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# Verdeurs: Oscar Wilde, Dorian Gray, and the Colors of Decadence

CHARLOTTE RIBEYROL

Dear Mr Payne,

The book that poisoned, or made perfect, Dorian Gray does not exist; it is a fancy of mine merely.

I am so glad you like that strange coloured book of mine: it contains much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps.<sup>1</sup>

—Oscar Wilde to Ralph Payne, February 12, 1894

OSCAR Wilde's letter to his young admirer Ralph Payne has been quoted so many times in studies exploring the controversial autobiographical dimension of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) that its chromatic dimension has almost passed unnoticed. Yet Wilde's description of his novel as "that strange coloured book of mine" is most intriguing for a number of reasons. First, this quotation shows that color, far from simply being a secondary element in Wilde's tale, is directly connected to its "strangeness." In the manuscript of the letter, the word "strange"—in its adjectival rather than adverbial form—is clearly isolated on the page, recalling Walter Pater's praise of "strange dyes, strange colours" in the subversive conclusion to his essays on the Renaissance.<sup>2</sup> It is as if Wilde, here, paradoxically articulated both identification ("much of me") and difference ("that strange book") through the means of color. This tension between strangeness (or rather estrangement) and mimesis is what I wish to explore in this essay, which revisits the decadent text of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* through a chromatic lens. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's reading of Plato's *pharmakon*, I will show that Wilde's use of culturally charged chromatic terms, as well as his description of the picture of the hero as a "coloured image" rather than as a portrait, serves his antimimetic aestheticism.

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It is also my contention that the moral degeneration of the hero is literally inscribed in the decaying colors of the eponymous picture in ways that reference the key source texts of decadence, which, as a movement, has rarely been approached from the perspective of color. This is all the more surprising since the major exponents of decadence frequently explored the poetic potentialities of fading or decaying colors. For instance, in his 1868 essay on Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier defines the style of decadence as a self-referential technolact “taking color from every palette” (*prenant des couleurs à toutes les palettes*), reminiscent of “language already veined with the greenness of decomposition, savoring the Later Roman Empire and the complicated refinements of the Byzantine School, the last form of Greek art fallen into deliquescence” (*la langue marbrée déjà des verdeurs de la décomposition et comme faisandée du bas empire romain et les raffinements compliqués de l’école byzantine, dernière forme de l’art grec tombé en déliquescence*).<sup>3</sup> Paul Bourget in his “Essai de psychologie contemporaine: Charles Baudelaire,” first published in *La Nouvelle Revue* in 1881, took up this chromatic analogy to expound his own theory of decadence:

His hours of delight are the evening hours, when the sky becomes as colorful as the background of a Lombard painting, with nuances of a dead pink and agonizing green. The beauty of woman appeals to him only when it is precocious and almost macabre in its thinness, with the elegance of a skeleton showing under adolescent flesh, or else later in life, in the state of decline that comes with ravaging maturity. . . . His bedside reading is the work of exceptional authors who, like Edgar Poe, stretched their nervous mechanism to the point of hallucination, like rhetoricians of a troubled life whose language is “already veined with the greenness of decomposition.”<sup>4</sup>

The term “greenness” (*verdeurs*) in its plural form may have had a particular appeal to decadent authors because it suggests both the energy of youth (described here as “precocious”) and the discoloration brought about by disease or the “ravaging” process of maturation. The choice of the color green is equally revealing in that the hue was always a *couleur maudite*, a color of subversion and disorder long shunned by dyers for its chemical instability. In the Middle Ages, when associated with yellow—another favored color of decadence—green could even suggest madness.<sup>5</sup>

In the rare discussions of Wilde’s colors,<sup>6</sup> green therefore often features as the dominant hue, whether in association with his emblematic aniline-dyed green carnation or with the essay “Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green” (1889). Drawing on Michel Pastoureau’s and John

Gage's pioneering discussions of color as a cultural and social fact, the essays devoted to Wilde's chromatic imaginary have rightly historicized his use of an artificial, homoerotic, and decadent green on a par with the yellow of the "yellow book," which would eventually become the chromatic metonymy of the 1890s.<sup>7</sup> My analysis of Wilde's color-sense will, however, diverge from these previous explorations in that I will reflect upon the greenness of *Dorian Gray* not only in terms of hue but also in terms of decaying chromatic matter. My approach will be threefold. First, I will map out the chromatic context of Wilde's novel in keeping with what I have elsewhere identified as "the chromatic turn" of the mid-nineteenth century that enabled the autonomization of color,<sup>8</sup> celebrated by Baudelaire in a discussion of a painting by Eugène Delacroix: "It seems that this color, and may I ask pardon for these subterfuges of language which express highly subtle ideas, thinks for itself, independently of the objects which clothe it. Besides, these admirable chords of this color often make one dream of harmony and melody, and the impression one carries away from his paintings is often somewhat musical."<sup>9</sup>

Baudelaire's celebration of the synesthetic modernity of color emancipated from the shackles of neoclassicism occurred just one year before William Perkins's accidental synthesis in 1856 of mauveine, which was to become the first aniline dye, transforming the textile industry across Europe. The invention equally affected the artistic world, and in particular what soon became known as the "color-sense" of poets in the 1870s. Although self-proclaimed heirs of Baudelaire, the aesthetes and decadents on both sides of the Channel often shunned these modern hues in favor of the more culturally charged "aesthetic" colors of the past, which they contrasted with an industrial modernity defined as much by its dull grayness as by its gaudy, vulgar tones. It is precisely in the light of these palimpsestual colors—which will be the focus of my second section—that I wish to argue that Wilde's novel dramatizes chromatic decay by confronting the luminous "Dorian" Hellenic pole with the neutralizing grayness of the modern urban space. In the final part of this essay, I will discuss the temporality of color itself, and more precisely of Basil's use of pigments, as it is plotted in *Dorian Gray*, with special attention to the chemical transformations of chromatic matter and its toxic effects on the bodies of its consumers.

