

**Original Copy:
Neo-Victorian Versions of Oscar Wilde's 'Voice'**

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Abstract:

This article considers the challenge that neo-Victorian versions of Oscar Wilde's 'voice' pose to the relationship between 'original' and 'copy'. I argue that the concept of 'voice' complicates Jean Baudrillard's assessment of the loss of the 'original' in postmodern culture, as 'voice' can be conceptualised as always already absent; voices can be understood as continuous processes of reconstruction. Establishing the significance of 'voice' in the cultural afterlife of Oscar Wilde, I focus on Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983) and Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002) to demonstrate that neo-Victorian 'copies' of Wilde's 'original' voice engage with the tension between loss and recreation which often remains unquestioned in neo-Victorian criticism's invocation of the concept of 'voice'.

Key words: Peter Ackroyd, copy, Maggi Hambling, originality, postmodern, repetition, Will Self, voice, Oscar Wilde.

On 30th November 1998 – the 98th anniversary of Oscar Wilde's death – Maggi Hambling's sculpture entitled *A Conversation with Oscar Wilde* was unveiled in Adelaide Street, opposite Charing Cross Station in London. This literal 'copy' of the original Wilde is clearly not a faithful simulation; Hambling depicts Wilde as swathed in greenish tendrils, his Medusa-esque hair melting into his facial features and a green carnation at his lapel. The title of this piece is significant, for it is Wilde-as-talker that is being memorialised, and the sculpture doubles as a bench where anyone can sit on the reclining aesthete and participate in the 'conversation'. The sculpture engendered fierce debate in the UK national press for a variety of reasons, but it was the voice-related aspect of the work which received particular attention.¹ Merlin Holland, Wilde's grandson, remarked that "Oscar seems to be in full conversational flow [...]. You feel almost as if he's talking to you" (qtd. Alberge 1997: 7), and Tom Lubbock also perceives that Wilde is "talking to us" (Lubbock 1998: 1). In a condemnatory assessment of the

preview of Hambling's Wilde at the National Portrait Gallery in 1997, Jonathan Jones argues that the sculpture is "a voice without a body" (Jones 1997: 11), while Neil McKenna describes the piece as "Wilde talking" (McKenna 1998). What is notable about these commentaries is the slippage enacted between the representation (or 'copy') of Wilde speaking and the literal voice of the original Wilde. *A Conversation with Oscar Wilde* is repeatedly figured as offering us the immediate experience of Wilde's speech; the 'copy' is apparently accepted as equivalent to the original.

This article argues that Wilde's voice emerges as a recurring theme in neo-Victorian literature and culture, and can offer us the opportunity to consider how neo-Victorianism engages with the relationship between 'original' and 'copy' in artistic production. Jean Baudrillard's theorisation of simulacra and simulation suggests that in postmodern culture the copy has supplanted the original: "simulation envelopes the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum" (Baudrillard 1994: 6). Julia Wood has interpreted Hambling's sculpture in the context of such postmodern simulations of Wilde:

the objects with his image upon them are substituted for the notion of the 'real' man, Oscar Wilde, who exists only as an image, a representation [...]. The *image* of Wilde has superseded any notion of the man, displaced it all together. (Wood 2007: 107)

Although Wood's analysis seems pertinent to Wilde's original 'voice' as being supplanted by Hambling's neo-Victorian copy, we should also be attuned to the ways in which the concept of 'voice' might further complicate the relationship between original/copy in neo-Victorianism. Beginning with a consideration of how 'voice' is a central trope in neo-Victorian scholarship, I suggest that this metaphor reveals an anxiety about the interplay between original and copy in neo-Victorian fiction, which belies the postmodern rejection of 'authenticity'. I will also identify the significance of 'voice' in the cultural afterlife of Oscar Wilde, demonstrating that the impossible desire to *hear* Wilde, to return to the original, paradoxically incorporates a sense of insurmountable loss but also avenues of creativity in the act of copying. Bearing this paradox in mind, my interpretations of Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*

(1983) and Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002) seek to emphasise the ways in which Wilde's voice is invoked as a signifier of the vexed boundary between original and copy in neo-Victorian fiction. Although at times both texts appear to lay claim to an 'authentic' voicing of Wilde, we shall see that Ackroyd and Self also dramatise various ways in which the original voice can be understood as always already a constructed, simulated experience. The example of Oscar Wilde's voice can thus lead us to interrogate the often hierarchical relationship between original and copy in artistic production.

