

Deceptive Picture

Alex Ross

The New Yorker. 87.23 (Aug. 8, 2011): p64.

Copyright: COPYRIGHT 2011 Conde Nast Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of The Conde Nast Publications, Inc.

<http://www.newyorker.com/>

Full Text:

Oscar Wilde was not a man who lived in fear, but early reviews of "The Picture of Dorian Gray" must have given him pause. The story, telling of a man who never ages while his portrait turns decrepit, appeared in the July, 1890, issue of Lippincott's, a Philadelphia magazine with English distribution. The Daily Chronicle of London called the tale "unclean," "poisonous," and "heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction." The St. James Gazette deemed it "nasty" and "nauseous," and suggested that the Treasury or the Vigilance Society might wish to prosecute the author. Most ominous was a short notice in the Scots Observer stating that although "Dorian Gray" was a work of literary quality, it dealt in "matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department or a hearing *in camera*" and would be of interest mainly to "outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph-boys"--an allusion to the recent Cleveland Street scandal, which had exposed the workings of a male brothel in London. Within five years, Wilde found himself convicted of "committing acts of gross indecency with certain male persons."

The furor was unsurprising: no work of mainstream English-language fiction had come so close to spelling out homosexual desire. The opening pages leave little doubt that Basil Hallward, the painter of Dorian's portrait, is in love with his subject. Once Dorian discovers his godlike powers, he carries out various heinous acts, including murder; but to the Victorian sensibility his most unspeakable deed would have been his corruption of a series of young men. (Basil tells Dorian, "There was that wretched boy in the Guards who committed suicide. You were his great friend. There was Sir Henry Ashton, who had to leave England, with a tarnished name. You and he were inseparable.") At the Wilde trials of 1895, the opposing attorneys read aloud from "Dorian Gray," calling it a "sodomitical book." Wilde went to prison not because he loved young men but because he flaunted that love, and "Dorian Gray" became the chief exhibit of his shamelessness.

Wilde died in 1900, in a run-down Paris hotel, at the age of forty-six. Almost overnight, a legend was born: Wilde the homosexual martyr, Wilde the moral rebel. A nascent gay-rights movement embraced him as a hero of defiance. When, in 1967, Craig Rodwell opened a gay-and-lesbian bookstore in New York, he named it the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop, and after the Stonewall riots of 1969 Rodwell used the bookstore's mailing list to help organize the first gay-pride parade. As recently as the late eighties, you could still find bookish young people coming to terms with their sexuality by way of reading Wilde. (You could at least find me.) Whether or not Wilde saw himself as part of a cause, he did not lack courage. The multiple versions of "Dorian Gray"--the earliest surviving manuscript, which is at the Morgan Library; the typescript sent to Lippincott's, which Harvard University Press has just made available in an "uncensored" edition; the published Lippincott's text; and the expanded book publication of 1891--show Wilde deciding, sentence by sentence, just how far he would go.

The Wilde Bookshop closed in 2009, a casualty not only of the decline of the bookselling business but also of the partial triumph of Rodwell's mission. In many major cities, at least, gays and lesbians no longer seem to need a safe place in the form of a store. And they no longer seem to need the tragicomic Oscar; the young gays of today can revel in the wit and wisdom of Neil Patrick Harris. All of which leaves Wilde in an interesting limbo. What will he mean in a perhaps not too distant time when homosexuality has ceased to be a conversation stopper?

"To the world I seem, by intention on my part, a dilettante and dandy merely--it is not wise to show one's heart to the world," Wilde once wrote. We should not assume that his heart was revealed to us when he became a gay icon, or when he was canonized in wider bohemian circles as the patron saint of "Be yourself." (The phrase appears in the 1891 essay "The Soul of Man Under Socialism.") Wilde's aestheticism, his fanatical cult of beauty, was the deepest and most lasting of his passions, and it is now the most radical thing about him. Perhaps only the threat of persecution prevented Wilde from freely expressing his sexuality in his writing; yet he also may have been caught in the modern struggle to inhabit an identity without becoming defined by it. The ghastly ending of "Dorian Gray"--Dorian stabbing his portrait in a frenzy--shows a man losing a battle with his public image.

