The Flâneur, the Collector and the Book: The Texture of the City in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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The Picture of Dorian Gray, at first sight, induces us to read the text as one example of the practice of aestheticism which the Preface asserts through actions of Dorian Gray. Yet reading this novel only in such a way is surely missing some other important points. What *The Picture of Dorian Gray* presents is not only the aesthetic lives permitted for the particular people in the special part of London in the end of the 19th century but the characteristic figure of the city, Victorian London, swarmed with all sorts of people. In this paper, I will locate this text in the bustle of the city including other fictional cities written by Poe, Dickens, Melville and so forth, and explore the representation of the modern city which stealthily erodes Dorian himself and even the text itself.

Under the influence of Lord Henry, Dorian is ambitious for becoming a "visible symbol" of a "new Hedonism" (22)[1] "with a wild desire to know everything about life" (47). Then, what does he do first for the pursuit of the new Hedonism?

> As I lounged in the Park, or strolled down Piccadilly, I used to look at every one who passed me, and wonder, with a mad curiosity, what sort of lives they led. (48)

Rambling through Hyde Park and Piccadilly, Dorian imagines how people are living in London. His perambulation about the city still continues.

> I don't know what I expected, but I went out and wandered eastward, soon losing my way in a labyrinth of grimy streets and

> black, grassless squares. (48)

Dorian walks in not only the Park which is the place for only "swell people" (62–63) but also "a labyrinth of grimy streets" overcrowded with poor people. This action is not appropriate for his status. As represented by Sir Thomas's line, "Still, the East End is a very important problem" (40), to the rich the East End is the only object of charitable work in order to satisfy their vanity, and is never the attractive spot for pleasure like Hyde Park. Upper-class people never ramble among the lower classes' residential area without purpose. When Dorian "went out and wandered eastward" "with a mad curiosity" about others' lives, he never practices the aestheticism which Lord Henry claims. If thinking of his action, we can say that Dorian's attitude is not the example of the aestheticism, but rather the representation of the peculiar tendency to stroll the streets which people living in the big city often have. Dorian's wandering is equal with the action of Edgar Allan Poe's narrator in "The Man of the Crowd": "I looked at the passengers in masses" "with a delicious novelty of emotion" (135). Moreover, like Dorian, the narrator begins to fancy the people's whole life: "I could frequently read, even in that brief interval of a glance, the [people's] history of long years" (139). Or a "labyrinth of grimy streets" is to Dorian as "the mighty labyrinths of London" (375) is to Thomas De Quincey's narrator in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. Raymond Williams points out, "perception of the new qualities of the modern city had been associated . . . with a man walking, as if alone, in its streets" (233), and this figure is defined as some words such as "the rambler, the stroller, the spectator" and "the flâneur"[2] (Deborah Epstein Nord 1). Dorian walking in London and even into the shabby paths for certain has the distinctive aspect of the flâneur which is often found in the modern city fiction.

Dorian's figure as the flâneur is highlighted in Chapter 7 and Chapter 16. First, let us look at his way of flâneur in Chapter 7.

> He remembered wandering through dimly-lit streets, past gaunt black-shadowed archways and evil-looking houses. Women with hoarse voices and harsh laughter had called after him. Drunkards had reeled by cursing, and chattering to themselves like monstrous apes. He had seen grotesque children huddled upon doorsteps, and heard shrieks and oaths from gloomy courts. (88)

Dorian, here, also perambulates the squalid district, and what he has seen in Chapter 16 was just "the sordid shame of the great city" (184). He seems to prefer entering into the endless lanes "like the black web of some sprawling spider" (185) to promenading in the beautiful Park. Without knowing it he always loiters in "the streets more narrow and gloomy" (185). In the previous quotation from Chapter 7, that Dorian regards drunkards as "monstrous apes" resembles that Thomas Carlyle thinks human-beings as "two-legged animals without feathers" (16) in *Sartor Resartus*. Carlyle, however, saying in such a way, probably intends to criticize the social evil which forces human being to be reduced to mere animals. While Dorian looks, so far from discontented, satisfied with it, and he even seems to want himself to melt into the dark world. When being terribly disappointed by Sibyl's acting and killing Basil and burning his remains in the grotesque way, in which cases he cannot find any beauty, Dorian goes out to the grubby streets as if he were attracted to the dark world all the more for its ugliness. It is the beauty lying buried in ugliness that Dorian truly wishes to find, which manifests that he himself betrays the maxim in the Preface: "Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming" (xxxiii). His practice of the flâneur shows that Dorian seeks after the beauty, to be sure, but this beauty is different from what Lord Henry wants. He is a new kind of aesthete.

