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Kostas Boyiopoulos

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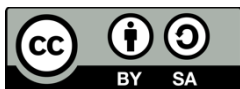
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Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

‘A series of variations on a theme’:
Reinvention and Amplification of Decadence in Jeremy Reed’s *Dorian: A Sequel*

Kostas Boyiopoulos

Durham University

In 2021 a book of twelve manifestoes was published by a group of writers, spearheaded by Brendan Connell and Justin Isis, who call themselves neo-decadents and are against what they term ‘Neo-Passéism’, a symptom of capitalism in which ‘we are trapped in numerous overlapping “era markets” running on commodified nostalgia’.¹ One of the contributors to these manifestos is the London-based, Jersey-born writer Jeremy Reed (1951–). Neo-decadence is reflected in what Reed calls the ‘new real’, whose distinguishing feature is ‘[i]ntensified visual imagery’; writing without it would be like a ‘non-alcoholic drink’.² He hallows *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/1891) as ‘the epitome of decadence’ and ‘the first British underground novel’ in which Oscar Wilde excels at ‘saturated imagery’,³ and goes on to consider the work of William Burroughs, J. G. Ballard, and William Gibson as worthy of the aesthetic embodied in Wilde’s novel. For Reed, neo-decadence is not about resuscitating the past, but about ‘being sucked forward into ultimate novelty by the forces of imagination that shape the new real into its appropriately expansive psychic postcode’.⁴ What does Reed mean by ‘expansive psychic postcode’, and how does he embrace ‘absolute novelty’? This is somewhat perplexing as his œuvre is obsessed with the past.

Reed has been a prolific writer of queer decadence since the 1970s. His work has been praised by Ballard himself, and poets David Gascoyne and Seamus Heaney, among others. A flamboyant performer, Reed has been described as ‘provocateur extraordinaire’.⁵ He is a maverick, a visionary poet, novelist, and biographer who wears his influences on his sleeve. He is drawn to the obscure, the experimental, and the avant-garde, represented by such figures as Wilde, Arthur Rimbaud, Jean Genet, Iain Sinclair, Anne Sexton, and especially Ballard, as well as rock musicians David Bowie, Marc Almond, Lou Reed, and Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones. Reed is fascinated with the iconography of glam rock stardom, but he also specializes in reinventing or reimagining

figures and writers associated with transgressive decadence, publishing biofiction and memoirs on Caligula, the Marquis de Sade, Rimbaud, and the Comte de Lautréamont, just as Wilde was obsessed with the cult of personality in nonconformist, marginal artists such as Thomas Chatterton and Thomas Griffiths Wainwright.

At the turn of the millennium, Reed published the homoerotic *Dorian: A Sequel to the Picture of Dorian Gray* (1997) with Peter Owen's publishing house. It is a book about hedonism, anguish, and introspection, peppered with Wilde's aphorisms and soundbites, muted by a sombre style. This is a poet's novel: hypnotic and hieratic in its tone, obscene yet elegant in its diction, saturated, hyper-visual, and filmic in its style, an exemplar of neo-decadence as the 'new real'. Three years after the publication of *Dorian: A Sequel*, Reed edited the *Lippincott's* magazine version of Wilde's text (including Chapter 16 of the 1891 version) for Creation Books. Writing long before he contributed his own manifesto of neo-decadence, Reed describes *Dorian Gray* in the introduction as the 'blueprint for the subversive genre' of the twentieth century as it is expressed by Burroughs, Ballard, and Genet; Dorian 'prefigures the metamorphic character of Divine' in Genet's debut novel *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* [*Our Lady of the Flowers*] (1943).⁶ Reed's *Dorian: A Sequel* may aspire to be in the company of these writers' underground works, but, crucially, it carries its Wildean 'blueprint' in a double sense: by subverting the narrative and yet reinforcing its message. In other words, it does so not only in its intertextual allegiance, but in its overt intertextual self-reflexivity as an element with which Wilde's text is already invested.

The movement against neo-Passéism, to which Jeremy Reed belongs, is in a sense a counter-neo-Victorian movement: it is suspicious of streamlined homage. The new real shifts emphasis to the derived text of the present and even to the future, a phenomenon acknowledged by Marie-Luise Kohlke. In what Kohlke calls 'appropriative reuse', the emphasis of certain neo-Victorian works is on reimagining rather than on recreating.⁷ Taken to the extreme, this idea can lead to the neo-Passéist polemic against reconstructing and rewriting the past. Even though Reed falls in with the neo-decadents' antagonistic approach, his novel appeared in the heyday of neo-

Victorian writing, in the 1990s, and so it cannot be neatly extricated from it. My aim in this essay is to focus on how Reed's *Dorian* re-uses Wilde's *Dorian Gray* in a unique manner that pivots on self-reflexivity: it amplifies and reinvents Wilde's decadence, measuring its tropes up against the arch-paradox of life as a work of art. Reed indulges in Wilde's novel not as something that lends itself to straightforward postmodern adaptation or historical nostalgia, but as an ur-text of decadent mythology that contains a map of its possibilities, a golden template, a formula of narrative transformation and amplification that projects into the future.