### 1. GREENERY-YALLERY: THE DECADENT COLOR-SENSE

On April 23, 1881, William S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's *Patience* premiered at the Opera Comique in London. The satirical operetta became

increasingly associated with Wilde following his lecture series in America, which was scheduled to coincide with the American tour of *Patience*. The original aesthetic hero, Reginald Bunthorne, however, was far more reminiscent of Algernon Swinburne and George Du Maurier's affected aesthetes in *Punch*. In many of these satires, color plays a central role—the aesthete's color-sense being stigmatized as deviant. In the case of *Patience*, for instance, Reginald's elitist affectations are encoded in his favoring of two colors—yellow and green—which are those of his decaying, emaciated body as well as those of the aesthetic venue par excellence, the Grosvenor Gallery, where Lord Henry tells Basil to exhibit Dorian's portrait:

A pallid and thin young man,  
A haggard and lank young man,  
A greenery-yallery, Grosvenor Gallery,  
Foot-in-the-grave young man!<sup>10</sup>

By linking the body of the aesthete to the unstable hues of the walls of his aesthetic haunt, Gilbert turns color into a key site, and symptom, of perceptual deviance. Similarly, the aesthetes and decadents were sometimes mocked as “jaded” youths—to quote *Punch*'s pun about Sargent's 1894 portrait of Wilde's acolyte Graham Robertson holding a bright green jade cane.<sup>11</sup> The materiality of the green-colored gem—also referenced in *Dorian Gray*—here conjures up the aesthetic refinement of Japan as much as the blasé pose of the dandy unfit to live in a vulgar industrial age.

Decadent texts are often cluttered with such beautifully ornate and useless objects. *Dorian Gray* is no exception, as exemplified by chapter 11, which emulates the enumerative style of Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À Rebours* (1884). The Victorian fascination with objects—which reached a climax in the fin de siècle—has recently been the focus of an increasing number of critical studies, in keeping with the material turn that is now transforming the humanities. However, the question of color complicates these object-focused analyses because color is not simply one among many properties of an object (i.e., a mere secondary bit of ornamentation) but a *substance* with a material history of its own.<sup>12</sup> In *Dorian Gray*, Wilde shows a striking awareness of the material, if not chemical, properties of color. For instance, when Dorian, in a fit of rage against Basil's idolatry of his portrait, compares himself to a mere “green bronze figure” (190), he is not simply protesting against his reification as an art-object. The use of the adjective *green* to qualify the bronze figure implicitly

suggests Dorian's fear that his own bronzelike Hellenic beauty will eventually oxidize and turn green as he ages.

Wilde was not the only author to show such interest in chromatic materiality. Following the discovery of the first aniline dye extracted from coal tar, which made a whole new gamut of cheap dyes available to all sections of society, color chemistry was increasingly debated among scientists and artists. The French chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul (whose 1839 *Loi du contraste simultané des couleurs* was translated into English in 1859) played a key role in discussions of chromatic harmonies in fashion and painting. Having noticed that the colors of certain Gobelins tapestries looked faded in association with other hues, Chevreul demonstrated the scientific relevance of color complementarity. This chromatic syntax proved extremely influential on both sides of the Channel, not only for the textile industry but also for the new generation of designers, painters,<sup>13</sup> and writers like Robert de Montesquiou.<sup>14</sup> During this period, color thus generated a plurality of discourses. But because these new "laws" or "grammars"<sup>15</sup> aimed mainly to control the chromatic chaos of modernity, they partly challenged what Baudelaire celebrated as the Romantic emancipation of color.<sup>16</sup>

Wilde's own use of color reflects this ambiguous approach to the colors of modernity. In "The Garden of Eros" (1881), a poem set in a Hellenized Oxford, Wilde adopts an openly Keatsian rhetoric to denounce how scientific conceptions of color "unwove" the sacred rainbow of Nature:

Methinks these new Actæons boast too soon  
That they have spied on beauty; what if we  
Have analyzed the rainbow, robbed the moon  
Of her most ancient, chastest mystery,  
Shall I, the last Endymion, lose all hope  
Because rude eyes peer at my mistress through a telescope!<sup>17</sup>