The two most recent major biographies of Wilde are Thomas Wright's "Built of Books: How Reading Defined the Life of Oscar Wilde," which appeared in 2008, and Neil McKenna's "The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde: An Intimate Biography," which came out in 2005. They present almost comically contradictory portraits. Wright's Wilde is an intellectual dreamer who rarely steps outside the literary realm. We are told that his parents--the eye-and-ear surgeon William Wilde and the poet Jane Francesca Wilde, who wrote under the name Speranza--accumulated mountains of books at their home, in Dublin, and that young Oscar habitually read in bed, his mind ravished by Irish folktales, ancient-Greek texts, Romantic poems, and gothic novels. Wright even suggests that Wilde discovered his sexuality in the pages of Plato. "Was it a case of literary nurture over biological nature?" Wright asks, as if Wilde might have found boys unattractive had the philosopher not put the idea in his head. In this telling, Wilde's ultimate humiliation came not on the day of his arrest, on April 5, 1895, but a few weeks later, when his library was auctioned off.

McKenna's Wilde, by contrast, is a largely sexual being who reads in order to find a language for his desire and writes in order to speak that desire aloud. He is hailed as "a martyr in an epic struggle for the freedom of men to love men." McKenna

rejects the idea, set forth in previous biographies, that Wilde had no gay life until his early thirties, when he met Robert Ross, a precociously self-aware Canadian teen-ager, in Oxford. In fact, certain of Wilde's youthful poems drip with homoeroticism—"And he looked on me with desire / And I know that his name was Love"—and his early friendship with the painter Frank Miles, among others, had a sexual tinge. Yet McKenna reads too much into meagre evidence. He is a writer of the "almost certainly" school, and he withholds material that belies his thesis. (He does not mention that Miles was notoriously attracted to very young girls.) Later chapters rely on the dubious memoirs of Edmund Trelawny Backhouse, a forger and a fantasist, who claimed carnal knowledge not only of the principals in the Wilde case but also of Paul Verlaine and the Dowager Empress of China. McKenna, by fixating on Wilde's sexual life, arrives at an oddly unflattering portrait. Preying on young literary fans, paying off rent boys, picking up lads as young as fifteen—Wilde is stripped of his charm.

To read Wright and McKenna in succession is like seeing a picture alter before one's eyes: a bookish fellow becomes a sex addict. There is, however, no real contradiction; countless literary lives have veered from monkish labor to mindless pleasure. Wilde himself first felt this split when he was studying at Oxford, in the eighteen-seventies. In the poem "Helen!," published in 1881, he wistfully imagines a life of "austere control," in which he "might have trod / The sunlit heights, and from life's dissonance / Struck one clear chord to reach the ears of God." But he tastes "the honey of romance" and loses his footing. Sixteen years later, Wilde traced the same downward arc in "De Profundis," the annihilating book-length letter that he wrote in prison to Alfred Douglas, his former lover: "Tired of being on the heights I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensations." He never found the middle ground between those extremes, although he glimpsed it. "All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment," he said, summing up "Dorian Gray."

Such epigrams were the foundation of Wilde's fame, and remain so. He is often seen as the godfather of celebrity culture, in that from the outset he was noted chiefly for being Oscar Wilde. Even in his Oxford days, his witticisms were making their way beyond the university walls. (His first hit: "I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china.") On settling in London, in 1879, he assumed the gaudy neo-Renaissance poses that inspired dozens of Punch cartoons and two characters in Gilbert and Sullivan's "Patience." He maintained exquisite attitudes during his American lecture tour of 1882, enduring jeers from college students and enjoying the unexpected admiration of Colorado miners. Back in England, he caused further chatter with a turn toward domesticity, marrying Constance Lloyd and producing two sons. Only when he published "The Happy Prince and Other Tales," in 1888, did his literary output catch up to his fame. With that publication, the most intense phase of Wilde's career began. His wit acquired a sharper edge: celebrity became a vehicle for subversion.