'[N]ot intended as a literal sequel'

Reed's *Dorian: A Sequel* predates Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002) by five years. Even though Self's neo-Victorian take on Wilde's novel enjoys the limelight, Reed's *Dorian* remains in obscurity. Self's novel updates Wilde's backstory by faithfully adapting it in the technological, cultural, and political milieu of the 1980s and 1990s: Dorian is an HIV-positive man who infects others but remains unchanged. Dorian's decaying portrait here is a 'video installation' created by Baz (Basil) and 'called *Cathode Narcissus*'.⁸ Self's narrative rationalizes Dorian's story while treating it as a universally repeatable twentieth-century myth that can be apperelled accordingly in each decade, splicing together all the decade-long fashions that have come before, the 'arithmetic cultural progression of modal repetition'.⁹ On the other hand, Reed's brand of neo-Victorian decadence is peculiar. Across its eight chapters, it opens up a discursive channel of a multi-layered and strangely incestuous intertextuality with Wilde's novel. Its plot is a roadmap to a metafictional Dorian, bifurcated into a literal and an anachronistic or parallel version.

The year is 1897 and Dorian has survived the mutilation of his portrait. He has schemed and murdered his illegitimate lookalike half-brother Jim, placing 'his own rings on the dead man's defaced body', giving rise to the belief that Dorian Gray is dead.¹⁰ Now Dorian lives in Paris with Lord Henry Wootton. The two are in a fraught homosexual relationship. The roles are here reversed as it is Dorian who exerts an influence on Lord Henry. Lord Henry feels he is becoming

a ‘parody’ of Dorian and returns to his wife Victoria who has discovered the pleasures of infidelity.¹¹ To fend off his conscience, while alternating between narcissism and self-loathing, Dorian becomes a dabbler in the occult. He is a nocturnal creature, choreographing elaborate, orgiastic S&M ceremonies, embodying a kind of satanic messianism as ‘the leather-crown king of the underworld’. He is hounded by an obsessive transvestite by the name of Nadja who threatens to expose Dorian’s crimes and kill him. He encounters real-life homosexual decadent writers Paul Verlaine and Wilde when the latter is released from prison. At Le Procope, Harry comes across an absinthe-inebriated and dissolute Verlaine accompanied by Lucien Letinois, a feminine ‘blue-denimed worker’.¹² In an extensive passage Verlaine reminisces about Rimbaud and the latter’s work and suicide.¹³ Dorian moves to Venice, ‘a city that to [him] personified decadence’¹⁴ to prepare for his death – an obvious nod to Thomas Mann’s famous novella. In Venice he presides over and is apotheosized by a court of transvestites. He takes up rooms with Florentino, a smitten beautiful young painter that he marries in an ostentatiously planned, sacrilegious wedding ritual, consummating his marriage at the centre of a magic circle under the gaze of his disciples.

The ending of the novel is an intertextual inversion or transposition of Wilde’s ending: Dorian is on the verge of paranoia as signs of ageing and decay mar his beauty. The now grotesque-looking Dorian attempts to stab his portrait while Nadja, his pursuer, stands menacingly behind him and stabs him. But to his surprise the portrait has been restored to its perfect beauty, just as Basil Hallward had painted it.

What Wilde glosses over or leaves understated in his novel, Reed brings to the fore and explores in detail, especially Dorian’s nocturnal city sojourns. Reed fills in gaps, overwrites characters, and fleshes out narrative permutations. He sketches out Dorian’s clandestine activities and unuttered sins, follows narrative possibilities to their logical conclusion (such as Dorian’s relationship with Harry), entangles the historical world of the 1890s with fiction (Dorian meeting Wilde and Verlaine, for example), and toggles or reverses plot details (such as Dorian influencing Harry; Dorian ageing with his portrait being intact). In taking advantage of the elasticity of Wilde’s

text, what Reed imaginatively employs is the narrative device of retcon (a portmanteau of ‘retroactive continuity’): this term means that a sequel or spinoff reworks or elaborates the parent narrative in a way that does not violate its internal logic and cohesion. Retcon is a popular term originally associated with graphic novel franchises and is often suspicious of distorting the ideas of the original.¹⁵ An example of a Wilde-inspired neo-Victorian retcon novel, also set in 1897, is Philip Purser-Hallard’s *The Spider’s Web* (2020), in which Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson step into the world of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) to solve a murder mystery. Even though retconning is linked with genre fiction, Reed employs it in his poetic novel. He retcons *Dorian Gray* not because he wants to revise it or use it as background cloth, but to showcase its inbuilt potential for neo-decadent transformation.

