

New (Un)certainty in Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* and Colm Tóibín's *The Master*¹

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims at exploring how the controversy between postmodernist uncertainty and new movements claiming for a new certainty determine the discourse of Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002) and Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004). After revising how this controversy has its roots deep in the history of art discourses, the article draws on postpostmodernist theories such as Raoul Edelman's performatism, Gilles Lipovetsky's hypermodernism and Alan Kirby's digimodernism. Although they help us understand texts at the turn of the millennium, they also prove eventually unsatisfactory in some cases. The analysis demonstrates that Self's and Tóibín's novels apparently aim at a new sense of certainty to represent homoerotic desire and its manifestations, as a *roman à clef* and a biofictional text respectively. However, certainty soon proves to be unfeasible as both novels turn to the precariousness and irony characteristic of postmodernism.

Keywords: New certainty, performatism, digimodernism, hypermodernism, postmodernism.

Nueva (in)certidumbre en *Dorian: A Imitation*, de Will Self, y *The Master*, de Colm Tóibín

RESUMEN

Este ensayo se propone explorar cómo la controversia entre la incertidumbre del postmodernismo y los nuevos movimientos que reclaman un nuevo concepto de certeza determina el discurso de *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002), de Will Self, y *The Master* (2004), de Colm Tóibín. Después de revisar como esta controversia hunde sus raíces en la historia de los discursos artísticos, el ensayo hace referencia al performatismo de Raoul Eshelman, el digimodernismo de Alan Kirby y el hipermodernismo de Gilles Lipovetsky. Aunque éstos nos ayudan a comprender los textos en el cambio de milenio, su uso no es siempre satisfactorio. El análisis demuestra que las novelas de Self y Tóibín aparentemente tienen por objetivo un nuevo paradigma de certeza para representar el deseo homoerótico y sus manifestaciones, bien en forma de roman à clef o bien como texto biofictional. Sin embargo, la certeza resulta ser un

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concepto harto difícil e impracticable en tanto en cuanto ambas novelas vuelven su cara hacia la precariedad e ironía características del postmodernismo.

Palabras clave: Nueva certeza, performatismo, digimodernismo, hipermodernismo, postmodernismo.

SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. to the art of (un)certainty: performatism, hypermodernism and digimodernism. 2. The new postmodernism of self's *dorian: an imitation*. 3. Neo-victorian uncertainty. the case of tóibín's *the maste* . 4. Conclusion

1. INTRODUCTION. TOWARDS THE ART OF (UN)CERTAINTY: PERFORMATISM, HYPERMODERNISM AND DIGIMODERNISM

After some decades of dominant uncertainty and scepticism in art, new movements such as Raoul Eshelman's performatism (2000, 2005, 2008), Gilles Lipovetsky's hypermodernism (2005, 2006), and Alan Kirby's digimodernism (2009) —to name a few—, have emerged as a reaction against postmodernism. Despite the particularities of these trends, they all claim for a return to a new certainty and to “the real”. Needless to say, this return cannot be a naïve one, since a long way has been walked in the meantime. Master narratives such as truth, certainty, and beauty are necessarily resurfaced under a new light. They are no longer universal and incontestable, but they are still convenient for post-postmodernist art forms. My main concern in this essay consists in analysing whether the discourse of neo-Victorian novels like Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002) and Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004) fit the poetics of postmodernism, or they claim for a new certainty akin to that of the texts they recall and/or update, concretely those of Wilde's and James's?

Besides an “imitation”, Self's text constitutes a self-conscious piece of art, constantly revising artistic representation, particularly the discourse of its hypotext, namely *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. As concerns Tóibín's novel, it constitutes a revision of classic biographies, a neo-Victorian fictional biography in Cora Kaplan's terms (2007). Both *Dorian: An Imitation* and *The Master* bear witness to an era and its artistic discourses by recasting Wilde's late-Victorian masterwork and James's production and persona. At the turn of the millennium, eclecticism and inter-artisticity (rather than merely intertextuality) have become widespread. Therefore, the analysis of these novels demands at least a revision of the artistic forms they make reference to.

As Mathew Collins argues in the documentary *This is Civilisation* (2006) —to which I will widely make reference in this first section— contemporary art was born out of an overall crisis of certainty. The ethical and aesthetic values taken for granted for ages were seriously questioned at the turn of the century. Cubists tried to save the uniqueness of artistic discourses which, in their view, were seriously threatened by the era of machines and standardization. They re-interpreted reality personalising its representation. In other words, they deconstructed reality to rearrange it anew from a