1. Speaking as Oscar Wilde: Voice as the Original Copy

'Voice' is closely associated with the concept of individuality and uniqueness in the cultural imagination. Although the production of voice is a physiological process, it is also understood as an expression of personality and social identity. Mladen Dolar explains: "We can almost unfailingly identify a person by the voice [...]. The voice is like a fingerprint, instantly recognisable and identifiable" (Dolar 2006: 22). Jonathan Rée further highlights the conceptual link between voice and social agency, stressing that "the idea of being heard, of possessing a voice or having it ignored or suppressed, or demanding, validating, giving or offering a voice [...] coincides with that of human and civil rights" (Rée 1999: 1). Such understandings seem to imply that there is a stability, truth or authenticity about the voice, but our voices are also necessarily an act of performative (self-)construction in each moment of utterance. The voice must be produced and projected, as Steven Connor argues: "As a kind of projection, the voice allows me to withdraw or retract myself. This can make my voice a persona, a mask, or sounding screen" (Connor 2000: 5). In this sense the concept of voice is located between various boundaries: the physical and psychic; the personal and social; the authentic and the constructed.

Neo-Victorianism is frequently associated with the desire to enter into a dialogue with nineteenth-century literary predecessors. The concept of authorial 'voice' becomes relevant to such an enterprise. For instance, Christian Gutleben notes that "far from looking for a new idiom of the present [...] novelists of the 80s and 90s have been bringing back to life the voices of the past and particularly of the Victorian era" (Gutleben 2001: 15-16). In contrast Catherine Bernard emphasises the failure of neo-Victorian authors to "forge a new language out of the voices of the past", arguing that the contemporary writer "is doomed to remain an imposter, an

impersonator” (Bernard 2003: 16).² These uses of the word ‘voice’ do not explicitly address the conceptual weight of the term, and yet it is apparent that a connection between Victorian ‘voices’ and originality is being implied. Put another way, a hierarchical relationship is suggested in which Victorian ‘voices’ are established as authentic, static expressions that are imitated by neo-Victorian constructions, with the latter deemed to be somehow lacking. If Victorian ‘voices’ are originals, then neo-Victorian ‘voices’ must be copies. However, if we accept that the presumed ‘original’ *voice* always includes an element of reconstruction in its very production, then the privileging of ‘Victorian voices’ becomes problematic. Indeed, is there ever such a thing as an original voice? Is ‘voice’ not always a form of simulation, a copy all along?³

Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn have argued that neo-Victorianism “play[s] with our desire to rediscover and possess the ‘original’ and ‘authentic’ by offering us a hall of mirrors full of copy. As in Baudrillard’s third order simulation, the copy becomes the real thing” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 184). I propose that this recognition of the way in which neo-Victorian literature and culture can expose the original as illusory is obscured in neo-Victorian criticism that relies upon an unquestioning acceptance of the authenticity of the concept of voice. Heilmann and Llewellyn’s commentary is attuned to the *tension* in neo-Victorianism between the desire to return to the original and the recognition that there are only ever copies available to return to. The compulsion to attempt to (re)construct the original in spite of this profound absence finds a fitting corollary in the preoccupation with Oscar Wilde’s voice in neo-Victorian culture. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), Baudrillard’s vision of postmodern returns to the past indicates an anxiety about the loss of the original:

When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and signs of reality – a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity. Escalation of the true, of lived experience, resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. (Baudrillard 1994: 6-7)

His assessment might seem apt for neo-Victorian versions of Wilde's voice, and yet perhaps we might understand voice as always being "figurative" in the first instance, due to the conceptual complexity discussed above but also due to its impermanence. Walter Ong elucidates this notion:

Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent. When I pronounce the word 'permanence', by the time I get to the '-nence' the 'perma-' is gone, and has to be gone. There is no way to stop sound and have sound. (Ong 1982: 32)

If a voice is already absent as soon as it has made its utterance, then its original reality does not have the "substance" which Baudrillard mourns the loss of in postmodern culture (Baudrillard 1994: 7); the voice is lost almost as soon as it originates. Of course, the individual speaker usually has the opportunity to produce her or his voice again, but I want to turn now to the interest in copying Oscar Wilde's voice after his death to consider the ways in which the loss of this individual's voice might be negotiated.

