Artists on Art

The Picture of Dorian Gray: Wilde's Parable of the Fall

Joyce Carol Oates

Its parablelike simplicity and the rather painful remorselessness of its concluding chapters have made it possible for readers to underestimate the subtlety of *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* So clearly does its famous plot move to its ineludible climax—so explicitly are its major points articulated (the poisonously charming Lord Henry is told: "You cut life to pieces with your epigrams")—that the complexity of Oscar Wilde's imagination is likely to be minimized. While in one sense *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is as transparent as a medieval allegory and its structure as workmanlike as that of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus,* to which it bears an obvious family resemblance, in another sense it remains a puzzle: knotted, convoluted, brilliantly enigmatic. If one might be "poisoned by a book" (as poor Dorian charges he has been, by Huysmans' rather silly novel), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* might very well be that book.

Joyce saw in Wilde not only a fellow artist but a betrayed artist and a "dishonored exile"—a kind of Christ—though his initial response to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was qualified: the book was "crowded with lies and epigrams" and its spirit muted by the fact that Wilde felt obliged to "veil" the homosexual implications.[1] That Joyce was insensitive to Wilde's deeper theme is suggested by his frequent echoing of Wilde: "My art is not a mirror held up to nature," Joyce boasts, "nature mirrors my art." These echoes develop only the explicit, daylight side of Wilde's aesthetics and make no allusion to the cautionary and even elegiac tone of much of *Dorian Gray.* It is not, certainly, the homosexual nature of Dorian's behavior or, for that matter, his allegedly promiscuous heterosexual be-

1. See Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (New York, 1959), pp. 283 and 241.

havior that constitutes Dorian's sin but the fact that he, without any emotion, involves others in his life's drama "simply as a method of procuring extraordinary sensations." Joyce's imagination was earthbound, even domestic, and if Stephen Dedalus with his ashplant and his pose of languid weariness brings to mind the adolescent defiance of Wilde's infamous "The Decay of Lying" of 1889, it is the case nonetheless that Joyce's artist was hardly likely to drift into satanism, let alone murder. Nighttown, in fact, will make a victim of *him.*

Beyond the defiance of the young iconoclast—Wilde himself, of course—and the rather perfunctory curve of *Dorian Gray* to that gothic final sight (beautiful Dorian dead with a knife in his heart, "withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage"), there is another, possibly less strident, but more central theme. That one is damned for selling one's soul to the devil (for whatever prize—"eternal youth" is a trivial enough one) is a commonplace in legend; what arrests our attention more, perhaps, is Wilde's claim or boast or worry or warning that one might indeed be poisoned by a book . . . and that the artist, even the presumably "good" Basil Hallward, is the diabolical agent. Wilde's novel must be seen as a highly serious meditation upon the moral role of the artist—an interior challenge, in fact, to the insouciance of the famous pronouncements that would assure us that there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book ("Books are well written, or badly written," Wilde claims in his preface. "That is all.") or that all art is "quite useless." Wilde's genius was disfigured by his talent: he always sounds much more flippant, far more superficial, than he really is. So one always says about *Dorian Gray,* with an air of surprise, that the novel is exceptionally good after all—and anyone who has read it recently replies, with the same air of faint incredulity, yes, it *is* exceptionally good—in fact, one of the strongest and most haunting of English novels. Yet its reputation remains questionable. Gerald Weales virtually dismisses it as "terribly *fin de siècle*" in a rather flippant introduction to the novel, and it would be difficult to find a critic who would choose to discuss it in terms other than the familiar ones of decadence, art for art's sake, art as "the telling of beautiful untrue things."

Beneath the entertaining and often distracting glitter of Wilde's verbal surfaces, however, one does discover another work—if not another *work,* precisely, then another tone, and another Wilde. Suddenly life is not a matter of dialogue, of drawing room repartee; it takes on the

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nostalgia of "unutterable longing," which Pater found in Shakespeare, and that ceremonial, elegiac rhythm one senses in the great plays: as if Shakespeare had had in mind some "inverted rite" by which human justice executes its sentences. Just as Pater translated Shakespeare's drama into other, more static forms—the tapestry, the religious rite, sculpture, pictorial art—so Wilde translates or transmutes what might be in another era a tragedy of the violent warring of consciousness with itself into a reassuringly old-fashioned morality play. The ceremonially correct punishment of Dorian seems to complete the novel; but in fact it merely ends the novel. The preoccupation with the questionable morality of the artist's interference with life—Basil's appropriation of Dorian's image, for instance, for his uncanny portrait—is never satisfactorily resolved, and even the final appearance of the aging and somewhat attenuated Henry hints at another level of human concern which Wilde has no space to investigate. What the strangely moved reader is likely to carry away from *Dorian Gray* is precisely this sense of something riddling and incomplete. One feels about it as one feels about the most profoundly haunting works of art—that it has not been fully understood.

