monstrorum artifex: Uncanny Narrative Contexture and Narcissism in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Andrew Wenaus

Among the sacred objects belonging to a sultan of Menangcabow named Gaggar Allum was the cloth sansistah Kallah, which weaves itself, and adds one thread yearly of fine pearls, and when that cloth shall be finished the world will be no more.

–W. W. Skeat[1]

This disturbing, full-length portrait of a Dorian Gray will haunt me, as writing, having become the book itself.

–Stéphane Mallarmé[2]

The relationship between the mutating painting and the fictional world of Victorian London in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) raises particularly interesting questions regarding the relationship between multiple levels of narrative and how this structural strangeness relates to narcissism and the uncanny. The association these different levels share with one another disrupts a reading that privileges one level over another; consequently, such a structure upsets the stability produced by representing a consensus reality. The work is emblematic of Modernist literature in that it tends to integrate conceptual instability between different levels that simultaneously establish, and become part of, the aggregate of multiple narratives. In Wilde's text, this reflexivity operates between the fictional world of the novel and the painting of Dorian. Yet, despite the oddity of this structural conundrum, the diegetic eloquence of Wilde's novel suggests that its strange form can be examined as being in a state of structural homeostasis and paradoxical balance. The collapse of two levels into a single narrative tangle asks readers to reconceptualise the unsettling effect of a logically paradoxical structure. Furthermore, this unsettling structural effect mimics the content of the novel.

Not only is Wilde's novel largely preoccupied with narcissism and the uncanny on the level of plot, but the diegetic structure itself produces the effects of narcissism and the uncanny. Narcissism here does not mean vanity or self-love. Instead, I adopt Marshall

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[1] W. W. Skeat, 'The Cloth Which Weaves Itself', in *The Book of Fantasy*, ed. by Jorge Luis Borges, Silvina Ocampo and A. Bioy Casares (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1988), p. 256 (p. 256).

[2] Cited in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Hart-Davis, 1962), p. 298.

McLuhan's understanding of the term as narcosis and numbness: that the gazer is transferred into the realm of the reflection, while the physical body is left without sensation. Thus, the gazer occupies a paradoxical conflation of two locales: the originary physical level as well as the level of the reflection. The two levels in Wilde's novel likewise do not simply mirror one another but are interwoven and transferred into each other. Narcissism itself is an uncanny experience as it is an example of irreconcilables which entangle in unsettling ways. By conflating the narrative level of the fictional world that Dorian inhabits with the narrative level of his portrait, Wilde effectively creates a structure that simulates the uncanny experience of narcissism. This conceptual diegetic structure as a logical impossibility occupies two self-embedded narrative levels simultaneously; it is intensely self-reflexive, and is unsettling because it will not settle into a static concept by which one can objectively observe it. As a result, Wilde's novel — on the structural level — seems to take on a life of its own. Indeed, 'it was the creation of such worlds […] that seemed to Dorian Gray', Wilde writes, 'to be the true object, or amongst the true objects, of life.'[3] The strange structure — the novel's paradoxical reflexive quality — simulates a kind of bringing to life of a monstrosity.

The novel's paradoxical structure strives for internal equilibrium despite its constant state of conceptual reorganisation. Such a metamorphosis between the distinct narrative levels establishes pre-existing conditions of quirky logic which, in turn, generate those logical conditions for the unsettling structure of the novel. Following this chain of structural metonymy leads to an examination of the metonymical relationship between the 'living' painting and the novel itself. In 1946, Jorge Luis Borges wrote, 'to speak Wilde's name is to speak of a dandy who was also a poet; it is to evoke the image of a gentleman dedicated to the meager [*sic*] proposition of shocking by means of cravats and metaphors. It is also to evoke the notion of art as an elite or occult game […] and the poet as a laborious "*monstrorum artifex*" [maker of monsters].'[4] If the novel itself is governed by reflexive internal textual processes — the looping homeostatic relationship between different ontological levels of diegesis — it may indeed be simulating a kind of monstrous textual organism. Since the structural eccentricity of the novel is metaphorically akin to the autonomic, internal dynamics of basic life, the reflexive relationships that constitute the

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[3] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Stories, Plays, Poems, and Essays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), pp. 17–167 (p. 105).
[4] Jorge Luis Borges, 'On Oscar Wilde', in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions*, trans. by Eliot Weinberger, ed. by Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine and Eliot Weinberger (New York: Penguin, 2000), pp. 314–316 (p. 314).

novel's diegesis may operate as a literary proxy for the processes associated with affective responses normally designated to the biological. As such, the internal textual dynamics relating the multiple ontological levels of diegesis in Wilde's novel, certainly in an abstract sense, give birth to a monstrosity. The novel, like the portrait, appears to have 'a life of its own'.[5]