Here the verb "analyzed" needs to be taken in its etymological sense, from the Greek *ana* "up, throughout" and *lysis* "a loosening," from *lyein* "to unfasten," suggesting separation or division, in contrast with the weaving process of poetic creation. Although Wilde rejected Ruskin's Romantic celebration of "the sanctity of colour" in favor of color for color's sake,<sup>18</sup> of color "unspoiled by meaning,"<sup>19</sup> like Ruskin, he did not seem to approve of coal-tar dyes. For instance, when Lord Henry tells Dorian to "never trust a woman who wears mauve" (255), this is likely because the bright hue was associated with the vulgarity of cheap fashion,

which the aniline revolution had precisely brought about. Nevertheless, this did not prevent Wilde from embracing the modern mauve of the impressionists: “That white quivering sunlight that one sees now in France, with its strange blotches of mauve, and its restless violet shadows, is [art’s] latest fancy, and, on the whole, Nature reproduces it quite admirably. Where she used to give us Corots and Daubignys, she gives us now exquisite Monets and entrancing Pissaros [*sic*].”<sup>20</sup> Like the aniline-dye green of Wilde’s carnation, these “mauve blotches” signal chromatic artifice, which Nature can only strive to “reproduce.”<sup>21</sup> Lord Henry’s gendered denunciation of mauve as a feminine hue not to be trusted echoes Dorian’s earlier stigmatization of the magenta costume of Sybil Vane’s mother: “a faded tired woman who played Lady Capulet in a sort of magenta dressing-wrapper on the first night, and looks as if she had seen better days” (215). Here the aniline color invented by French chemists in 1859 appears so strikingly anachronistic that it breaks the charm of the theatrical illusion.<sup>22</sup> Dorian and Lord Henry’s chromatic elitism is reminiscent of *Punch*’s satires. On February 3, 1877, Du Maurier published a cartoon entitled “True Artistic Refinement,” subtitled “Died of a Colour, in Aesthetic Pain.” It depicts the poseur Mr. Mirabel refusing to be introduced to Miss Chalmers on the grounds that the young lady “affects aniline dyes”: “I weally couldn’t go down to suppah with a young lady who wears Mauve Twimmings in her skirt and Magenta Wibbons in her hair!” Here the aesthete’s snobbish color-sense translates into linguistic affectation, raising the question of the literary inscription of new chromatic bodies.

Very few studies of Wilde’s chromophilia have addressed his inter-medial translations of color matter into text. Yet by giving new names to their new colors, chemists evidently transformed the way poets wrote about color. As editor of *Woman’s World*, which featured numerous passages relating to color harmonies in fashion and domestic space, Wilde was certainly aware of the literary challenge posed by the new chromatic terminology to the aesthetic color-sense—a color-sense that had to be “trained,” as noted by Nick Gaskill: “The introduction of cheap and brightly colored wallpapers, textiles, and furnishings to a buying public woefully uneducated in the principles of chromatic harmony threatened to create a dangerous spiral in which weak perceptual capabilities yielded poorly colored goods, which in turn crippled color sensitivity even more.”<sup>23</sup> The very notion of a color-sense was a Victorian invention, and it did not emerge from the work of psychologists but from a literary study. The expression was coined by William E. Gladstone in 1877, almost

twenty years after publication of his three-volume *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age* (1858), in which he evoked the paucity of color terms in Homeric poems.<sup>24</sup> Ignoring the material evidence of the ancient Greeks' chromophilia, Gladstone went so far as to claim that the Hellenes of the archaic age suffered from a form of "color-blindness" as he deemed their color-sense both primitive and deficient.<sup>25</sup> The conclusion, which Gladstone based partly on the spurious findings of the ophthalmologist Hugo Magnus, were criticized by Charles Darwin, Grant Allen, John Addington Symonds, and, much later, Havelock Ellis in their own discussions of color-sense in literature.<sup>26</sup>

As a Hellenist, Wilde—who had sent some of his early poems to Gladstone—must have been aware of this controversy, which intensified in the late 1870s. It is revealing in this respect that his own use of the term "color-sense" should occur in a specifically Darwinian context in *The Critic as Artist* (1891): "Even a color-sense is more important, in the development of the individual, than a sense of right and wrong. Æsthetics, in fact, are to Ethics in the sphere of conscious civilisation, what, in the sphere of the external world, sexual is to natural selection. Ethics, like natural selection, make existence possible. Æsthetics, like sexual selection, make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, and variety and change."<sup>27</sup> What Wilde is trying to do here is sever the "variety and change" of color perception, not only from the ethical sphere, but also from the arbitrariness of the Victorian perceptual norm. This recalls Pater's praise of the changing colors of Ionian art in his anti-Gladstonian essay "The Beginnings of Greek Sculpture I: The Heroic Age of Greek Art," which appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* in February 1880: "The whole black and grey world of extant antique sculpture [needs] to be translated back into ivory and gold, if we would feel the excitement which the Greeks seem to have felt in the presence of these objects. . . . We must seek to relieve the air of our galleries and museums of their too intellectual greyness. Greek sculpture could not have been a *cold* thing. . . whatever a colour-blind school may say."<sup>28</sup> In this text, based on a lecture delivered at Oxford just a few months after Gladstone's essay on "The Colour-Sense," Pater ironically describes the apostles of the abstract whiteness of Hellenic sculpture as a "colour-blind school," that is to say a school blind to Greek polychromy, to the material evidence of the Greek love of color. As Linda Dowling and Stefano Evangelista have each shown, Hellenic references functioned as a homosexual code in Victorian Oxford, which was evidently made all the more subversive by



traces of polychromy defacing the purity of Greek marble.<sup>29</sup> It is not surprising therefore that the term “colour-blind” should also be used by Havelock Ellis in *Sexual Inversion* (1897) in his discussion of the homosexuality of the Hellenophile J. A. Symonds, whose works Wilde admired: “Symonds compared inversion to colour-blindness. . . . Just as the ordinary colour-blind person is congenitally insensitive to those red-green rays which are precisely the most impressive to the normal eye, and gives an extended value to the other colours finding that blood is the same colour as grass, and a florid complexion blue as sky—so the invert fails to see emotional values patent to normal persons.”<sup>30</sup> In a *Punch* cartoon entitled “Modern Aesthetics” (February 10, 1877), Du Maurier had already depicted an intellectually incompetent aesthete as both effeminate and “cullah-blind,” thus turning deviant color perception into an element of “sexual parody.”<sup>31</sup> Numerous other instances of the pathologizing of “decadent” color perception can be found in Max Nordau and Cesare Lombroso, who associated “color mysticism” with “mental decay.”<sup>32</sup> In Nordau’s *Degeneration* (1892–93), where Gautier’s definition of the decadent style features *in extenso*, Wilde is listed as one of these dangerous “colour mystics” on a par with Huysmans.<sup>33</sup>

