

(from) *THE EROTICS OF PUBLIC
POSSIBILITY, 2011*
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*So I tell him. Sibyl Vane is the actress
Dorian falls in love with, specifically
while he watches her perform on stage.*

He reminds me he knows, and that he told me to re-read
the book in the first place.

*Just humour me. I say. Sibyl is a fairly
terrible actress, and she's not even
necessarily beautiful, but she's
representing Juliet, who is. Moreover,
as Juliet, she's also the recipient of
Romeo's infatuation, and it's this
beautiful, desired image that Dorian
relocates to his reality, resulting in the
famously tragic demise; Away from the
stage, Sibyl is ordinary. This terrifies
Dorian, he rejects her, she kills herself
and so on. But post suicide, doesn't
Dorian love her again?*

**He loves the image of
him loving her again.** He says.

Are you sure?

Why do you care?

*Because I'm trying to talk about
unfulfillability, which I fully appreciate
isn't technically a word, and if he desired
her while she was obtainable, he'd risk
actually having her. And that, I say, would
be awful.* He points out that really, it was much more awful for

her. *Well, I blame Basil, or more
specifically, I blame Basil's infatuation
with Dorian, via Basil's projection of
Dorian as painting. This transfers
to Dorian, who becomes narcissistic
and the narcissism kills Sybil.*

Dorian wasn't

narcissistic,
just selfish and very good
looking.

I ignore the snag and wonder if narcissism is the most romantic relationship ever, because the things you can't quite get are always the most seductive. It's perfectly tragic, and completely reliable, all at once.

But there's nothing very seductive about reliability. Besides, there's plenty of things that are completely unfulfillable and totally un-seductive. Like religion. Or a protestant work ethic.

*Well one thing is certain, I say,
a narcissist uses other people as
extensions of their private selves.
And this is very bad PR.*

I think you mean public
life. So...PL?

I think I mean relationships with other citizens, which isn't quite PR and isn't quite PL. Either way narcissism is an inability to recognize wider society, and at the time Dorian Gray was painted, public life was already in decline.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, public life in London was flourishing, largely due to public performances of rationality in coffee houses. Here, men would spend the days locked in rational debate with other reasonable men, governed only by the laws of reason. Private baggage and personal expressions of self were unwelcome, which might account for the 1674 Women's Petition Against Coffee. This demanded a total ban on coffee – that evil stuff which 'dried up the radical moistures' and 'eunucht' their husbands.

That's a lot of coffee.

He says. But there are other causes for the libido dip. Firstly men were essentially having affairs of the mind; perpetual loops of discourse for discourse's sake, performing an unfulfillable dangerous liaison with public life. In this game of intellectual erotics, and tantalising displays of possibility, polite societies' libidos became distracted and wives became displeased. Alternatively, we could blame the brothels that cashed in on post-enlightenment traffic. Once public man had flexed his public rationality and performed his intellectual gymnastics, he could amend the life/work balance, above the coffee shop, in the private realm of primordial pleasure. Or maybe, they just drank too much coffee. *Which do you think?* I say. He thinks it's a combination of a and b because it takes more than too much coffee to shrink a man's libido and stop him getting his end away. I tell him don't

be crass, and couldn't we just conclude that 'reason' is the ever-to-be chased demimonde; an unconquerable mistress. He repeats it a few times 'a muse called reason' then reconsiders because isn't reason a bit...

Up tight?

You're right! Reason would be the worst mistress. She'd be all dried up and sensible.

He tells me not to be crass, so I suggest that, perhaps, there really is nothing more alluring than a floating, not-yet anchored idea.

Perhaps reason was just a chat up line to get the idea anchored?

But I can think of so many things that are so much more seductive than unrealised ideas.