Because Wilde's narrative structure — as a logical monster, an uncanny contexture, a paradoxical tangle — attests to a playful, open self-reflexivity as well as a seriously crafted yet gaudy rehashing of tired gothic tropes, it stands to reason that we may consider the novel as a kind of postmodern work *avant la lettre*. Yet, it is also a remarkably unique novel in the strangeness of its structural tangling. Indeed, critics have convincingly commented upon the postmodern qualities of Wilde's work. Vicki Mahaffey's *States of Desire: Wilde, Yeats, Joyce and the Irish Experiment* (1998) employs the Deleuzoguattarian model of desire to demonstrate how Wilde, Yeats, and Joyce all — aesthetically and biographically — challenge and subvert official authoritarian and national systems of control and consolidation by destabilising conventions. In *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in his Criticism* (1997), Lawrence Danson remarks that 'according to *Intentions*, to be modern is to be *not* of one's age [emphasis added], and to know one's self is to know the "moods" of otherness. According to *Dorian Gray*, to be not of one's age and to be made of moods is to be a flower of decadence. Decadence *is* modernity in this inverted formula' [emphasis in original].[6] Furthermore, 'the decadent program', Danson continues, 'is the empowering of the special individual [...] to receive the greatest number of "impressions" and realize most intensely the moods and modes that create this dissident modernity.'[7] Wilde also intimates that to be absolutely modern is not only to be politically empowered but to achieve a kind of self 'whose potency comes precisely from being not only itself, not [...] self-consistent, but rather from being [...] the many moods, the masks and poses, by which it fleetingly makes and remakes itself'.[8] Furthermore, Danson writes that Wilde's 'own paradoxes, after all, also perform the decentring, of meaning and of its authorizing agencies, which presages the postmodernist author-as-text'.[9]

Michael Gillespie in *The Picture of Dorian Gray: 'What the World Thinks Me'* (1995) remarks that the fundamental structure of the novel 'stands apart from other nineteenth-

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[5] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 95.
[6] Lawrence Danson, *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in his Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 16.
[7] Danson, p. 17.
[8] Danson, p. 17.
[9] Danson, p. 9.

century works of fiction' and that 'through the multiple perspectives imbedded in its narrative, it encourages diverse readings, anticipating the direction taken by the experimental efforts of twentieth-century fiction'.[10] As a kind of proto-postmodern work, the novel eschews 'a prescriptive cause-and-effect discourse that emphasizes one invariable interpretation' for a mode of interpretation whereby the 'novel involves the reader's imagination in the creation of meaning'.[11] In *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity* (1996), Gillespie captivatingly demonstrates that Wilde's body of work is profoundly influenced by both public and critical reception, and yet is comprised of an *oeuvre* that is radically multiple and resists single interpretation. In this way, Gillespie suggests that Wilde's canon invites 'a dialectical equilibrium rather than the imperative to impose some form of interpretive closure'[12] and that Wilde's writing stimulates 'approaches that support disparate methodologies' and that 'acknowledge the presence of multiple levels of reading (an aesthetic metasystem)'.[13] Gillespie aims to demonstrate that 'the ability of characters to sustain a multitude of conflicting moral values without any sense of disruption or contradiction within their consciousnesses enforces the idea that to understand these individuals one must come to grips with the concept that a breadth of contending principles guides their behavior [*sic*] without any one holding primary'.[14] Arguing that Wilde altered his work both to challenge and suit the expectations of Victorian audiences, Gillespie is interested in Wilde's moral pragmatism: Wilde is able to meet the expectations of the audience, while at the same time develop an art practice that is experimental, multiple, inconclusive, and attests that 'readers have the benefit of a range of diverse constructions'.[15]

Just as Gillespie's identification of Wilde's work as an aesthetic metasystem which readers meet with interpretations that are multiple — at once familiar and reaffirming, and yet unfamiliar and challenging — we may consider the unusual multi-layered narrative tangle of *The Picture of Dorian* as a kind of uncanny logic in and of itself that at once settles and unsettles itself. 'The narrative', Gillespie notes, 'encourages perceptions of multiplicity through numerous representations of characters reforming their values to meet evolving conditions, yet at the same time the discourse still relies upon the counterforce of existing

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[10] Michael Gillespie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: 'What the World Thinks Me'* (London: Prentice Hall International, 1995), p. 13.
[11] Gillespie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: 'What the World Thinks Me'*, p. 13.
[12] Michael Gillespie, *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), p. 14.
[13] Gillespie, *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity*, p. 58.
[14] Gillespie, *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity*, p. 59.
[15] Gillespie, *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity*, p. 63.

attitudes to define events and disrupt any sense of stability.'[16] Wilde's tangled and warped narrative paradox, because it refuses intellectually to settle and sit still for the reader, feels as if it is in a process of making, remaking, and unmaking itself. 'The complex narrative structure of formal and thematic elements truly set *The Picture of Dorian Gray* apart', Gillespie notes. He continues by remarking that 'Wilde's discourse does not simply displace conventional interpretive perspectives with iconoclastic ones. It acknowledges both the impact of a variety of views and the ability of individual readers to maintain simultaneously a sense of multiple responses to the novel.'[17] Wilde's is a unique work of gothic fiction in that it employs the common trope of embedded narratives so as to create the effect of making and unmaking of logic and linear consequence. Ultimately, Wilde's novel is unique not in its content but in its structural gesture: it is an interweaving of narrative levels that seems to self-perpetuate through the making, remaking, and unmaking of logical consistency and contradiction. Indeed, the novel is an amusing and unsettling, irrational monstrosity.

