

Subjectivity and the “Shocking”: Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde and Ethical Limits of Pleasure

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Introduction:

A discussion on censorship at any political or legal moment is hardly complete with a mere narration of contemporary events, without invoking a philosophical and historical lineage of bodies of control and discipline. By this, one does not only indicate institutions that form the censor-board(s) only, but also those institutions, creators of a problematic discourse, causative-agents of aesthetic rebellions that involve a response to these censorships. They would be the problem-makers to laws legitimizing control, but their motives can be read as practices that very gradually politicize aesthetics, which then becomes a response both inevitably progressive and shocking. It involves stretching the permitted projections of the self (“self-fashioning”, a subject that would be taken up soon) in terms of aesthetic bodies capable of continuing the discussion on the very subject of control, thereby questioning it, or manipulating it to various degrees. The series of responses and questions raised thereby indicate the ever-immanent association of censorship and ethics. Without asserting an opinion over the legitimacy and fairness of censorship, my objective is to exemplify the ways in which ethics functions in correspondence with history and conventions to chalk out responses and counter-responses which may lead to unacceptance or censorship by bodies of control. Moreover, it is notable that the self functions as the centre of individualistic expression, declaration and avowal of beauty, sexuality and political or ethical agency. This article would like to analyze Foucault’s theories of “care of the self” to relate the modern current of individualism to the Graeco-Roman influence of Epicureanism on

the Aesthetic school of the 1990s. It would, in the second part, focus on the changing philosophies of this school of the late Victorian society by a detailed examination of Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, comparing the ethical stance of each; and analyze how their art was closely related to the problems posed by prohibition and its extent.

The Dandy

I would like to begin by briefly examining the implication of Foucault's use of the term "flaneur" to describe what he considers the embodiment of modern living in the essay *What is Enlightenment?* Not only does it serve as a metaphor of existence, but it also anticipates articulations on the socio-economic, historical and cultural experiences that characterized the flaneur as a category of response, an expression of subjectivity imbibed and concentrated in awareness of the physical body, specifically in terms of the emergence of modernity in France. Elsewhere, as in England self-fashioning took a similar but not identical direction, being a product of the Aesthetic movement among other influences unique to England. In any case, Foucault only fleetingly remarks upon the English Aesthetic movement once in the interview published as *On the Genealogy of Ethics* (Foucault 271). But he does, of course discuss Baudelaire to bring up the idea of modernity as an elaboration of individual awareness. Also, the Aesthetes have repeatedly admired Baudelaire and have readily associated themselves with the Baudelairean dandy. Oscar Wilde, we may remember at this point, reveals his very deep admiration for Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs Du Mal* (1857) in these lines in *The Critic as Artist*:

And if we grow tired of an antique time, and desire to realize our own age in all its weariness and sin, are there not books that can make us live more in one single hour than life can make us live in a score of shameful years? Close to your hand

lies a little volume, bound in some Nile-green skin that has been powdered with gilded nenuphars and smoothed with hard ivory...it is Baudelaire's masterpiece.

(Wilde *Intensions* 165)

Therefore, it is no surprise that the views of the Aesthetes and the Decadents converged on many points. In so far as both were interested in manifestations of beauty in art, literature and life; and that they emphasized the subjectivity of opinion and triumph of the individual over the mass or crowd, they could be called remarkably similar. Both these practices of the self are *performed on* the self. There is an element of artifice in them, not only related to the necessity of beautification of the body, but also to the implication of the body on subjectivity. But in the Foucauldian sense, such “self-awareness” is intricately bound up to the “limits” imposed on the enjoyment of pleasure, in other words to the degree and direction of censorship of expressions of the self. These limits are not merely external impositions that are unidirectional and prohibitory, as they also reclaim the existence of these prohibited or censored acts or performances in the possibility of any discourse about them or surrounding them. Therefore, self-awareness must also be acknowledged as a response to the possibility of loss of control. Loss of self by unsustainable hedonism, or through “voiceless-ness”, or by agreement to “normalcy” or by being coerced through censorship, is ultimately nothing but loss of power, whether civil or ethical; and this entails danger or fear of death, bodily, moral or social.