John Stokes uses the phrase "the oral Wilde" to represent a strain of the Wilde myth that focuses on the power of Wilde's voice; both in his prowess as an oral storyteller and in terms of the aural impact that his mellifluous tones had upon his listening audience (Stokes 1996: 23). Stories about the beauty and originality of Wilde's speaking voice abound in memoirs: Lillie Langtry (1925: 86-87), W. B. Yeats (1955: 87) and André Gide (1951:14) are amongst the numerous peers of Wilde who wrote of his brilliant conversation and compelling style of speaking. This myth-making surrounding the voice of Wilde has had a significant afterlife in the twentieth century, taking a supernatural turn in the recreation of Wilde's voice by spirit mediums. In 1923 Mrs Travers Smith apparently made contact with Wilde via her use of automatic writing, and the phrase "Oscar is speaking" resonates throughout the transcripts of their communication (qtd. Wood 2007: 96). Wilde's voice was more literally recreated in a now-famous session with the medium Leslie Flint and a recording exists of him supposedly possessed by the spirit of Wilde (Wood 2007: 97).⁴ The veracity of such manifestations of Wilde's voice is clearly questionable. However, the interest in recreating the voice of Oscar Wilde bears a telling

relationship to the boundaries between original and copy, as there is no recording of Wilde's actual speaking voice and hence the original is irretrievable; the copy is an act of creation in itself.⁵ Maggi Hambling's sculpture engages with this impossible desire to return to the original and, as my opening discussion demonstrated, it is thought-provoking that the majority of commentators on this *Conversation* appear to have exchanged the simulation for reality. Kate Kellaway is unusual in identifying the sense of loss that the work generates: "You don't have to look long to see something tragic besides his smile. The piece is original but did not make me laugh, for it is about a 'conversation' that will never happen" (Kellaway 1998: 4). Perhaps the originality of Hambling's sculpture comes in its neo-Victorian realisation that, if a contemporary audience wants to converse with Wilde, then they must always create his voice anew.

A further facet of the theme of copying Wilde's voice is the recording of Wilde reciting lines from his poem 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', reputed to have been made at the Exposition Universelle in Paris, 1900, by Wilde speaking into Thomas Edison's phonograph machine. The recording first came to light in the 1960s during H. Montgomery Hyde's visit to America to promote a new book. The author of several biographical studies of Wilde, Hyde was played the recording whilst being interviewed by the radio presenter Caspar Citron. Citron's researcher had apparently 'found' the recording in an archive and Hyde was impressed enough to bring a copy back to England for Vyvyan Holland – Wilde's younger son – to listen. Holland initially identified the voice as belonging to his father and, despite him later changing his mind, the recording was believed to be genuine for many years. Hyde even reproduced the moment of the recording in his biography of Wilde (Hyde 1976: 462). In 1987 it was revealed that the speaker could not have been Wilde; the sound quality was such that it must have been produced later than 1900, by which time Wilde had died.⁶ John Stokes has offered a thoughtful gloss on this desire to literally hear Wilde speak:

Willingness to believe that the recording really was made in Paris, really was of Wilde, depended not only upon long-established curiosity about how he sounded (how Irish? How 'camp'?), but upon the force of the imaginary situation. Wilde was in the right place at the right time [...]. Wilde's

voice, never forgotten by those who heard it, evoked with such care and admiration by its disciples, remains forever inaudible, but only by a matter of years, of months even. Repetition is written into the record. (Stokes 1996: 18)

We can thus understand the story of the fake recording as providing an allegory for the importance of Wilde's voice in the late twentieth-/early twenty-first century. Wilde's voice is constructed as a clue as to which version of Wilde's identity will be privileged – the gay Wilde, the Irish Wilde – yet crucially, the original/authentic version remains imaginary, pure fiction.

The setting of this fictional recording incident in Wilde's life locates him as on the very cusp of modernity. His relevance to the twentieth century is underscored in the potential that his original voice could have been immortalised at this event. We could have had an 'original copy', in which to indulge our postmodern nostalgia, and thus Wilde's voice might have had a different afterlife in relation to Baudrillard's reading of the desire to return to the non-existent original in a culture of the copy. However, we are denied this heritage as this voice can only be remembered, or rather re-imagined, as a constructed copy. Wilde's voice, as Stokes implies, can only ever be heard as a copy; repetition *becomes* the original. Should this be mourned, or celebrated? Might the fiction of the 'original copy' of Wilde's voice actually be a generative discourse? I want to turn now to several neo-Victorian versions of Wilde – Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and Will Self's *Dorian: an Imitation* – to explore the ways in which Wilde's voice has been reconstructed in neo-Victorian fiction and to consider the strategies both authors employ to generate the paradoxical 'original copy' of Wilde's voice.