new, personal(ised) logic. Simultaneously, there were attempts to “normalise” artistic discourses, rejecting the ground-breaking spirit of modernism, particularly during the fascisms of the nineteen thirties. According to Collings, Hitler counterattacked the emerging avant-gardism with the 1937 exhibition on *Entartete Kunst*, or “Degenerate Art”. For the dictator, degeneration was crossing the frames of art and was already making an effect on reality. The exhibition was his attempt at normalising, eradicating impurity, and restoring the certainty of classic art (Barron 1991). However, art has always followed its own logic and, as a whole, it defied fascist control. How could the idealised pastiche of Roman heroic art fostered by fascisms represent the condition of Europe in the thirties? The continent was devastated. The overall feeling of chaos, fragmentation, uncertainty, and death could not be rendered in simplistic, normative art forms re-producing Roman megalomania. Art could not detach itself from this general sense of crisis, but be part as well as a response to it. Abstract art is perhaps the best example of deviation from the guidelines enacted by totalitarianism. The relation between what avant-garde artists reflected on canvas and the classic conception of representation as a mimetic practice was fractured. Against the false sense of confidence and heroism of fascist and communist artistic manifestations, new art forms shouted from pain. A sense of loss and uncertainty lies behind most abstract art, from Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), to the paintings by Paul Klee, and the abstract expressionists, as Collings’s documentary proves throughout. In his view, all these works demanded an active role from the viewer, who frequently felt either confused, unable to decode their message, or threatened by their ethical implications and demands. This type of art speaks to reality and its viewers out of fury. Therefore, one is not expected to look at a picture or read a book unproblematically, Collings argue. Already in the era of postmodernism, viewers and readers were confronted with a process of recognition of otherness (Levinas 1978) and undecidability (Hillis Miller 1987), and with words or traces which can only make reference to their impossibility of saying. There is always an unreachably undecidability within the text, which obliges the reader to come to terms with himself and the other through the reading process.

The impact of the two World Wars and the Holocaust on mid-century artistic discourses is undeniable. However, the relation between art and reality turned more complex than ever. The paintings by Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman—to name a few—do not show bombings and war victims (Collings 2006). Their response may seem *a priori* uninvolved with actual problems. Their traces, blocks of colour, their abstraction in sum, constitute however a challenge to the viewer and reality. What does a block of colour tell one about oneself? Collings wonders. With these monochromatic vacuums, these painters force viewers to think about ourselves and the other. They worked as existentialist windows constantly interrogating and interpellating us and (our interaction with) the world we inhabit. Theirs is therefore a revolutionary act, both aesthetically and ethically. There was still an authorial frame in these works which would eventually disappear with the coming

of postmodernism. To illustrate modernist monism and the re-enactment of the sublime, Shaw makes reference to Newman's brushstrokes which "draw the eye into the canvas, to the point where it is impossible to distinguish between object and subject: the inside of the painting, the *ergon*, and the outside, or *parergon*, in which it occurs. For Newman, the effect of this warping of time and space is profoundly spiritual. As he writes in his influential essay 'The Sublime Now' (1948), the intention is to "reassert ... man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions (1990: 170-3)" (Shaw 2006: 121). Like the blocks of colour split by zips in Newman's pictures, Rothko's huge monochromatic rectangles produce a bizarre feeling of extinction and nothingness. The spectator is confronted with a vacuum whereby he is exposed to himself and the other. This is necessarily, as Mathew Collings points out, a moral event: the visual purity of these pictures insinuates an overall moral desolation. Thus, although post-war art still longs for the sublime, it does so from a de-secularised perspective.

The de-secularised transcendentalism and pessimism of abstract expressionism was cancelled with the coming of Pop art. As Baudrillard points out in *Simulation and Simulacra* (1978), reality is essentially unreachable, and we can only have access to a succession of simulacra instead. Pop art was born of the indifference to this (Baudrillardian) aporia. Likewise, it assumed and fostered the superficial character of late-capitalism and its politics of mass consumption. Against the spirituality, uniqueness, and transcendentalism aimed at by previous movements, artists like Andy Warhol reified mass culture. Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley could be reproduced *ad nauseam*, just like soup cans. The concept of art, its nature, and aims were thus renegotiated. The boundaries between the *ergon* and the *parerga* were increasingly blurred and liminal. However, drawing on Collings again, Pop art is not free from conflict and a sense of uncertainty. As part of late-capitalist mass production and consumption, we frequently feel alienated and confused, as subjects and objects, of this self-begetting system. Therefore, under postmodernism, we could only comply with the superficial certainty of the material from an ironic stance. Against this ironic attitude, post-postmodernist critics like Lipovetsky argue that current hypermodernity does not cancel the current tendency to a new certainty. Mainly due to some outrageous contentions by postmodernist theorists —particularly Baudrillard's articles on the Gulf War (1991)—, literary and cultural studies have suffered an ethical turn. This turn does not necessarily imply a return to classic values, but their re-adjustment to a new *status quo*. In any case, there is currently a race between postmodernism and post-postmodernism, between uncertainty and irony on the one hand, and a new certainty, a return to master narratives, on the other. To what extent do homoerotic revisions of Victorian icons like *Dorian: An Imitation* or *The Master* comply with one or the other?