This relational tangle between the alternate narratives of the painting and the fictional world in Wilde's novel is, thus, best considered as an interwoven contexture, a 'novel […] as lovely as a Persian carpet, and as unreal', in which the narrative levels of London and the painting are intricately knotted together into a complex and dynamic whole.[18] Furthermore, it is tempting to analyse this knotted structure hierarchically, by privileging the diegetic level of the fictional Victorian world over the fantastic narrative in the metamorphosing painting. Gillespie attests that this

> willingness to acknowledge multiplicity without succumbing to diffusiveness reflects a particular cultural/historical context that has led to the ontological duality facing contemporary readers of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: the novel clearly situates itself in a deterministic Victorian context. At the same time in a decidedly postmodern fashion it repeatedly introduces elements into its discourse that disrupt prescriptive interpretive impulses without clearly signaling [*sic*] the primacy of any alternative point of view.[19]

The problem here is due to the difficulty of uniting multiple levels of narrative that are tangled and conflated in a paradoxical way: the narratives are distinct and yet occupy the same textual space. The novel, Gillespie notes,

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[16] Gillespie, *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity*, p. 62.
[17] Gillespie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: 'What the World Thinks Me'*, p. 19.
[18] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 45.
[19] Michael Gillespie, '"What's in a Name?" Representing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*', in *Irishness and (Post)Modernism*, ed. by John S. Rickard (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1994), pp. 44–60 (p. 44).

substitutes a structure in which multiple meanings are possible in every reading of the novel. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* changes the traditionally passive reader into an actively involved figure, allowing him or her to decide how to incorporate independent ideas in the narrative into an interpretation that permits different, sometimes even contradictory perspectives to coexist. As a result, Wilde's novel rejects the idea that fiction can be read by progressively narrowing the interpretive options until only a single meaning remains.[20]

Such active involvement engages not only the interpretive involvement of the reader; it also involves an affective engagement from the reader. The difficulty of consolidating the multiple meanings therefore upsets the stability of an analytical position from which one can experience the narrative. Coexisting interpretations as well as tangled narrative levels result in contradictory perspectives that are unsettling in both intellectual and physically emotional ways.

However, the monstrous nature of the text's structure may not be immediately acknowledged by the reader because it is the almost invisible constituent of the novel's tropally conventional content. Jerusha McCormack aptly observes that 'it is hard to say anything original about *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, largely because there is so little that is original in it. As if in two facing mirrors, the novel and its analogues seem to multiply towards a possible infinite, in a kind of self-perpetuating critical machine.'[21] She further suggests that 'Wilde has tapped a root of Western folklore so deep and ubiquitous that the story has escaped the literary and returned to its origins in the oral tale'; Wilde's narrative crosses from one diegetic level, print, to another, that of the storyteller and listener.[22] This, an instance of those analogues that multiply towards infinity, also operates in the opposite direction. The novel itself *contains* this process. Not only is the novel like two facing mirrors, but it is also a structural expression of the phenomenon of such iterative mimesis. The novel in both form and content escapes from one mirror into the other, back again, and so on, oscillating *ad infinitum*. This split, for McCormack, between the literary and the oral, 'explores the fault line that, in itself, defines modernity'.[23] The novel thus marks an explicit moment in English literature: the recognition of a multi-diegetic tangling of the corporeal with the literary that would become so characteristic of modernity. Indeed, McCormack remarks that 'modernity […] entails the blurring of the boundary between the human and the

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[20] Gillespie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: 'What the World Thinks Me'*, p. 14.
[21] Jerusha McCormack, 'Wilde's Fiction(s)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 96–117 (p. 110).
[22] McCormack, p. 111.
[23] McCormack, p. 111.

artefact'.[24] It is this blurring, this reiterative analogue of analogue itself, that constitutes Wilde as a maker of monsters.

Moreover, this loopy logic underpins Wilde's work, philosophy, and aesthetic. 'Wilde saw that the "self" was not inevitably indubitable, rational and progressive', writes Reginia Gagnier, 'but was socially constructed. It was constructed through language, which is why he waged a life-long subversion of conventional speech patterns. It was constructed through social institutions, which was why the school, marriage and family, medicine, the law and the prison […] so exercised his critical faculties.'[25] The self is a product of society and of social artefact. Because the constructed individual also constructs according to his or her reflection, the constructed individual already determines his or her constitutive environment. Both artefact and individual are self-perpetuating critical machines. Or, as Wilde himself suggests, this way of thinking 'treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation'; the artefact and the individual are equally creative entities.[26] Wilde thus 'draws on the deep structure of a kind of tale which pretends to order sequentially, in a narrative, what is actually the destruction of all sequence'.[27] Wilde's narrative, as a conceptual architecture or structure, is that which defies linearity, directionality, and predictable sequence. It is a self-perpetuating critical machine in the logically paradoxical sense: a kind of monstrosity that acts as the starting point for the creation of new monstrosities. It is the artefact that weaves itself into identity and, oddly, appears to come to life. Indeed, its tangled narrative contexture, likewise, appears to have a life of its own.

What may be called the 'originary' ontological level of narrative is the fictional world of late-Victorian England that occupies the majority of the novel's diegesis. This is the world — the 'deterministic Victorian context' — which opens the book: 'The studio was filled with the rich odor [*sic*] of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.'[28] Here

> the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk
> curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of
> momentary Japanese effect, and making [Lord Henry Wotton] think of those

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[24] McCormack, p. 111.

[25] Regenia Gagnier, 'Wilde and the Victorians', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 18–33 (p. 20).