## 2. A “FIERY-COLOURED” LIFE: FROM DORIAN TO GRAY

For Nordau, “colour mysticism” originated in an overevaluation of the sensual properties of color severed from its referent, culminating in synesthetic confusion. Both this autonomization of color and its synesthetic affinities were satirized in *Patience*. The following passage describes the chromatic confrontation of a group of aesthetic maidens with a group of officers:

Jane. (*looking at uniform*) Red and Yellow! Primary colours! Oh, South Kensington!

Duke. We didn’t design our uniforms, but we don’t see how they could be improved!

Jane. No, you wouldn’t. Still, there is a cobwebby grey velvet, with a tender bloom like cold gravy, which, made Florentine fourteenth century, trimmed with Venetian leather and Spanish altar lace, and surmounted with something Japanese—it matters not what—would at least be Early English! Come, maidens.

(*Exeunt Maidens, two and two, singing refrain of “Twenty love-sick maidens we.” The Officers watch them off in astonishment.*)

Duke. Gentlemen, this is an insult to the British uniform.<sup>34</sup>

Jane and the maidens’ elitist scorn for the primary or rather *primitive* colors of the uniforms of the officers reveals that color debates were not only

gendered but also culturally charged, as the group of women here evidently favors foreign materials over national symbols.

This palimpsestual dimension of aestheticized hues is central to our understanding of color in *Dorian Gray*. But in the case of *Patience*, the maidens' chromatic nostalgia is so excessive that color itself is almost abolished into grayness—the hue that Roland Barthes (in his notes on *Le Neutre*) precisely describes as a noncolor, a “color-blind” color (which is, he notes, different from the absence of color).<sup>35</sup> Wilde may have had this passage from *Patience* in mind when he wrote to the *Daily Chronicle* to defend his novel, which had been condemned as “poisonous”: “Finally, let me say this—the aesthetic movement produced certain colours, subtle in their loveliness and fascinating in their almost mystical tone. They were, and are, our reaction against the crude primaries of a doubtless more respectable but certainly less cultivated age. My story is an essay on decorative art. It reacts against the crude brutality of plain realism. It is poisonous if you like, but you cannot deny it is also perfect, and perfection is what we artists aim at.”<sup>36</sup> For Wilde, as for all the opponents to Gladstone, the color-sense was indeed a cultural rather than physiological question. Moreover, the “mystical” colors that Wilde here vindicates are openly antimimetic. As isolated hues signify nothing,<sup>37</sup> color was indeed the ideal means to challenge what Wilde perceived as the vulgar realist ethos of his age.<sup>38</sup>

Such color mysticism severed from any form of referent can be found again when Dorian contemplates his collection of ecclesiastic vestments:

The orphreys were woven in a diaper of red and gold silk, and were starred with medallions of many saints and martyrs, among whom was Saint Sebastian. He had chasubles, also, of amber-coloured silk, and blue silk and gold brocade, and yellow silk damask and cloth of gold, figured with representations of the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ, and embroidered with lions and peacocks and other emblems; dalmatics of white satin and pink silk damask, decorated with tulips and dolphins and fleurs de lys; altar frontals of crimson velvet and blue linen; and many corporals, chalice veils, and sudaria. (285–86)

Wilde's use of erudite terminology is addressed to cultivated readers with an assumedly superior color-sense. The *raison d'être* of all these hues is intended to be purely aesthetic, just like the actual vestments themselves. This function is reminiscent of Gautier's definition of the self-referential style of decadence: it is “an ingenious style, complicated, wise, full of nuances and research, always pushing back the frontiers of speech,

that borrows words from all technical lexicons, taking color from every palette.”<sup>39</sup> Dorian’s attraction to colorful vestments has evidently no spiritual dimension: the focus is on rich patterns, textures, materials, and “subtle” colors with no liturgical function. As noted by Claire Murray in her analysis of this chapter, “the passage is filled with passive past participles that underline the artificial and elaborate nature of the colors (‘wrought,’ ‘embroidered,’ ‘woven,’ ‘raised,’ ‘figured,’ ‘decorated’),” which ostentatiously turn the vestments into collectibles rather than devotional objects.<sup>40</sup>

Chapter 11 corresponds to the chromatic climax of the novel where the hero comes to resemble most closely Huysmans’s decadent Des Esseintes, whose story has often been identified with that of the mysterious Parisian in Dorian’s “yellow book.” The volume acts as a revelation for Dorian, spurring him to embrace the “fiery-coloured” life extolled by Lord Henry (184). As noted by both Josephine M. Guy and Joseph Bristow, “fiery-coloured” was one of Wilde’s favorite epithets, evidently another Paterian echo.<sup>41</sup> Initially described as an ideal Hellenic figure whose flawless perfection recalls the marmoreal purity of ancient sculpture, Dorian, whose very name evokes the “sweetness and light” of the Greek culture extolled by Matthew Arnold,<sup>42</sup> progressively falls into sinful, modern color. As noted by Lord Henry, “Sin is the only real colour-element left in modern life” (192).

