



## Exploring Oscar Wilde's and Henry James' interest in 'personality'.

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According to Sheldon Liebman, the Victorian novel proclaims that 'moral certainty is attainable [...] personal responsibility is assumed, and self-unification is possible'.<sup>1</sup> As fin de siècle aesthetes, James and Wilde challenge the Victorian conception of self-unification by 'cultivating an ideal self or "personality" that is then projected into the work of art', a process not devoid of 'dangers and difficulties'.<sup>2</sup> Leon Edel asserts that James holds a 'fantasy of the artist as a double-personality, moving in the world' yet occupying 'a separate anchorite life'.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Wilde fashions himself 'a persona from his own fictional creations, which always feature at least one character who seems to invite being read as a Wilde surrogate', Alan Sinfield claims.<sup>4</sup> As authors who both rejected and relied on burgeoning mass consumerism, James and Wilde each attained a status of 'personality' or 'celebrity' in society.<sup>5</sup> They also crafted characters who experience the thrill and torture of their poses, namely the narrator's pretence of a new identity and Dorian's duality of body and soul. In *The Aspern Papers* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, James and Wilde contemplate the cost of inventing and reinventing personality; yet, their narratives of self-fashioning differ in tone and technique. As James depersonalises personages and Wilde multiplies personalities, both novels exhibit self-reflexivity.

Michael Gorra writes that *The Aspern Papers* ponders the 'responsibilities of an editor...the tension between art and life' and 'the odd revenge they take upon each other'.<sup>6</sup> The narrator shirks all personal responsibility for his research and writing by adopting a pseudonym to enter the Bordereau's house. Upon arrival, the narrator furthers his deception by manufacturing a servant, 'this personage... an evocation of the moment', and new tastes, 'I live on flowers!'<sup>7</sup> According to the OED, personage can connote 'a character adopted or impersonated, especially in a play; a guise' or 'a person; an individual (without the implication of status or importance)'.<sup>8</sup> The narrator invents an unimportant personage and a taste for flowers to play the part of a wealthy and cultured gentleman and impress his landladies. By expressing his affinity for flowers, he also adopts the pose of a dandy. Each pose enables the narrator to escape association with his real desire—the letters of Jeffrey Aspern. Reflecting on his plot to become a tenant, the narrator muses: 'I did count it as a triumph, but only for the editor [...] not for the man, who had not the tradition of personal conquest'.<sup>9</sup> In private, the narrator is conscious of his deceitful 'personal conquest', yet shifts the blame for his greed from his private self to his professional self. Stougaard-Nielsen attributes this depersonalisation to James's 'central-

<sup>1</sup> Sheldon W. Liebman, 'Character Design in The Picture of Dorian Gray', *Studies in the Novel*, 31:3 (1999), 296-316 (p. 313).

<sup>2</sup> Elana Gomel, 'Oscar Wilde, "The Picture of Dorian Gray" and the (Un)death of the Author', *Narrative*, 12:1 (2004), 74-92 (p. 76).

<sup>3</sup> Leon Edel, 'Henry James: The Dramatic Years', in *Guy Domville* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960), p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminism, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (London: Cassell, 1994), p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Ziegler, *The Mediated Mind: Affect, Ephemerality, and Consumerism in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), p. 188.

<sup>6</sup> 'Introduction', in *The Aspern Papers and Other Tales*, ed. by Michael Gorra (London: Penguin Books, 2014), p. xxvi.

<sup>7</sup> Henry James, *The Aspern Papers*, in *The Aspern Papers and Other Tales*, ed. by Michael Gorra (London: Penguin Books, 2014), p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> 'personage n. senses 1(b) and 7(a)', OED Online, (Oxford University Press: 2005).

<sup>9</sup> James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 63.

consciousness narrative technique' in which 'the author is speaking through masks of both others and himself', creating a 'radically impersonalised' authorial tone.<sup>10</sup> The narrator's ultimate deception, however, is having 'sailed under false colours' and given Miss Tita the impression of being 'a new person' with a 'new name'.<sup>11</sup> Unlike many of Wilde's plays which conclude with the 'revelation of characters' identities' and self-knowledge, the narrator's revelation does not result in a more settled identity.<sup>12</sup> When his plot to reinvent himself fails, which personality has he abandoned? Exposed as literary thief, he retains both the editor's lust for conquest and the dandy's passive appreciation of beauty. James satirises the narrator's decision to memorialise Jeffrey Aspern rather than respecting the Bordereau's dignity.