“Care of the Self” and Pleasure as a Goal

Foucault locates some historical moments in which the relationship between the subject and power changes. In case of the earlier Greeks, till Platonic thought currents prevailed, he says that care of the self is related to care of others because the good life of the others are related to the self and therefore, good care of oneself would simply imply better social relations-

epimelesthaisautou, as he mentions in *Technologies of the Self*, "to take care of yourself", "to be concerned, to take care of yourself."(Foucault226)It involves the management of the self in a space of interconnected power relations, largely civic. These are "both truth and prescriptions." In case of the later Stoics the idea of power in relation to the self changes because there exists a set of rules or basic principles which are the *logos* of conduct. Freedom is non-slavery, or control over the self more than bad practices can control the self. The same thought is carried further when Christianity introduces the concept of an afterlife so that the care of the self, already related to good conduct, gets woven into freedom from sin. Later, the definition of power gets institutionalized in terms of knowledge in modern Europe. In each of these shifts however, one may observe there exists a relation of "care of the self" with a fear of "loss of control"; it is an anxiety that marks man's tendency to question his position in the world. Therefore, as far as any form of policing or censorship, usually expressed in terms of ethical justifications, is concerned, it entails fear from both sides of the activity in question: first, the fear of the rebel entails the problem, how far can I reach without foregoing the "care of the self" for pleasure; and second, the fear of the disciplining body which is accountable for censorship entails the question, how far can the rebel's reach be permitted so as to prevent a mass fascination with pure pleasure, thus ignoring the relation of the self to civic society.

The modern man's posture, is distinct because it is the "spectator's posture". (Foucault311) But Foucault goes on to clarify why this posture of an interplay of the present with memory involves a subtle violence with respect to time and mortality. There is an awareness of self-differentiation from the crowd that characterizes each of these modern practices of the self. One may fleetingly refer to the possibility of treating ethics in terms of real or lived encounters, as does Levinas, in the experience of encountering the infinitely Other face-to-face.¹ But this

tradition of ethics as a discursive practice essentially concerns itself with and is evoked by conversation; it is distinct from the self-reflexive or contemplative free ethics of the Stoics. Ethics as a cultivation (as I intend to deal with in the limited scope of this article), is as much an aesthetic methodology as a legislation, as opposed to ethics as a “first philosophy” that is interpretive and intersubjective. The position of spectatorship is the modern man’s moment of contemplative ethical classicism. At the same time, as the essay would attempt to duly establish, the aspiration of an aesthetic embrace of beauty is individualistic but not counterculture. In fact, the very laws that govern the aesthetic ideal posing as “free”, “eternal” or “formal” are governed by inter-subjective relations.

At this point, let us turn to the special place of the Aesthetes of 19th century. The problematic ethical position of the late Victorian dandy is the problem of divergent ethics. He is situated in Victorian bourgeois society characterized by a complex interplay of consumerism, conservatism and latent sexual desire. It is deeply entrenched in association of the self with sin. But he is well versed with the Classical philosophies, literature and their taste in the arts. He belongs to that upper class which has suddenly lost its hold on economy and governance due to the sudden rise of the middle classes and all that he now has as a mark of his class are his aesthetic standards or his refinement. He detests the masses enough to wish to shock their notions of morality but at the same time he realizes that they are the consumers of the spectacle of his aristocratic life. There are twin ethical standards, one that is Christian, juridical and which belongs to the masses; and another that is pagan, purely a cultivation of individual interest and elitist self-education. In such a context, the Aesthetes were treated dismissively as hedonists whose actions in public and private life failed to keep up to their proclaimed Classical influences. Their common outcry of “art for art’s sake” quickly degenerated them into vague and self-

centred social anomalies rather than the promised body of art they would have liked to be. These problems bring forth certain questions: Was there a gap between the cautious and rather critical stance of the early Aesthetes like Ruskin and Pater towards pagan philosophies like Stoicism and Epicureanism, and the later Aesthetes, like Wilde in actual embrace of some of these ideals in their own lives and works? Did they evade the ethical dimensions of Stoicism or Epicureanism in terms of its social responsibilities while seeking pure art, or “becoming a piece of art”, or did their way of life degenerate into unhindered hedonism? If so, this would be very unlike the Greek philosophies that inspired them at least initially (which were well known and widely read by that time and which, if evaded, would have been intentional).