In a homoerotic twist to the Pygmalion myth, the sculptural hero indeed comes to life through color. In the process, he reconnects with his mother’s colorful Dionysian inheritance: “How curious it all seemed! And his mother with her Lady Hamilton face and her moist, wine-dashed lips—he knew what he had got from her. He had got from her his beauty, and his passion for the beauty of others. She laughed at him in her loose Bacchante dress. There were vine leaves in her hair. The purple spilled from the cup she was holding. The carnations of the painting had withered, but the eyes were still wonderful in their depth and brilliancy of colour. They seemed to follow him wherever he went” (289). In this portrait, the faded carnations are made to contrast with the uncanny “brilliancy of color” of Dorian’s mother’s eyes, further associating color with strangeness. But by embracing the feminine and the colorful as well as the Dionysian, Dorian becomes Ionian. In his essay on “The Marbles of Aegina” (1880), Pater suggests that the two “opposing tendencies” of Greek culture may be envisaged in chromatic terms: in contrast with Plato’s Dorian ideal of “abstractness and calm,” the Ionian pole “[delights] in brightness and colour, in beautiful material, in changeful

form everywhere, in poetry, in philosophy, even in architecture and its subordinate crafts.”<sup>43</sup> The variegation, cunning, or “myriad-minded” dimension of “Ionian voluptuousness” is precisely what Pater defines as *poikilia*—a term encoding variety, curiousness, and, most importantly, *changing* color.<sup>44</sup> Pater’s Hellenism was evidently far more historically grounded than that of Arnold, Jowett, or Gladstone, with Pater embracing the rich material culture of the Hellenic past, including its polychromy.<sup>45</sup> Wilde’s fascination with archaeology, and his love of Praxiteles (whose statues were originally painted) and of polychrome Tanagra, suggests a similar form of decadent chromophilia.<sup>46</sup>

In his “fiery-coloured” phase, Dorian himself becomes myriad-minded: “To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead” (288). But this equally causes his flesh—translated into the pigments of his portrait—to appear tainted. Dorian’s flawless, marmoreal surface becomes veined, variegated—almost “*marbrée*,” to take up Gautier’s image of the decadent degradation of pure marble into mottled, diseased flesh. And yet, as Dorian’s corruption escalates, a discoloring process also seems to unfold. His nocturnal explorations of the London underworld are described in grayscale. As he mingles with the lower classes, Dorian’s grayness is increasingly emphasized: “There was an exquisite poison in the air. I had a passion for sensations. . . . Well, one evening about seven o’clock, I determined to go out in search of some adventure. I felt that this grey monstrous London of ours, with its myriads of people, its sordid sinners, and its splendid sins, as you once phrased it, must have something in store for me” (211). Wilde’s pun on Dorian’s name is made more explicit in the earlier *Lippincott* version, where the word is spelled “gray.”<sup>47</sup> Dorian’s fear of aging is also described as a “graying” process in the 1890 text, an anxiety about becoming “haggard, and gray, and wrinkled” (81). The word is replaced by “old” in the later version, possibly to avoid too obvious a pun. In both texts, Wilde also apparently deleted a whole sentence paradoxically articulating passion with grayness: “Life will write a line across my face. Passion will grey it, and thought will twist it from its form” (29n). Although initially “fiery-coloured,” Dorian’s corrupt life on the grim, shady streets of the modern metropolis eventually brings about the decaying of color itself. The opposition between Dorian and Gray—symbolically separated by a full stop on Charles Ricketts’s cover for the 1891 edition of the novel—therefore not only plays on the gothic theme of the evil double in

the manner of Robert L. Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) to which Wilde's novel has often been compared;<sup>48</sup> as I elaborate in my next section, it also suggests a chromatic itinerary literally inscribed in the temporality of the colors of Dorian's picture.

### 3. "THE COLOURED IMAGE": THE TEMPORALITY OF COLOR IN THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

Dorian's graying is indeed mirrored in the aging of the picture: "It had altered already, and would alter more. Its gold would wither into grey" (246). I would like to conclude this essay with a discussion of the chromatic metamorphosis that Basil's portrait registers throughout the novel. As noted by Pascal Aquien and Xavier Giudicelli, Wilde's novel challenges G. E. Lessing's distinction in the *Laocoon* (1766) between the spatial art of painting and the temporal art of poetry.<sup>49</sup> I believe the transformation affecting the chromatic substance of the painting is precisely what introduces in the picture the element of time and decay. This causes the portrait to progressively turn into a "coloured image" (258), ultimately severed from its no longer identifiable model, and thereby pushing to a decadent climax the Romantic autonomization of color.