[26] Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Stories, Plays, Poems, and Essays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), pp. 1009–59 (p. 1029).

[27] McCormack, p. 111.

[28] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 18.

pallid jade-faced painters of Tokio [*sic*] who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion […]. The dim roar of London was like the bourdon note of a distant organ.[29]

This is the ontological plane which bored men experience 'through the thin blue wreaths of smoke that curled up in such fanciful whirls from […] heavy opium-tainted [cigarettes]'[30] as they lie on couches; where Basil Hallward paints his magnificent 'full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty';[31] in which the young and beautiful Sibyl Vane is found 'lying dead on the floor of her dressing-room' after swallowing 'some dreadful thing they use at theatres' composed of 'prussic acid or white lead';[32] where 'the wretched boy in the Guards'[33] and Alan Campbell each commit suicide;[34] and where Sir Henry Ashton, Adrian Singleton, Lord Ken, the Duke of Perth, and Lady Gwendolen are shamed, broken, and scandalised as a result of their association with Dorian;[35] as well as where Dorian murders Basil by digging a 'knife into the great vein that is behind the ear, crushing the man's head down on the table, and stabbing again and again'.[36] Indeed, this ontological level is where Dorian puts his new hedonism into practice, untouched — until the novel's conclusion — by the physical consequences of either a life of excess or of the ravages of time. This is the ontological level of diegesis in which a fictional London is hyperbolically and ornamentally represented, created, and established as a literary proxy for the extra-diegetic London; in short, this narrated world is where the characters of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* exist.

Yet, embedded within, and directly affected by and effecting, this narrative is another narrative level: Hallward's mutating portrait of Dorian. The portrait involves Dorian as its sole character and mutates in accordance to a changing sequence of events taking place on a different ontological plane of narration, and therefore qualifies as a narrative in its own right. The portrait, however, is embedded within the originary diegetic plane — of London in which Basil, Lord Henry and Dorian exist — which is itself inserted into the extra-diegetic level occupied by the reader in the form of a material book. However, unlike the originary and extra-diegetic planes in which sequences of events presumably precede one another, the

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[29] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 18.
[30] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 18–19.
[31] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 18–19.
[32] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 83.
[33] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 117.
[34] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 159.
[35] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 117–18.
[36] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 123.

narrative nature of the painting exists *ab ovo*. Indeed, the moment of the portrait's completion marks a diegetic fissure:

> The sweep and dash of the brush on the canvas made the only sound that broke the stillness, except when, now and then, Hallward stepped back to look at his work from a distance. In the slanting beams that streamed through the open door-way the dust danced and was golden […] Hallward stopped painting, looked for a long time at Dorian Gray, and then for a long time at the picture, biting the end of one of his huge brushes, and frowning. 'It is quite finished,' he cried.[37]

Wilde's tropally ornate style here is reminiscent of Christian teleology. After tasting the vinegar, Jesus utters his final words on the cross: 'It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.'[38] Yet Basil's utterance also evokes a kind of creation mythology. A primordial act of painting establishes 'the only sound that broke the stillness', while 'slanting beams' of light stream into the room to reveal golden dust dancing in the air: an abyss is filled, a new narrative world comes into being, a grammatical ghost or structural double that materialises and haunts. For Dorian, 'as if awakened from some dream', the act of producing new worlds through art is an act of both aesthetic and ontological magnitude.[39] Firstly, Dorian's recognition that these worlds — those created aesthetically — are 'true objects', truer than the distant roar of London, suggests a conceptual collapse of the ontological level occupied by the artist and the work of art; indeed, the artefact is brought to life by its poetic equivalence with life. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, this recognition signifies the blurring between multiple diegetic levels that compose the novel itself.

The narrative status of the portrait, however, is not necessarily firmly established until Dorian first notices a physical change in its composition. After Sibyl Vane's disastrous performance at the theatre, Dorian grossly and irrationally mistreats the young actress, and thus instigates the vertiginous ontological level-crossings that propel the supernatural intrigue of the remainder of the novel. Leaving the theatre, and the weeping actress, Dorian returns to his home only to notice that the face of the portrait is slightly changed:

> The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth […] the strange expression that he had noticed in the face of the portrait seemed to linger there, to be more intensified even. The quivering, ardent sunlight showed him the lines of a cruelty round the mouth

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[37] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 33.
[38] John 19. 30
[39] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 33.

as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing.[40]

That the 'portrait had altered' signifies the confusing shifts between narrative levels: although the 'great events of the world take place in the brain', the actions of one narrative level manifest their effects in another ontological plane.[41] For Dorian, '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.'[42] Despite the fact that he finds it unsettling, Dorian must keep this magical mirror — this object that signifies the level-crossing of traditionally Cartesian ontological divisions of the body and soul — as he feels the portrait will 'bear the burden of his shame'.[43]