Reed’s retconned sequel, however, seems to be marred by a curious inconsistency. We know that it is set in 1897, and in the preface Reed clarifies that the ‘novel begins where Wilde’s ends’.¹⁶ But does Wilde’s narrative end in 1897? In Wilde’s novel Dorian comes across Huysmans’s *À rebours*, so the original novel is set between 1884 and 1890, most likely in 1890, the year of its first publication. We also know that at the beginning of Wilde’s novel Dorian is 20 years of age, and when he dies 18 years have elapsed – this is what Sybil Vane’s enraged brother James tells Dorian towards the end of the book.¹⁷ That makes Wilde’s Dorian 38 years of age, and the year of his death circa 1908. Further, Reed’s Dorian meets Wilde in 1897, yet he listens to Charles Aznavour, Juliette Gréco, and Serge Lama on his audio system,¹⁸ a combination of French chanson singers that push the time to the 1960s. Is, then, 1897, a glaring blunder? In the preface Reed explains that

The book is not intended as a literal sequel to Wilde’s novel, but more as the expansion of a theme into its modern equivalents. I have taken liberties with the time-frame, and juxtaposed historic with contemporary associations. I have tried to maintain the spirit of Wilde’s authoritatively decadent novel, and to transpose his *fin de siècle* aesthetics to a corresponding set of values existing at the end of the twentieth century. [...] In giving Dorian Gray another face-lift, I have not altered the predominant characteristics with which Wilde invested his creation. It is quite simply another time, another place, and so the story continues.¹⁹

Reed tacitly perceives Wilde's *Dorian* as a 'metamorphic' text (to use Reed's own characterisation of Genet's *Divine*) that is configured in such a way that it lends itself to future projections and extrapolations. In Dorian's perfumed room, surrounded by his *objets d'art* and books, Harry muses that Dorian has perhaps 'multiple lives', '1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, all the way to a thousand'.²⁰ It should be noted that this technique of amalgamating the time period of the subject matter with contemporary aesthetics is routinely found in Reed's oeuvre. In his neo-decadent novel *Boy Caesar* (2004), for example, Jim is a doctoral student who writes his dissertation on Heliogabalus, embellishing the historical record in order to reconstruct the emperor's life by employing a heavily anachronistic style. In the preface, Reed explains that he has 'taken the liberty of fusing classical and modern times', thus 'giving Boy Caesar another bite at the apple'.²¹ Reed may be a serial narrative revamper, and 'another bite at the apple' may be similar to 'another face-lift', but his *Dorian Gray* is not like other decadent stories. Wilde's original text turns out to be a narrative of infinite side-shadowing possibilities as well as a sequel-making machine. Dorian himself exhibits an extraordinary metafictional awareness:

He knew he could never again begin to retell his story. There was something so intractable about personal narrative that it could be committed only once, and after that it became a series of variations on a theme. Any number of untruths constellated around a quasar hidden in the unconscious.²²

Dorian, the 'ultimate enigma',²³ represents an inscrutable centre that undergoes a continual neo-Victorian transfiguration. The eternal 'theme' of Dorian's secret of beauty in the face of life's limitations can be repeated in 'variations', both within the novel and across existing and hypothetical sequels. The retconned story set in 1897 and its anachronistic 'face-lift' correspond to two visual styles that are fused.

In the first one, the novel bears the characteristic decadent signature of the collector's exquisite *objets d'art*, recasting Wilde's and Huysmans's iconography of elegant sensuality and excess. Reed emulates the artificiality of Des Esseintes' *château*, which in Huysmans's novel is designed to resemble a ship's cabin. Correspondingly, with its star-studded 'ultramarine ceiling'

Dorian's 'bedroom resemble(s) a galactic *annus mirabilis*'.²⁴ Echoing Des Esseintes' gem-studded tortoise, Dorian has two pet snakes named Sodom and Gomorrah, a menagerie of reptiles and stuffed animals, and mannequins modelled on aliens and extraterrestrials.²⁵ He has an extensive collection of 'ostentatious ensembles', a 'textural density of velvets, satins, heavy sequins', a description that applies to Reed's own scintillating writing style as well. Dorian is a connoisseur of the occult, and his bookshelves are lined with 'the works of John Dee and Thomas Vaughan, lives of Gilles de Rais, the Marquis de Sade's scatological novels, the works of Eliphas Levi and J. K. Huysmans, and a whole compendium of privately printed erotica', with the 'ritualistic accoutrements' to his reading being a collection of 'perfumes, ceremonial robes and sex toys'. He owns a 'specially bound copy of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*', 'bound in black silk from an item of Jeanne Duval's lingerie'; the narrator here notes that 'Baudelaire's fingers must also have lived on the fabric in its tight adherence to his mistress's curves'. And *À rebours* has a synaesthetic effect on Dorian, reminding him of 'semen and perfume, incense and ripe hayfields before thunder'.²⁶ Within the trope of the collector's eccentric repertoire of objects and tastes, that of the decadent book that exerts its influence on the main character is of key importance. By having Dorian revering *Les Fleurs du Mal* (also cherished by Des Esseintes), *À rebours* (the 'yellow book'²⁷ that haunts Wilde's Dorian), and *Dorian Gray* itself (a book that consumes Reed's Dorian), Reed amplifies Wilde's trope of multiple nesting of books within books as well as forking out a shortcut within this nesting. Reed's Dorian is not just culturally appropriated in the manner of Self's adaptation. The text he inhabits is caught in a bidirectional relationship between literary influence and response.