2. THE NEW POSTMODERNISM OF SELF'S *DORIAN: AN IMITATION*

One of the characters in Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation*, Baz Hallward, is an acolyte of Warhol. Baz is an updated version of Wilde's Basil, the painter in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Instead of the portrait of the Wildean masterwork, Baz captures Dorian's beauty on a "Viola-via-Warhol" postmodernist video installation (Bartlett 2002: 2). *Cathode Narcissus* constitutes a performance consisting in nine screens arranged in a semi-circle to display Dorian's enigma:

The first monitor [...] zigged and zagged into life. it showed the naked figure of a beautiful young man, posed like a classical Greek kouros, one hand lightly on hip, the other trailing in groin, half-smile on plump lips. A naked figure that turned to face the viewer as the camera zoomed in. The second monitor came to life and this displayed a closer view of the still turning youth. The third view was closer again. The sensation imparted as all nine monitors came to life was of the most intense, carnivorous, predatory voyeurism. The youth was like a fleshly bonbon, or titillating titbit, wholly unaware of the ravening mouth of the camera. The ninth monitor displayed only his mobile pink mouth. (Self 2002: 12)

The performance is a poly-referential, transient and parodic device. Not only is it a re-creation of Greek male beauty and the abject in Wilde's hypotext. It recalls other postmodernist examples, like the AIDS-inspired TV documentary the protagonist of Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-pool Library* witnesses to (1998: 48-49) and Tony Scott's film *The Hunger* (1983), where beauty and death also merge in the aftermath of the AIDS outburst. The viewer feels compelled to bear witness to the scene under the strict control of a panopticon. The spectator looks at the screen. Yet, it is the multiplying screens that actually look at the spectator. The liminal uncertainty between subject and object positions increases as the role of art is gradually more problematic. Under the logic of postmodernist exhaustion, Baz argues: "The fucking medium is dead. Fuck, it was born decadent, like all the rest of conceptual art. First it was Nauman, then Viola and me, now it's finished" (Self 2002: 13). Although as a whole *Dorian: An Imitation* constitutes an insightful revision of art's role, *Cathode Narcissus* works *en-abyme* as a product of the eighties, new technological devices, gay subculture, and the plague of AIDS. On revising the canon and artistic representation, the novel sheds new light on the problematic poetics and politics at the turn of the millennium, particularly the culture of hyperconsumption.

If abstract art demanded an ethical response from its viewers, what does a novel like Self's demand from its readers? The uncertainty of the post-war years has turned even more complex. The pessimism of those paintings has turned into a new kind of pessimism, a new sense of loss derived from the multiple frames of representation in the era of hyperreality and late-capitalism. However, against this overall sense of uncertainty in the last decades, a new certainty and a renewed interest in ethics has

recently come into view. Immanence has replaced transcendence. Thus, as mentioned in the introductory lines of the essay, what is here at stake is whether and to what extent *Dorian: An Imitation* complies with mainstream postmodernism or, on the contrary, commits its readers with a new sense of truthfulness heralded by postpostmodernism?

The feeling of uncertainty in Self's novel increases as AIDS becomes an aesthetic, as well as a political, concept. In metaphorical terms, the world becomes a space of viral transmission. Like signifiers, bodies make up their meaning—in this case of disease and death—by proxy, juxtaposing each other. The characters and their peers form an “ever lengthening conga line of sodomy—with jet travel connecting cock from San Francisco with asshole in NYC, cock from NYC with asshole in London—that allows it to get so out of control” (Self 2002: 95). The trauma of AIDS spreads very rapidly, both as a physical event and a cultural phenomenon. We witness to the hero's Orphic descent to Hell, quickly crossing frames into filth:

On and on he went; darker and danker it became, as wonkily partitioned room succeeded warped vestibule, each filthier and ranker than the last with the odour of faeces and semen and poppers. All around was the thwack of flesh on flesh, with its ragged accompaniment—the grunts and groans of effortful coition (95).

Likewise, Patrick Bateman, the hero of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, is trapped within the mirage of a fake transcendence. The novel closes with a mysterious message “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT” (1991: 399), which recalls a graffiti one of Bateman's friends is infatuated with. The graffiti reads “Abandon all hope ye who enter here”, an obvious reference to the gates of Hell in Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

What in the late-Victorian text was just hinted at and was, therefore, only understandable for the connoisseur, becomes unmistakably identified as homosexuality, drug-addiction, promiscuity, and assassination in the hypertext. The truth-effect explicitness of the turn-of-the-millennium text is however problematised in the epilogue. We eventually learn that Dorian's story so far is just a *roman à clef* written by the deceased Lord Henry Wotton, himself a replica of Wilde's eponymous character. *Dorian: An Imitation* works thus after a three-layered frame of representation, namely Wilde's hypotext, Wotton's *roman*, and the third-person narration of the novel as a whole (Yebra, 2010, 2011). Which and whose is (the) ‘truth’ in this web of overflowing ontological frames? It is difficult to answer since the constant flux of (inter)texts, artistic events, characters and emotions throughout *Dorian: An Imitation* triggers off a feeling of uncertainty and proliferation, characteristic of postmodernism.

There are critics who have ‘blamed’ Self's novel with taking pleasure on pain and violence and, very especially, of being overly explicit (Douglas-Fairhurst 2002; Harrison 2003; Leclair 2004). What is the use of making Wilde's masterwork reveal its ‘true’ face? What is *Dorian: An Imitation* telling us (about ourselves) at the turn of

the millennium? Its direct references to AIDS —as both an ethical and aesthetic issue— and the blurring of ontological boundaries convey simultaneously uncertainty and a truth-effect. Very seldom has AIDS been described in such detail in English literature. Recalling the Holocaust, the victims of the disease look like “radiator-grille ribcages [whereas their] concentration-camp eyes telegraphed [...] the front line with Death [...] and their] faces were studded with Kaposi’s sarcoma” (Self 2002: 78). The disease is all together appealing and abject, real and metaphorical, a complex aesthetic and semiotic phenomenon, a trope conveying a sense of traumatic uncertainty. The novel confronts its readers with a feeling of authenticity, namely the mass demise of a generation. However, rather than historical information about the outburst of AIDS, it aims at disturbing readers, confronting them with themselves, the face of the other, and the problematic role of art. How can catastrophe become edifying from an artistic outlook? How can such texts comply with the demands of historiography?

