



Dorian

Will Self

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Will Self's DORIAN is a "shameless imitation" of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that reimagines the novel in the milieu of London's early-80s art scene, which for liberated homosexuals were a golden era of sex, drugs and decadence before the AIDS epidemic struck later in the decade. It is "an age in which appearances matter more and more and more. Only the shallowest of people won't judge by them." Young Dorian Gray, just out of school, is a trust funded, impressionable Adonis-like blonde with none of the cynicism of the characters who end up corrupting his innocence even as they love him for it. He arrives in London to help socialite and philanthropist Phyllis Hawtree with her project of running a shelter for young drug addicts. He knows he is strikingly beautiful, that he could be a male model, but he tries not to get too caught up in the "looks thing." Basil Hallward, an artist friend of Phyllis's son Henry Wotton, meets Dorian and immediately falls for him, asking him to pose for a video installation called *Cathode Narcissus*, wherein Dorian is surrounded by nine television monitors which project images of himself looking into a mirror. In the book's final pages, we discover that Dorian is so taken by the images that he makes a wish that they will age while he remains eternally young. And indeed, Dorian soon swears he sees some faint traces of aging in the images.

Meanwhile Dorian is so impressed with the witty, sophisticated banter between Baz and Wotton that he immediately wants to be part of their world (he is described as a social chameleon, easily slipping into the characteristics and fashions and mannerisms of those around him). Dorian, then, breaks up with his college girlfriend and takes up with Baz's friend Wotton, a rich, intelligent but affectless homosexual boozer and cokehead (and careless Jaguar driver) who has a loveless marriage of convenience with the socialite Lady Victoria, a somewhat batty woman who is fine to live in denial of her husband's sexuality so long as their marriage keeps bringing in a flood of party invitations. Jealous of Baz's affections for Dorian and eager to see Dorian "thoroughly pleasure this jaded century" via his unparalleled looks and money, he takes Dorian under his wing and Dorian soon grows to prefer the wild, devil-may-care Wotton over the earnest, somewhat pretentious Baz. ("Baz Hallward the wayward acolyte, seething with energy and bumptiousness; while the younger man [Wotton] played the part of his mentor, consumed with cool, eaten up with indifference.")

"Dorian knew his own limitation: he had money but no real style. His upbringing had been here and there, on the fringes of film sets, in foreign hotelsâ€“ It had given him polish but no shine. He lacked the deep lustre of someone like Wotton." But in truth, Wotton is no better himself: "Henry Wotton was subject to saying to anyone who would listen that the chameleon is the most significant of modern types." And while outer appearance would seem to belie this, the truth was that beneath the Planet of Wotton was a realm of complete flux." The characters to which Wotton introduces Dorian are no better: drug addicts who revere Dorian only for his looks and money. As Dorian gets caught up in this world he becomes every bit as superficial as these people: "Dorian had begun to display talents in the only two areas of life that are worth considering, he was becoming a seducer par excellence, and he was transforming himself into an artificer of distinction, a person who is capable of employing all of the objective world to gain his own end." He eventually falls for a junkie named Herman largely for his beautiful black skin. To celebrate the debut of *Cathode Narcissus*, Dorian invites Herman over for an orgy with Wotton, Baz, and the others although not as jaded as Dorian has become (and apparently not a homosexual), Herman's craving for drugs is such that he agrees, and at the party he shares a needle with the other attendees and unwittingly infects them with AIDS. After the party, perhaps because he is ashamed of what he has sunk to, he kills himself in the street.

PART TWO: TRANSMISSION

Ten years have passed, and Henry Wotton now lies in a hospital bed on the AIDS ward. He knows he is dying, as is his friend Baz who visits him now for the first time in years, but unlike Baz, Wotton has continued to live the life that brought him down, bribing the hospital employees to let his dealer visit him. His wife is in absolute denial, calling Wotton's infection a "bug." Baz becomes angry that Wotton is not taking care of himself (having been clean for five years, Baz has recovered his soul). He tells Wotton about his move to New York City in the early eighties, when Manhattan was at the very peak of a great mountain of depravity. His drug habit drove him to poverty and homelessness and he eventually ended up an errand boy for three transvestite cabaret acts who housed him in their squalid apartment. Dorian found him here and "saved" him by cleaning him up and taking him shopping so that Baz might introduce him to some of his downtown connections (Warhol, Mapplethorpe, Burroughs, etc.) This doesn't really happen, but Dorian does manage to put himself at the center of every season, ever-popular for his looks, fake refinement, and money. "His social promiscuity and his sexual promiscuity have had the same bewildering effect" that of making him incomprehensible, unknowable. Is he gay or straight? Is he nob or yob? And incidentally, how old is he exactly? Dorian discovers gay nightlife, sleeping with hundreds (maybe thousands) of men and in one brutal instance he later recalls with glee, beating a man to death as he sodomizes him in the basement of the Mineshaft nightclub. Eventually, however, when the AIDS scare begins, Dorian popularity lessens when many suspect that he is knowingly transmitting the disease.

When Wotton returns from the AIDS ward, a dinner party is thrown and Dorian shows up unexpectedly. Wotton and Baz are shocked to see that he looks exactly as he did ten years ago—he hasn't aged a bit and apparently doesn't have AIDS. During the party Baz tells Dorian that he would like to photograph Cathode Narcissus for an upcoming retrospective and Dorian invites Baz back to his mews home to see it. There, Dorian offers Baz oral sex and his first hit in five years. He tells Baz of the wish he made when he first saw Cathode Narcissus and reveals that ever since then, the images have indeed been aging while he stays young. When Baz refuses to believe it Dorian reveals the monitors and sure enough they play horrifying images of an AIDS-stricken Dorian—"concentration camp victims forced to dance by some insane Nazi doctor. When Baz refuses to copy the tapes for Dorian so that he can continue to preserve his youth, Dorian brutally stabs Baz several times, killing him without compunction. "Baz joined the wraithlike Dorians, who had stepped down from their monitors to meet him and in the null space in the middle of the null room, the ten of them linked hands, formed a ring, and commenced a stately dance."

EPILOGUE

As it turns out, everything up until this point is the text of a novel written by Henry Wotton, who is now dead of AIDS and has left the book for Dorian and Victoria. Dorian is hurt and indignant about the way he is portrayed: he insists that he never killed anyone, he is not a shallow narcissus but rather someone who genuinely cares about the good of others, he is not a free-loading model but has worked hard as the publisher of a fashion/design magazine. He brushes the book off but as he tries to go on with his work of preserving the now-famous work of Baz, the cynical narrative voice of Henry Wotton's book keeps intruding into his thoughts until finally, as Dorian visits the scene of his friend Princess Di's fatal crash, Wotton reappears and cuts his throat.

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