In the other, anachronistic visual style (anticipating Self's techno-cultural updating) Reed's retconned sequel is, in fact, a reimagined neo-Victorian sequel. As such, it invests Wilde's Victorian tale with imagery and vocabulary evocative of the 1990s, Reed's own time when he wrote the book. Reed's approach is distilled in a nonconformist translation of a poem by Baudelaire, 'Les Métamorphoses du vampire' [The Vampire's Metamorphoses], which he contributed to an

anthology in 1992, opting for such pornographic renderings as ‘scarlet lipstick mouth’ and ‘sucked the pearl beads from my cock’.²⁸ Incidentally this poem by Baudelaire resonates with Dorian. Reed’s textual patina in the novel is decisively Ballardian. Dorian often seems like a character out of Ballard’s experimental, transgressive novels, such as *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) and *Crash* (1973). He is written in a twentieth-century psycho-technological vernacular that belongs to the province of science fiction and echoes advanced biology, computer science, and intersecting geometries, expressing movement and speed in the evening cityscape:

Neons, logos kaleidoscoped into jerky cryptograms.

The cab took the length of a sizzling avenue, bucking the sparkling wall of sustained sibilants. They were moving at speed again, the lights fizzing as geometric fractures, the night breaking up around them. It was like looking at scrambled brain cells.

[Dorian’s] past was floating on the waters like a data-based hologram. He imagined seeing his image cloned right across the lagoon: *Dorian Gray*.

[Dorian’s] life appeared to be the chemical printout of an uninterrupted future. His informational DNA, his gene pool, his endorphin buzz, his biochemistry were all programmed for a future in which Dorian would share.²⁹

These ultramodern Ballardian images do more than serve as stylistic devices. They participate in the novel’s neo-decadent status as a metafiction in a dynamic conversation with the original, especially in capturing the interstices between Dorian’s split selves. Reed even grafts the mythology of decadent archetypes onto Ballard’s twentieth-century mythology. In the final chapter Dorian imagines a labyrinth full of ‘banks of television and computer screens on which the dead would show’: a ‘psychopathic pantheon’ including ‘Caligula, Heliogabalus, Pope Pius V, the Marquis de Sade’, and Wilde himself.³⁰ Reed replaces Ballard’s hagiographic gallery of such figures as Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, and John Kennedy, with a rollcall of historical figures associated with decadence.

The difference between Self’s and Reed’s immersion of *Dorian Gray* in a sea of technological postmodernism is that the former remakes Wilde’s novel more conventionally, mapping it onto his own contemporary era, while the latter maps his era onto the novel. If for Self

the story of Dorian Gray is accessorised by the imagery of a late-twentieth-century decade, for Reed this imagery is the very breathing style of the story. The examples quoted above tend towards Reed's idea of neo-decadence as the 'new real' and the aesthetics of 'novelty' in reflecting the past being pushed into the future.³¹ The novel's strategy of amplification goes beyond decadent iconography; it pivots on an unusual metafictional axis in which the narrative frame is hybridized and bifurcated: Reed's Dorian is Wilde's Dorian and at the same time he is not, in the sense that he is a Dorian from a parallel universe.

Dorian meets his author

Dorian's interaction with Wilde himself, especially their extended chance encounter in Chapter 3, makes Reed's novel stand out. It is what pushes Reed's retconning ingenuity and novelty into the territory of self-reflexivity. In his introduction to Wilde's novel in its *Lippincott's* version, Reed makes the claim that Wilde's double life as a homosexual man in the West End is injected into the figure of Dorian.³² Reed's sequel reconfigures this avatariar relationship, but unsettles it by having Dorian meet a post-penitentiary lackadaisical Wilde in Paris. In keeping with the anachronization of the narrative, Dorian enters a club on the 'corner of Rue de Richelieu' with a 'pink neon cat' as its sign and 'pink' table lamps. His attention is arrested by Wilde's photograph on the wall, a discreet in-joke that parallels Dorian and his portrait. It turns out that the club is a haunt Wilde frequents, going under the name of Sebastian Melmoth.³³ The two have a conversation, and a rent boy enters the scene and dances for Wilde. The scene crescendos to a chaotic situation in which the dancing young man produces a knife and creeps up on Wilde who is whisked away by Dorian in a taxi that takes them to his apartment. By having Dorian and Wilde meet and interact, Reed introduces what Gérard Genette has called 'metalepsis', in which intertextual diegetic thresholds are transcended, evoking the metafiction of Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino.³⁴