The murder of Basil by Dorian is usually seen as one of the most demonic of Dorian's acts. Yet the murder is symbolically appropriate, and appropriate too is the fact that, for Dorian, this former idolator ("I worshipped you too much") becomes a loathsome "thing" after his death and must be eradicated by crude scientific means—cut up, presumably, and dissolved with nitric acid in a sleight of hand Wilde feels no need to make plausible. Basil functions as a "good" character, one of Henry's straight men, but his role in Dorian's damnation is hardly an ambiguous one, and his sudden death answers to an internal logic.

"Actual life was chaos," Dorian thinks, as his moral disintegration allows him insight, "but there was something terribly logical in the imagination": by which Wilde suggests the limits of Henry's, and his own, faith in the power of the individual will. To become a spectator of one's own life, as Henry has boasted, not only fails to save one from suffering, it makes suffering inevitable—though the suffering of course will come in unanticipated forms, as ennui, paralysis, the "shallow moods and sickly thoughts" of protracted adolescence. Dorian's wickedness appears to be involuntary; he would not have exchanged his soul for eternal youth and beauty had not an artist, Basil, presented him with an utterly new, unrequested, and irresistible image of himself—if, that is, the terrible logic of the imagination had not set into play a tragic sequence of events of which Dorian happened to be the central figure.

There is no doubt but that Basil initiates the tragedy, for it is his worshipping of the young man's physical beauty and his appropriation of his image (as "art") that calls Dorian's attention to himself and stimu-

lates Henry's undisguised homoerotic interest. (To Henry, Dorian is a young Adonis who looks as if he were made of "ivory and rose-leaves." He is a Narcissus, a "brainless, beautiful creature, who should be always here in winter when we have no flowers to look at.") Basil, however, is deeply troubled by his painting. He understands instinctively—despite his friend's gibes—that he must not exhibit it in public because it reveals too much of himself. *Why* he has painted Dorian's picture is not clear, given his ambivalent feelings about Dorian's beauty and the fatality he believes attends all human beings of distinction. He says, in words that must echo Wilde's own thoughts on the subject, of Dorian: "Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion." Though Basil cannot know that his dream image will quite literally destroy him, he has experienced, at their first meeting, one of those violent and inexplicable spasms of emotion that attend a "fatal" attraction. The role of the artist, so extravagantly proclaimed by Wilde as self-determined and superior to mere life, sounds here as if it were a matter of involuntary fate. Basil felt terror in Dorian's presence: "I knew that I had come face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself." But Basil's resistance is, of course, futile. He does give away his soul, he does fall in love with a boy who symbolizes the harmony of soul and body, and he soon comes to feel that he could not live as an artist without Dorian.

On the other hand, Basil says, quite bluntly, that Dorian is "simply a motive in art" and that his likeness on canvas might bear little resemblance to the young man himself. Dorian is reduced in Basil's aesthetic imagination—overheated as it is—to a manner of painting, to "the curves of certain lines" and to the loveliness and subtlety of "certain colors." Dorian has no soul or worth of his own; he functions as the artist's muse or anima, and his value lies in his unconscious (and feminine) stimulation of the male artist's energy. Basil is not in love with Dorian but with his own image of Dorian, which is to say, his own "motive" in art. Wilde knows that the artist oscillates between the frenzy of inspiration and the lucidity of an almost impersonal wisdom when he has Basil allude to a godly or suprahuman destiny that will involve both the artist and his mesmerizing subject. Basil is fated to single out Dorian for his art and by means of his art to force Dorian into a tragic self-consciousness: by appropriating the boy's image in answer to an artistic motive he begins the boy's destruction, and it is altogether fitting that Dorian should murder him some years later—as, it might be argued, Wilde's "artfulness" came close to destroying him and expelled him forever from the society of presumably normal people.