From the start, the description of the eponymous picture is extremely limited. The composition of Basil's portrait is reduced to a blazon of fairly obvious colors: blue eyes, gold hair, red lips. These stereotypical hues say nothing of the model's beauty but recall one of Wilde's early poems (inspired by a pastel by Violet Troubridge) in which he inscribes the notion of decay into the very title, "Wasted days" (1877):

A fair slim boy not made for this world's pain,  
With hair of gold thick clustering round his ears,  
And longing eyes half veiled by foolish tears  
Like bluest water seen through mists of rain;  
Pale cheeks whereon no kiss has left its stain,  
Red under-lip drawn in for fear of Love  
And white throat whiter than the breast of dove.<sup>50</sup>

A similarly limited palette is used in *Dorian Gray*, but, as Basil's pigments uncannily change, a form of estrangement takes place. Interestingly, the painter's first reaction on discovering his altered work—in which he still recognizes "some gold in the thinning hair and some scarlet on the sensual mouth" as well the blue of the "sodden eyes"—is rationally to ascribe this "impossible" transformation to the chemical composition of his paints: "I remember it! Oh, how well I remember it! No! the thing is

impossible. The room is damp. Mildew has got into the canvas. The paints I used had some wretched mineral poison in them. I tell you the thing is impossible” (298). Basil here perceives the colors as both similar and changed—including his own “vermilion” signature. Wilde may have had in mind debates about the “evils” of modern pigments, which the painter William Holman Hunt denounced in a lecture delivered on April 21, 1880, at the London Society of Arts.<sup>51</sup> In his 1877 review of the first Grosvenor exhibition, Wilde had celebrated Hunt as one of “the greatest masters of colour,” with Edward Burne-Jones and J. M. W. Turner.<sup>52</sup> In Hunt’s lecture entitled “The Present System of Obtaining Materials in Use by Artist Painters as Compared with That of the Old Masters,” the painter contrasts the chromatic expertise of past artists with the ignorance of his contemporaries, whom he deems too reliant on color suppliers and ready-made cheap industrial pigments. Hunt’s text was then discussed in *The Times*, leading to a fierce debate among, on one hand, color suppliers like Messrs. Rowney who felt targeted by the painter’s diatribe and, on the other, chemists such as Arthur H. Church (professor of chemistry at the Royal Academy) and prominent artistic figures like Sir Coutts Lindsay—founder of the Grosvenor Gallery—who supported Hunt’s color crusade.<sup>53</sup>

Hunt most feared the fugitive character of these newly available colors, and in particular of “pestilential aniline dyes” whose aging properties were often unknown (498). He expressed his disdain in both moral and physical terms, describing these new colors as a form of “evil” (492), especially when ill-assembled, and akin to a form of “malady” or “blister” disfiguring paintings (493, 497). Hunt gives the example of the mineral pigment Strontian yellow, which soon “deteriorate(s) to a much darker shade . . . neutralized to a pitch which makes it scarcely a colour at all (with) little shades of reddish hue spattered about it” (484). Notably, the description brings to mind the later red spots in Wilde’s novel that mar the representation of Dorian’s beautiful “white hands” (277): “the scarlet dew that spotted the hand seemed brighter, and more like blood newly spilled” (356).

Drawing on a modern vermilion of unknown origin, Hunt also relates the insidious changes that affected one of his own canvases:

At first, I thought that my eye, or a dark day, had deceived me, and I scraped out my work and did it again, with the same degree of disenchantment in turn. When I suspected the pigments, it was necessary to determine which was at fault. . . . In two weeks, the orange vermilion and flake white had come to the tint which you now see—a sort of *café au lait* colour. . . .

Unfortunately, the leaden-hued veins which deaden this combination, did not at first appear, and I determined to make my flesh-colour for the last time of zinc white. The end was that I lost all my labour, for in trying to avoid Charybdis, I had been wrecked on Scylla, and I had to hide my picture away, instead of exhibiting it. (495)

Dorian's portrait seems to be affected by a similar chromatic adulteration, which eventually leads the shameful hero to also hide his picture away.

Just like Hunt's "pestilential" pigments, Basil's colors seem to have contained some form of "mineral poison"—"poison" being a key word in the novel. However, debates about poisonous colors were not confined to the artists' materials, as the Victorian press equally relayed chromatic scandals ranging from toxic wallpapers and lethal he addresses to contaminated food coloring.<sup>54</sup> Wilde himself was of course aware of the toxicity of arsenic-based greens, such as "Pomona-green," which he references in "Pen, Pencil and Poison." In *Dorian Gray*, the toxicity of certain colors is also underlined, for instance when Sybil commits suicide by consuming either "prussic acid or white lead" (252), the latter being yet another poisonous mineral used both as a pigment and as a skin whitener. Similarly, "sulphur-yellow roses" remind Dorian of his decomposing painting (248). Elemental sulphur is not toxic, but many simple sulphur derivatives are. Wilde's synesthetic reference to "sulphurous fumes . . . troubling the brain" evidently suggests decay and danger (218), as in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), in which the uncanny and claustrophobic wallpaper is described as having a "sickly sulphur tint."<sup>55</sup>

Finally, the "mineral poison" connects the dangerous colors of the painting with the "yellow book." Like the portrait, which is never described except for a few color notes, the mysterious volume is only alluded to by its color, or rather by its colors, since Dorian has no fewer than nine large-paper copies of the book bound in as many different hues to "suit his various moods and the changing fancies" (276).<sup>56</sup> Color therefore acts as a poisonous metonymy implicitly connecting writing and painting as in Plato's *Phaedrus*, which was a key text for Oxford Hellenophiles like Wilde.<sup>57</sup> The Victorian reception of this text, however, has never been envisaged from the angle of Plato's chromophobia,<sup>58</sup> although this is something Pater had questioned in his discussion of the Ionian pole of Greek culture: "An enemy everywhere to variegation, to what is cunning or 'myriad-minded,' (Plato) sets himself, in mythology, in music, in poetry, in every kind of art, to enforce the ideal of a sort of Parmenidean abstractness and calm" (253).<sup>59</sup> In his essay on "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida explains that the notion *pharmakon* plays a central

role in the *Phaedrus*. The term designates a drug that could be either a poison, a remedy, or a pigment, which Plato connects to “evil and death” in his condemnation of both writing and painting as deceptively mimetic (134):