As Dorian's excesses become increasingly extreme, so too do the effects on the narrative of the painting. Indeed, the sentence 'the terrible portrait whose changing features showed [Dorian] the real degradation of his life' emphasises the collapsing of the diegetic reality of the portrait into that of a consensus reality.[44] The 'real degradation' committed in one level of narrative is, paradoxically, manifest in another: the death of the living artefact is a death in actuality. The collapse and blurring of these different ontological levels is intensely experienced by a reaction of surprise and shock, not solely by Dorian, but also by Basil, the creator of the painting. We are told that 'The surface [of the portrait] seemed to be quite undisturbed, and as [Basil] had left it. It was from within, apparently, that the foulness and horror had come. Through some strange quickening of inner life the leprosies of sin were slowly eating the thing away. The rotting of a corpse in a watery grave was not so fearful.'[45] Basil's experience of the ontological level of the painting — and his curious understanding of its reflexive relationship with the narrative world that he and his friends occupy — ultimately prompts Dorian to murder the portraitist. Because the two ontological planes are confused, Dorian's reaction is not altogether the passionate act of a paranoiac, because the incriminating evidence of his behaviour exists in both the painting itself and London: both hold equal ontological status within the novel's structural tangle. The assumed unidirectional relationship between the two planes — the consequence of Dorian's actions marking a change in the portrait — ultimately undergoes a strange reversal at the novel's conclusion.

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[40] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 77.
[41] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 80, 29.
[42] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 88.
[43] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 88.
[44] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 111.
[45] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 122.

Dorian, determined to free his conscience and 'kill the past', reasons that he must destroy the painting: 'As it [the knife] had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter's work, and all that it meant.'[46] Yet the attempted destruction of the painting famously leads instead to Dorian's death. The diegetic level of the painting not only remains intact, but actually loops back to its original unsullied state: 'hanging upon the wall, a splendid portrait of their master as [the servants] had last seen him, in all the wonder of its exquisite youth and beauty.'[47] The mutations that the painting have undergone abruptly relocate into the originary ontological level, leaving Dorian 'lying on the floor […] in evening dress, with a knife in his heart […] withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage'.[48] It is this startling shift at the novel's conclusion that unhinges the ontological status of a singular consensus reality.

Indeed, Wilde's novel complicates the horizontal relation as well as the vertical relation between different ontological levels of narrative, in that the effects of what occurs on one level are spontaneously displaced, ultimately affecting another level. Because the correlation between the diegetic level of the painting and the narrative world inhabited by the characters is a continuum of interweaving level-crossings rather than one of mediation, the surprising reconfiguration of the two levels of narrative at the end of the novel raises particular difficulties in envisioning a quirky spatial relationship. Brian McHale, in *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), writes that many narrative strategies associated with creating multiple diegetic worlds involve the juxtaposition of

> microworlds occupying the same ontological plane [arranged] along the same horizontal axis. It is also possible, however, to foreground the 'worldness' of world by juxtaposing worlds not […] in series, on a horizontal axis, but rather *in parallel*, on a *vertical* axis; that is, it is possible to juxtapose worlds occupying *different* ontological planes — worlds and meta-worlds, or world and inset world. [Emphasis in original][49]

The narrative levels in Wilde's novel are neither fully juxtaposed nor in parallel; instead, they are complex and conceptually illogical in their tangled configuration. The effect is an amusing and discomforting sense of a story that is at once intricately crafted yet a logical impossibility and a conceptual monstrosity. Consequently, the relationship between the ontological level occupied by Dorian and that occupied by his portrait is not one that can be satisfactorily interpreted as either horizontal or vertical. As Dorian's excesses on one

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[46] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 167.
[47] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 167.
[48] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 167.
[49] Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 251.

ontological level of narrative increase in intensity, the effects are manifest in another level according to a logical structure akin to a complex knot. The spatial conceptualisation of the tangled relationship between these two levels must furthermore accommodate reflexivity and metonymy. Conceived of as two facing mirrors, as McCormack notes, the novel multiplies towards infinity in which each iteration contains both a part and the whole.

All of this complicates the discussion regarding Dorian's narcissism, a discussion largely dominated by psychoanalysis and stemming from Freud's foundational 1914 paper 'On Narcissism: An Introduction'. Marshall McLuhan's discussion of the Grecian Narcissus story offers an alternative interpretation that is more explicitly concerned with homeostasis, level-transfer, and self-regulating dynamics. In her book *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), N. Katherine Hayles writes, 'homeostasis had been understood as the ability of organisms to maintain steady states when they are buffeted by fickle environments. When the temperature soars, sweat pours out of the human body so that its internal temperature can remain relatively stable.'[50] Indeed, according to the logic of reflexive systems, an organism can maintain homeostasis by employing feedback loops. As such, organisms maintain a state of equilibrium by mutual exchange of certain elements with their environment; in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, one diegetic level maintains stability 'metabolically' by casting off certain narrative elements and redistributing them, through narrative level-crossing, to another diegetic level, thus maintaining a state of textual equilibrium. This is evident in the way in which the picture is made to serve as a repository for Dorian's hidden guilt: 'What the worm was to the corpse, his sins would be to the painted image on the canvas. They would mar its beauty, and eat away its grace. They would defile it, and make it shameful. And yet the thing would still live on. It would be always alive.'[51] Indeed, for McLuhan, narcissism is explicitly homeostatic. The word 'Narcissus', he notes, comes from the Greek word '*narcosis*, or numbness'.[52] McLuhan here draws attention to the common misrepresentation of the Narcissus story in which Narcissus is said to have fallen in love with himself by admiring his own reflection in the water; and admittedly, it is this focus on the idea and activity of vanity which plays out in some ways between Dorian and his portrait. Nevertheless, the novel associates Dorian and his actions far more closely with the qualities that McLuhan positions at the centre of the myth: narcosis and numbness. The tale of Narcissus, like Wilde's novel, is not one primarily concerned with vanity, McLuhan argues. Indeed, Narcissus, in seeing his