James depersonalises the narrator and his companions by employing a nineteenth-century practice which is rooted in Aristotelian thought—physiognomy.<sup>13</sup> According to Elana Gomel, physiognomy assumed that one's moral character or 'psyche' could be discerned by examining their 'physique', reducing one to a sum of her parts.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the narrator's description of Miss Tita as 'a long lean, pale person, habited apparently in a dull-coloured dressing gown', is essential to her character.<sup>15</sup> James may have found inspiration for her appearance in the Dante Gabriel Rossetti painting, *Astarte Syriaca*, which features a similarly-clad figure.<sup>16</sup> Although Miss Tita herself is not an art model or object, portraying her as an object or keeper of the narrator's desires decreases her agency. Viola Hopkins identifies this point of James's style as 'his pictorialism [...] describing people, places, scenes or parts of scenes as if he were describing a painting and his use of art objects for thematic projection and overtone'.<sup>17</sup> Conversely, the reader only receives the narrator's 'word of honour that [he] was a most respectable, inoffensive person' rather than a physical description.<sup>18</sup> Whilst one cannot determine his moral or artistic 'type' from his appearance, one must evaluate the intention of "keeping one's word", which informs so many of James's characters' struggles to construct new modalities of ethical selfhood', according to Ileana Orlich.<sup>19</sup> The absence of pictorialism in this passage, focalised through the narrator, casts doubt on the credibility of his word because the reader cannot evaluate his psyche by means of his physique. Ultimately, the narrator is only loyal to beautiful art, causing him to despise Miss Tita when 'the transformation was over and she had changed back to a plain, dingy, elderly person. It was in this character she spoke'.<sup>20</sup> Because Miss Tita destroyed the art object of the narrator's desire—the letters—he distances her from himself by labelling her as a different 'character'. He once saw her as an artist's model and enigmatic muse, judging her to be a trustworthy keeper of artistic secrets. By immolating a literary treasure, she loses all personality and beauty for him, which allows him to justify his abandonment of her a day earlier. Thus, the narrator's pictorial accounts of characters' physique inform the reader's assessment of their personalities—a vain attempt to retain his artistic ideals and minimise his responsibilities. Through his characters, James voices the requirements of and impediments to artistic production.

<sup>10</sup> Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, 'James's Faces: Appearance, Absorption and the Aesthetic Significance of the Face', in *Henry James's Europe: Heritage and Transfer*, ed. by Dennis Tredy, Annick Duperray, and Adrian Harding (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011), pp. 237-46 (p. 250).

<sup>11</sup> James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 124-125.

<sup>12</sup> John McGowan, 'From Pater to Wilde to Joyce: Modernist Epiphany and the Soulful Self', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 32:3 (1990), 417-45 (p. 427).

<sup>13</sup> Stougaard-Nielsen, 'James's Faces', p. 243.

<sup>14</sup> Gomel, 'Oscar Wilde, "The Picture of Dorian Gray"', p. 82.

<sup>15</sup> James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 59.

<sup>16</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Astarte Syriaca*, c. 1876-1877, oil, 72 x 42 in, Manchester City Art Gallery, Manchester.

<sup>17</sup> Viola Hopkins, 'Visual Art Devices and Parallels in the Fiction of Henry James', *PMLA* 76:5 (1961), 561-574 (p. 561).

<sup>18</sup> James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 65.

<sup>19</sup> Ileana Alexandra Orlich, 'Henry James and the Politics of Authorship: (Re)constructing the Portrait of the Artist-Critic', *The Centennial Review*, 40:3 (1996), 537-60 (p. 557).

<sup>20</sup> James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 145.