The author-as-character is as old as literature itself, from Euripides and Aeschylus in Aristophanes' *Frogs* to Virgil in Dante's *Divina Commedia*, from the quasi-historical reconstruction

of Shakespeare in Wilde's *The Portrait of Mr W. H.* to Victorian writers as characters in neo-Victorian novels. Particularly faddish in that regard have been genre fiction sleuth mysteries, such as Howard Engels's *Mr. Doyle and Dr. Bell* (1997), James Reese's *The Dracula Dossier: A Novel of Suspense* (2008), William Palmer's 'Mr. Dickens' series (1990s), or more pertinently Gyles Brandreth's Oscar Wilde murder mysteries (2007–2012). In Reed's case, however, we have something different. The novel shares with the aforementioned examples what Richard Saint-Gelais calls 'transfictionality', but in a particularly specialised manner.³⁵ This is a type of narrative in which the character confronts the author that created them, and it has its own precedents: in *True Histories* by Lucian of Samosata (second century CE), for instance, Odysseus meets Homer. A more relevant example of neo-Victorian decadence is Ken Russell's symbolist camp film *Salome's Last Dance* (1988), where the character-meets-author trope is staged: Wilde plays audience to a private performance of his own play in a brothel, even occasionally interacting with the actors/characters.³⁶ According to Paul Franssen and Ton Hoenselaars, this kind of appropriation, rather than confrontation, is 'a subtler form' of Bloomian anxiety of influence, 'in which an author neutralises his predecessor by rewriting him in his own image'.³⁷

Dorian and Wilde '[a]imed for a collisional future', retreating 'into the precincts of inner space'.³⁸ The phrase 'inner space' famously sums up Ballard's theory about science fiction. With reference to the dreamworld interiority of Surrealist painting, Ballard defines 'inner space' as 'the internal landscape of tomorrow that is a transmuted image of the past, and one of the most fruitful areas for the imaginative writer'.³⁹ Reed paraphrases this definition loosely and repurposes it. In the neo-decadent literature of the future that *Dorian: A Sequel* represents, Wilde the author has receded and become just another character, a virtual fiction within the text.

Yet, in a further retconning narrative contortion, Reed's Dorian is only Wilde's fiction insofar as he is a farfetched coincidence in the sequel's intradiegetic reality: Reed's Dorian is not Wilde's Dorian, but something of a reverse simulacrum: a random individual whose life closely resembles that of Wilde's protagonist by chance, thus substantiating the motto in 'The Decay of

Lying' that 'Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life'.⁴⁰ Reed's Dorian has fallen under the spell of Wilde's *Dorian Gray* (alongside *À rebours* and Baudelaire's poetry). Wilde's text as a 'blueprint' (to go back to Reed's introduction to Wilde's text) reveals the way to 'create a self distinct from the past'.⁴¹ Reed's Dorian is inspired by the original Dorian's desire to annihilate the past and escape into a realm where everything impossible becomes possible. He confesses to Wilde: 'I had the feeling that you had created me through your book. That I had stepped out of your mind and committed the crimes you had imagined on the page'.⁴² This metaleptic trick mirrors Wilde's own Dorian, whose life is an imitation as well as a prefiguration of the fictional Des Esseintes:

The hero, the wonderful young Parisian in whom the romantic and the scientific temperaments were so strangely blended, became to him a kind of pre-figuring type of himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it.⁴³

Reed helps to underscore the original as a sequel-making machine. It is not surprising that in a similar moment in Peter Ackroyd's *The Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), a quasi-imaginary autobiographical memoir of Wilde in 1900, Bosie Douglas falls under the spell of Oscar's novel and so he was 'determined to meet its author' as 'he felt he had read in *Dorian Gray* the history of his own life'.⁴⁴

The metafictional possibilities generated by such an encounter unravel further. Wilde replies to Dorian: 'Your story involves me in the despair I had anticipated'. The conversation makes the intertextual narrative fold and loop over itself. Then Dorian says: 'Time is always blacked out in my life. Drugs, sex and manipulated states of consciousness do the rest. I am not sure that I am not dead and exist in an extratemporal state'.⁴⁵ Reality becomes just another layer of fiction when it is enveloped and co-opted by another narrative. The effect of a lifestyle of decadent indulgence is to extricate life from the ravages of time. Hence, the libertine Dorian is a walking paradox as he imagines himself a fiction, static and frozen in time. Reality and fiction converge to a vanishing point.