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[50] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 8.
[51] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 97.
[52] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Berkley: Ginko, 2011), p. 63.

own reflection, took this image to be another person. This reflection is, for McLuhan, a medium, an extension; the reflected image effectively numbs Narcissus's perceptions until he 'became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image'.[53] Narcissus is then no longer able to hear the voice of Echo because he, by becoming servile to the medium (his reflection), is anesthetised. Adapting to this extension of himself, Narcissus becomes a self-regulating closed system. The reflection as a medium/technology becomes an extension of his body; he adapts and mutates in the way he experiences his own body and his environment as a result of his extension. Like Narcissus, he is numb because his experience of his own body is transferred into the reflected image. Because the transfer between body and extension in this myth is complete, Narcissus becomes completely anesthetised: this act of transfer and level-crossing maintains the equilibrium within the closed system. As Wilde put it, 'Art has no influence on action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile.'[54] Like Narcissus, whose mind and senses are numbed through their extension and reconfiguration as alternative levels of organisation, Dorian 'watched with listless eyes the sordid shame of the great city, and now and then he repeated to himself the words [...] "To cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul." Yes, that was the secret. He had often tried it, and would try it again now. There were opium-dens, where one could buy oblivion'.[55] So, in this sense, where Narcissus amputates his whole body, Dorian seeks oblivion by being transferred completely to the extension; yet the extension itself is entirely dependent upon the body.

The story of Narcissus and his narcosis is, then, a meditation upon art and the self as self-updating and dynamic systems of representation. 'When Dorian Gray', writes Christopher Craft, 'stands before his portrait, therein to consider both himself and his difference from himself, he requires a prosthesis'.[56] A response to a kind of absolute autoamputation, the prosthetic in question here is that of a complete double of Dorian's body. The prosthesis Dorian requires is, Craft writes, 'so familiar it hardly seems like one. Dorian requires a mirror.'[57] Craft analyses the significance of both mirrors proper and of the portrait, since this dipartite reflection is the only way Dorian can place his enduring beauty and developing monstrosity in contradistinction. The 'Gothic technology' or medium that Wilde implements here, that of a supernatural mirror/portrait, is for Craft a formal meditation upon

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[53] McLuhan, p. 63.

[54] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 163.

[55] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 140.

[56] Christopher Craft, 'Come See About Me: Enchantment of the Double in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*', *Representations* 91.1 (2005), 109–36 (p. 109).

[57] Craft, p. 109.

the alienation-effects experienced by the individual when encountering his own reflection.[58] Like McLuhan's Narcissus, Craft notes Dorian's 'silent delirium' upon his first encounter with Basil's painting.[59] Craft's Dorian is an exemplar of Lacanian psychoanalysis: 'Wilde insists that disclosive moments of self-recognition entail a complex semiotic interchange between the one who apprehends himself in an image and the visual image that has already apprehended the "same" him over there.'[60] However, Craft adds that Wilde insists on focusing extensive attention upon the 'visual technology [the portrait, rather than Dorian the character] that generates the flux (and reflux) of information'.[61] Furthermore, this logic of flux and reflux places a marked emphasis upon, not simply the technology or the character, but upon the loopy dynamics of reflection. 'As that "most magical of mirrors"', Craft suggests,

> the portrait effectively conjoins Wilde's lazy gothic plot with the formal dynamics of self-regard. This, in turn, enables Wilde to map the saturated, irreal space that intervenes between a self-apprehending subject and the mimetic apparatus that returns this subject to himself, but always in the guise of objectal or phantasmal other.[62]

A viewing subject, according to Craft, when reflected in a mirror, may, according to the circularity of reflection, return from the duplicated image to the physical locale from where the image originates. However, upon this return, the viewing subject is not the same subject as when one began. Beginning as a complete and present human being, the viewing subject returns from the reflection to the originary world as an 'image-being devoid of precisely *this* presence' [emphasis in original].[63] The complication of Narcissism is that it simultaneously provides an image of the viewing subject and all that the viewing subject is not. In short, as Manganiello suggests, Narcissism 'distorts as it reflects'.[64] The return effect establishes an illusion of unity in the face of evident splitting, yet simultaneously provides processes of 'perpetual disintegration'.[65] This complex process of spatio-temporal dislocation between the subject and the image of the other — the reflection or imago — results in alienation. Such a reading brilliantly engages with concerns about the subject and an 'erotics of self-

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[58] Craft, p. 114.
[59] Craft, p. 114.
[60] Craft, p. 113.
[61] Craft, p. 113.
[62] Craft, p. 114.
[63] Craft, p. 110.
[64] Dominic Manganiello, 'Ethics and Aesthetics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 9.2 (1983), 25–33 (p. 31).
[65] Craft, p. 110.

identification'; however, when speculating upon narrative level-crossing from the perspective of the novel's uncanny narrative structure, the logic of self-reference operates somewhat differently.[66] While Lacanian identification with the imago leads to alienation and the 'perpetual disintegration' of the subject, McLuhan's self-reflection and self-extension brings one back precisely to the point of one's departure from the originary world. Rather than analysing the misidentification between two spatio-temporal locations, the multi-levelled narrative structure of the novel upsets the habitual assumption regarding the directionality and temporality that link two locales — origin and reflection — by effectively making these apparent opposites a single unit. Certainly, gothic doubling and the implication of the viewing subject with the other occur time and again in the novel; however, this uncanny repetition also takes place conceptually via the logical monstrosity constituting the loopy structure of the novel.