Whilst James's characters resemble art objects or one-dimensional types, his art objects resemble individuals with personalities. Throughout *The Aspern Papers*, the existence and location of the letters themselves is shrouded in mystery because 'the old woman won't have the documents spoke of; they are personal, delicate, intimate, and she hasn't modern notions'.<sup>21</sup> James challenges the artistic notion voiced by John McGowan: 'the modernist does not believe that art can or should reveal metaphysical or moral truths about the relation of the self to nature or to other people'.<sup>22</sup> As a woman without 'modern notions', Juliana likely personifies the letters because she believes that they hold a moral truth. More importantly, James treats the documents with a tone of familiarity — 'personal, delicate, intimate' — and Juliana with a tone of detachment — 'the old woman'. The narrator continues to distance himself from human connection when he observes the statue of Marcus Aurelius at sunset, attributing personality to another art object: 'The western light shines into all his grimness at that hour and makes it [the statue] wonderfully personal' but 'he could not direct me what to do, gaze up at him as I might'.<sup>23</sup> A true aesthete, the narrator seeks what Ivory regards as 'the realization of personality through contact with art...because it brings to the admirer awareness of new passions and new pleas'.<sup>24</sup> His desire for self-knowledge rejects the modern notion that art is divorced from truth; yet, he also sees art as a means by which to achieve his artistic deception. When Juliana offers him the chance to buy a portrait of Jeffrey Aspern, he says that he wants the likeness because it is 'wonderfully well painted', refusing to admit his interest in Jeffrey Aspern.<sup>25</sup> Again, the narrator adopts the pose of a dandy to avoid paying the personal price of exposing his real identity. In his preface to The New York Edition, James demonstrates his passion for orchestrating 'a forward continuity, from the actual man, the divine poet [...] into a value of nearness on our own part'.<sup>26</sup> Thus, James endows this narrative with self-reflexivity by examining a historic personality with a contemporary lens. James highlights the personality of art objects whilst obscuring the identity of the author and his characters, attempting to elude the personal cost of public exposure.

Conversely, the titular character of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* adopts different personalities throughout the novel, the first of which is the artist's muse. Wilde problematizes his statement from the preface that 'to reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim', through the character arc of the artist, Basil.<sup>27</sup> Basil confesses to Henry in the garden that Dorian's 'personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style', defined by 'the harmony of soul and body'.<sup>28</sup> In this passage, personality likely means 'the quality or collection of qualities which makes a person a distinctive individual' or 'the body or physical appearance of a person'.<sup>29</sup> Considering the muse's tangible and intangible traits, Elana Gomel suggests that 'in his capacity as Basil's muse, Dorian is merely a sign for the painter's own dreams and desires'.<sup>30</sup> In that case, Dorian is a passive recipient of Basil's attentions, barely conscious of his objectification. When Henry meets Dorian for the first time, he awakens Dorian's self-knowledge by painting a grand vision of the future for him: 'A new Hedonism—that is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol. With your personality there is nothing you could not do'.<sup>31</sup> As Basil paints, Henry serves as a muse for the muse, utilising his influence to

<sup>21</sup> James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 56.

<sup>22</sup> McGowan, 'From Pater to Wilde', p. 418.

<sup>23</sup> James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 142.

<sup>24</sup> Yvonne Ivory, 'Wilde's Renaissance: Poison, Passion, and Personality', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 35:2 (2007), 517-36 (p. 530).

<sup>25</sup> James, *The Aspern Papers*, p. 112.

<sup>26</sup> 'Appendix', in *The Aspern Papers and Other Tales*, ed. by Michael Gorra (London: Penguin Books, 2014), p. 322.

<sup>27</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1891, ed. by Michael Patrick Gillespie (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> 'personality, n. senses 4b. or 5', OED Online, (Oxford University Press: 2005).

<sup>30</sup> Gomel, 'Oscar Wilde, "The Picture of Dorian Gray"', p. 82.