2. Ackroyd's Wilde: The Testament as Copy

Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* takes the form of a diary kept by Wilde (and latterly his companion, Maurice) during the last months of his life in the Paris of 1900. The novel is grounded in some of the verifiable details of Wilde's life. Wilde's recollections of the circumstances of his childhood, his rise to fame, success and downfall are populated by a cast of 'real' historical figures, both major and minor players in the Wilde story: Lord Alfred Douglas, Speranza, Frank Harris and Lillie

Langtry, to name only a selection. The tone of Wilde's voice is impressively authentic at times, as Wildean epigrams, classical/mythical allusions and *bon mots* proliferate – some of which Wilde certainly said, some of which Wilde could have said – and just how important is this distinction? In a review for the *American Spectator*, Roger Lewis claims that Ackroyd's authorial voice is "more Wildean than Wilde" (Lewis 1984: 3), implying that the relationship between the original and copied voices is disturbed by Ackroyd's novel.

If Maggi Hambling's *A Conversation with Oscar Wilde* can be interpreted as a manifestation of the wish to have an impossible dialogue with Wilde, then *The Last Testament* can also be perceived as a form of wish-fulfilment. The diary furnishes the reader with several responses to the questions which are perennially asked (but never satisfactorily answered) by biographers and critics. *The Last Testament* informs us of the occasion of Wilde's first homosexual experience (Ackroyd 1985: 101-102); the relationship between Wilde's life and work (Ackroyd 1985: 94); and the reason why he stood trial as opposed to fleeing when he had the opportunity (Ackroyd 1985: 136-138). Ackroyd provides the voice for Wilde's responses that the reader and critic yearn to hear, and this is a process of original creation rather than reconstruction.

The relationship between Wilde's original voice and its copies converge in a fascinating way in Ackroyd's depiction of Wilde's visit to the Exposition Universelle. Wilde tells us of being recognised in the American section and, sure enough, he is encouraged to record his voice:

He asked me to say something into Edison's speaking machine [...] I recited some lines from the *Ballad* and, as I did, I felt chilled. I think that even then I had a premonition of my death. That place, and that machine, were not of my time. (Ackroyd 1985: 179)

It is worth remembering that it wasn't until 1987 that the purported recording of Wilde's voice was exposed as a fake, so we can speculate that Ackroyd's inclusion of this incident was initially intended as an attempt to render an authentic picture of Wilde's last months in the city. This scene now functions as a testament to the ever-shifting borderlines between original and copied versions of Wilde's voice. Furthermore, Wilde's

discomfort at this incident should make us pause for thought. The phrase “that place, and that machine, were not of my time” is haunting; just in whose “time” and in which “place” *should* Wilde’s voice be located? In the neo-Victorian desire to make Wilde speak to and for ‘us’, do we simultaneously lose something of his original setting? Perhaps the original “place” of Wilde is irrevocably lost, but in our haste to enter into a dialogue with this biofictional character we might also lose sight of the fact there was, at some point, a real man who suffered and died in exile from his loved ones. The ethical issues at stake in the aesthetic copies of Wilde should not be silenced in this exchange.⁷

However, Ackroyd’s novel is attuned to the issue of silencing in relation to Wilde, both literally and symbolically. As the third trial of the original Wilde concluded in May 1895 with a guilty verdict and the sentence of two years of hard labour was passed, Wilde purportedly asked: “And I? May I say nothing, my lord?”, to which Justice Sir Alfred Wills responded with a dismissive wave of his hand (Ellmann 1987: 449). At this pivotal juncture the self-styled ‘lord of language’ lost his access to the power of autonomous speech, and without being given leave to speak, he was transported to Holloway prison, the first of a number of institutions where Wilde was to serve his sentence. *The Last Testament* offers a slightly different perspective on this moment:

The judge uttered those words of condemnation which I had always feared and, in my delirium, I wished to fall in front of the court and confess the sins of my entire life, to utter all the terrible secrets which I harboured and the strange ambitions which I had nourished. I wished to become like a child, and speak simply for the first time. But the judge waved me away, and I was taken in handcuffs to the waiting room. (Ackroyd 1985: 145)

We witness the moment of Wilde’s silencing and hear how his internal voice reflected upon the event. Significantly, Ackroyd’s Wilde implies that, prior to this point, his speech in the trial had been the projection of a persona; Wilde is acknowledging that his voice has never been authentic or genuine, but at the very moment he feels that he might “speak simply for the first time” – as his ‘genuine’ self – he is silenced. The implication is that