Marius the Epicurean and Pater’s Sense of Ethics

We may first refer to a few instances from Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas* (first published in 1885) to observe that the attitudes of wonder and appreciation expressed in the text to Epicureanism and Stoicism are mixed with a sense of restraint. Oscar Wilde, the iconic figure of the cult of the dandy was a student of Pater; so it might be useful to look into Pater’s most influential work before trying to read Wilde’s aestheticism in detail. Pater’s narrator is inclined to stick to a Christian sense of ethics in a text set in the late Roman Empire, especially in defining virtues of the soul and in addressing philanthropy as the spiritual duty of the subject. This can be observed in the progress of the ethical principles of the protagonist, a young boy, living in the countryside in the last decades of the Roman Empire, the years coinciding with the rise of Christianity. Marius comes under the influence of the dominant philosophical schools of the age and his temperament grows to be that of a lover of beauty, who is however faced with the dilemma which the omniscient narrator calls a dilemma of “an early Christian” (Pater I: Chapter II), who however, being born a pagan, could not find a religion or a

spiritual model to perfectly fit his conscience. Pater's portrayal of Graeco-Roman philosophy is clearly not one of abandon and amorality but he is explicit in mentioning the sombre atmosphere that Marius grew up in, an atmosphere of deliberate upkeep and maintenance that is borne out in a deep concern with the body as a container of the soul. The growth of medical practice described in detail in the early part of the first book indicates how these ideas of "care of the self" became deeply rooted in the way of living of the general populace, so that the art and "family" of Aesculapius became an "institution":

...(T)he apparatus of the medical art, the salutary mineral or herb, diet or abstinence, and all the varieties of the bath, came to have a kind of sacramental character, so deep was the feeling... the body becoming truly, in that case, but a quiet handmaid of the soul.

Further it says of Marius:

He was of the number of those who... must be made perfect by the love of visible beauty."(Pater I: Chapter III)

The narrator mentions Plato's *Phaedrus* as the source of this type of discourse, "which supposes men's spirits susceptible to certain influences, diffused...by fair things and persons visibly present...and confirming the seer to themselves as with some cunning physical necessity" (Pater I: Chapter III). The phrase "physical necessity" for natural things of beauty ascertains that external beauty of things is related to the concept of need, and beauty is not treated as anything less than a requisite condition of good life. It is notable that many of the letters and speeches of the Stoics bear reference to the same text, pointing out that it indeed was influential in shaping contemporary way of life. Marius is delighted by his childhood friend and influence, Flavianus,

who instills the love of beauty in him. The short chapter in which the two friends read the story of Cupid and Psyche (Chapter V) together is filled with sensual imagery describing the beauty of the surroundings of the young boys as well as the sumptuous formal perfection of the Greek myth. After Flavian's death due to prolonged illness, Marius is directly influenced by Epicureanism as a theory. It is interesting that the narrator treats Marius' own instinctual Epicureanism, partly developed by the early influence of the practices of Flavianus, as in constant contest with the theory of New Cyrenaicism (a version of Epicureanism), which is subject to attack and rejection by Marcus Aurelius. There is a split between the philosophical theory that Marius admires intellectually and the "lifestyle" (self-fashioning?) that he continued as a practice. The relation between pleasure and ethics is kept unresolved.

The two otherwise contending schools of Epicureanism and Stoicism were however similar in the rejection of fear of the gods which they condemned as superstitions to delude the thoughtless and ignorant. They also emphasized individual responsibility for action which would no longer be governed by authority of civic laws or by a general concern for civic wellness, but by a sense of what is best for the self in the present and future. The narrator goes on to elaborate the associations of this "new Cyrenaicism" (Epicureanism, as experienced by Marius as a boy) and its difference to hedonism and how the philosophy is susceptible to misinterpretation in its call for pleasure. It is almost evident that the narrator expresses a genuine appreciation of the Epicurean's taste for the "eager, concentrated, impassioned realization of experience" (Pater I: Chapter IX), but at the same time he is also aware of the problems of the same, in its tendency to posit itself antagonistically to ritual or what the Christian narrator calls "morality." It is clear to the narrator that the claims of unethical hedonism against the Epicureans are incorrect. Subsequently, Marius is influenced by the Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius who convinces him of