<sup>31</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 23.

promote an entirely new manner in life. Yvonne Ivory claims that 'beauty thus simultaneously stimulates and is a product of personality', which implies Dorian's personality and beauty may further develop through his practice of hedonism.<sup>32</sup> Finally, Henry plants the narcissism of celebrity in Dorian's mind, assuring him, 'You are the type of what the age is searching for, and what it is afraid it has found [...] Life has been your art'.<sup>33</sup> Wilde situates the second-person pronoun in a place of prominence to create a tone of flattery. During the nineteenth century, as 'personality became synonymous with "celebrity"', an author's personal life contributed to his reputation as much as his oeuvre.<sup>34</sup> To escape the passivity of an artistic muse, Dorian subsequently indulges in the pleasures his natural beauty and personality afford him. Some might deny the celebrity the licence to reinvent himself whilst others might become engrossed in his personality and lose their sense of selfhood. Yet, Henry still advocates for the pursuit of new personalities in art as well as life. For Wilde the author, new personalities are muses for artistic creation.

When the model has absorbed what he can from sitting for an artist, he must take advantage of his opportunities for personal growth. Henry considers that 'the aim of life is self-development. To realize one's nature perfectly'.<sup>35</sup> Awakened to own his potential, Dorian must pursue the end of self-realisation wherever it leads. Ivory posits that 'in Wilde's theory of individualism, then, personality is developed through a practice of experimentation that involves the rejection of social norms'.<sup>36</sup> Having become enamoured of Sybil Vane's art, Dorian plays the part of Prince Charming behind stage, transgressing social norms when he refuses to marry the young actress. Henry sees in him 'a complex personality...a real work of art' of which Dorian 'was becoming self-conscious'.<sup>37</sup> Henry ascribes this new self-knowledge to Basil's artistic influence: 'your portrait of him has quickened his appreciation of the personal appearance of other people'.<sup>38</sup> Dorian, like Basil, has constructed an imaginary version of his love, based on her physical appearance. He only sees Sybil for the art and beauty she brings to his life, as he consumes her celebrity personality. To realise his potential—becoming 'a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations'—Dorian engages in 'insincerity...a method by which we can multiply our personalities'.<sup>39</sup> Dominic Manganiello argues that Dorian's 'psychology of "insincerity"' allows him to 'ultimately evade moral responsibility'.<sup>40</sup> Epitomised by Dorian Gray, the antinomian aesthete has a repertoire of personalities to experience the spectrum of sensations available to him. This passage features the 'one occasion when the narrative shifts from third person to first person', suggesting an authorial presence. Immediately, Wilde prevaricates and attributes this statement to 'Dorian Gray's opinion'. Considering the content and tone of the epigram, McGowan aptly purports that 'Wilde favors lying over the truth in the artistic presentation of the self because uniqueness can only be preserved by the proliferation of masks'.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Wilde traces the development of personality through the character of Dorian Gray from self-awareness to aesthetic taste to insincerity.

<sup>32</sup> Ivory, 'Wilde's Renaissance: Poison', p. 530.

<sup>33</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 179.

<sup>34</sup> Ziegler, *The Mediated Mind*, p. 188.

<sup>35</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 19.

<sup>36</sup> Ivory, 'Wilde's Renaissance: Poison', p. 528.

<sup>37</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 51.

<sup>38</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 64.

<sup>39</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 119.

<sup>40</sup> Dominic Manganiello, 'Ethics and Aesthetics in "The Picture of Dorian Gray"', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 9:2 (1983), 25-33 (p. 30).

<sup>41</sup> McGowan, 'From Pater to Wilde', p. 427.