And just as the *Republic*, in its condemnation of the imitative arts, links poetry and painting together; just as Aristotle’s *Poetics* associates them under the single heading of *mimesis*; so too Socrates here compares a piece of writing to a portrait, the *graphema* to the *zographema*. “You know, Phaedrus, that’s the strange (*deinon*) thing about writing, which makes it truly analogous to painting (*homoion zo graphiaî*). The painter’s products stand before us as though they were alive (*hos zonta*), but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence (*semnos*). It is the same with written words” (275d). (136)

Imitation was indeed for Plato a dangerous magical illusion, akin to the cosmetics of the *simulacrum* (138),<sup>60</sup> which he even more explicitly rejected in the *Republic* (X, 602c–d; 607c), leading Derrida to the following conclusion: “The *Republic* also calls the painter’s colors *pharmaka* (420c). The magic of writing and painting is like a cosmetic concealing the dead under the appearance of the living. The *pharmakon* introduces and harbors death. It makes the corpse presentable, masks it, makes it up” (142). In her analysis of the Hellenic color-sense, Adeline Grand-Clément emphasizes the uncanny dimension of changing chromatic matter conjured by the Greek term *pharmakon*: “*Pharmakon* introduces a ‘magical’ or ritual dimension, linked to the efficiency of the chromatic matter which the anointing activates. Whether it is of natural or artificial origin, covered or covering, skin or surface, color is eye-catching, especially when undergoing metamorphosis. It is first and foremost a form of coloration because the Greeks set great store on movement and variation.”<sup>61</sup> These shifting, magic colors, I have argued, lay at the core of Dorian’s own transformation. In Paterian fashion, Wilde here challenges Plato’s chromophobic logic to embrace the changing cosmetics of decadence in his own “strange coloured book.” This leads us back to our opening quotation blurring the lines between Wilde’s own text and the other, ambiguous “yellow book,” which, like the color-*pharmakon*, covering and revealing Dorian’s crimes, “poisoned” and “made perfect” the eponymous hero.

#### NOTES

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1. For an image of the original letter in the Alexander Turnbull Library (MS-Papers-3195), see <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22715779> (accessed September 3, 2019).
2. Pater, "The Renaissance," 1:237.
3. Gautier, "Charles Baudelaire," 17. See Matthew Potolsky's translation in *The Decadent Republic of Letters*, 51.
4. Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine*, 30–31 (my translation).
5. See Pastoureau, "Formes et couleurs du désordre," 66. On green as a demonic, dangerous color in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, see also Pastoureau, *Vert*, 90–102 (in particular page 97): "C'est la couleur de la moisissure, de la maladie, de la putrefaction et surtout des chairs décomposées."
6. See Beckson, "Oscar Wilde and the Green Carnation," 387–97; and Matthews Davis, "Tainted Love," 127–42.
7. See Doran, *The Culture of Yellow*, 47–61.
8. See the forthcoming special issue of *Word and Image* entitled "The Changing Colour of Nineteenth-century Art and Literature." This chromatic turn is also the subject of my ERC Consolidator Project CHROMOTOPE (2019–2024).
9. Baudelaire, "Exposition universelle, 1855," 241. Translation quoted in Dolan, "Manet's Synesthetic Portrait," 155.
10. Gilbert, *Patience*, 38.
11. Robertson, *Time Was*, quoted in Beckson, "Oscar Wilde and the Green Carnation," 387.
12. On new approaches to chromatic materiality, see Young, "The Colour of Things," 173–85.
13. On the artistic influence of Chevreul's *Lois*, see Roque, *Art et science de la couleur*; and Kalba, *Color in the Age of Impressionism*.
14. Montesquiou owned a copy of Chevreul's book on color and often referred to the chromatic principles in his correspondence. See the Montesquiou archives at the Bibliothèque Nationale, esp. NAF 15281.
15. See Labrusse, "Face au chaos," 97–121.
16. Baudelaire defined colour as one of the key features of Romanticism, alongside "intimacy," "spirituality," and "aspiration towards the infinite" (Baudelaire, "Salon de 1846," 86).
17. Wilde, "The Garden of Eros," 1:134, ll.223–28.
18. On Ruskin, rainbow, and sacred colours, see Ribeyrol, "Victorian Rainbow Makers."
19. Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," 4:195.