The fairy tales are well stocked with delightful paradoxes, yet they are encircled by strangeness and sadness. "The Star-Child" ends with the sentence "And he who came after him ruled evilly." They are tales of impossible love: a fisherman's for a mermaid, a statue's for a swallow. Victorian parents who read the stories to their children may have stumbled over the friskier moments, as when the title character of "The Young King" presses his lips to a statue of Antinous, Hadrian's male slave. Wilde reveals the human complexity and suffering behind the luxurious surfaces that he summoned so easily in rolling Irish prose. The Young King is dismayed to discover that his subjects have toiled severely—and even died—in order to manufacture his golden raiments, yet when he tries to assume a humbler guise the kingdom revolts against him.

Wilde was never an open radical in the manner of George Bernard Shaw, but the imperious essays he published between 1889 and 1891—"The Truth of Masks," "Pen, Pencil, and Poison," "The Decay of Lying," "The Critic as Artist," and "The Soul of Man Under Socialism"—dug tunnels under the moral foundations of Victorian England. Artists are cast as outlaws ("There is no essential incongruity between crime and culture"), purveyors of dangerous ideas (the better to resist "that splendid system that elevates [men] to the dignity of machines"), tellers of gorgeous lies that supplant dull truths, and habitual antinomians, rejecting "the shallow shibboleths of any sect or school." In "The Soul of Man," Wilde imagines a revolution that will sweep aside all middle-class Philistinism. Technological advances, he predicts, will liberate even the working classes, granting them lives of aesthetic reverie. The vague economic logic of the argument is a pretext for Wilde to vent his rage on an audience that treated him as an amusing sideshow:

The public make use of the classics of a country as a means of checking the progress of Art. They degrade the classics into authorities. They use them as bludgeons for preventing the free expression of Beauty in new forms. They are always asking a writer why he does not write like somebody else, or a painter why he does not paint like somebody else, quite oblivious of the fact that if either of them did anything of the kind he would cease to be an artist. A fresh mode of Beauty is absolutely distasteful to them, and whenever it appears they get so angry and bewildered that they always use two stupid expressions—one is that the work of art is grossly unintelligible; the other, that the work of art is grossly immoral. What they mean by these words seems to me to be this. When they say a work is grossly unintelligible, they mean that the artist has said or made a beautiful thing that is new; when they describe a work as grossly immoral, they mean that the artist has said or made a beautiful thing that is true.

This fulmination anticipates the rhetoric of modernism. Yeats and Joyce, in particular, felt a strong connection to their Irish forerunner. Yeats, who believed that Wilde would have made a great soldier or politician, praised him for launching "an extravagant Celtic crusade against Anglo-Saxon stupidity." Joyce evidently drew on the trials of 1895 in creating the hallucinogenic persecution of Leopold Bloom in the "Circe" chapter of "Ulysses."

The gay strain in Wilde's work is part of a larger war on convention. In the 1889 story "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," a pseudo-scholarly, metafictional investigation of Shakespeare's sonnets to a boy, Wilde slyly suggests that the pillar of British literature was something other than an ordinary family man. In the 1891 play "Salome," Wilde expands a Biblical anecdote

into a sumptuous panorama of decadence. Anarchists of the fin de siècle, especially in Germany, considered Wilde one of their own: Gustav Landauer hailed Wilde as the English Nietzsche. Thomas Mann expanded on the analogy, observing that various lines of Wilde might have come from Nietzsche ("There is no reality in things apart from their experiences") and that various lines of Nietzsche might have come from Wilde ("We are basically inclined to maintain that the falsest judgments are the most indispensable to us"). Nietzsche and Wilde were, in Mann's view, "rebels in the name of beauty."

In early 1892, Wilde enjoyed a huge theatrical success with "Lady Windermere's Fan," and until he went to prison he confined himself to social comedy. The subversive agenda remained: Richard Le Gallienne plausibly proposed that Wilde "made dying Victorianism laugh at itself, and it may be said to have died of the laughter." But the increasing virtuosity of Wilde's dramatic technique masked a weakening of his creative impulse; the plays were written amid long periods of inactivity and relied intermittently on old lines. "The Importance of Being Earnest," brilliant as it is, threatens to become a greatest-hits compilation. Wilde later blamed the dissipations of Alfred Douglas for the slowing of his productivity after 1892; their affair began that year, after Wilde paid off a blackmailer on Douglas's behalf.