the need to reject the elitism of an Epicurean way of life, which admits a natural inclination of man towards life free from suffering. Marcus Aurelius instead proclaims the need to live a humble life of minimum necessities and to reduce passions to a minimum. But Marius is soon disillusioned by this school of philosophy when he becomes aware of the indifference of the stoic to pain and suffering of others. His dilemma and discontent arises out of an innately Epicurean nature that however, cannot come to terms with certain tenets of the philosophy. The late Roman philosophers, especially the Stoics, as mentioned earlier, attribute a certain code of conduct to ensure a wise control over one's own will, or a self-fashioning that makes a separation necessary between natural or instinctual inclinations and tendencies, and an ethical life of "fittingness." The Epicurean way of life also projects a concern with the self in a similar way. But this rejects an ethical involvement with the other subject, who is purely unrelated to individual health or pleasure through civic life. Philosophers like Cicero argue on behalf of Epicureanism that wisdom guarantees the knowledge of good and bad through the realization of cause and effect of actions. Only an ethical action, in so far as it ascertains no possibility of incurring pain later is good action, or action that is justified by its *fittingness* or decorum in Latin and "*prepon*" in Greek. (Bychkov and Sheppard 125) This means, ethics is related to a clear wisdom of the truth. This implies prudent action. In the words of Cicero, an action is ethically acceptable:

...(F)or it is fitting to use reason and speech prudently and do what you do considerately, as well as discern and preserve the truth in all matters. On the contrary it is as unfitting and indecorous to be mistaken, err, fail and be deceived as to be mad or delirious. In the same vein, all just things are fitting, and the unjust, on the contrary, are ugly and therefore unfitting. (Bychkov and Sheppard 136)

Cicero also quotes from a lecture delivered by Lucius Torquatus, in the 1st book of *De Finibus*. Torquatus was asked what makes men risk their all for battles and the like if their sole purpose in life, as naturally inclined men, were solely pleasure, “complete removal of pain.” To this question, Lucius replies, it was honor and esteem, the strongest guarantees of security in life. (Cicero 17-75) The governing motive of life is pleasure, which itself is dependent on security. The idea is very different from the kind of civic concern of the Platonists because it contains the idea of honor and esteem which are very close to the sense of self. This in turn implies the subject is responsible to his surroundings to care for himself, and in the process, to care for his surroundings. Also, it implies a mutual responsiveness of each to the other, which makes the basic substrate of any argument claiming political necessity of censorship of motive, delimitation of pleasure or control of the body.

Also, the point becomes clear from the above quoted lines that the association of fineness or beauty with decorum or fittingness makes it quite contrary to the accusations of hedonism. Relentless and un-thinking quest for pleasure, driven by luxury alone is not the motto of Aesthetic movement, which was, as mentioned above, influenced by these very schools of philosophy. However, when we look at the caution with which the subject of Epicureanism is treated in *Marius*, it is not so much a hesitancy towards hedonism, as it is a propensity to fall back on the Christian virtuosity. Marius is disturbed by Marcus Aurelius’ unresponsiveness to others’ pain as long as he does not contribute as its cause in any way. (Pater I: Chapter XIV)

The goal of the Stoic or the Epicurean, of evading pain, leads up to a tenet of indifference at some level, in confining the responsibility of one’s action within the premises of his life as a mortal, which is a rather insufficient solution in the Christian worldview. This is because the Christian self is created not only in terms of actions but also thoughts of the mind. The fear of

death that governs the aesthetic self in Hellenic philosophy meets a different set of demands in case of a Christian soul with a concept of the afterlife. Foucault calls this a paradoxical change that comes up with Christianity because, for the Christian, death is not the end, but a means to salvation, so there is no need to rush through life; and renunciation becomes a means to salvation. Even if renouncing pleasures is an important tenet of Stoicism, the end of “ethical practice” is governed by death, so the question of prudence arises only as it can distance pain from the subject as far as the final moment of death. At the same time, these analogies with Pater’s text make it clear that he did not employ misrepresentations of Graeco-Roman ethical notions in art; and was definitely not equating Epicureanism with hedonism. But there appears to be a dualism already evident in the first of the Aesthetes about the ethics of the Aesthete hero. It is clear that much of the narrator’s sympathies with the pagan hero are associated with his being a Christian soul in a pagan body. He is a lover of beauty and pleasure at the core, but he cannot ascertain spiritual fulfillment through the same. Marius represents the problem of the “Graeco-Roman Victorian.”