With the infinite regress triggered by juxtaposing reality with fiction, Reed circumscribes art-imitating-life as a continual process. Wearing ‘a dark-blue suit with a pink carnation splashed over the buttonhole’,⁴⁶ Wilde is sitting at a table, reading a book, his body now large, unmuscular and neglected. Dorian orders champagne cocktails and approaches him. Reed brings the scene to life strategically by injecting vividness of detail. By doing so, the metafictional encounter between character and author acquires a thrilling effect of ambiguity between happenstance and verisimilitude. The conversation explores the full potential of such an encounter:

‘You are just as I imagined Dorian Gray’, [Wilde] said. ‘I knew I wouldn’t find or see him until after I described him in my book. You see, my idea is right, that art inspires and directs nature. You would never have existed had I not described Dorian. Do sit down, Mr Gray.’⁴⁷

Wilde’s hypothesis here contains the novel’s double reading: in the logic of ‘sequel’, Reed’s Dorian now turns into the exact same fictional Dorian from Wilde’s original novel, both retconned and reimagined. Reed’s Dorian exists because of Wilde’s novel: ‘I had the feeling you had created me through your book. That I had stepped out of your mind and committed the crimes you had imagined on the page’. And in a further blurring of epistemological boundaries, Wilde says: ‘ideas expressed in my novel were used against me. Fiction was used to seem a reality.’⁴⁸

‘You must reinvent yourself again’

If Reed highlights the original *Dorian Gray* as a textual artefact that contains its own formula for future reinventions, Wilde as a character embodies change and transformation, paralleling Dorian, when he says: ‘My life is like a work of art. An artist never starts the same thing twice.’ Double meanings hover like a penumbra over Reed’s sentences. These double meanings suggest neo-decadent metamorphism; that is, how Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* keeps generating fictions in which the self, vizarded by the artificiality of beauty, transcends diegetic boundaries. The lesson of the original *Dorian Gray* is not the mere imitation of life as art, but the imitation of its formula of protean reinvention. Like a Plato-like mentor, Wilde advises Dorian: ‘You must *reinvent* yourself *again* in order to stay free.’ Wilde’s words reach beyond Reed’s text, mapping out a trajectory of

intertextuality. In reinventing himself, Dorian is also a synecdoche for *Dorian Gray*, the text of the myth of decadence that must ‘reinvent’ itself ‘again’, a deliberately superfluous phrase that points to both the diegetic expansion of Dorian’s character, as well as to the continual reimagining of Wilde’s original novel. As Wilde aphorizes at the club in rue de Richelieu, ‘All life is a limitation. Escape with yours and continue to expand it.’⁴⁹

Self-reinvention is at the heart of Reed’s sequel, which begins with Dorian’s reinvention of his identity when he murders his illegitimate half-brother Jim and places his rings on his disfigured victim’s fingers. The second murder is not only a plot device that demonstrates Dorian’s moral depravity, but also emblematic of intertextual continuity. Dorian may be the paragon of perpetual beauty, but he exists within a time-bound reality that he strives to transcend or escape through ritualistic identity changes. Early in the text, we follow Harry as a spectator in the S&M club Dorian frequents, a carnivalesque space teeming with transvestites, voyeurs, and fetishists. This is a space that chimes with Reed’s queer aesthetics of drag, cross-dressing, and gender fluidity, embodied in the world of music camp stardom of the 1970s and 1980s, as in the chameleonic personae of Almond and Bowie. Here, Dorian resembles Odysseus as he ‘compare[s] the sexual outlaw’s journey to heroic descent into the underworld. The day-world ritualistically reversed itself into a network of sexual contacts.’⁵⁰ The S&M club, as well as all the clandestine lurid scenes in the novel, is characteristically neo-Victorian as an articulation of the obverse of decorum in Victorian fiction. It imbues the tantalizing lacunae of Dorian’s secret London life in Wilde’s novel, when he ‘consorted with thieves and coiners and knew the mysteries of their trade’, and ‘[h]is extraordinary absences became notorious’.⁵¹

In order to escape the human (and novelistic) condition, Dorian’s self-reinvention takes on a religious formality in Reed’s sequel. At the club, Dorian performs a bombastic ritual crucifixion, a parodic imitation of the Passion of Christ: in his ‘masochistic apotheosisation’ in the underworld, he uses ‘[p]ain’ as ‘a trajectory to re-creating himself’. He is like a ‘sacrificial and dying god’. By being crowned ‘an S&M divinity’, Dorian hopes ‘to elude his former self and convert to

a Dorian free of the past' in an effort 'to get away' from it 'by driving a car at burn-out speed towards the future'.⁵² Reed invests faux religious sacredness with the language of Ballardian futurism to express Dorian's desperate desire to escape reality. But the succession of 'past' and 'future' also suggests the neo-decadent novelistic reincarnations of Dorian, with the added paradoxical irony that a succession of Dorian's life histories is a succession of realities, albeit intradiegetic ones. Throughout the sequel, Dorian, both self-deprecating and grandiose, becomes a living myth that undergoes reinvention, with Wilde's *Dorian Gray* serving as a kind of guiding scripture, its theology of amoral beauty remaining constant.