Dorian: An Imitation redeploys the aesthetic logic of computing language out of *Cathode Narcissus* to arrange the stories of the different Dorians, whether virtual or fictional. The novel shows how our way of representing and looking at reality has necessarily changed with the coming of new technologies. Alan Kirby calls this phenomenon digimodernism. In his view, it “owes its emergence and pre-eminence to the computerization of the text, which yields a new form of textuality characterized in its purest instances by onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, and anonymous, social and multiple authorship” (2009: 1). Art forms are thus produced, spread, and recast by millions of Internet users:

In May alone there were 2,456,707 hits on the *Cathode Narcissus* website (www.cathodenarcissus.com). Visitors to the site could view Baz hallward’s original installation [...] Sponsored and maintained by the Gray Organisation, the site featured links to Gray magazine, as well as a photo-file of Dorian’s own career in modelling. All of the images and the texts were available for downloading free of charge. ‘*Cathode Narcissus* Belongs to Us All’, the slogan on the homepage proclaimed. (Self 2002: 270)

Despite the interplay of Baudrillardian layers of simulacra in computing language, Kirby considers digimodernism as part of the current revival of certainty. Likewise, Gilles Lipovetsky’s *Hypermodern Times* challenges the scepticism of postmodernism and inscribes art within the overall logic of the market. Lipovetsky sums up his view as follows:

The ‘post’ of postmodern still directed people’s attentions to a past that was assumed to be dead; it suggested that something had disappeared without specifying what was becoming of us as a result [...]. The climate of epilogue is being followed by the awareness of a headlong rush forwards, of unbridled modernization comprised of galloping commercialization, economic deregulation, and technical and scientific

developments being unleashed with effects that are heavy with threats as well as promises. (2005: 30-31)

His words recall the urgent tone of Self's novel. It interpellates us, compelling our empathy with AIDS victims. Yet, this process of identification is simultaneously problematised as we are complicit with the aesthetisation of the disease. Mass media and internet convert everything —death and trauma included— into a marketable product. Like the spectator of Sam Fuller's films and hyperreal 3D blockbusters, the reader of this type of novels feels moved, both emotionally and physically. We are at a loss under a proliferation of realities and codes. However, is this ontological confusion the outcome of centuries of philosophical debate, or is it more specifically the product of Lipovetsky's hypermodernism and hyperconsumption? This is, in my view, the crossroads where *Dorian: An Imitation* lies and to which it bears witness.

At the turn of the millennium, modern art is no longer something incomprehensible and alienating. It has become normalised as a fashionable, marketable product. There are everywhere factories of modern art, where the current mood —a confusing uncertainty in the case of Self's novel— is mass produced. To a certain extent, time has confirmed Warhol's view, and his *Factoree*, where Baz works for a time, has given way to actual art factories. Modern art seems to have been normalised as a disposable good available to everybody. This does necessarily entail the loss of its rebellious character. After the experimentalism of avant-garde manifestations and the worldwide traumatic experiences of the last century, it results particularly difficult to astonish viewers and readers. However, the readers of *Dorian: An Imitation* are still confronted with an avalanche of death which takes them by surprise as opposed to the codified language of its Victorian hypotext. Thus, AIDS remains an issue to be normalised after so much information and images have been spread on screens the world over. The novel bears witness to the massive death of youths and a whole culture during the eighties. Yet, it does so from a traumatophilic stance. New gothicism and a de-secularised and immanent sublimity convert diseased bodies into auto-referential signifiers which challenge classic transcendence (Self 2002: 236, 183): the reader is confronted with the crudest materiality of the abject in the era of AIDS and its side-effects, namely diarrhoea, herpes (183), viruses, pneumonia and cancer (236). With the new Dorian Gray we glimpse at a false sublime, transient and characteristically postmodernist. We must meet a juxtaposition of late-nineteenth-century aestheticism and late-capitalist mass-production/consumption of objects, bodies or traumas. Thus, Self's novel updates the decadents' defamiliarization of beautiful things; “trumpet-shaped scarlet flowers (*rhododendron cinnabarinum*) (2002: 237), for instance, stand for the abject “beauty” of new maladies.