there can be no access to the ‘truth’ of the voice even for Wilde, whose voice has become inauthentic even to his self. In Ackroyd’s version the famous utterance – “And I? May I say nothing, my lord?” – is actually omitted. In its place we learn of Wilde’s *wish* for speech. Indeed, *The Last Testament* can be perceived as Wilde’s own wish-fulfilment narrative, for the *Testament* is an extended opportunity to “confess”, to “utter” the “secrets” and “strange ambitions” that have been silenced. The use of the word ‘testament’ is suggestive, carrying implications of quasi-Biblical scripture and legal documentation (as in ‘the last will and testament of...’) but also of the speech act of testifying to tell the truth in court. The text thus purports to be the voice of Wilde that was denied in the courtroom, ironically placing claim to an authority that the novel undermines through its status as a fictionalisation of Wilde’s life. Towards the end of his *Testament* Wilde reflects metafictionally on the authenticity of the voice he has provided in this document: “perhaps even in this journal I am not portraying myself as indeed I am” (Ackroyd 1985: 171). Ackroyd’s Wilde recognises that even the most intimate process of voicing a confession, presented in the trappings of an authentic and truthful speech act, is still a constructed performance. We are therefore encouraged to reflect on the performative aspects of all acts of voicing and to question the cultural assumptions we might hold about the voice offering access to an individual’s real identity.

There is an earlier moment in the text which encapsulates this tension between the purported authentic or original voice and the process of reconstruction, copying and imitation. Wilde recounts his experience of winning the Newdigate Prize at Oxford for his poem ‘Ravenna’:

I recited some of the more violet passages [...]. It was a wonderful moment, and I borrowed for the occasion some of the techniques which I had seen employed with great effect at the Brompton Oratory. It was my first taste of success as an artist. (Ackroyd 1985: 37)

Interestingly, Wilde associates artistic success with oral performance as opposed to the written text; this is a version of Wilde which taps into the ‘lost’ powers of his wonderful voice. However, this original voice is founded on the imitation of others, and significantly Wilde concludes: “I

found myself by borrowing another's voice" (Ackroyd 1985: 37-38). Hence the original voice is revealed to be a copy, and therein lies the limitation of fixating upon Wilde's voice as offering us access to the 'real' Wilde. Ackroyd's *Testament* clearly has an investment in Wilde's voice as a way of bringing a postmodern readership closer to the original man and yet exposes the illusory 'authenticity' on which such a wish is founded.

3. Imitating an Imitation: The Self-ish Wilde

Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* constitutes a different representation of Wilde's voice to that of Ackroyd's text, as it is an adaptation of Wilde's work as opposed to a fictionalisation of the author himself. In a commentary upon Self's reuse of Wildean epigrams, Thomas Mallon observes:

It is pointless to think of this as thievery, because the modernised *Dorian* creates a world in which Wilde's existence cannot be allowed to have occurred. Had he ever lived, all the current characters would be in on the plot, not to mention the odd coincidence of their own names. Wilde's banishment amid the continuation of all else is a curious homage, a reverse index of immortal stature. (Mallon 2003)

It is only through actually *eradicating* Oscar Wilde from the history of the world presented within the novel that Self's text can succeed. This sentiment appears to echo Harold Bloom's concept of the "anxiety of influence" in which the "ephebe" must first imitate, then undermine his literary predecessors in order to produce an original work (Bloom 1973: 16). Self must silence Wilde as an author for his own narrative voice to construct a Wildean text. The copy must usurp the original. In spite of this tribute through effacement, Wilde does still have a presence in the novel. Self adheres to the original plot and characters, albeit with some changes – Basil's painting, for example, becomes a video installation called 'Cathode Narcissus' and Sybil Vane is re-imagined as a black, heroin-addicted rent boy named Herman. Self also retains some Wildean phrases in the form of a selection from the original novel, other works by Wilde and Wilde's own biography: "When we are happy we are always good, but when we are good we are not always happy" (Self 2002: 59); "For Baz to have died once

would have been unfortunate; for him to die twice looks like carelessness” (Self 2002: 186); “I shall have to die beyond my means” (Self 2002: 125). The novel also includes up-dated versions of Wildean epigrams: “Fixing coke is the perfect modern pleasure, because even as you do it you want to do it again” (Self 2002: 58). In a comparable manner to Ackroyd’s version of Wilde, Self’s Henry Wotton fluctuates between his fictional precursor’s voice, Wilde’s textual and biographical voice and Self’s narrative voice.