According to Raymond Williams, "the lonely figure walking the streets" like Dorian, "is overwhelmed by the crowds" (235). When he faces to the multitudes, what effect does it cause on him? In the "monstrous London . . . with its myriads of people" (48), anyone is exposed to danger of engulfing himself into the infinite people. Losing the difference from others, he may become just "The Man of the Crowd" as if he stood for the short story's title of Edgar Allan Poe. The immensities of the city "give rise to the crises of identity and a range of anxious responses" (Julian Wolfreys 99). In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Wakefield", for example, once "he [Wakefield] . . . melt into the great mass of London" (133), the narrator cannot but deplore that "Poor Wakefield! Little knowest thou thine own insignificance in this great world!" (133). Everyone living in the great city is liable to be Wakefield.

When Dorian wanders and scans the city, he is the "observer"[3] to the crowd, streets, houses and London. While "Jim", the brother of Sibyl Vane, "frowned from time to time when he caught the inquisitive glance of some stranger" (65). Jim is always the object of other people's eyes, even though once he assumes the role of witness to Dorian near a wharf. After all, Jim is killed as a target of a hunting. Dorian is sometimes seen by others, for instance, when he models for the painter. However, he does not suffer from others' gaze, rather verifies that his beauty attracts them. No wonder Dorian can solidify his identity as far as he can maintain his position as the observer to others, but it continues not so long. Going to opium-dens in Chapter 16, he cannot help "glancing back now and then to see if he was being followed" (187), and even "he seemed to see the eyes of Basil Hallward looking at him" (188) though Basil has already died. It is obvious that he is afraid of being looked at by others. When he "wanted to be where no one would know who he was" and "wanted to escape from himself" (188), he seems to be eager to erase his identity. What happens to him?

In Chapter 2, he decides to live according to Henry's words: "The aim of life is self-development. To realize one's nature perfectly — that is what each of us is here for" (17). Certainly in this stage, Dorian realizes what he is, in other words, his identity, and expects to further develop it. He has nothing to do with the crisis of identity. But, not satisfying himself by developing his nature, he is anxious to imbibe the thought of every great person from all kinds of ages. At last, it appears to him that "the whole of history was merely the record of his own life . . . " (144). What does it mean? Rachel Bowlby explains:

> Dorian's grand aspirations, by identifying him with all the great men of history, reduces him to pure generality. Since he sees himself in everyone, his self can have no distinguishing features at all. (186)

Finding himself in every man results in impossibility for him to persist in his any originality. It also means that he has completely lost his identity. The search for the new Hedonism and the development of his nature ironically causes the exact opposite effect. The division between his body and soul — the portrait, first of all, may begin the fissure of his identity.

We can find another man falling into the identity crisis in Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby". He cannot have any attachment to his life, and at length he kills himself by the refusal of eating. Bartleby by himself longs to become nobody. Dorian, on the other hand, intends to reset his life by killing his picture and get a new life. "A new life! That was what he wanted. That was what he was waiting for" (221). But Dorian's last is not different from Bartleby's. The entirely new identity does not exist. His identity consists of a tissue of what he has been from the past to now. The only legacy after his death is "a splendid portrait . . . in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty" (224) now losing its master. This picture looks as if one of the dead letters, losing their masters forever, which are sent to "the Dead Letter Office" where "Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk" (65). Dorian aims to accomplish the self-development. Nevertheless, his way of life leads him to the crisis of his identity, and finally the complete loss of it. U. C. Knoepflmacher says about the identity as a theme of Victorian City Fiction.

> In the City Novel the protean reality of the city acts primarily as a setting for the struggles of characters in search of their identity. The disguises and transformations possible in a metropolis hold a peculiar fascination for the Victorian novelist. (529)

Dorian has also started on a journey to the search for his identity, and he even hopes to extend it. His destination, however, is no more than his own death.

If interpreting the text as modern city fiction, as we have already done, we should not forget the contrast between the city and the country. Dorian's transfer from London, the city, to the country, told by him to Henry in Chapter 19, is worth noticing. He decides to go to the country in order to begin his good actions. It is the country that is appropriate for his good actions. Although Dorian states the reason why he loves Hetty: "She [Hetty] was quite beautiful, and wonderfully like Sibyl Vane" (210), the true reason for his love is quite different. He can love Hetty, only because she "was simply a girl in a village" (210) not living in the city. There is no concrete reference to the locality of "the country" where Dorian loves Hetty, in contrast to other precise names such as "the villa . . . at Trouville", "the little white walled-in house at Algiers" or "his great house in Nottinghamshire" (141). It does not matter to him where he meets her, as far as it is just the country, because "anybody", as Henry suggests, "can be good in the country" (209).