Dorian's aversion of ugliness increases as the novel advances. At the end of Wotton's *roman à clef*, he decides to murder her lover Helen for aesthetic reasons. Her flesh “had the alarming, greasy hue of uncooked veal” (Self 2002: 231) and,

therefore, she deserves being infected with “a thousand HIV impregnations” (231). The hero’s amoral attitude shocks the readers the way the also aesthetically-inspired murders of Patrick Bateman do in Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991). Both novels were controversial for similar reasons: they took the politics of late-capitalism to the extreme of its aesthetic and ethical possibilities, furthering an irrepressible feeling of uncertainty. Thus, excess is not pointless, but seriously political, as it resurfaces the trauma of AIDS to current artistic discourses. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be read as a morally-inflected text since the hero is eventually punished for his misdemeanours throughout. *Dorian: An Imitation* and, to a certain extent, *American Psycho*, recast the discourse of their late-Victorian hypotext (Yates 2009: 205-206) and adapt it to the ethical turn of late-postmodernism. Self’s *Dorian* and Ellis’s *Bateson* re-inscribe Wilde’s hero’s craze for beauty within consumerism. Everything around them —themselves included— has turned into commodities to be sold and bought, consumed and replaced at ease. This is the Baudrillardian regress to nothingness that mesmerizes and victimises both heroes. Their identities are changeable, transient, slippery and liminal. They hide behind masks of virtuality granted by the new aesthetics of computing language, mass media and the market. Although they master a new language, they are exposed to uncertainty as they cannot help a sense of alienation which addresses the overall crisis at the turn of the millennium. Therefore, these novels do not submit to the tenets of new certainty critics like Eshelman and Kirby.

For Lipovetsky (2005), our culture has been ruled by the market and capitalism for long now. Yet, in the last decades a postfordian postpostmodernist period has emerged (Lipovetsky 2010: 69-89). For the French critic, the relativism of classic postmodernism has been replaced by a new sense of certainty. Although classic moral values are no longer untouchable, there is, in his view, a renewed social consensus on individual moral responsibility to the other (2005: 11-12). In his view, against expectations, the all-pervading consumerism at the turn of the millennium has not abolished values, especially the respect for the other and a new proliferation of spirituality: “Certain values proper to modernity, such as human rights, are not about to collapse in a welter of pure consumerism [...] the desire for truth, or the importance of human relations” (2005: 18). Paradoxically, when everything has been marketed by an omnivorous economic system worldwide, there is more altruism than ever. The disappearance of an unconditional morality and the relativism of values have not erased democratic values (Lipovetsky 2005: 21). Movements in favour of the underprivileged mushroom everyday. Volunteers in humanitarian causes live next door with insatiable multi-national companies. New interpersonal links and a new ethics and post-morality —which “is not the same as immorality” (21)— explain all these processes of social empathy. Correspondingly, art has recovered old formats and mediums, replacing (or revising) the ubiquitous experimentalism of previous decades. However, novels like *Dorian: An Imitation* and *American Psycho* dissent from this new trend. They are still postmodernist texts, clung to Lipovetsky’s second

stage of hyper-capitalism/modernism where egotism rules social relations. Dorian and Patrick Bateman are essentially hyperconsumers, actors and victims of a self-begetting system. Bateman's self-portrayal constitutes a paradigmatic reification of the ego: "I'm resourceful [...] I'm creative, I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled. In essence what I'm saying is that society cannot afford to lose me. I'm an asset" (Ellis 1991: 3). Not only do they consume objects like "a suit by Ermenegildo Zegna, a cotton shirt with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie, or leather wing tips by Fratelli Rosetti" (4-5), but also people. This hypercapitalist cannibalism eventually degenerates into criminality. Updating the modus operandi of Jack the Ripper or Mr Hyde, both characters murder people who do not attain to the aesthetic logic of the market or threaten their desire as consumers: fat women, prostitutes or bad artists make up the bulk of their victims. When Bateman is reading the newspaper, we witness his maniac derangement when exposed to the dark side of the city:

I hate to complain about the trash, the garbage, the disease, about how filthy this city really is [...] and the joke is, the punch line is, it's all in this city —nowhere else, just here, it sucks, whoa wait, more Nazis, gridlock, gridlock, baby-sellers, black-market babies, AIDS babies, baby junkies, building collapses on baby, maniac baby, gridlock, bridge collapses. (1991: 4)

His apocalyptic discourse forecasts the ambiguous character of hypermodernism. Behind the glamour of the Fifth Avenue or Kensington, there lies a threatening underside, that of the obsessive serial killer. Dorian and Patrick represent the tyranny of order, serial reproduction of goods, beauty, and death. Yet, they lack the empathy with the other that Lévinas puts forward and that is increasingly present in Lipovetsky's hypermodern world.

Cathode Narcissus apparently accomplishes the logic of Kirby's digimodernism. The video installation can be reproduced *ad nauseam* and although originally devised by an artist, it becomes an authorless phenomenon when Dorian turns it into an interactive web page. Nevertheless, and despite the different ontological layers at stake in *Dorian: An Imitation*, the novel is still a closed text. By closed I do not mean that it is conventional; in fact, the novel is constituted as an intertextual event which frequently contests itself and breaks the boundaries between reality and fiction. In any case, it is not a digimodernist device; i.e., a text in the make which literally changes as the reader interacts with it. *Dorian: An Imitation* is self-comprehensive and intertextual, and defies the classic sense of certainty. We can no longer expect from literature the feeling of certainty and confidence of pre-modernist realism. The only certainty today is that art is able to respond to our needs, to make us face the complexity of reality, the changing, unstable character of our existence, and the need to come to terms with the other. This is what Self's novel aims to do. It is not a pastiche of Wilde's masterwork, a mere review of twentieth-century art, or a

recollection of AIDS images. It is an active artefact which bears witness to a changing era, and makes us complicit with it, just as abstract and Pop art did with its viewers some decades ago. Almost at the end, Lord Henry Wotton questions:

The so-called ‘art’ of the twentieth century with a particularly rare and hearty passion [...] With a few notable exceptions [...] the artists of this era have been in headlong flight from beauty or any meaningful representation of the human form. Were Basil Hallward’s video have a life of its own, it would be a fitting coda to this vile age with its spasms of isms. (Self 2002: 220)

Are Wotton’s words heralding a new concept of art, more faithful to classic standards and akin to Eshelman’s performatism (2001)?