The pattern of deification and ritual continues when Dorian is in Venice, where, following Walter Pater's gospel of experience for its own sake, he perfects 'the art of living in the moment, extending the pulsating nanosecond to a full beat'. Dorian decides with his Roman *puer*, Florentino, to 'push perversity to its limits' by marrying one another in a secret ceremony in a chapel on the Lido. The preparations involve Dorian dabbling in arcane knowledge and 'sexual magic'.⁵³ With the endorsement by a retinue of transvestite disciples, Dorian consummates his 'profane rite' by offering 'Florentino's body to the altar'. Dorian enters into a strange reverie: he imagines that his union with Florentino will result in a kind of 'parthenogenesis' (virgin birth) in the form of a 'brainchild' from Florentino's left eye – 'a child no larger than a gold insect', 'balanced on an eyelash, waving its filigree arms and legs like antennae', with its own 'conscious perception of the world'.⁵⁴ This surreal vision, almost sacrilegious in its oblique associations with the New Testament, carries the theme of both intradiegetic and intertextual reinvention into the domain of allegory.

The self-reflexive transposition and dislocation of intradiegetic reality in the sequel is completed at the end when Reed revisits the classic stabbing of the portrait. This is a moment of doom in which Dorian Gray's self-reinventions appear to be mere snakeskin-shedding. And yet, this is a moment where he has 'orchestrated his own grand dénouement', again playing upon the Christian theme of determined self-sacrifice, forming a symmetry with his apotheosized

masochistic performance in the gay club in Paris at the novel's opening. Just as with Wilde's original novel, the portrait is restored to its original state of perfect beauty, 'staring back' at his double. In Reed's version, the reverse transformation of the portrait takes place before the final confrontation: in Venice, signs of ageing and decay had already gradually appeared on Dorian's body, and in a desperate attempt at self-illusion he paints a mask over his face.⁵⁵ At the 'dénouement' he slashes at the portrait's 'protective clinging' – in a sense, its costume, or mask – expecting to see the portrait putrefying. Instead, he sees the beautiful youth whom Basil Hallward had painted, and 'It was [Dorian] who was old and who embodied the catastrophic physical blemishes that had grown to be the painting's biographical identity.'⁵⁶ It is at this moment that Dorian gets his comeuppance when he is stabbed by and falls dead into the arms of Nadja, his nemesis, a character reminiscent of the chthonic Furies of Greek myth.⁵⁷ In a notable detail, the convergence of these three entities is fraught with ambiguity and instability that fosters further narrative amplification. Dorian wonders whether Nadja is present, 'or if he was hallucinating a simulacrum of his blackmailing adversary'.⁵⁸ We are not sure if Nadja is just another split self just as the portrait is, at least symbolically.

Reed tweaks Wilde's ending but not the outcome: Dorian's decline and death. The outcome is mundane if taken in a vacuum, without the neo-Victorian connection with Wilde. It only becomes a novelty, a cunning twist, by reversing the ending of Wilde's novel. Reed's ending is entirely novelistic because it feeds on the original text, and so it is *Wildean* in a double sense. On the one hand, Dorian is aware of himself as a fiction, a supreme example of life imitating art. On the other hand, he is now the ageing 'painting'; he is the written biography ('biographical identity'), attached to the painting, the work of art. The painting emerges as the real character, with Dorian, the fictional character, as the portrait's secondary, reflected self. With just a few sleight of hand tricks, supported by a laden, introspective style, Reed amplifies the play of paradoxes in an infinity of metalepses and frame narrative violations. If anything is reinvented, it is *Dorian Gray*

as an amoral myth of quasi-religious self-sacrifice to beauty that rises and falls with every neo-decadent response.

Conclusion

In Reed's lyrical novel of supercharged decadence, we come across the following sentence: 'Dorian's capacity for decadence was voracious beyond Harry's most extreme imaginings.'⁵⁹ The word 'decadence' here is a loaded sign, a demarcated and measurable cultural territory. And yet it is extricated from its fin-de-siècle milieu. To come back to Reed's definition of neo-decadence as a forward thrust of 'the new real into its appropriately expansive psychic postcode', Reed anticipates the new real in a poem appositely titled 'The Nineties':

One looks for a new poetry,
Something animated, a renaissance

Of imagery, a futuristic
Dynamic [...].⁶⁰

Throughout the novel, Dorian strives to annihilate the past and reinvent himself in the future. His demise could simply be a gesture towards resurrection in another fiction, the fiction of the future. Wilde's novel, the text within the text, is the 'expansive psychic postcode' – postcode being a symbol of both origin and destination, original and sequel. Reed amplifies Wilde's decadent text not by amplifying its familiar tropes, but by amplifying its formulas for the amplification of decadence. If Reed's novel makes a statement, it is that Wilde's text is a map, a blueprint, and a template for future neo-Victorian reincarnations. As Reed says in the preface, 'and so the story continues'.