This contrast is also found in the following Henry's words. "It is an odd thing, but every one who disappears is said to be seen at San Francisco" (211–212). A missing person never appears in the country. If he cannot be found in London, he may be in Paris or San Francisco, but never in the country, where "a country community . . . is an epitome of direct relationships: of face-to-face contacts within which we can find and value the real substance of personal relationships" (Williams 165). In such a place the missing person cannot live. It is natural that he prefers the city where "experience and community would be essentially opaque" (Williams 165) to the country. In fact, Wakefield can hide himself from his wife for twenty years by living in a small apartment which is just "in the next street to his own [house]" (133). He successfully becomes the man of the crowd because he lives in the big city — London, not in the country. When Lord Henry says about the country: "There are no temptations there. That is the reason why people who live out of town are so absolutely uncivilized" (209), and says about San Francisco: "It must be a delightful city, and possess all the attractions of the next world" (212), he surely puts much more value on the city than on the country.

Then, what attractions does the city have? The city, as Burton Pike remarks, expresses "our culture's restless dream about its inner conflicts and its inability to resolve them . . . this ambivalence expresses itself in mixed feelings of pride, guilt, love, fear, and hate toward the city" (8). The city which holds "the accumulated records of Man's Experience" (Carlyle 174) is often thought "a repository of secrets" (Carol L. Bernstein 127). When Dorian sees the multitudes, as I mentioned before, he invents their lives. Because "every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other" (Charles Dickens 10), "hidden identities and plots lurk everywhere" and hence "every human being requires investigation" (James Eli Adams 225). Every one of the crowd has "the hideousness of mysteries" (Poe 134) and is worthy of inquiry.

When Dorian walks through the streets in order to explore others' secrets, each person turns out to be a mysterious book to be read by him. De Quincy, for example, compares human being to a book: "every man and woman was a most interesting book, if one knew how to read them" (*Letters to a Young Man whose Education has been Neglected* 39). Or people's secrets never reveled to others are regarded as books which cannot be read in Dicken's *A Tale of Two Cities.* "No more can I turn the leaves of this dear book that I loved, and vainly hope in time to read it all" (10). We can find, here, the desperate wish for the perfect grasp of others even with resignation. In the big city, the closest person easily becomes the complete Other. No doubt the city possesses a lot of attractions because of its mysteries and secrets pouring down from the multitudes, but we can neither read nor decipher them perfectly. Even if we attempt to examine the spatial design, it only leads to "the necessary hypothesis of the atopical or of the placeless. The true ground, the 'it,' is everywhere and nowhere. It can be located on no map" (J. Hillis Miller 52). The modern industrious city losing the fixed center can no longer represented as the stable condition.[4] "The city is informed", to use the phrase of Julian Wolfreys, only "by the condition of *bricolage*" (131)[5]. The city lies before us as the enormous book which consists of many other little books.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* the yellow book depicting a life of a young Parisian appears in Chapter 10. Although being absorbed in it, he cannot determine whether he was reading "the spiritual ecstasies of some mediaeval saint or the morbid confessions of a modern sinner" (125). Dorian cannot really understand the contents of it which "seemed to him to contain the story of his own life" (127). This follows the fact that he fails in reading his own biography and decoding it properly. Dorian's life is nothing else than mystery to even himself.

There is another, probably more important "book" for him in the text. It is his portrait. "In Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*", as Garrett Stewart puts it, "portraiture comes to signify a kind of narrative writing in engaged receipt" (347). Dorian himself calls the picture "a diary of my life" and says to Basil that: "You will not have to read long" (154). It is interesting to note that "the satinwood bookcase" in Dorian's schoolroom "filled with his dog-eared schoolbooks" (121) when he first hid the portrait is altered into "an almost empty bookcase" (155) when he enters the same room with Basil after many years. Where do many books vanish? It seems as if the letters of these books transferred to the appearance of the picture owing to the function of re-reading and re-writing Dorian's actions. Whenever he does something evil, the letters fly from the books into the air and the portrait re-arranges them for the design of it. The picture has been reading all Dorian has done and weaving them into the texture of it. It is clear that the portrait becomes the most largest book in the bookcase, because it increases every day as the function of the diary.