Pater’s highly influential book, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* was also that which, according to Michael Patrick Gillespie, led to Pater’s “acquiescence to the suppression of the original conclusion” (Gillespie 6). However, it was not unusual to try to maintain an equilibrium between public opinion or censorship and the author’s own views. Pater asserts that art is most detrimentally judged by current ethical standards. But at the same time he remains a proto-modernist as he does not resolve the problem of the disjunction between art and ethics, which becomes problematic only a generation later when life aspires to become art. There is the typically Aesthetic rejection of Victorian moral values, but he remains unsure as to what the alternative standards should be. Pater’s student Oscar Wilde is perhaps the closest we can get to

the dandy, the man who has most approximated a piece of art. Perhaps this is the reason why his views are associated to such an extent to his works that they inevitably lead to conclusions that confuse. Apart from his unparalleled craft of beautification, his penchant for epigrams and his upper class heroes, Wilde was also the most successful aristocratic symbol of refined and high lifestyle. Richard Hibbit writes, for instance, “he was fêted by the mass media; he was adept at public relations.” (65) In other words, he could become a lifestyle icon at a time when the flags of Victorian morality were flying high but ironically, he could become so in a vein quite contrary to conventions.

Art for Art's Sake

The dandies of the 90s cultivated themselves such as to make perfection of their own form an expression of their exquisite individualism, in creating new yardsticks of taste, and taste itself a yardstick of human worth. These indices lay beyond all previous laws that defined subject relations to society. It was as the icon of such a cult that Wilde owed his fame as well as infamy. From advertisements of ice-creams to pamphlets on interior decoration, Oscar Wilde's fixed expression of impermeability and natural indifference could manage to draw people to gaze at the phenomenon of formal perfection. Wilde was incessant in his advocating of a life free from any moral hypocrisy and suppression of individuality. He was often called the “elite Bohemian” in referring to his amoral personal choices as well as the eloquent philosophy of pleasurable life he kept reiterating through his works. Finally, his last works show him embittered with the double standards that rendered him so helpless and pushed him to penury. Wilde's detachment was characteristically Epicurean but his disregard for the ethical in art becomes evident and more problematic than Pater's claims when he regards in numerous accounts, both in textual

expressions as well as in social discourses, the “harmony with one’s self” (Wilde *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 76) above harmony with society as a whole. It would be wrong to say Wilde is unconcerned with goodness, as the aesthetic alternatives that he proposes are in themselves creating a new ethical standard- one that would be better armed than the Victorians to observe and realize transcendental values of art.

At the same time, it is extremely reductive to define Wilde’s works in terms of a structure of ethical intention. It is important to realize that Wilde’s construction of the self is different from the Romans precisely because he is a modern man who is fascinated by the Roman way of life. Here we must recall Foucault’s lines that provide valuable perception of the dandy’s way of life. Foucault is clear in pointing out that the stance of the dandy is one of a staged appearance. His “doctrine of elegance” (Foucault 312) is performative and he derives pleasure in shocking his audience.