In a far less graceful fashion Hawthorne explored in "The Birthmark" the problematic relationship between an artist of sorts and his

subject. Here, a scientist of genius attempts to remove the defect of a birthmark from his beautiful wife's cheek, with the inevitable result that the woman dies. In this ponderous tale there is no doubt that the scientist is the villain. He interferes with beauty, his "fatal hand" dares to grapple with "the mystery of life," and so an angelic spirit is released from its mortal frame. Hawthorne's Aylmer is an awkward Yankee cousin of Faust's whose experience is more blundering than wicked; Hawthorne ends, somewhat obscurely, with the remark that had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom "he need not thus have flung away the happiness which would have woven his mortal life of the selfsame texture with the celestial."

By contrast, the fateful union of Basil and Dorian is predetermined by the gods. Basil, as the artist, *must* succumb to his motive; he *must* be seduced by the Adam-like Dorian, whose erotic powers are of course entirely unconscious. (Before meeting Henry, and his own likeness, Dorian is indeed a brainless beautiful creature. He is somewhat spoiled but spoiled in a childlike way; he is good-natured, spontaneous, and generous, an absolute innocent.) But the artist takes his image from him and exhibits it to him as art, as an object for contemplation. Dorian *objectifies* his own physical being, and his corruption begins at once: "When he saw [the portrait] he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time. . . . The sense of his own beauty came on him like a revelation." And immediately the boy begins to think, in language not unlike that of Henry's, that his predicament is a very unhappy one. The surprise of the scene is that he *thinks* at all, still less in such a manner:

> "I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June. . . . If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that—for that—I would give everything! . . . I am jealous of everything whose beauty does not die. I am jealous of the portrait you have painted of me. Why should it keep what I must lose? . . . Why did you paint it? It will mock me some day—mock me horribly!"

Dorian's background, revealed later to Henry, is suitably romantic: his mother, who died shortly after his birth, was a beautiful young woman who ran away with a penniless subaltern. The boy's misfortune charms Henry, for beyond every exquisite thing there must be something tragic; "worlds had to be in travail, that the meanest flower might blow." The charm of Dorian is precisely Henry's awakening from innocence to a realization of his own power. Talking to such a person, Henry thinks, is like playing upon an exquisite violin—and it strikes him as highly desirable that *he* should seek to dominate Dorian, as Dorian,

without knowing it, dominates Basil. There is something enthralling to Henry in the exercise of influence: "To project one's soul into some gracious form . . . ; to hear one's own intellectual views echoed back to one . . . ; to convey one's temperament into another. . . ." So Basil's "subject" becomes Henry's.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is a curious hybrid. Certainly it possesses a supernatural dimension, and its central image is gothic; yet in other respects it is Restoration comedy, energetically sustained for more than two hundred pages. It approximates the novel Henry would write if he had the ambition—a book as lovely as a Persian carpet and as unreal. The supernatural element, however, is never active except in terms of the portrait. It would be quite ludicrous if introduced to Henry's drawing room society, and it is really inexplicable given the secular nature of Dorian's personality. Evidently diabolical powers are stirred by Basil's art, but Basil himself has no awareness of them, apart from a certain uneasiness regarding the morality of his relationship to Dorian. Is the devil responsible? But does the devil exist? Hell is hardly more than theoretical to Wilde, and heaven is equally notional; when Dorian is attracted to the Catholic church it is primarily for the sake of exotic ritual, ecclesiastical vestments, and other somewhat ludicrous treasures of the church, which Wilde delights in cataloging. The *consequences* of a Faustian pact with the devil are dramatized, but the devil himself is absent, which suggests that the novel is an elaborate fantasy locating the Fall within the human psyche alone. Basil, Henry, and Dorian are all artists, aspects of their creator. Basil is a conventional artist, apart from his attraction to Dorian; Henry and Dorian are aesthetes—artists of their own lives—who hope to generate a new hedonism. Wilde echoes Pater, of course, but with a unique intensity, and it is significant that there is nothing remotely supernatural about such passages as the following, which are clearly at the very heart of the novel:

> There are few of us who have not sometimes wakened before dawn, either after one of those dreamless nights that make us almost enamoured of death, or one of those nights of horror and misshapen joy, when through the chambers of the brain sweep phantoms more terrible than reality itself, and instinct with that vivid life that lurks in all grotesques, and that lends to Gothic art its enduring vitality. . . . Veil after veil of thin dusky gauze is lifted, and by degrees the forms and colors of things are restored to them, and we watch the dawn remaking the world in its antique pattern. The wan mirrors get back their mimic life. . . . Nothing seems to us changed. Out of the unreal shadows of the night comes back the real life that we had known. We have to resume it where we had left off, and there steals over us a terrible sense of the necessity for the continuance of energy in the same wearisome round of stereotyped habits, or a wild longing, it may be, that our eyelids might open

> some morning upon a world that had been refashioned anew in the darkness . . . a world in which the past would have little or no place, or survive, at any rate, in no conscious form of obligation or regret. . . . It was the creation of such worlds as these that seemed to Dorian Gray to be the true object . . . of life.

Certainly it will not do to dismiss such sentiments as "romantic"—they strike a very deep chord and underlie all creations of alternate worlds in art. If it is the case that the hedonist, unrestrained by morality, customs, or the surveillance of his neighbors, always drifts to the most extreme experiences, then it might be hypothesized that the hedonist is an archetype of man, not perverse but representational. His quest for new sensations in order to give vitality to his flickering life is nothing more than an exaggeration of any quest for meaning.

Wilde's contempt for the "shallow psychology" that defines man in terms of his social and familial position is as savage as D. H. Lawrence's. How is it possible, Dorian wonders, to conceive of man's ego as "a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence"? Wilde, like Lawrence, sees man as "a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead." Insincerity, Wilde observes, is merely a method by which we multiply our personalities. Where in Wilde the experimentation with alternative lives is a desperate means of escaping that *taedium vitae* that "comes upon those to whom life denies nothing," in Lawrence it is clearly quite different. Lawrence, who believed that "nothing that comes from the deep, passional soul is bad, or can be bad,"[2] was repulsed by the kind of hedonism Wilde preached and created the gnomish Loerke of *Women in Love* as a spokesman for *fin de siècle* aesthetics. To the batlike but highly articulate Loerke, art is purely self-referential: it is "a picture of nothing, of absolutely nothing," with no relationship to the everyday world, which exists on a separate and distinct plane of existence. Loerke is the rock bottom of all life, the perfect stoic who is also the perfect epicure, troubled about nothing, connected to no one, a parody of decadent aesthetics as it shades into European fascism. That Loerke crouched in Lawrence's soul and fascinated him as he does Gudrun goes without saying. Even Lawrence's hatreds sprang out of sympathy.

Yet it would be wrong to assume that Lawrence's insights are inevitably deeper than Wilde's or that his vicious portrait of Loerke ("I expect he is a Jew—or part Jew," Birkin mutters) is a more critical portrait than that of Dorian himself. Wilde's great theme is the Fall—the Fall of innocence and its consequences and the corruption of "natural" life by a sudden irrevocable consciousness (symbolized by Dorian's infatuation

2. D. H. Lawrence, foreword to *Women in Love* (New York, 1920).

with himself); but this falling from grace is available only to those who have attained a certain degree of economic and intellectual freedom. Restlessness, ennui, the inability to apply one's strength to anything—these are not merely symptoms of Dorian's perverse nature but symptoms of a highly advanced and sophisticated civilization itself. So Dorian is a victim—not unlike Dostoyevsky's similarly emblematic Stavrogin, who drifts into a life of unimaginative vice because he is "freed" of the earth and of the necessity to labor as ordinary men do. Stavrogin is accursed by boredom: "As to my political views," he says in his confession, "I just felt I'd have liked to put gunpowder under the four corners of the world and blow the whole thing sky-high—if it had only been worth the trouble."[3] Stavrogin's role in the death of a young girl is more convincing than Dorian's role in the death of Sybil Vane, just as Stavrogin's predicament, generally, is more convincing in realistic terms than Dorian's: but both young men, handsome as they are, with the power to move others deeply while remaining unmoved themselves, are allegorical figures whose fates are meant to symbolize the sterility of an "advanced" civilization. How, Stavrogin asks, is one to apply one's strength, one's "limitless" strength, to anything that is not an illusion?