Dorian resolves to control his portrait by changing the appearance of it. After loving Hetty, he expects that "the signs of evil had already gone away". But he "could see no change" in the picture, on the contrary it was "more loathsome" (221). He cannot succeed in re-writing the texture of it. Now, it is the picture that entirely dominates him. Losing a fight against it, Dorian kills himself. The yellow book, of course, is "a poisonous book" (125) for him, but the most poisonous book is nothing except his own portrait.

Trying to evade the fear produced by this poisonous book, in the famous Chapter 11, Dorian builds a collections of elaborate curios like

perfumes, instruments, jewels and embroideries which seem to outdo a specialist. By being buried in these collections and isolated from everything, "he could escape, for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne" (140). Walter Benjamin insists that: "The private individual . . . needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions" (8–9). In short, "His living room is a box in the theater of the world" (9), and the "interior is the asylum of art. The collector is the true resident of the interior" (9). Dorian never tires of gathering them as if he built his private asylum. In order to realize his ideal world, he continues to collect fragments of all beauty he wants to gain.

Dorian, as I have already stressed, often walks among the streets which are unfamiliar to him. While rambling the unknown district as a stranger, he may search for new fragments which can be added to his collections. Another name for the flâneur is certainly the collector who goes out the living room to the city to find curios. Moving around London, in which Dorian can never properly read what he sees and even where he is, he earnestly wants to cut little pieces from what he is looking at and re-creates a new city by gathering them. As soon as he piles up pieces on his new city, however, other pieces surely fall down.[6] The completely new city is only an illusion like his entirely new identity. The day when the city is completed will be postponed forever unless he ceases to be the flâneur to collect fragments. Dorian is one of the "outsiders who are isolated in, and chastised by, the city" (Pike 106). The real city, if exists, hates and drives off the stealer who intrudes into the depth of it and tears its fragments off. Instead of Dorian who is enthusiastic about the construction of the illusionary city, the picture tracks his path cautiously, reads his actions minutely and writes down them into the book of his life. Dorian himself cannot perfectly read or write any books such as the yellow book, the portrait made from the letters of books, and the city consisting of many books.

While Dorian walking in the city and the portrait chasing his way, what are we doing? Probably we also try to seek him out around London and decipher his traces. But we always fail in running after him and lose his sight as "the experienced cab-driver who takes him to the quay loses his way in the maze of streets"(Norbert Kohl 149). However hard we make efforts to follow him, he disappears into the dim streets, and we cannot know whom Dorian meets and what he really does there. Although the "reader is made hungry for information never supplied" — the real title of the yellow book, the relationships between Dorian and Adrian Singleton, and the weakness of Alan Campbell — we never discover it. It "remains one of Dorian's many secrets" (Anne Varty 128).

The narrator in "The Man of the Crowd" tracks "a decrepid old man" (139) through the night, but when the "sun arose" he cried: "He [this old man] is the man of the crowd. It will be in vain to follow" (145), and finally gives up disclosing the old man's secrets. It may be true that he "shall learn no more of him [the old man], nor of his deeds" (145). And if we follow Dorian's way all night as the Poe's narrator does, we would not reveal any his secrets either. They remain just secrets which evade any our pursuits. Dorian sometimes disappears into the crowd all of a sudden or deceives us by wearing "his own curious disguises" (160) with dexterous fingers. Yet still, it is undeniable that we can never stop trailing him to the beautiful Park or even to the dirty lanes. As far as Dorian is wandering around London keeping his secrets, we cannot help being in pursuit of him. We must be flâneurs perhaps more than Dorian is. The only way which remains for us, this may be the destiny of the flâneur, is that we collect his failing traces from the chaotic city — London, and weave these fragments into the texture of a book, even if we surely notice that the book refuses to be deciphered forever.

Notes

(1) All quotations from this novel are from *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* ed. Isobel Murray (London: Oxford UP, 1974).

(2) For details about the flâneur, see Benjamin, "The Flâneur." *The Arcades Project.* 416–455.

(3) The observer is defined as the "person who is, with some awareness, looking at the city from a detached viewpoint." See Pike, 9.

(4) Pike says that the representation of the modern city in the nineteenth century is "portrayed less and less as elements perceptually fixed in relation to each other and more and more as a succession of fluid and unpredictable juxtapositions." See Pike, 27.

(5) Wolfreys continues: "Writing the city, in order to be true to the condition of the city must be an act of *bricolage.*" See Wolfreys, 131. His idea of *bricolage* is taken from the essay: Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Writing and Difference* (1967) trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1981), 278–95, esp. 286.

(6) Benjamin writes: "As far as the collector is concerned, his collection is never complete." See Benjamin, "The Collector." *The Arcades Project,* 211.

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