In Eshelman’s view, that postmodernism is being overcome is a conspicuous fact. To justify his opinion he points to “the renewed interest in beauty and the discipline of aesthetics, a new seriousness or lack of manifest irony, a renaissance of painting (as opposed to performance art and installations) as well as a tendency towards projecting unity and totality in art works” (2008: 1). This re-turn to monism constitutes both a reaction to postmodernist “anti-art” and a revision of “classicism, neo-Kantianism, or the Apollonian” (2008: 11). In other words, being performatism “a language act that does what it promises” (Eshelman 2001: 1), it challenges the relativism and nihilism of postmodernism, reinstating instead concepts such as “the *telos*, the author, belief, love, dogma and much more” (1). Obviously Eshelman’s theory —like new sincerity and others— reformulate old concepts and values to the aesthetics of the postpostmodern era. They return to the authorial frame, discarding the death of the subject, so that “the act of narrating becomes an act of belief” (2001: 4). Art becomes therefore a holistic phenomenon which demands a re-negotiation of the relation between sign and thing, rejecting the deferring semioticism and futile epistemology of postmodernism.

The neo-Kantian stance of modernism, particularly abstract expressionism, which strived for “a semiotic unity of artist, work, and viewer” (Eshelman 2008: 1), was replaced in the sixties by a neo-Hegelian/Nietzschean perspective, which fostered “ironic conceptuality, [...] trying to smash through our conceptual illusions by representing them ironically in deliberately flawed or repellent works of anti-art” (2). This is the scenario of aesthetic rehabilitation in Self’s novel. However, Eshelman rejects the pessimism of postmodernism and claims for long-lost concepts like holism, theism, transcendence, and responsibility. The new authenticity the critic calls for is not naïve though. The work of art, its signs, the authorial frame and the reader/spectator rely on a communal sense of confidence: “The net result [...] is to create an artificially framed aesthetic field that we *believe in* even though we are aware of the artificial, manipulative conditions behind” (Eshelman 2008: 6). With all this in mind, Lipovetsky’s reformulation of moral responsibility in hypermodernism gains a new meaning.

To fully understand the monism of performatism, Eshelman draws on the notion of double frame, which consists of two interlocking parts:

The primary or inner frame (the ostensive sign) and the outer frame or work frame. My basic assumption [...] suggests that contemporary artists have intuitively or unconsciously turned to latter-day variants of the ostensive sign to avoid the endless regress and increased strained ironies of classic postmodernism, and that they place an outside frame—an ironclad or lock—around that sign to insure that its aesthetic efficacy remains unbroken. (2008: 2)

This interlocking of inner and outer frames to conceive comprehensive artistic discourses recalls Derrida's logic of *ergon* and *parergon*, the core and the contours or liminal framework of the art piece (1987). However, performatism does not comply with the endless deferral of Derrida's theory—which, in my view, Self's novel however confirms. The relation between the inner and the outer frame in performatism is established by an authorial frame which makes it consistent, meaningful, and transcendental. In other words, the interlocking of frames is “imposed on viewers [in visual arts] through the opaque will of the theist artist” (Eshelman 2008: 7). The critic illustrates his view through different artistic formats. All of them however show how “nature, art and the observer are bound together in a framed unity that seems to transcend, rather than undercut, the premises upon which that unity is based” (7). Against the postmodernist aporic deferring of the real, performatist art re-values the sign and its unity with reality. Art is obviously an artificial event, but re-inscribes beauty, totality, and allows reentering history (Eshelman 2008: 11). *Dorian: An Imitation* relies on a multiframed structure; as we learn, Dorian's story is embedded within Lord Wotton's *roman à clef*; not to mention the relation between Wotton's relation with its hypotext in Wilde's novel. Yet, the narrative framework and ontological levels in Self's text are immediately contested. No transcendence is aimed at, but an ontological game instead.

3. NEO-VICTORIAN UNCERTAINTY. THE CASE OF TÓIBÍN'S *THE MASTER*

In the last decades the canon has been constantly revised. This has been especially the case of (late)Victorian literature, and more concretely of (potentially) queer voices such as Oscar Wilde's and Henry James's. Whether these neo-Victorian novels are the symptom of cultural exhaustion, or they are the result of a traumatic shortage of ideas is difficult to say and, in any case, is not at stake here. The fact is that a whole industry has been born around this revival process. As concerns epistemology and ontology, we will see to what extent apparently classic novels like Colm Tóibín's *The Master* stick to or recast the sign-to-thing relation, itself a performatist recast of the

logic of representation of nineteenth-century realism. As shown so far, *Dorian: An Imitation* questions ontological boundaries and genres, and updates its hypotext to convey an overall sense of uncertainty following the poetics of postmodernism. Irony and parody constitute its valid tropes to cope with current traumas, particularly AIDS. Moreover, the novel does not aim at reaching the sign-to-thing logic fostered by Eshelman, opting instead for a Baudrillardian regression *ad infinitum*. Briefly stated, it is a postmodernist artefact celebrating uncertainty, ontological and epistemological indefiniteness and queerness.