After reading the newer books on Wilde, I returned to Richard Ellmann's 1988 biography, which, despite some errors and eccentricities, still commands the field. Ellmann performs the supreme service of taking Wilde seriously, as a writer first and a personality second. He catches Wilde's lawless moralism, his outcast-preacher tone. "His creative works almost always end in unmasking," Ellmann writes. "The hand that adjusts the green carnation suddenly shakes an admonitory finger." Ellmann explains better than any other chronicler why, in 1895, Wilde chose to face his accusers instead of fleeing to the Continent. It was not an act of martyrdom, or of arrogance or self-delusion, but, rather, an exercise in intellectual consistency. Ellmann writes, "He submitted to the society he had criticized, and so earned the right to criticize it further."

Dorian Gray emerged from the same dinner that insured the immortality of Sherlock Holmes. Wilde and Arthur Conan Doyle dined together in London in August, 1889, as guests of Joseph Marshall Stoddart, the editor of Lippincott's. Doyle, like so many others, came away dazzled by Wilde. "He towered above us all, and yet had the art of seeming to be interested in all that we could say," Doyle recalled. Later that year, Doyle sent Lippincott's his second Holmes tale, "The Sign of Four," assigning a few Wildean traits to the great detective. (You can imagine Wilde saying, "I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation.") Wilde, for his part, may have picked up some tricks from Holmes's creator: parts of "Dorian Gray" are as gruesome as a police procedural.

Last spring, I spent a few hours looking at the autograph manuscript of "Dorian Gray," at the Morgan Library. When Dorian attempts to destroy his portrait, the manuscript has him "ripping the thing right up"; Wilde then adds the phrase "from top to bottom." Nicholas Frankel, the editor of the new Harvard edition of "Dorian Gray," notes that the eviscerating gesture evokes Jack the Ripper, whose crimes had filled the papers two years earlier.

The original magazine story, at fifty thousand words, has all the familiar elements of the book version, which is the one most people know. Lord Henry, a Mephistophelian aesthete who seems to be Wilde's mouthpiece, visits the studio of his friend Basil Hallward and becomes fascinated by a picture displayed there. Basil confesses his attraction to its subject. When Dorian enters, Lord Henry intellectually seduces him with a philosophy of hedonism. ("The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it.") Dorian, saddened by the idea that he must grow old while his portrait stays the same, wishes the opposite were true. An elfin magic takes hold. Dorian falls for a gifted young actress named Sibyl Vane and then casts her aside when he determines that the joy of love has rendered her art banal. She kills herself. The face in the picture acquires a cruel look. As Dorian wallows in debauchery, Basil pries into his secret life and wonders about the state of his soul. Dorian, who has hidden the picture in his attic, shows Basil the now hideous face, and kills him. Thoughts of repentance cross Dorian's mind, but he decides that he must wipe out the only remaining record of his crimes: the portrait. When he stabs it, he falls dead, his face misshapen beyond recognition. In the same instant, the picture's beauty is restored.

In the Morgan manuscript, Wilde's hand flows confidently, as if taking dictation, but the appearance of fluency may be deceptive: the autograph is probably a copy of an earlier draft that has disappeared. Although Wilde is celebrated as the greatest natural talker of modern times, he edited his prose meticulously. The opening paragraphs, describing Basil's studio, are a masterpiece of precise evocation, and Wilde's handwritten changes sharpen the imagery yet more. In a passage that compares the "dim roar of London" to the "bourdon note of an organ," Wilde inserts the word "distant" before "organ," adding a twinge of far-off religious dread.