During the age of enlightenment the face patch, a small piece of black cloth, originally used to hide imperfections, became the height of fashion, and a code of communication, in and of itself. The patches symbolised emotions, so that a patch on the nose indicated passion and one on the chin, sexiness. This enabled women, in particular, to express themselves through a visual language, without necessarily performing the noun and eventually, this trope was adopted by some men. This tacit language smuggled emotions into rational space, which made the non-emoting coffee-house regulars a little uncomfortable. Their gestures essentially operated as double entendres, carrying an inappropriate meaning for those in the know...

Are you asleep?

Sorry. Just dropping off...

It's a...?

Double entendre. Necessarily both a public and a private language. Wake up.

Like the patch, semiotic meaning springs forth to whoever is bilingual in both private and public etiquette. It's also a way of flirting, and I thought flirting was a nice place to go because it can be performed for its own sake, so long as you don't mind a prick tease. The flirt is hinting at something, but not necessarily realising this and like anything worth its salt, it's advancing obliquely. Furthermore the inventor of the double entendre was Mae West, and I'm a huge fan.

Are you sure?

No, I'm not sure. But she was a good flirt, and this has less to do with her well kept curves and more to do with how well kept away from public view her curves really were. She was always dressed.

Are you sure?

Never naked! I say. Although I'm not absolutely certain.

Besides. I say. *This is far more sophisticated than saying outright that there's value in the power of suggestion.*

You mean the power of suggestion?

Yes. I say. *I suppose so.* If you're an image or a representation, then really, you're a piece of theatre. By being a piece of theatre you provoke believability and audiences become enchanted by you, just like men became enchanted by enlightenment ideals. But he's not sure about that.

I'm not sure enlightenment ideals amount to theatre.

I toss my hair dramatically.

Ideology, I say, *is always pure theatre.*

And he buys it, which proves my point. *Furthermore,* I say, *by being an image, at a distance, they keep their potential intact. And potential is far better than reality, something that politicians just can't understand.*

Politicians? But it's not really their fault. He tells me. It's their audience; the public demand transparency and judge on private characters.

Exactly! A pornography of private life.

Not an erotics of public possibility.

He's not sure about this.

It's true! They spew their private lives all over the lecterns of rationality.

To resolve this we look up vice presidential candidate Richard Nixon's Checkers speech, September 23, 1952, with his wife In the wings, waiting patiently in her republican cloth coat, with not a patch of mink in sight.

So you see, he says, private life is public life's strategy.

But this isn't really vice president Nixon's private life, because what's private is really so very private, and his house looks like a stage-set. In this case, private life is fiction, used as strategy, performed as theatre, and the whole foray is so much like amateur dramatics. He's a really bad actor. But maybe we just need to believe in representations rather

than the thing itself, which means a believable person is excusable, so long as they're fairly unbelievable in general. I draw my conclusion hard and fast.

It's simple, I sniff,

we need much more panto.

He doesn't understand and neither do I, so we check the dictionary: Pantomime – a dramatic entertainment, originating in Roman mime, in which performers express meaning through gestures accompanied by music. I revoke my conclusion. Then after a bit, consider Labour's 1997 election anthem 'Things Can Only Get Better' which they stole from

D: Ream. I also consider Bill Clinton's presidential campaign featuring Fleetwood Mac's Don't Stop (Thinking About Tomorrow) which is frankly unforgivable, and Gordon Brown's exit from his manifesto launch to 'Your Love Keeps Taking Me Higher', which I actually thought was pretty cool. Overall though, this is so depressing.

Maybe, I say, ***they should just go all out-and-out panto and wear emoticon black patches on their left cheek to symbolise shame at the budget deficit.***

He thinks this seems good, but maybe points to the wrong kind of possibilities.

And I thought you wanted possibilities?

Oh I do! I want unrealisable possibilities, I want the seduction of potential ideas and thoughts, and discourse for discourses' sake, and teasing and flirting and alluding, and moving obliquely, never to conclusions.

Newness. Absolute newness. The possibility of change, dynamics, movement for movements' sake, never actualised, never concluding, the erotic's of unreachable possibilities and permutations.

This!

punch the air.

Is the stuff of ideas!

This is British Politics. He says.

Which is a massive blow to my progress.