Colm Tóibín's *The Master* recalls the other late-Victorian homoerotic icon, namely Henry James. If Self's novel recasts Wilde's flamboyance, Tóibín updates the indirection and silences of James. The postmodernist pyrotechnics and anti-art (in Eshelman's terminology) of Wilde differ from the apparently classic tone of James's texts. *The Master* revives the latter's periphrases and chronic vacillation, particularly his passive involvement in homoerotic bonds after (and under the effect of) Wilde's traumatic downfall. Uninterested in Wilde for long, as he "threw caution away and seemed ready to make himself into a public martyr, the Irish playwright began to interest him [James] enormously" (Toibín 2004: 73). Toibín's hero's fascination with the main sexual scandal in Victorian England and the novel's fascination with James's literary discourse —particularly his autobiographical writings— renders *The Master* a neo-Victorian text with retro-Victorian undertones in Llewellyn's taxonomy (2010: 5). Instead of Baz's early-postmodernist audio-visual performances, the voice of Tóibín's narrator recalls the handcraft technique of painting. Like James, the narrator draws brushstrokes that make up a quasi-pictorial event. Drawing on Lipovetsky and other theorists of postpostmodernism, Kirby points to "a general move back to more traditional modes of storytelling [...] the tone throughout [being] warm rather than knowing and ironic" (2009: 17). Does this return to truth-effect discourses apply to *The Master*? Briefly stated, does the novel comply with postmodernist playfulness and irony or does it return to the renewed interest in certainty heralded by critics like Eshelman? Being a (neo-Victorian) biography, the novel should *a priori* address reality and certainty. However, being a fictionalised life story, its compromise with truthfulness is complex and eludes easy categorization. It is a biography, yet one which challenges the logic of classic certainty, as fiction and reality intermingle freely in a liminal territory (Nünning, 2005, and Lusin, 2010). The truth of fiction and the truth of the real necessarily complement each other and, therefore, reality cannot be grasped and rendered according to classic standards whereby signs utter things unproblematically. The confluence of conflicting signs claiming for the truth of James makes the attempt at biographing him a revision of life-writing and its rapport with fictionality. Its liminality has made *The Master* a polemic text. In Mendelsohn's view, Tóibín's novel is a failure precisely because it purposefully overidentifies with the real James: "Each memory that is triggered or captured may lead to the creation of a work of literature by Henry the artist, but each memory tends also to lead you to a scene of moral failure on the part of Henry the

man” (2004: 4). In other words, Tóibín’s character prioritises aesthetics over ethics, exploiting James’s alleged aestheticism to downgrade him at a personal, emotional, and ethical level. For Mendelsohn it is Tóibín’s (rather than the Jamesian) fascination with high tragedy that makes “him unable to get to the deep opaque heart of Henry James [...] for whom art was the highest satisfaction” (2004: 5).

Although remaining ironic, playful, and sceptic, late-postmodernism has veered away from pure formalism and relativism towards a more ideological stance, apparently closer to postpostmodernists’s position. However, *The Master* does not “perform” the sacral, theist and monist turn that Eshelman claims. The novel merely plays with the illusion of biographical writing from the standpoint of fiction; a new formula to cope with the overall atmosphere of crisis today that defies the reductionist discourse of Eshelman’s neo-monism. The neo-Enlightenment of theorists like Terry Eagleton is gaining adepts, particularly when we feel at a loss, mourning ourselves as traumatised victims of the alleged crisis of values of postmodernism. *The Master* looks backwards. However, this return does not imply acknowledging nineteenth-century ethics, poetics and politics literally. Despite its Victorian setting, the novel tells us about ourselves and our current condition. In other words, James is a beautiful excuse to confront (our) new crises. For Mendelsohn James’s persona is (ab)used for dramatic effect, disregarding ethical consequences. However, Tóibín’s text is simply part of the phenomenon of biofiction. The focus is on the hybridity of experience and the difficulty of representation. We learn how most of the plots in James’s novels, novellas and short stories derive from biographical episodes. In that sense, reality informs fiction and viceversa and, as readers, we are required an act of (transitory) belief and compromise; otherwise, the fragile concept of certainty in the novel would break down a moment too soon. Tóibín’s James points out that “life is a mystery and that only sentences are beautiful” (2004: 355). Without art, (his) reality would not hold. In a concluding, quasi-testamentary, remark, the hero claims:

“I’m a poor story-teller,” Henry said, “a romancer, interested in dramatic niceties. While my brother makes sense of the world, I can only briefly attempt to make it come alive, or become stranger. Once I wrote about youth and America and now I am left with exile and middle age and the stories of disappointment which are unlikely to win me many readers on either side of the Atlantic.” (2004: 354-55)

Henry’s discourse is self-disempowering, apparently restricting his influence to the realm of fantasy. Yet, his writing enlivens and delves into reality. As mentioned above, the latter is not immune to the transforming power of (his) fiction. It is in this liminal space where the text’s compromise with James’s production and persona stands. If abstract expressionists confronted viewers with a nihilist ethical dilemma, Tóibín’s James confronts us with the problematic relation between ethics of aesthetics. The novel questions whether literature has the right to interfere in and manipulate the real to meet its purposes, as well as whether new aesthetic trends can

break with the certainty and poetics of classic moral values. This is what James's production hinted at and *The Master* puts to the test.