20. Wilde, "The Decay of Lying", 4:95.
21. In *À Rebours* (p. 16), Huysmans singles out the colour mauve as the sign of aesthetic refinement.
22. The painter John Singer Sargent did not object, however, to the anachronism of Ellen Terry's "magenta hair" in *Lady Macbeth*. Letter to Mrs. Gardner, January 1, 1889, quoted in Charteris, *John Sargent*, 100–101.
23. See Gaskill, *Chromographia*, 81.
24. See Gladstone, *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age*, vol. 3 (1858), and "The Colour-Sense," 366–88.
25. Gladstone, "The Colour-Sense," 366.
26. On Gladstone, Darwin, and color, see Bellmer, "The Statesman and the Ophthalmologist," 28; Allen, *The Colour-Sense*, 1879; Symonds, "Colour-sense and Language"; and Havelock Ellis, *The Colour-sense in Literature*. For a discussion of the nineteenth-century color-sense, see also Gaskill, *Chromographia*, 21–31.
27. Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," 4:204.
28. Pater, "The Beginnings of Greek Sculpture I," 191.
29. On Victorian Hellenism, see Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality*; and Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece*. On polychromy as complicating the reception of the Hellenic heritage, see Dowling, "Ruskin's Pied Beauty," 1–8; and Ribeyrol, "Étrangeté, Passion, Couleur."
30. Havelock Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 134.
31. On *Punch* and sexual parody, see Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody*.
32. Nordau, *Degeneration*, 142–43: "it is an old clinical observation that mental decay is accompanied by colour mysticism. . . . Lombroso cites 'eccentric persons' who, 'like Wigman, had the paper for their books specially manufactured with several colours on each page.'" Dorian, who has nine copies of his yellow book bound in different colours, would have certainly been considered as one of these "eccentric persons."
33. Nordau, *Degeneration*, 320. Drawing on the evidence of "Pen, Pencil and Poison," Nordau claims that Wilde cultivates a "mysticism in colour."
34. Gilbert, *Patience*, 11.
35. Barthes, *Le Neutre*, 83.
36. Holland and Hart-Davis, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 436.

37. Lichtenstein, *La couleur éloquente*, 60: “la théorie de la *mimésis* bute toujours sur la question de la couleur. Considérée en elle-même, la couleur est un pur ornement qui ne ressemble à rien.”
38. I would like to thank Nick Gaskill for sharing with me his forthcoming essay “Color against Realism” on this topic. See also Meltzer, “Color as Cognition in Symbolist Verse,” 253–73.
39. Gautier, “Charles Baudelaire,” 17, translated in Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters*, 51 (translation modified).
40. Murray, “White Alb and Scarlet Camail,” 244.
41. It is in “The English Renaissance of Art” that Wilde used the term “fiery-coloured” in its most Paterian sense as an injunction to “burn always with one of the passions of this fiery-coloured world.” See Bristow, “Oscar Wilde’s Unfinished Society Plays,” 62; and Clements, *Baudelaire and the English Tradition*, 149.
42. “Sweetness and Light” is, of course, the title of the first chapter of Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1868). On the Hellenic connotations of Dorian’s name, see Bristow in Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 370–71; and Ross, *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece*, 170ff.
43. Pater, “The Marbles of Aegina,” 6:252–53.
44. Pater, “The Marbles of Aegina,” 6:253, 217.
45. As noted by Charles Martindale in his introduction to *Pater the Classicist*, “he broke with the stress on whiteness and purity in neoclassical theory . . . to stress the complex materiality of early Greek artefacts” (5).
46. Sybil is compared to a Tanagra on page 233. As noted by Bristow, Wilde alluded to Tanagras—and notably to *polychrome* Tanagras—elsewhere in his writings, for instance in “L’Envoi” (1882) and “The Critic as Artist,” 386. As “late” Hellenistic artworks, Praxiteles’s sculptures, as well as Tanagra figurines, were often described as decadent. See Ross, *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece*, 104–5.
47. McGarry, “Les couleurs du livre,” 157.
48. On Rickett’s cover, see Bristow’s introduction to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 3:xxvi.
49. Giudicelli, *Portraits de Dorian Gray*, 15.
50. Wilde, “Wasted Days,” 42, ll.1–8, quoted in Aquien, “Du même à l’autre,” 127.
51. The lecture, which was chaired by Sir Coutts Lindsay, was published on April 23, 1880 in the *Journal of the Society of Arts*. All subsequent references are noted parenthetically in the text.

52. Wilde, "The Grosvenor Gallery," 118. Wilde reviewed this first exhibition (which was also attended by W. E. Gladstone) for the *Dublin University Magazine* in July 1877. In this text he singles out Hunt's *Afterglow in Egypt*, which he describes as a "superb . . . study of colour" (120). According to Ellmann, Wilde enthused about the daring modern color scheme of the new Aesthetic gallery "hung with scarlet damask above a dado of dull green gold" (118). See also Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 75.
53. The *Journal* also included the minutes of the discussion that followed Hunt's lecture: "Mr. Holman Hunt, in acknowledging the vote of thanks, said . . . Sir Coutts Lindsay had expressed a very good idea, in saying that artists, who were specially interested in the question, should fix upon a time for holding a meeting, at either the Grosvenor Gallery or some other place appropriate to the subject" (499).
54. Victorian debates about the toxicity of colour are explored in Cobbold, "Adulation or Adulteration?" 23–50; and Matthews Davis, *Fashion Victims*.
55. Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wall-Paper," 133. On Gilman and Wilde, see Gaskill, *Chromographia*, 79–113.
56. As noted by McGarry, only five copies are referred to in the 1890 version ("Les couleurs du livre," 152). See also Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 276.
57. Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece*, 150–53.
58. On Plato's chromophobia, see Lichtenstein, *La Couleur éloquente*, 45–63.
59. Pater, "The Marbles of Aegina," 253.
60. On Wilde, Plato, and the simulacrum, see Whiteley, *Oscar Wilde and the Simulacrum*, 18: "Wilde's aestheticism, in turning life into art, affirms that 'strange power' of the simulacra, which Plato and Hegel desperately attempted to deny and denigrate." I believe that the color-*pharmakon* is central to what Whiteley describes as Wilde's "phantasmalogical" reversal of "the principal of *mimesis*" (15).
61. Grand-Clément, *La Fabrique des couleurs*, 50 (my translation).

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