The monstrosity of the novel's structural paradox, between maker and artefact, individual and object, is an instance of familiarity and strangeness. 'From the moment he speaks of his desire', McCormack suggests, 'Dorian himself becomes an artefact, neither alive nor dead: one of the fabulous undead, such as Dracula, who must draw life from others.'[67] Dorian's victims are not the only ones from whom Dorian must draw life. He must also claim life from the narrative level of the portrait: the painting takes from Dorian, and thus gives to Dorian. Dorian takes from the painting, and thus gives to the painting. The economy here is homeostatic and recalls narcissistic anaesthesia: 'Dorian anaesthesises himself with things,' McCormack writes, 'inventing himself by means of his own collections. His relationship with himself, as with others, is dictated by an object; but which Dorian is now the artefact?'[68] He is therefore a *doppelgänger* without a primal individual from whom to copy; indeed, the novel presents two *doppelgängers*: Dorian and the painting, like mirrors, reflecting one another, multiplying to infinity. Declan Kiberd suggests that 'the self and the *doppelgänger* have the makings of a whole person' [italics in original], and, so it seems, the novel supports this claim fully both as it is and in its reverse: the whole person has the makings of a self and a *doppelgänger*.[69] The novel then develops a conceptual structure that acts as a proxy to this process whereby the logic of cause and effect does not fully comply both in the content of the novel and in its form. The effect of this narrative structuring is one

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[66] Craft, p. 114.
[67] McCormack, p. 113.
[68] McCormack, p. 113.
[69] Declan Kiberd, 'Oscar Wilde: The Resurgence of Lying', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 276–294 (p. 292).

that is remarkably unsettling: it creates the overwhelming sense of that which is intimately familiar conflated with that which is alien and logically impossible. The novel's narrative structure, like its content, is uncanny.

Like Wilde's novel, Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' both describes the concept of its title in its content and enacts it in the logical structure of its argument. The essay is a fascinating piece largely because it does not necessarily offer a conventional definition of the 'conceptual term', *uncanny*, while simultaneously establishing a semantic and structural matrix which justifies this move.[70] A peculiar aspect of the work is the implication of the first of the three parts of Freud's essay: the denotative and etymological elucidation of the strange relationship between the words *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. *Heimlich* denotes both one thing and its opposite; if we follow this logic, the morphological negation of that word, *unheimlich*, establishes an oscillating semantic relationship between these two terms. The inherent conceptual instability of the subject of Freud's essay — the uncanny — establishes, and becomes part of, the essay's structural form. While Freud purports to describe 'the uncanny' in the psychoanalytic experience, he rather succeeds in representing it in the structure of his analysis.

The etymological examination that opens Freud's analysis is not only fascinating in itself, but also leads to a conclusion that is remarkable in that it is innately inconclusive. Freud's investigation into the word *heimlich* in Daniel Sanders's *Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache* introduces the reader to the inbuilt strangeness of the term. While, as Freud demonstrates, *heimlich* denotes 'belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly', its secondary definition is 'Concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it, withheld from others'.[71] Freud concludes that

> What interests us most […] is to find that among its different shades of meaning the word '*heimlich*' exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, '*unheimlich*.' What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich* […] In general we are reminded that the word '*heimlich*' is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different. [Italics in original][72]

Freud links this strange etymological relationship with the psychoanalytic experience, through Schelling's suggestion that 'everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained

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[70] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed, by Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 930.
[71] Freud, pp. 931, 933.
[72] Freud, p. 933.

secret and hidden but has come to light'.[73] This is the pressing anxiety that forces Dorian to keep the portrait 'hidden away at all costs'[74] while, at the same time,

> creep upstairs to the locked room, open the door with the key that never left him now, and stand, with a mirror, in front of the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him, looking now at the evil and ageing face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his sense of pleasure. He grew more and more enamoured by his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul.[75]

The uncanny, for Freud, supports the psychoanalytic theory regarding the return of the repressed, while, for Wilde, the uncanny supports the looping reflexive structure of multi-diegetic monstrosity.

Here, then, it is the complex relationship between the content and structure of Freud's essay that is of immediate interest. If, as Freud suggests, '*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*', then it is precisely the unsettling semantic implication of this ambivalent logic that both establishes and constitutes the structure of the rest of the analysis.[76] The form of Freud's argument, though the whole is framed within 'the specialist literature of aesthetics', is tripartite: a thorough etymological study of the word *unheimlich*, a psychoanalytic reading of Hoffmann's story 'The Sandman', and finally a differentiation 'between the uncanny that we actually experience and the uncanny that we merely picture or read about'.[77] What is striking about the latter two parts of the essay — Freud's reading of Hoffmann's story, and the discussion of the incongruity between the aesthetic uncanny and the uncanny of actual experience — is that these sections do not seem to follow the etymological study by means of causal logic.