The unifying character of performatism is, in Eshelman's view, also linked to the updating of the phallus as a cultural concept:

Contrary to the poststructuralist assumption that the phallus functions only by muzzling, suppressing or penetrating the female, the performative phallus creates a positive, gender-transcending unity through a process of more-or-less voluntary self-sacrifice. The centrifuging, attention-grabbing fusion of corporality and semioticity which the act of self-sacrifice entails leaves behind an empty space which is not seldom filled out by female characters. The phallic order thus annihilates itself. [...] In view of the active presentation and retraction of the phallus (not castration!) the female characters themselves receive the opportunity to act in a phallic way. (2001: 6)

Eshelman's reconfiguration of the phallus as a producer of meaning is problematic, even challenged, in *The Master*. Females are fully disempowered and dispossessed of any phallic privilege. Emotionally clung to James, his sister Alice, his cousin Minnie, and his friend Constance cannot overcome his neglect and eventually die (Tóibín 2004: 119-22, 221, 256-57). However, the fact that women are just tools in the hands of the writer does not imply that he owns the phallus. Rather than in control, James is painfully governed by the writing process. He is somehow condemned to write endlessly despite the anguish it brings about (Tóibín 2004: 83) Moreover, like James himself, Tóibín's hero is emasculated after suffering "the obscure hurt", an episode the former reproduces in his autobiographical writings (Graham 1999: 17). Therefore, rather than a performative desexualised phallus, the novel performs its absence. Whereas James's father and elder brother allegedly represent masculinity, the authority and muscle of the phallus, the hero stands for powerlessness, inaction, deferral, and lack, which he projects on his victims: Eshelman's rearticulation of the phallic as a transgendered phenomenon is thus disallowed. Despite (or rather because of) his emasculation, Tóibín's James's treatment of women is male-chauvinist. He cancels their corporeality and reduces them to semiotic signs and literary motifs he exploits. He is even accused of preferring them "dead rather than alive [as] he had known what to do with [them] once life was taken from [them]" (Tóibín 2004: 122). The phallic is not updated to inscribe women. Furthermore, even males like James's father and brother fail to embody the Victorian ideal of masculinity. Both are handicapped (2004: 156, 183) and suffer from nervous disorders (142-43), which were considered characteristically female.

The Master bears witness to the current fascination with James's traumatic poetics. For some the phenomenon responds to the logic of fashion which has found in James an easily marketable good. His deferred and deferring discourse fits the textual needs to represent the current sense of crisis. His poetics of indirection frequently hide a disturbed and disturbing identity that feeds contemporary discourses on gender

trouble. In other words, the queer and gothic in his fiction can illuminate us and find new ways of expression in and for new texts. It is impossible to escape the main trends of critical theory to understand why James has become so relevant: biographies and adaptations for the screen come out every year. However, I still think this is not enough to consider this process of rehabilitation and re-reading merely as a fashionable phenomenon, a hypermodern product, in Lipovetsky's terms.

4. CONCLUSION

After the widespread relativism of early postmodernism, the last decades have witnessed a return of ethics and politics to come to terms with the multifaceted character of literary discourse. Some current literature still clings to the aesthetic and ethical tenets of nineteenth-century realism whereby the relation of mimesis between reality and fiction gives way to an effect of symbiosis, truthfulness, and certainty. However, this return does not necessarily entail assuming that literature contributes, responds to, and partakes of, a well-defined moral framework, as some critics like Wayne Booth, Martha Nussbaum, and Adriana Caverero have claimed (Eaglestone 2004: 605). For this very reason the essay has addressed two neo-Victorian novels, which, however, is not the same as novels set in the nineteenth century (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4). As both critics argue, neo-Victorian literature “*must be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery, (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (4, original emphasis). Victorianism in *Dorian: An Imitation* and *The Master* is just an excuse to question contemporary issues indirectly. Both novels are metafictional devices that interrogate us about ourselves and how we relate to the text as source of meaning and uncertainty. The analysis has proved how, parallel to a neo-realist writing that claims the end of postmodernism, there is a trend that has its roots deep in that movement. Self's and Tóibín's novels definitely belong to the latter: certainty is just a delusion that does not last for long. The hyperrealism of *Dorian: An Imitation*, which so genuinely portrays (deviant) sexuality and the effects of AIDS, turns out to be the *roman à clef* of a diseased homodiagetic narrator. Thus, the (un)certainly of mass death eventually breaks down into a narratological game. As concerns *The Master*, what *a priori* seems to be the biography of an actual literary figure becomes an example of biofiction, thus breaking the boundaries between the truth-seeking spirit of biography and the fictionality of the novel. They popularise master figures like Wilde and James as marketable goods in line with the spirit of modern art. However, both novels do so from a well-documented stance that partakes of but transcends the logic of Lipovetsky's hypermodernism, particularly his optimism. Likewise, they aim at the certainty claimed by Eshelman and Kirby, if only to question it as a valid formula of representation in the era of crisis.

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