In *The Reception of Oscar Wilde in Europe*, edited by Stefano Angelista, the impeccable methods by which aestheticism becomes a public movement is appreciated in terms of its delicate balance between shock and sympathy. Wilde’s own reaction to the circulating caricatures and lampoons based on his image as the iconic Aesthete provides us with some evidence that he treated his elaborate performance as a New Hedonist, as a spectacular art for the eyes of his public. Ostermark-Johansen enlists names like “Oscuro Wildgoose”, “the Wilde Eyed Poet”, “Our own Aesthetic Bard” and “Ossian Wilderness”, other than those which “frequently ridiculed his effeminacy (“Frøken Hermine Bang” or “Miss Hermine Bang”), his homosexuality (“Hr. Manbang”) and his cosmopolitan sympathies (“Ermano de Bang”, “Hermann von Bangemachen” and “Armand de Bangenét”).” (Ostermark-Johansen 230) It shocks the audience to see his extremism- which may be an overwhelming passion for beauty or an inhuman

detachment to suffering or poverty. He felt, if there was anything worse than being talked about, it was not being talked about! (Doody 51)Such extremism is part of his performance, which interestingly implies that the dandy may not be held accountable for opinions in the course of performances.

Turning into Art

The debates regarding the viability and the degree of censorship of this man's life and art could be turned around by him into an inquisition into the same line of thought. By provoking response to censorship of such exemplary "turning into art", Wilde also initiates a continual discourse that fed on its own expressions of apprehensions or doubts about concerns of individualism or subjectivity. It initiates, via condemnation, a tentative encounter with the modern. The reviews to his *The Picture of Dorian Gray* were harsh to say the least, so much so that much of it was banned for a long time and what we have usually read is only a censored version of the original that was abhorred for being explicit about the so-called devious kinds of love. I would not go into the details of concessions that had to be made in order to make the novel suitable for contemporary sense of propriety, and more fundamentally, to permit its publication, because that alone has formed the subject of much detailed research already. But at the same time all his general opinions, whether in his novel or otherwise, were lapped up by the public either for curiosity or for pure enjoyment of his art. Du Maurier's caricatures of the dandy in the *Punch*, which were evidently based on him, were no less popular and Wilde's critics' rebuttal of his claims along with his own responses to each of these attacks only kept increasing his charm over the decade, till his sudden persecution for sodomy that led to his imprisonment. Yet what is noteworthy in Wilde's unique method of circumventing the demands and expectations of his audience is that he seemed to be enjoying the masquerade he was putting on as an elaborate but

lovely lie, instead of a harsh truth against art that is not threatening to the moral police. His plays were all satires against the hypocrisy of Victorian morality but they were never too provocative. Gillespie seems to suggest that he makes it very difficult to locate the locus of bypassing limitations at any fixed point (14). An assimilation of diverse possibilities of imaginative range demands a scope of the risks they may pose. Therefore, the creation of perfect art demands incorporation of those exercises of enhancement, that may or may not result in obliteration of elements unnecessary for formal perfection. Wilde's aim was to make ethics extremely subjective. The obvious question that arises is how far can ethical subjectivity be taken, when one is the subject of one's own art? To put the question in Foucault's own terms:

What should one do with oneself? What work should be carried out on the self?

How should one "govern oneself" by performing actions in which one is oneself the objective of those actions, the domain in which they are brought to bear, the instrument they employ, and the subject that acts? (Foucault 87)

Gillespie mentions that in a letter to Ralph Payne dated 12 February 1894, Wilde talks about "multiple aesthetic meta-systems" of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, partly in a style, typical of him, of amusing and perplexing his readers at the same time; and partly to ridicule the critics who simplistically attacked the amorality of his only novel. He quotes Wilde:

I am so glad you like that strange colored book of mine: it contains much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me:

Dorian what I would like to be in other ages perhaps. (qtd. in Gillespie 58)

If we consider the novel in terms of its dialectics, we would notice almost always that there are choices available to Dorian Gray and each time he is conscious of the same. Even when he confesses he has come so far as to not have a choice to go back, it is evident to the reader that he

is willfully testing the margins of his actions, stretching the limitations to the extremes of experience, to the point where it will be accepted no more either by any justifiable ethical system, or any political potentate. This becomes particularly relevant to us in our concern with censorship or the radical delimitation of choices. Perhaps this is the point where censorship becomes the most problematic in spite of its justifications with respect to selfhood and social cause. Censorship as an extreme form of control contradicts its own position when it rejects the thrill of experience to its subject while ironically citing care, or nurture. This is particularly problematic when care of the self, as we have seen, is also an exploration of the tendencies of the self, and a test of how far can pleasure be made viable to the self. The reader is invited to marvel at the thrill of indulgences. Censorship prohibits such a possibility out of an apprehensive fear of failure of judgment.