Rather, these arguments are more like variations on the significance of the term; in other words, variations on a concept that do not tell the reader anything new about 'the uncanny' but, instead, become — more akin to Wilde's narrative structure than to the three works Freud examines in the essay — a specialist literature of aesthetics itself. The logical relationship between these three sections seems *hidden* from the reader, yet all three divisions of the argument simultaneously *reveal* the unsettling nature of attempting to deal with the

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[73] Freud, p. 934.
[74] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 96.
[75] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 167, 102–03.
[76] Freud, p. 934.
[77] Freud, pp. 930, 948.

concept. The implications of the uncanny build in intensity by having the term loop back upon themselves. The argument operates by forcing the reader to ask 'which uncanny?' in much the same way that the reader of Wilde's novel is constantly asking 'which Dorian? The one who is pouring out tea for us, or the one in the picture?'[78] But never is the concept brought to rest in a stable and conclusive way. If the meaning of *heimlich* 'develops in the direction of ambivalence' until it is indistinguishable from *unheimlich*, the same process must apply if we begin with *unheimlich*. In this sense, the subject of the essay is absolutely ambivalent and is therefore a convenient metonymy to justify the disjointed and inelegant structure of Freud's argument. And what becomes even more captivating about Freud's essay, here, is the way in which both the conceptual term and the constituted structure of the essay simultaneously both peak, like Wilde's narrative, in a state of homeostasis and of reflexivity.

The denotative ambiguity of the word *heimlich* suggests that its meaning, like the structural narrative peculiarity of Wilde's novel, can be examined as being in a state of semantic homeostasis. There is a tendency in the semantics of this term to gesture toward a complex kind of stability through constant oscillation and feedback between its two conflicting meanings. The term attempts an internal equilibrium, despite the fact that it is in a state of constant conceptual reorganisation. *Heimlich* may be used to signify one of either two opposing signifiers, yet this internal semantic structure of the word asserts that it covertly constitutes both one thing and its opposite. To think about this logic as a metonym for the form of Freud's essay is of particular interest: it implies that the denotation of the term uncanny is subject to two ambiguous meanings simultaneously, and furthermore, that the ambiguous self-reflexive doubling both informs and gives form to the logical structure of Freud's analysis. Again, like the strange metonymical loop structure of Wilde's novel, Freud's mode of writing seems 'to be able to give a plastic form to formless things'.[79]

Homeostasis, however, as a metaphor for the function of the word *heimlich*, is not entirely satisfactory on its own. It is that logical structure to which homeostasis gives rise that is critical in understanding the metonymic function of the term in relation to the essay and novel's structure as a whole. In its logical structure, homeostasis is like narcissism and the uncanny: an evolving and auto-updating form of self-reference. In this sense, the constantly oscillating logic of the relationship between the conceptual terms *heimlich* and *unheimlich* is used by Freud to generate a representational system, yet also becomes representative of both

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[78] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 36.
[79] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 30.

part and the whole of the argument. The intriguing status of *heimlich* and *unheimlich* in Freud's paper, consequently, functions as an indicator of how the overall analysis operates. The metonymic function of the etymological study establishes pre-existing conditions of vertiginous logic which, in turn, generates those logical conditions for the essay's structure.

If the conceptual term, *heimlich*, is inherently semantically ambivalent, then any formal investigation into it is subject to representing a similar effect. Freud attempts to explain the uncanny in terms of the psychoanalytic experience, Wilde in terms of an aesthetic experience; yet in some ways both seem to represent it in both the structure and content of their respective works, rather than describing the concept. It is in this sense that Freud's essay itself is uncanny; in the same way, this is the structural logic that makes Wilde's novel an essentially uncanny experience, as much as the content itself does. If 'The Uncanny' seems to provide an unsettling — even unsatisfactory — study that is more akin to variations and permutations on an ambivalent conceptual theme than a formal argument proceeding by logical consequence, this is perhaps the brilliant point of Freud's essay and, we may add, of Wilde's two Dorians. Perhaps, however, McCormack is correct to remark that mirrors facing mirrors is indeed the appropriate model by which to understand a narcissistic and uncanny selfhood; in this sense, the reader experiences the structure governing his or her own mind embedded within narrative forms of this kind. This is why a narrative of this form 'has a life of its own'; it mimics autopoetically as a representational system, and becomes the invented hyperreal extension of the structural peculiarity of a mind itself.[80] A tangled narrative contexture is strange because it is the quasi-perceptible, quasi-familiar structure of the mind itself; the 'idea [is] monstrous'.[81]

Like the portrait, the text itself is not literally an organism; however, the quirky structural apparatus governing the relationship between the multiple levels of diegesis in the novel does share some similarities with the most basic functions of a life form. Constantly fluxing and reorganising itself through internal textual dynamics, the multi-levelled diegesis of Wilde's novel, as it is governed by the topographical conceptualisation of the strange loop, paradoxically maintains and equalises itself. The multiple ontological levels of diegesis, through the strange logic, refuse to remain stable and fixed — rather, the textual aggregate consists of an ever-moving tangled hierarchy in which any diegetic locale paradoxically occupies the same textual space as an alternative narrative space. These features may constitute the rules — the aesthetic principles and regulations — behind the 'elite or occult

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[80] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 95.
[81] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 121.

game' through which Wilde animates the multi-diegetic contexture of his novel. Indeed, perhaps Borges is eloquent in describing Wilde as a 'laborious *monstrorum artifex*'.