¹ Justin Isis *et al*, 'Against Neo-Passéism', in *Neo-Decadence: 12 Manifestos*, ed. by Justin Isis (London: Snuggly Books, 2021), p. 135.

² Jeremy Reed, 'English Poetry: Neo-Decadence as the New Real', in *Neo-Decadence: 12 Manifestos*, p. 114.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 107, 108.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁵ Gillian McCain, 'Jeremy Reed: Ruined by Poetry', *Please Kill Me: This is What's Cool*, 4 March 2019, <https://pleasekillme.com/jeremy-reed-poetry/> [accessed 22 December 2023].

- ⁶ Jeremy Reed, 'Introduction', in Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Volume 5 of Creation Classics (London: Creation Press, 2000), pp. 5, 9.
- ⁷ Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'Adaptive/Appropriative Reuse in neo-Victorian Fiction: Having One's Cake and Eating It Too', in *Interventions: Rethinking the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Andrew Smith and Anna Barton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 169-87.
- ⁸ Will Self, *Dorian: An Imitation* (London: Penguin, 2009 [2002]), p. 13.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- ¹⁰ Jeremy Reed, *Dorian: A Sequel to The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Peter Owen, 2001), p. 20.
- ¹¹ The bulk of Chapter 6 focuses on Victoria.
- ¹² Reed, *Dorian*, pp. 24, 26, 15.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-17.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ¹⁵ See Mark J. P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 212-13.
- ¹⁶ Reed, *Dorian*, n.p.
- ¹⁷ See Oscar Wilde, *Complete Works*, introduced by Vyvyan Holland (London: Collins, 2002), p. 145.
- ¹⁸ Reed, *Dorian*, pp. 147-48.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, n.p.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- ²¹ Jeremy Reed, *Boy Caesar* (London and Chester Springs: Peter Owen, 2004), p. 9.
- ²² Reed, *Dorian*, p. 32.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29. These bizarre collections are a direct biographical reference to Marc Almond. See Jeremy Reed, *The Last Star: A Study of Marc Almond* (London and San Francisco: Creation Books, 1995), p. 69.
- ²⁶ Reed, *Dorian*, pp. 25, 83, 26, 34, 89.
- ²⁷ Wilde, *Complete Works*, p. 101.
- ²⁸ Charles Baudelaire, 'The Vampire's Metamorphoses', transl. by Jeremy Reed, in *Blood and Roses: The Vampire in 19th Century Literature*, ed. by Adèle Olivia Gladwell and James Havoc (London: Creation Press, 1992), p. 91.
- ²⁹ Reed, *Dorian*, pp. 62, 64, 77, 80.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- ³¹ Dorian acknowledges that Huysmans's novel influenced Wilde's decadence: 'What he [Dorian] would have liked was a literature that blew the back out of the sky. He had made a ritual burning of all realist novels' (Reed, *Dorian*, p. 89).
- ³² Reed, 'Introduction', p. 6.
- ³³ Reed, *Dorian*, pp. 46, 47.
- ³⁴ See John Pier, 'Metalepsis', in *Handbook of Narratology*, ed. by Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier, and Jörg Schönert (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2009), pp. 190-91.
- ³⁵ See Richard Saint-Gelais, 'Transfictionality', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010), *ProQuest*, <https://www.proquest.com/encyclopedias-reference-works/transfictionality/docview/2137959357/se-2> [accessed 4 February 2024].
- ³⁶ Wilde as a character in fiction has fascinated numerous writers since the 1890s. See Angela Kingston, *Oscar Wilde as a Character in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- ³⁷ Paul Franssen and Ton Hoenselaars, *The Author as Character: Representing Historical Writers in Western Literature* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1999), p. 25.
- ³⁸ Reed, *Dorian*, pp. 62-63.
- ³⁹ J. G. Ballard, 'Time, Memory and Inner Space', in *A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 200.
- ⁴⁰ Wilde, *Complete Works*, p. 982.
- ⁴¹ Reed, *Dorian*, p. 31.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- ⁴³ Wilde, *Complete Works*, p. 102.
- ⁴⁴ Peter Ackroyd, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (London: Sphere Books, 1984 [1983]), p. 125. Incidentally, in a further parallel, in his biography of Marc Almond, Reed dedicates a few paragraphs to how *À rebours* was an instrumental influence on the pop star. See Reed, *The Last Star*, pp. 69-70.
- ⁴⁵ Reed, *Dorian*, p. 52.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 51.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 54 (my emphasis), 55.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ⁵¹ Wilde, *Complete Works*, p. 112.

⁵² Reed, *Dorian*, pp. 29, 25, 28.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70, 70, 104.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 104, 91.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 165, 167, 151.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁵⁷ A possible reference to *Nadja* (1928), the second book published by André Breton.

⁵⁸ Reed, *Dorian*, p. 166.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁶⁰ Jeremy Reed, *Nineties* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), p. 6.