Dostoyevsky, no less than Wilde, is enamoured of his creation but quite serious about the strength that might be applied to sheer labor, peasant labor. Stavrogin might have been redeemed had he knelt down to kiss the earth he had defiled, as Raskolnikov does; he might have saved himself had he followed Shatov's advice to "find God through labor." But Wilde would have none of this. He can be as sentimental as Dostoyevsky and as unreasonably pious, but his "lower classes" are never anything but lower. They appear, in fact, to belong to a level of consciousness distinctly different from those of their elegant masters—tiptoeing about with their "masks of servility," lapsing into unwelcome "garrulousness" about tiresome household matters when their masters are eager to begin a night of vice: two kinds of human beings, two species—those who are "free" and those who are not.

Dorian's freedom, however, as we know, is a consequence primarily of his loss of humanity. His soul is no longer his own: it has been appropriated by art. His response to Sybil's melodramatic death is one of surprise and alarm at his own failure to feel grief: "Why cannot I feel this tragedy as much as I want to?" he complains to Henry. Real life is eclipsed by art and by the emotional responses we commonly give to works of art, as we rejoice in their artificiality. The girl's death has for Dorian "all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a great part, but by which I have not been wounded." In the end Henry explains Dorian's egotism to him and assures him that Sybil never lived—not for *him*—apart from the phantom in his imagination.

3. Dostoyevsky, *The Possessed,* trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York, 1962), p. 418.

After the girl's death Dorian becomes increasingly detached from what might be called normal human emotions. It is interesting to note that the Shavian ideal—the man of disinterested sensibility who looks unmoved upon the melodrama of life—does not greatly differ from the precious, rather infantile, and supremely confident model of the dehumanized personality Wilde offers. Dorian is a golem, a parody of Henry, assuring Basil that it is only shallow people who require years to get rid of an emotion: "A man who is master of himself can end a sorrow as easily as he can invent a pleasure. I don't want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, to dominate them."

Is it inevitably the case that a doctrine of art for art's sake reduces to the sort of sickly, simpering aestheticism of a Des Esseintes? Is there something doomed in the very notion of a purely self-referential art that, at the very most, *uses* materials from the real world? One encounters repeatedly in literary history the belligerent claim that art has nothing to do with anything beyond itself and that writing that aspires to the loveliness of, let us say, a Persian carpet must necessarily be unreal. The stylist is encouraged to cultivate his own sensibility, for where actual life is surrendered to chaos one might nevertheless forge a certain logic of the imagination. In *Dorian Gray* Wilde surely believes in his aesthetics and at the same time offers, by way of Dorian and his fate and Basil and *his* fate, a disturbingly prescient commentary on his beliefs: the artist who succumbs to the spell of beauty will be destroyed, and so savagely destroyed that nothing of him will survive. The novel's power lies in the interstices of its parable—in those passages in which the author appears to be confessing doubts of both a personal and an impersonal nature.

It might be hypothesized that the airless and claustrophobic world of self-referential art, when it is not primarily a reaction against prevailing norms of "social realism" in its various guises, is actually a paradigm of the infant's world. Everything in that world is self-referential: everything refers inward; words, as they are grasped one by one, appear to be *created* by the child (just as the mother and other adults, mobilized by cries of hunger or alarm, certainly appear to be controlled by the child). The illusion of possessing and controlling everything is a powerful one, and its charms are not readily surrendered even in adulthood. So we encounter in theoreticians of self-referential art both the puzzling contempt for real worlds and the sentimental hope for a forcible remaking of the universe as if there were not already a universe to be acknowledged. The impulse for such creation—Faustian in its aspirations—must spring from a sense of insignificance; for even the infant's delusion of omnipotence is compensatory to its actual helplessness. *It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.*

The value of Wilde's allegory lies in the questions it asks rather than in the experience it transcribes. For *Dorian Gray* gives us hardly any experience at all—it is surface and symbol and too tidily constructed.

Dorian, Henry, and Basil fade, but their voices remain, asking certain unanswerable questions that are as appropriate for our time as they were for Wilde's: Is the Fall from innocence inevitable? Is the loss of illusion tragic, or comic, or merely farcical? Is the artist by his very nature inclined to manipulate and pervert his subject? And is his doom bound up with the fact of his artistry, his autonomy? Henry declares that if a man treats life artistically, his brain is his heart, but Wilde's novel—and Wilde's experience—suggest otherwise.