At the same time, Wilde's revisions to the opening dialogue between Basil and Lord Henry betray a rising anxiety, an urge to lower the emotional temperature. Exclamations over Dorian's beauty give way to more reserved remarks about his "good looks" and "personality." "Passion" becomes "feeling," "pain" becomes "perplexity." Wilde's pen stops Basil from mentioning the time Dorian brushed against his cheek and from announcing that "the world becomes young to me when I hold his hand." And when Basil explains why he is withholding the painting from London gallery-goers he is prevented from saying that "where there is really love, they would see something evil, and where there is spiritual passion they would suggest something vile." Tellingly, Wilde removes intimations of a prior attachment between Basil and Lord Henry. He deletes a description of Basil "taking hold of [Lord Henry's] hand." One passage is so heavily scratched out as to be almost illegible, but in it Lord Henry seems to berate Basil for having become Dorian's "slave," and then blurts out, "I hate Dorian Gray." In the end, Wilde cancels any hint of jealousy and gives Lord Henry the mask of an amused aesthete: "Basil, this is quite wonderful! I must see Dorian Gray."

Even before Wilde sent his manuscript to the typist, then, he was hesitating over its homoerotic content, and especially over the pages devoted to Basil's desire. The focus on Basil is not surprising, given that Wilde later declared, "Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be--in other ages, perhaps."

When the typescript arrived in the Philadelphia offices of Lippincott's, it was Joseph Marshall Stoddart's turn to have second thoughts. His changes are noted in the new Harvard edition. Stoddart was no prude, and moved in unconventional circles; when Wilde came to America, Stoddart introduced him to Walt Whitman. But the editor knew his public's limits. He, or an associate, cut another of Basil's confessional remarks about the portrait--"There was love in every line, and in every touch there was passion"--and several descriptions of Dorian's nighttime wanderings, including a sentence that might depict the ancient ritual of cruising: "A man with curious eyes had suddenly peered into his face, and then dogged him with stealthy footsteps, passing and repassing him many times." In good American style, Stoddart had no problem with the violence.

"Dorian Gray" failed to scandalize America. England was, of course, another matter. Although Wilde was already planning to expand the story into a novel, he certainly reacted to the insinuations in the press. More references to physical contact between the male characters were dropped. Just as significant as the expurgations are the additions: six chapters, totalling some twenty-eight thousand words. They supply further episodes of society comedy, fresh adventures for Dorian in the opium dens, a fuller sketch of the unlucky Sibyl Vane, and a baroque subplot involving James Vane, Sibyl's brother, who seeks to avenge her. The new material gives "Dorian Gray" a novelistic heft, even a political edge. The chapter about the Vanes, for example, sets Dorian's velvety life style in stark relief. Yet these excursions in high and low society feel a bit like staged distractions. There are too many tidy formulations--"It was his beauty that had ruined him, his beauty and the youth that he had prayed for"--positioned to reassure the middle classes.

The version that Wilde submitted to Lippincott's is the better fiction. It has the swift and uncanny rhythm of a modern fairy tale--and "Dorian" is the greatest of Wilde's fairy tales. Wilde made clear from the outset that he wished to show not only the thrills and pleasures of a ruthlessly aesthetic life but also its limits and dangers. The hideousness of Dorian's demise is as integral to the work's conception as any bloodcurdling twist in Poe, and looking at the final pages of the manuscript you can almost see Wilde's lips curling cruelly as he wrote. Beneath the brutal final paragraph, he signs his name in slashing strokes, as if wielding a knife. Ellmann sums it up thus: "Drift beautifully on the surface, and you will die unbeautifully in the depths." Wilde steps outside his practiced persona to cast a cold eye on the sensation-seeking life style popularly ascribed to him.

The most problematic aspect of Wilde's revision is the novel's Preface, with its famous cavalcade of epigrams: "To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim"; "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book"; "All art is quite useless." These lines, together with new quips for Lord Henry ("Art has no influence upon action. . . . It is superbly sterile"), are related to letters that Wilde wrote to critics and readers after the Lippincott's publication. They amount to a formalist defense, positing the story as an autonomous object in which diverse readers perceive diverse ideas. But art does reveal the artist, and it does influence action, however unpredictably. In Wilde's narrative, books are described as "poisonous" agents that enter the bloodstream: an unnamed French book that Lord Henry gives to Dorian discloses new vistas of vice. In the typescript, we learn that the book is "Le Secret de Raoul," by Catulle Sarrazin--probably a fictional stand-in for Huysmans's 1884 novel, "Against the Grain," which describes a gay encounter more explicitly than Wilde ever dared to do. (Wilde read it on his honeymoon.) Above all, there is Basil's painting, which destroys both its creator and subject. When Mallarme read the story, he singled out for approval the line "It was the portrait that had done everything." Art is not innocent, Wilde implies. Violence can be done in its name. Indeed, the twentieth century brought forth many Dorian Grays: fiendishly pure spirits so wrapped up in aesthetics that they become heedless of humanity. Wilde's anatomy of the confusion between art and life remains pertinent with each new uproar over lurid films, songs, or video games.