However, the novel's structure does not forgo repeated references to the expectations of Victorian ethics. The fascination with the self, at once aware of its displacement from the natural as well as proud of its aesthetic accomplishment on itself is evident in these lines:

[H]e would sit in front of the picture, sometimes loathing it and himself, but filled, at other times, with that pride of individualism that is half the fascination of sin, and smiling, with secret pleasure, at the misshapen shadow that had to bear the burden that should have been his own. (Wilde 135)

The narrative shifts and wavers alternately between the objective and the subjective moral codes. Each time Victorian expectations are suggested, there are corresponding openings to separate subjective recipient positions. It is as if each character becomes an element in an elaborate experiment, which is complicated by the possibility that Wilde treats these characters as different performances of his own self, just like in a theatre a single actor may play more than one

character. If we take the instance of the Sibyl episode, then it is seen to provoke different reactions from each of the characters, Lord Henry, Basil and Dorian Gray. Here too, Dorian himself consciously makes a choice in favor of art over life, but the choice is inherent with complexities when we note that throughout the novel the boundaries of life and art are not fixed. Lord Henry appears to be the agent of Dorian's *paideia* or special schooling, just like Marius' schooling as seen in Pater's work. But even Lord Henry appears to perform a role of particular interest to him. He professes more in the Ciceronian tradition rather than treating philosophy as a practice of good life in himself. He dons the role of an ideal teacher of hedonism to observe the flowering of Dorian as a product of this philosophy that interested him intellectually. Interestingly, Lord Henry's transgression is limited, in so far as Lord Henry does not face the same end that Dorian does. Murder is unethical by any school of philosophy; and contrary to many responses to the text, the reason why Dorian commits murder is not that he is unaware of the difference between transgressing ethics and transgressing Victorian morality but a more likely determinant may be his will to commit horrific acts as an extreme presentation of his art on the self. He is his performance and cannot abandon it. He is so rapt in his practice that he exudes indifference and authority even when he addresses Campbell, the man he blackmails into destroying the body of Basil whom he murdered. (Wilde 162-166)

The problem with Dorian, and that which kills him eventually of fear of experience of aging, is that while he is a hedonist in nearly every possible way one can imagine, he does not drink life's experience to the fullest, which is paradoxical in his nature. It is the same irony of censoring out experiences partially and delimiting the pleasures that life has to offer to the perfect epicurean. It is the irony that befell much of modernity, the fascination and fixation with evil, the same that made Aestheticism and Decadence appear associated with negativity, and led

to their distortion into ugliness. It is this same paradox which will cost Dorian his life. Lord Henry expresses the haste to live *all* experiences as a characteristic of the new hedonist in these words:

The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible... You have only a few years in which to live really, perfectly, and fully. When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, and then you will suddenly discover that there are no triumphs left for you, or have to content yourself with those mean triumphs that the memory of your past will make more bitter than defeats... Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you... A new hedonism - that is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol. (Wilde 24-25)

These words of Lord Henry remind one of a pre-Christian conception of death. The Greeks were concerned with philosophy as a way of control over life (and not afterlife). The drive to attainment of perfect harmony of the self with situation or surroundings becomes relevant in a system where the fear of Death marks the end of achievement. Therefore, in case of a Victorian version of renewed aestheticism, it leads to a pursuit of such a "test of the limits of decorum" (Patrick Gillespie 78) and those of self-expression as art, complete with its permanence and crystalline perfection. In this context, one may refer to the Stoic '*meletethanaton*', as Foucault calls it in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, "a meditation on death, or rather, a training for it." (Foucault 104) Foucault recalls Seneca and Marcus Aurelius in this respect, as associating moral perfection necessarily requiring that man lives every day as his last. Foucault quotes Seneca, "In Letter 12, he says: "Let us go to our sleep with joy and gladness; let us say; I have lived." (Foucault 105) Dorian Gray's fear of death is not surprising, but he clearly does not associate it with a haste to harmonize life with society. In this context, his framing of the image of the

individual shifts towards becoming more similar to the post-Renaissance man. His supposition is that of the enthroned individual. A critical reading of Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*, makes it easier to locate the change in attitude of the author towards pain and pleasure. Wilde is most sensitive to pain in this late work and treats pain as the dominating influence on human life rather than pleasure. Pau Gilabert Barbera provides an interesting commentary on Wilde's medievalist deviation from these ideas typically associated with Hellenism in the essay "Anti-Hellenism and Anti-Classicism in Oscar Wilde's Works. In "The Second Pole of a Paradoxical Mind", he cites Wilde's essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, 1891:

But it is rarely in the world's history that its ideal has been one of joy and beauty. The worship of pain has far more often dominated the world. Mediaevalism, with its saints and martyrs, its love of self-torture, its wild passion for wounding itself, its gashing with knives, and its whipping with rods—Mediaevalism is real Christianity, and the mediaeval Christ is the real Christ...The painters of the Renaissance drew Christ as a little boy playing with another boy in a palace or a garden, or lying back in his mother's arms, smiling at her... Even when they drew him crucified they drew him as a beautiful God on whom evil men had inflicted suffering... (Wilde, *n.pag.*)

Also,

(T)o find the presentation of the real Christ we must go to mediaeval art. There he is one maimed and marred; one who is not comely to look on, because Beauty is a joy... (Wilde *n.pag.*)

It becomes evident here how the easy association of pleasure or absence of pain to harmonic life becomes problematic post Christianity, as it does not hold the same philosophic ideal as the

Greeks did. Further, post-Reformation, laughter or a pleasurable life is an alternative to pain and not inclusive within the general resignation to situations of life. In case of Dorian Gray, the fear of Death does not naturally invoke a Stoic resolution. Instead, it begets more horror and fear of loss of individuality. Dorian Gray interprets Lord Henry's words thus:

How sad it is!' murmured Dorian Gray, with his eyes still fixed upon his own portrait. 'How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older... If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that –for that- I would give everything! ...When I find that I am growing old, I shall kill myself! (Wilde 27-28)

Later, he feels betrayed by his own self. Inevitably, the self is related to its image. In this case, the image is literally that of Evil. Greek beauty remains a fascinating transcendental ideal for the Aesthete but the fear in its foulness and terror is Satanic. In the final lines of the novel, art captures all the beauty that the artist of the self in his impeccable performance had assimilated in the body. The painting is whole and as beautiful as ever whereas Dorian Gray lies wrinkled and dead.

Then he loathed his own beauty, and, flinging the mirror on the floor, crushed it into silver splinters beneath his heel. It was his beauty that had ruined him, his beauty and the youth that he had prayed for... His beauty had been to him but a mask, his youth but a mockery. (Wilde 210)

Conclusion

Clearly, Art is the identity of the Aesthete. The biggest desire of the Aesthete is the desire to freeze his performance as an artist of the self in a photographic frame. The criterion for judging this piece of art that he has become should be solely beauty and nothing else. This is the reason why an Aesthete feels the height of fulfillment on becoming the blue china or the sunflower or lily in it- for they are judged as objects of pure beauty. If the Aesthetes of the late nineteenth century are interpreted solely on the basis of their shocking Epicureanism, then it leaves a number of open questions about the extent to which they legitimized their opinions and actions (both of which were notably a part of the overall experiences they offered to their consumers), according to the Classical tenets of the philosophies which fascinated them. They managed to turn fascination into a consumer fetish while blithely waltzing from one subject of experience to another, smiling gently at the prudes who failed to resist the charm. In turning themselves into art, they accumulate the subject and the object into themselves and become the centre of a suction-point of temporality. At once, death and life are sucked into their body defining and deconstructing modern experience. By laughing at their own exaggerations and passing unscathed through impositions of censored behavior, they continuously remind us not only of their performative existence, but also that as audience to the spectacle of uncontrollable beauty, we are strangely lenient in defining philosophic schools. Contrary to all misinterpretations of the same persistent appeal for a suspension of ethics, aestheticism should be realized as a methodological ideal for literary works; a performance of extremes and a re-initiation of the discourse surrounding prohibition and ethical justifications of the same.

Notes:

¹ See *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Section I A Chapters 4, 7 and Section III B Chapters 1, 2.

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