

The Victorian Newsletter

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*Paper delivered English X Section of MLA, Chicago, 1985.

Cover: Portrait of Robert Louis Stevenson by Percy F. S. Spence
On the centennial of the publication of
Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and *Kidnapped*

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consciousness (107). He shifts Byron's marital problems to Herbert, the Shelley character, whose wife Lady Annabel, a learned woman of high moral tone quarantining an only daughter from the "nefarious" but magnetic father, resembles Annabella Milbanke. Most striking of all the changes, Disraeli drowns Caducris, strong swimmer though he is reported to be, in a boating accident that in its other particulars is almost exactly patterned on the one fatal to Shelley and Edward Williams. The symbolic significance of this departure from fact hardly needs comment. It clearly states the point suggested by the shift from Byron as model and spokesman to Byron as subject matter – Disraeli could finally bury his hero. Having grown up as a man and a writer, he could rely on his own potential and attempt to shine without the reflected light.

Even with the youthful infatuation behind him, though, Disraeli continued to live a life reminiscent of Byron's in odd ways. I think that one can see their two existences, determined in part by chance and in part by choice, as parallel lines proceeding in opposite directions. Byron, to the Abbey born, went

forth and gained new distinction for himself as a revolutionary in the East. Disraeli, a child of the Levant, climbed by dint of talent and persistence to the top of the ruling class on which Byron had turned his back. And having so exalted himself, Lord Beaconsfield died on the 19th of April, as had Lord Byron.

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Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Wilde's Autobiographical Signature in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Karl Beckson

In our post-Freudian age, one encounters little critical resistance to Henry James's remark that the "artist is present in every page of every book from which he sought so assiduously to eliminate himself" (Edel 140). Indeed, many writers have expended so little energy in attempting to "eliminate" themselves from their works that self-advertisement is the inevitable result. Of late Victorian writers, Wilde is a notable example of how a writer, aware that socially unacceptable sexual transgressions must be conducted in secret, nevertheless reveals his impulses with startling clarity, an indication of how defenses fail when forbidden impulses are compulsive. A critical commonplace asserts that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reveals the author's open secret concerning the "terrible pleasure of a double life" (Wilde, *Letters* 175).

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the painter Basil Hallward declares that "every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter" (5), a view that, despite witty paradoxes, Wilde himself shared. In a letter written in 1894, he revealed that the novel "contains much of me in it: 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" (*Letters* 352). Despite Wilde's dismissal, Lord Henry is also an embodiment of the author in his insistent pseudo-Patrian urging that Dorian pursue new and strange sensations.

In order to reinforce the autobiographical nature of the novel, Wilde employs a device that has been curiously overlooked by

critics. In sixteen of the twenty chapters in the second revised and augmented edition, which appeared in 1891, he uses the adjective *wild* (appearing twenty-seven times), the comparative form *wilder* (appearing twice), and the adverb *wildly* (appearing five times). Since these words are common enough, one would expect their random appearance in virtually any sensational novel, but given the number of appearances in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, one must give pause, for Wilde was an extraordinarily careful and self-conscious writer. It is highly unlikely that his use of *wild*, *wilder*, and *wildly* would have escaped his calculated sense of irony and his wry smile as he penned them--perhaps at first casually, then deliberately and increasingly in almost every chapter.

Such a device no doubt gratified his narcissistic urges, for the appearance of his name, shorn of the *e*, in a mirror image before him (like Dorian and his portrait), suggests a symbolic form of self-mutilation consistent with his own masochistic impulses, as we know from his self-destructive path that led to the dock in the Old Bailey and eventually to Reading Gaol.¹ Indeed, symbolic self-mutilation, both moral and physical, is the major theme and plot device of the novel, as it was in Wilde's life. The use of his name in the novel as autobiographical signature (not unknown, we recall, in other writers, such as the suggestive "will" in Shakespeare's sonnets and "done" in Donne's verse) reinforces our awareness that Wilde playfully uses his name to underline the subtextual nature of his novel-

1. For a discussion of the relationship of narcissism to masochism in Wilde, see my "Oscar Wilde and the Masks of Narcissus," *Psychoanalytic Study of Society* 10 (1984): 249-67.

that is, as a mirror image of his own "soul," a term central to the work.

Significantly, *wild*, *wilder*, and *wildly* are associated with the major characters as though to suggest their autobiographical import and to introduce a magical presence that Wilde assigned to language. The power of words used by Lord Henry so affects Dorian that he muses (or, rather, Wilde does) on them:

Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them! They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things, and to have a music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of lute. Mere words! Was there anything so real as words? (19)

And indeed for an artist as self-exploitive as Wilde, are not "words" his mirror image, as potent and self-revealing as Dorian's portrait?