Even in the final book version, Wilde refuses to moralize, to tell the artist what to do or the reader what to think. Each individual must devise his own ethical code. When Wilde wrote that all excess as well as all renunciation brings its punishment, he evidently had in mind the contrast between Basil, who can conceive of his love for Dorian only in abstract terms, and Dorian, who is so intent on embracing the physical that he loses his mind. Both men meet bad ends. Lord Henry, by contrast, emerges unscathed, his talk naughtier than his walk. Indeed, Basil accuses him of being secretly virtuous: "You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing." Lord Henry espouses a peculiarly contemporary kind of moderation, indulging his brain but not his body, employing Dorian as a proxy hedonist. (Today, Lord Henry might spend a lot of time on the Internet.) There is something sad about him, for, unlike Basil and Dorian, he fails to commit himself. His life is vicarious.

What begins as an alluring fable ends as a full-on modernist nightmare. Only one character experiences anything like spontaneous joy, and that is Sibyl Vane, when she decides to abandon the artistic life and devote herself to Dorian. "I am sick of shadows," she tells him. "You are more to me than all art can ever be." Tragically, Sibyl does not realize that Dorian has exchanged his soul for that of the painting; like the others, she is trapped by the image's spell.

The eerie thing about Wilde's life is that he, too, could not escape the infernal logic of the "Picture." His own book exhibited "poisonous" properties. Alfred Douglas read it at Oxford and, by his own testimony, reread it thirteen times. He became determined to meet the author. He was Wilde's fantasy come to life--Dorian stepping from the canvas. But he had an ugly soul; as Wilde recognized in "De Profundis," hate excited him more than love. Wilde, Basil to the end, adored the young man all the same.

On February 18, 1895, the Marquess of Queensberry, Douglas's hate-engorged father, inscribed a visiting card with the words "For Oscar Wilde, posing Somdomite," and left it at Wilde's club. Urged on by Douglas, Wilde made the mistake of suing the Marquess for libel--a decision catastrophic not only for his career but also for his sense of dignity, since, as he later wrote, he was forced to present himself as a "champion of respectability in conduct, of puritanism in life, and of morality in art."

At the libel trial, Queensberry's chief attorney, Edward Carson, needed to demonstrate that the words on the card were justified. So he set about establishing that Wilde had already advertised his proclivities in print. "Dorian Gray" became Carson's main resource, and he elected to treat it as Wilde's life story--an ironic move, because in its pages Basil complains that "men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography." The barrister pounced on a passage that had appeared in the Lippincott's version and was later cut: "It is quite true that I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man usually gives to a friend. . . . I quite admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly." The following interrogation ensued:

: Have you ever extravagantly adored?, : Do you mean financially or emotionally?, : Financially? Do you think we are talking here of finances?, : I don't know what you are talking about., : Don't you?, : You must ask me a plain question., : I hope I will make myself very plain before I am done.

Wilde was obviously perturbed by the exchange. It was like talking to an eight-year-old who couldn't tell the difference between an actor and his role. He defended himself ably, but Carson was softening him up for the blow. Private detectives hired by Queensberry had rounded up rent boys and starstruck youths who had served Wilde's needs, and there were no clever answers to the next round of questions: "Did you become intimate with a young man named Conway? . . . He sold newspapers on the pier at Worthing? . . . Did you put your hands inside his trousers? . . . Did you give him sums from time to time amounting to fifteen pounds?" The roll call of Wilde's associates hauntingly echoes the list of young men whom Dorian is said to have ruined.