In a 1890 letter to the editor of the *St. James Gazette*, Wilde admits that there ‘is a terrible moral in *Dorian Gray*’ which is ‘the only error in the book’.<sup>42</sup> Whilst such a moral contradicts Wilde’s aesthetic manifesto, it also realises the dangers of undue influence or domination by another’s personality that may result in a loss of autonomy for model, artist, or audience. Basil becomes a victim of his obsession with ‘the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal’, confessing to Dorian that ‘your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I was dominated, soul, brain, and power, by you’.<sup>43</sup> According to Liebman, Henry’s ‘theory of self-development’ states that ‘anyone who is strongly influenced loses his individuality, his self-determination’.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, Basil’s complete absorption with the personality of Dorian is the ruin of his art. Dorian rejects Basil’s forthright admission of his idolatry because he cannot reconcile his perfect form with his corrupt soul, revealed in Basil’s painting. Liebman also asserts that ‘Dorian becomes one of Henry’s multiple selves’, through which Henry can live vicariously and re-experience the pleasures of youth.<sup>45</sup> Whilst Dorian’s personality dominates others, he himself is dominated by the singular pursuit of pleasure to the point of ennui. Like Jack in the *Importance of Being Earnest*, Dorian ‘cannot hold these various guises together and still maintain his sense of self’.<sup>46</sup> After James Vane’s death, Dorian similarly admits that ‘my own personality has become a burden to me. I want to escape, to go away, to forget’.<sup>47</sup> The syntax of Dorian’s *cri de coeur*—characterised by first-person pronouns and parallelism—creates a tone of urgency and despair. While Dorian succumbs to self-absorption, dying in an attempt to liberate himself from conscience, Wilde later paints a picture in *De Profundis* of ‘imaginative enlargement, moving outward from a sense of privileged personal uniqueness to encompass the whole suffering symbolic human race’, according to William Buckler.<sup>48</sup> While this statement may be another Wildean pose, it proposes an alternative to Dorian’s fate— empathy for other suffering souls.

Elana Gomel submits that ‘the seduction of art lies precisely in the fact that it is capable of imaginary unification of the self that comes at the expense of its complexity and vitality’, a temptation for character and author.<sup>49</sup> In *The Aspern Papers* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, James and Wilde each conduct an experiment, testing the possibility of authorial self-unification. They contemplate whether it is possible to reinvent the personality of the author to escape the clamour of public opinion and serve the goddess of Art. Accompanying the prospect of a new personality is the fear that self-fashioning is a futile ambition. The narrator’s concerted efforts to forge a new identity and preserve the memory of Jeffrey Aspern come to naught when Miss Tita destroys the object of his desire. Dorian Gray’s division of body and soul does not protect him from the vulgar realities of murder and conscience. Exploring these failures, Manganiello posits that ‘*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is at once an attack on dualism (the soul/body, art/life split) and an exposure of the aesthetic attempt at reconciliation as a widening of that split’.<sup>50</sup> James, too, concludes that the author cannot completely escape the relational responsibilities that accompany one’s dedication to one’s art. McGowan identifies Wilde as ‘torn [...] between a belief that the self is a fiction that can be reinvented in each successive moment’ and the ‘belief in an essential character or soul possessed by each individual’.<sup>51</sup> Whether or not James and

<sup>42</sup> Oscar Wilde, ‘To the Editor of the *St. James Gazette*’, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1891, ed. by Michael Patrick Gillespie (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 358.

<sup>43</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 95.

<sup>44</sup> Liebman, ‘Character Design’, p. 302

<sup>45</sup> Liebman, ‘Character Design’, p. 302

<sup>46</sup> Michèle Mendelssohn, Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 172.

<sup>47</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 169.

<sup>48</sup> William E. Buckler, ‘Oscar Wilde’s Aesthetic of the Self: Art as Imaginative Self-Realization in “De Profundis”’, *Biography* 12:2 (1989), 95-115 (p. 102).

<sup>49</sup> Gomel, ‘Oscar Wilde, “The Picture of Dorian Gray”’, p. 86.

<sup>50</sup> Manganiello, ‘Ethics and Aesthetics’, p. 25.

<sup>51</sup> McGowan, ‘From Pater to Wilde’, p. 427.

Wilde were able to realise their artistic potential in the light of their seemingly predestinarian views, their authorial personalities are immortalised in their works of art.

As artists, James and Wilde fashion numerous personalities through their lives and writing. The process of artistic production entails both devotion and accountability to the relationships and philosophies each piece of art necessitates. In *The Aspern Papers* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, each author envisions different possibilities for realising and reinventing the self that result in the destruction of an artistic ideal. James achieves this end by adopting an impersonal tone towards his characters and highlighting the humanity of the art objects that surround them. Conversely, Wilde's aesthete Dorian multiplies his personalities in an attempt 'to cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul'.<sup>52</sup> Yet, neither the narrator nor Dorian Gray emerges with his soul unscathed.

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<sup>52</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 21.

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