It is generally Henry Wotton who articulates recognisably Wildean sentiments in Self’s text. In an interview with Robert McCrum for *The Observer*, responding to the question “How much of Will Self is there in Dorian, Henry Wotton and Basil Hallward?”, Self explains:

Wilde famously said that Wotton was as the world saw him, that Hallward was as he really was and that Dorian was as he would like to be. It’s a meaningless remark. Hallward is a vaguely effete cipher. Dorian is a nasty little piece of work in Wilde’s book just as much as in mine. Wotton is, of course, Wilde. My Wotton is one part me and two other parts people I knew who fitted the bill. (McCrum 2002: 15)

Wilde’s original comment is as follows: “Basil is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian is what I would like to be in other ages, perhaps” (Ellmann 1987: 301). A crucial misquotation is performed as Wilde’s statement is rather more ambiguous than Self’s re-citation. Wilde’s use of “I think” injects his comments with a cautiousness that is lacking from Self’s account, and the final phrase “perhaps” adds a tentative atmosphere to Wilde’s speculation. It is, of course, Self’s privilege to misquote his literary precursor to suit his own purposes, but even if this is an unintentional misquotation it remains equally telling. There is an amusing irreverence in his casual disregard for authorial intention, but more remarkable is Self’s implicit identification with Wilde, refracted through the character of Henry Wotton. In this sense, Self’s statement circumvents the issue of the loss of Wilde’s voice; Self not only speaks for Wilde but suggests that he might speak *as* Wilde, or perhaps, in place of Wilde. In an interview with Self published in *Time Out* magazine, Paul Burston remarks: “Gay or straight, Self has always been a peculiarly queer writer” (Burston

2008: 104), and perhaps this is his queerest moment, as in copying the voice of Wilde-the-queer-icon Self comes to embody the original.⁸

Self's reviewers, if acknowledging the novel's title, appear to understand *Dorian: an Imitation* as a reference to the *text*'s status as a copy to an original.⁹ Another interpretation would be to analyse the word "imitation" as specifically referring to the character of Dorian, and this theme is explicitly related to Dorian's overt queerness in Self's novel. As Self's Dorian lives through the sixteen-year period of the novel, he adopts a variety of personae to adapt to his changing milieu. "Baz" Hallward remarks upon Dorian's "clone" image:

It was strange the way he not only adopted the typical clone costume of biker jacket, white T-shirt, and jeans, with greased-back hair under a peaked cap, he even made it his own. All the clones I've seen since then – even the ones I saw walking through Soho on the way here – seem to me to be clones of Dorian. (Self 2002: 92)

The implication that Dorian can emulate the style of others and through doing so appear to be the originator has an intriguing relationship with the 'clone' as a gay subcultural style. According to Rebecca Schneider:

'Clone' had been an appellation adopted by gays to name the hypermasculine camp that had come to signify post-Stonewall gay male style [...]. Clone style, overt and carefully manipulated signatures of macho affective and behavioural patterns, threateningly outed masculinity as constructed [...] and as appropriable. (Schneider 2001: 98)

Schneider's analysis is informed by a Judith Butler-inspired theory of the performance of gender. Butler argues that all gender identities – heterosexual or otherwise – are constructed through a process of performative repetition, the re-citation of a discursive script of gender which produces the illusion of a coherently gendered subject (Butler 1999: 43-44). If we accept Butler's analysis of camp/drag as a parodic copy of the *illusory* original that constitutes heterosexuality, then Dorian's adoption of the clone style is a copy of a copy of a copy.¹⁰ His persona is refracted and multiplied

through layers of imitation, and yet he still possesses the ability to present his multiply copied image as the original. If the ostensible original of this dizzying formula is derivative, then the essence of originality eludes detection; the concepts of original and copy again become irrevocably confused and entwined. This understanding of the clone as a strategy of thwarting the hierarchy between original/copy returns us to the queerness of Self's appropriation of Wotton/Wilde's voice within *Dorian*; via his embodiment of Wilde's voice, Self is Wilde's copy, but this is positioned against the backdrop of a novel where the queer clone will expose the absence of origins.

The *pièce de résistance* of Self's text is the inclusion of an epilogue, extending the plot beyond Dorian's suicidal departure. The scene shifts to the kitchen of the Wotton household where Dorian and Victoria – Henry's widow – sit reading the manuscript of Henry's novel, the same book the reader has just completed. The 'real' Dorian, we discover, is an attractive, well-preserved gay man in his mid-thirties, a successful business man, pro-New Labour and kind to his friends. He is utterly indignant at his fictional copy. In response to Victoria's amusement at Henry's literary project, he remarks: "Plays with the form? [...] He's taken colossal liberties with the truth!" (Self 2002: 258-259). This version of Dorian (original? copy?) is deeply offended by Henry's inauthentic – and defamatory – depiction of his character.