During the two dismal criminal trials that followed, Wilde had one magnificent moment, and it, too, involved "Dorian Gray." While being questioned on the subject of Alfred Douglas's poem about "the Love that dare not speak its name," Wilde was suddenly moved to defend that love instead of denying it. With emotion, he announced that such love was "as pure as it was perfect," that it "pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo." According to one transcript, he said, "It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection." He was quoting almost directly from "Dorian Gray": "The love that [Basil] bore him . . . had nothing in it that was not noble and intellectual. It was not that mere physical admiration of beauty that is born of the senses and that dies when the senses tire. It was such love as Michael Angelo had known, and Montaigne, and Winckelmann, and Shakespeare himself."

Wilde's speech aroused hisses in the courtroom and also a brave burst of applause. At least one member of the jury voted against a guilty verdict, forcing a retrial. A political panic erupted: the men around Lord Rosebery, the Prime Minister, feared that if Wilde were not convicted they would be accused of sheltering a degenerate. (Rosebery had a personal motive; it was rumored that he had been the lover of the older brother of Alfred Douglas, Francis, who had died in 1894, probably a suicide.) A second prosecution began, with the Solicitor General in charge, and it was successful. Justice Wills, the presiding judge, bombastically described the case as "the worst . . . I have ever tried."

Over time, though, the shaming of Wilde generated as much sympathy as disgust, particularly among those who were disenchanted by the strutting poses of the British Empire. "When the verdict was announced the harlots in the street outside danced upon the pavement," Yeats wrote. And in the gay underworld Wilde's defiance cracked open the door of hope. Havelock Ellis, in the 1906 edition of his book "Sexual Inversion," noted that the Wilde trials "generally contributed to give definiteness and self-consciousness to the manifestations of homosexuality," and quoted a correspondent saying that Wilde's sufferings made him feel "ready to strike a blow, when the time comes, for what we deem to be right, honorable, and clean."

Wilde foresaw his posthumous triumph. "I have no doubt we shall win, but the road is long, and red with monstrous martyrdoms," he wrote to the early gay-rights campaigner George Ives. Even so, the clean-cut categories of contemporary sexuality might have puzzled him. He was attracted to women as well as to men, if not nearly as strongly, and the collapse of his marriage may have had as much to do with temperamental differences as with sexual ones. (You could see him as one more self-entitled Victorian male exercising his right to extramarital recreation.) Furthermore, he might have resisted the tendency toward normalization in gay circles--the drive of an oppositional culture to abolish itself. When he spoke of winning the battle, he probably did not have in mind gaining the right to join the military and marry in church. "The world spins only forward," Prior Walter says at the end of Tony Kushner's "Angels in America," a "gay fantasia" that opened in 1991, a century after the publication of "Dorian Gray." Prior goes on to say, "We will be citizens. The time has come." Seeing the Signature Theatre production of Kushner's masterpiece last spring, I thought of how much had changed in twenty years, never mind a hundred. When I was in college, cast a pall of fear over gay life, and I struggled to summon the courage to tell my closest friends who I was. I couldn't have imagined that gay marriage would become legal in half a dozen states, or that I would be married myself.

The transformation is almost dreamlike. Yet I doubt that Wilde would recognize in our world the utopia that he dreamed aloud in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." A man who steeped himself in the literature of the ancient Greeks, who

modelled his being on the writing of Balzac and Stendhal and Pater, who read Dante every day in prison, might have seen a new kind of hell in the global triumph of American-style pop culture. Medicine prolongs life and slows aging, but personal satisfaction is as elusive a commodity as it was for Dorian Gray. Prejudice wanes, ignorance grows, the world spins forward and backward. Few of us would wish for the return of Wilde's London, with its opulent surfaces and savage heart. But Wilde might have been content to stay there, savoring his joys and sorrows. No one lives happily ever after.

Alex Ross

Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

Ross, Alex. "Deceptive Picture." *The New Yorker*, 8 Aug. 2011, p. 64. *Academic OneFile*, go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=cuny_gradctr&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA263718920&it=r&asid=54484e277cc2c76adbcb778d9d2740b8. Accessed 22 Mar. 2017.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A263718920