized as an anti-bildungsroman, for reasons intimately tied up with Wilde’s explorations of heredity.

The term *anti-bildungsroman* has been in circulation at least since the 1950s but has become more common in recent decades. Credit for the first theoretical examination of the genre usually goes to Gerhart Mayer, who discusses it in his 1974 essay “*Zum deutschen*

⁸⁸ Hedge, “The Lords of Life,” 387.

⁸⁹ Qtd. in Carr, *Phenomenology*, 78.

Antibildungsroman.⁹⁰ In the German tradition, major figures on its line of development include Gunther Grass, Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, and Karl Philipp Moritz, whose autobiographical novel *Anton Reiser* takes the origins of the anti-bildungsroman back to the eighteenth century, predating Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. In English literature, we might trace a line back through Saul Bellow, James Joyce, George Meredith, and, to rival Moritz, Laurence Sterne. A wide range of suggestion can be found as to what constitutes anti-*Bildung* and the anti-bildungsroman, all of which is problematic, given that it assumes a stable category of *Bildung* and agreement on what defines the bildungsroman — questions which remain matters of debate. Amid the chaos, however, some patterns can be observed. Often, a work is said to be an anti-bildungsroman when the protagonist fails to achieve *Bildung* in the Humboldtian or Hegelian sense, or in cases of the death or destruction of the protagonist. The term is also used for cases of generic parody or when there is a “grotesquely comic undermining” of character, as in Thomas Mann's *Entbildung*.⁹¹ Mann's concept also applies to one of the larger categories to be found — novels that feature a rejection of cultural or intellectual institutions, famously instanced by Diogenes Teufelsdröckh's “Everlasting No,” and, more positively, by Stephen Dedalus's *non serviam*: “You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.”⁹²

Some critics have been optimistic in characterizing *Dorian Gray* as a bildungsroman. In her introduction to the novel, Isobel Murray writes that “what the novel amounts to then in a wide sense, is the growth, education, and development of an exceptional youth, who, through personalities, a book, perhaps even a picture, is moulded or moulds himself, discovering himself and what he believes in.”⁹³ John R. Maynard sees in *Dorian Gray* the first “canonical bildungsroman [to] offer a more clearly gay identity formation.”⁹⁴ That the novel's hero literally does not age, however, is already suggestive that Wilde is presenting a story of failed *Bildung*. Dorian's inability to learn from experience or relate to society, because people cannot see behind his mask and he cannot authentically interact with them, places the novel in inverse relation to the bildungsroman. As Douglas Mao notes, it is “a cunning allegory of the form's late nineteenth-century transformation (or, as Moretti would have it, dissolution).”⁹⁵ Charles Altieri suggests that in Henry's advice to Dorian there is an “organic ideal of development which insists that the self must be allowed to grow with as little interference as possible.”⁹⁶ Had Dorian

⁹⁰ *Jahrbuch der Raabe-Gesellschaft* 15 (1974): 41-64.

⁹¹ Reed, *Thomas Mann*, 229.

⁹² Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist*, 220. See also Gibson 97-98 and O'Leary, 97-99.

⁹³ Murray, introduction, ix.

⁹⁴ Maynard, “The Bildungsroman,” 286. Maynard takes a broader definition of the genre than most, noting that “it is not, as some have argued, about happy amalgamation into an existing society,” and that “the end may be tragic regression” (300).

⁹⁵ Mao, *Fateful Beauty*, 94. See also Cohn 35.

⁹⁶ Altieri, “Organic and Humanist Models,” 220.

succeeded in this ideal, he may have achieved anti-*Bildung* of the Joycean variety, rejecting social and cultural institutions in creating one's own path. But as Altieri also suggests, perhaps Wilde has Henry express the ideal only to demonstrate its impracticality.

Similarly, Dorian's rejection of Sybil after she loses her artistic gift and his spectator-like reaction to her suicide are arguably fictional tests of Wilde's hypothesis about breaking down the art/life dichotomy, with tragic results. Wilde was provocative, not dogmatic, in his presentation of ideas. Rather than the manifesto or cautionary tale it is often claimed to be, the novel is in many ways experimental in Émile Zola's sense — a venue for Wilde to represent and interrogate ideas that intrigued him, including some he held dear. Even the quintessentially Wildean notion of making one's life a work of art comes in for scrutiny. Although Dorian believes that "life itself was the first, the greatest, of the arts, and for it all the other arts seemed to be but a preparation," the reader is not convinced of his success in realizing this ideal, nor, ultimately, of its merit. Towards the end of the story, Henry says to Dorian, "I am so glad 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. You have set yourself to music. Your days are your sonnets" (352). Yet there is a certain barrenness to this. That all three main characters are childless is a detail rich in significance, and here it might reflect this failure to produce. True, Basil begins a productive artist, but his work is said to attenuate after losing Dorian as a Muse. Henry and Dorian, for their part, are mere spectators and connoisseurs. Murray is correct when she writes that "contemplation of life as opposed to participation in it, the end proposed for the aesthetic critic in 'The Critic as Artist,' is the attitude most dramatically implicitly condemned by the book."⁹⁷

Dorian may fancy his life a work of art, but hidden away is an actual work of art that reflects his life, and its aesthetic qualities are ghastly. The function of edification which portraiture had reclaimed from history painting has clearly broken down. Dorian had earlier recognized that "the picture, changed or unchanged, would be to him the visible emblem of conscience," which, minus the ability to change, is [p. 169](#) a common theme in the history of portraiture (246). Richardson, for example, wrote that people who "see their pictures set up as monuments of good or evil fame, are often secretly admonished by the faithful friend in their own breasts, to add new graces to them by praise-worthy actions, and to avoid blemishes, or deface what may have happened, as much as possible, by a future good conduct."⁹⁸ Given his own high praise of the portrait, and his referring to it as "the real Dorian," Basil may have had similar hopes, perhaps including himself in the equation. When the Renaissance artist Sebastiano del Piombo made a bust of his friend Claudio Tolomei in 1543, the latter wrote to him:

⁹⁷ Murray, introduction, xvii.

⁹⁸ Jonathan Richardson, *Works*, 10.

If I obtain this favor . . . it will seem to me henceforth that I have acquired a mirror, because in it I shall see you and me And seeing myself vividly portrayed by your art will provide me with a continual stimulus to purge my soul of its many defects, and seeing therein the illuminating rays of your genius will kindle in my soul a noble longing for glory and honour.⁹⁹

Such concepts of the merits of portraiture are presented and then inverted in the novel as Dorian becomes “more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul” (277), and Basil, though he had put much of himself into the portrait, comes to mean less and less to Dorian. When he finally sees the degraded canvas, Basil remarks, “My God! If it is true . . . and this is what you have done with your life, why, you must be worse even than those who talk against you fancy you to be!” (299). Through his metaphysical legacy, Dorian has made his other self into a thing of horror, and he has failed to make himself into a work of art. Given the failure of *Bildung*, he has not “made himself” at all.

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⁹⁹ Qtd. in Brilliant, *Portraiture*, 129.

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