On leaving the Wotton household with Henry's manuscript, Dorian's life is gradually infiltrated by the presence of a disembodied voice in his mind, sounding very much like that of Henry Wotton: "You're Henry's narrative voice in that stupid book of his. I haven't thought about it in months – I haven't thought about *you* in months" (Self 2002: 269). Dorian's life is progressively dominated by the voice and finally it transpires that life is imitating Henry's fiction. Dorian believes that he had been living the debauched life of his fictional counterpart. In an echo of the historical Wilde's own meditation on the fraught relationship between original and copy via Dorian's portrait, the distinction between Henry's text and Dorian's life in Self's novel is transgressed. Is Dorian insane and incorporating Henry's fiction into his own delusions, thus copying his author's voice? Or has Henry's novel been a copy all along, transcribing the story of Dorian's dastardly deeds? The epilogue of *Dorian: An Imitation* thus provides a very Wildean meditation on the relationship between origins

and copies of fictional/authorial voices and the ways in which such voices can be simultaneously derivative and generative.

Self has openly expressed his admiration for Oscar Wilde in several of his articles for newspapers and magazines. In a piece written for the American version of *GQ* magazine (reprinted in *Feeding Frenzy*), he refers to Wilde as his “hero” (Self 2001: 375), remarks on his interest in rewriting *Dorian Gray*, and also suggests that there is much in Wilde’s life and work that is still relevant to contemporary society. Discussing Wilde’s American lecture tour, he explains:

Many flocked to hear this dandy speak without realising that their fascination was provoked by witnessing tomorrow’s cultural news today: Wilde – the harbinger of the styles and modes of the twentieth century, an era to be rendered dyspeptic with the gorging of its own decadences. (Self 2001: 376)

Self suggests that it is through the medium of Wilde’s *speech* that he becomes relevant to contemporary concerns; he is figured as an oracular prophet who will ‘speak for’ the current moment. However, Self is also attuned to the ways in which Wilde obviously cannot now speak for himself and has participated in the debate surrounding Hambling’s *Conversation*. Self criticises the covert location of the monument and its posture but also finds resonance with his own interest in Wilde’s voice in the sculpture: “in a way we still do hallucinate him, imagine his orotund tones in our mind’s ear” (Self 2001: 209). Although at times Self gives the impression of having the authority to speak for/as Wilde, his remark on the compulsion to “hallucinate” or “imagine” Wilde’s voice does acknowledge the loss of the original. The motif of Wilde’s voice being recreated in our minds generates an image of being haunted or possessed by Wilde, a theme that is also apparent in the concept of Self speaking with Wilde’s voice as might a spirit medium – hence underlining the prevalent theme of spectrality in neo-Victorian generally.

4. **Conclusion: Speaking for the Copy**

This article has identified a tendency in some neo-Victorian criticism to invoke the concept of voice as a signifier of the authenticity or originality

of Victorian authors in relation to the simulations or copies of neo-Victorianism. If this assumption goes unquestioned, it seems to suggest that neo-Victorian artistic production has limited affiliations with Baudrillard's theory of the precession of simulacra in postmodern culture, for it implies that is the possibility of some sort of access to an original behind or beyond multiple copies or replicas. However, I have sought to demonstrate that the concept of voice will always have a fraught relationship with the notion of a finite origin. Voices can be understood as being both authentic *and* reconstructed, simultaneously 'real' and always already a simulation, and so challenge Baudrillard's assumption that the 'real' was ever particularly secure (Baudrillard 1994: 6); when thinking about the concept of voice, the 'real' itself is necessarily a simulation.

Oscar Wilde provides an important example of how the tension between original and copied voice might be played out in neo-Victorian art and fiction. The strain of the Wilde myth focusing on Wilde's fabulous voice indicates a desire to recapture this original voice to get closer to the 'real', but at the same time it must always engage in acts of imagination and creation to achieve a copy. The original is lost, but neo-Victorian versions of Wilde's voice are attuned to the ways in which voices are never fixed, authentic or original in the first place, so that, in a sense, verisimilitude itself relies on the voice's evanescence and dissolution. Although there certainly was an original man called Oscar Wilde, who was purported to have a beautiful speaking voice, Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* encourages the reader to ponder the authenticity of his original utterances. In what ways was the speaking voice of Oscar Wilde a reconstruction in his own historical moment? In what ways was Wilde's voice a stable or authentic entity, even to the man himself? At times the novel might seem to stage a wish-fulfilment in the sense that it appears to offer the reader privileged access to the 'real' voice and hence inner self of Wilde, but the *Testament* also engages with the layers of performative copies and (dis)simulations already echoing in and through Wilde's 'original' voice.

Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* offers a multi-voiced perspective on the negotiation between Victorian literary originals and neo-Victorian textual copies. Although it might initially appear that Wilde's voice as a historical figure has been silenced in the world of the novel, Self's response to the loss of this original is to identify with/as Wilde. In this act of

connection with Wilde via the voice of Henry Wotton, Self provides us with a metatextual reflection on the ways in which fictional voices inform ‘reality’. Dorian’s ability to queerly recast his multiple imitations as authentic selves mirrors Self’s act of speaking as Wilde, and Wotton’s ability to verbally dictate the terms of Dorian’s existence in the novel’s epilogue permanently suspends our ability to distinguish the original from its imitation or vice versa. Self’s discussion of Hambling’s *A Conversation with Oscar Wilde* recognises the ways in which the piece can be interpreted as various versions of the multi-faceted icon that is Oscar Wilde; it is Wilde the conversationalist, Wilde the dandy-aesthete, but also Wilde as Sebastian Melmoth, the outcast “endlessly admonishing us – quite rightly – for the bigotry and persecution and lack of generosity we wreak on our fellows” (Self 2001: 210). Which version of Wilde do we want to hear? In a commentary on her sculpture, Hambling explains: “It is actually completed when a member of the public, a passerby, chooses to sit down and have a chat with him” (BBC News 1998). The conversation with Oscar Wilde – the original copy – has as many possible voices as passers-by who might choose to sit and “chat”, a fitting testament to the impossibility of locating Wilde’s voice to a finite origin or, indeed, a posthumous ending.

Notes

1. The sculpture has primarily been criticised for its ugliness (Spencer 2009: 30), its “tackiness” and frivolity (Lubbock 1998: 1), and its covert location (Self 2001: 208-210). Interestingly, two of the most vociferous critics of Hambling’s *Conversation* are offended by its focus on Wilde’s voice. Jonathan Jones suggests that the emphasis on Wilde’s speech occludes the significance of bodily pleasures in Wilde’s life and work: “In Wilde’s writing, words are a poor substitute for sex” (Jones 1997: 11). Thomas Lubbock objects to what he perceives as Hambling’s inadequate focus on Wilde-the-conversationalist: “We have nothing of the nerve, the folly, the ruin, the glory. We have nothing for history – only the whimsical notion of us chatting cheerfully with this anodyne figment” (Lubbock 1998: 1).
2. There is another voice-related strand of neo-Victorian criticism which focuses on the process of neo-Victorian literature ‘giving voice’ to the historically silenced. (See, for example, Widdowson 2006: 505-506, Llewellyn 2008: 165, and Kohlke 2008: 9.) My monograph *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian*

and Neo-Victorian Fiction: Passionate Puppets (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2012) offers a sustained engagement with the aesthetic and gendered politics of ‘voicing’ the Victorians.

3. After this point, qualifying commas are implied but will no longer be used around the words ‘original’, ‘copy’ and ‘voice’. A central aim of this article is to interrogate the hierarchical relationship between original/copy, and to outline the ways in which the concept of voice can be understood as constructed and mutable as opposed to fixed or finite.
4. Sound clips of Leslie Smith’s “direct voice” channelling of Oscar Wilde are available at <http://www.xs4all.nl/~wichm/oswilde.html>.
5. Richard Ellmann’s biography does feature a transcription of Wilde’s style of “accenting and pausing”, made by Helen Potter during Wilde’s American lecture tour of 1882-1883 (Ellmann 1987: 592-593).
6. See Jonathan Vickers and Peter Copeland on the technical evidence for why the voice cannot be Wilde’s (Vickers and Copeland 1987: 21-25).
7. Mark Llewellyn has discussed the tension between “ethics and aesthetics” in using “real Victorian lives” in neo-Victorian fiction (Llewellyn 2009: 38-40).
8. See Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (1994) for a sustained discussion of Wilde as a queer icon in the twentieth century. For a further consideration of Will Self as a queer author, see Helen Davies, ‘Self-ish Sex? Que(e)rying Sexual Subversion in Will Self’s *Cock and Bull* and *Dorian: An Imitation*’ (forthcoming 2012).
9. The imitative qualities of Self’s novel particularly offended Michiko Kakutani. In her review of *Dorian* for *The New York Times*, she condemned the book as an “act of theft [...] so deliberate and heavy-handed that the resulting book feels like a dogged, mercenary rewrite” (Kakutani 2003: 8).
10. See Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). In Butler’s terms, the process of compulsory repetition of gender has subversive potential, and “parodic” gender performances (where the arbitrary relationship between anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance is exposed) can trouble the privileged position of heteronormative gender as the “origin” to queer “copies”: “The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy” (Butler 1999: 41).

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