To be sure, in several instances, Wilde employs his name in seemingly gratuitous fashion (though perhaps with symbolic reverberations), as in Lord Henry's remark to Hallward that because "Genius lasts longer than Beauty," we over-educate ourselves: "In the wild struggle for existence, we want to have something that endures. . . ." (12), and in the account of Dorian's mother, who risked everything for "a few wild weeks of happiness" (35). However, the more revealing instances of Wilde's autobiographical signature occur in contexts that leave little doubt that consciously or unconsciously Wilde yielded to his need for confession. For example, when Dorian tells Lord Henry, "You filled me with a wild desire to know everything about life," (47) the desire is also Wilde's in courting new sensations among London's male prostitutes. In a low quarter of the city, Dorian recalls Lord Henry's advice to "cure the soul by means of the senses": "From cell to cell of his brain crept the one thought; and the wild desire to live, most terrible of all man's appetites, quickened into force each trembling nerve and fibre" (186).

Furthermore, after Sybil Vane's suicide, Dorian muses on its significance and on its effect on his portrait:

He felt that the time had really come for making his choice. Or had his choice already been made? Yes, life had decided that for him--life, and his own infinite curiosity about life. Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins--he was to have all these things. (105)

The "wild joys" and "wilder sins" (a moral comparative), with its secret pleasures, are confessional as narcissistic reflections of Wilde himself.

As the novel progresses, Wilde uses his name in evermore revealing fashion. In Chapter IX, when Hallward asks Dorian whether he had ever noticed "something curious" in the portrait--an allusion to Hallward's homosexual attraction to Dorian--the young man, aware that indeed there is something curious in it because it now reflects his moral corruption, exclaims: "'Basil!' . . . clutching the arms of his chair with trembling hands, and gazing at him with wild startled eyes" (114). By the end of that chapter, with its focus on concealed and revealed secrets, Hallward confesses to his "worship" of

Dorian, who muses when his friend leaves: ". . . how strange it was that, instead of having been forced to reveal his own secret, he had succeeded, almost by chance, in wresting a secret from his friend! How much that strange confession explained to him! The painter's absurd fits of jealousy, his wild devotion. . ." (117). Clearly, "wild devotion" is homosexual. Long before the prosecution for the Crown attempted to wrest the secret from Wilde, it had been revealed playfully in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and during Wilde's trial, passages were read from the novel to suggest its morally subversive nature.

In describing Lord Henry's "new Hedonism," Wilde reflects on how the pursuit of pleasure (associated with the darkness of night) might transform the Victorian world (with its daylight of restrictive morality), which reasserts itself with each new dawn:

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 for our pleasure. . . . (131)

The "wild longing" is here obvious as Wilde's, less obvious as Dorian's.

When Dorian tells Hallward that he will show him his "soul," the painter is seized by "a wild feeling of pity" (153), and after showing him the portrait, Dorian tells him: "'Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him, Basil,' cried Dorian, with a wild gesture of despair" (157). He means of course, potentialities, not actualities, and the despair that he feels is related to what was undoubtedly Wilde's own sense of inevitable fate because of his increasing sexual abandon, even in 1891. In his prison letter to Lord Alfred, he points to "the note of Doom that like a purple thread runs through the gold cloth of *Dorian Gray*" (*Letters* 475). After Sybil's death, Dorian, pursued by her brother (another embodiment of conscience), sees his face in the window of his country house; at the dinner table, Dorian's manner has "a wild recklessness of gaiety" (199), but on the following day, he is "sick with a wild terror of dying, and yet indifferent to life itself. The consciousness of being hunted, snared, tracked down, had begun to dominate him" (199).

In the final chapter, Dorian, reviewing his life, asks:

Was it really true that one could never change? He felt a wild longing for the unstained purity of his boyhood--his rose-white boyhood, as Lord Henry had once called it. He knew that he had tarnished himself, filled his mind with corruption and given horror to his fancy; that he had been an evil influence to others, and had experienced a terrible joy in being so. (219)

This "wild longing" sounds the depths of Wilde's moral nature. Indeed, in defending the novel against critics who sensed its prurient implications, Wilde insisted, in a letter to the *Daily Chronicle*, that "the real moral of the story is that all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment. . . . (*Letters* 263).

In despair, Dorian recalls the "curiously-carved" mirror that Lord Henry had given him and into which he had looked "with wild tear-dimmed eyes" (220) when he discovered the first alteration in his portrait. Before he plunges the knife into his portrait, Dorian is convinced that it was his "duty to confess, to suffer public shame, and to make public atonement" (222). Symbolically, through the device of the autobiographical signature, the novel does that for Wilde. It remained for him to approximate this self-fulfilling prophecy in the mid-nineties, though his "atonement" was private and conciliatory in his

prison letter to Lord Alfred, an indication of his refusal to relinquish what he regarded as essential to his nature.

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Brooklyn College, CUNY

Books Received

Baker, William. *Some George Eliot Notebooks: An Edition of the Carl H. Pforzheimer Library's George Eliot Holograph Notebooks, MSS 707, 708, 709, 710, 711*. Vol. 2-Ms 708. Salzburg Studies in English Literature 46. Salzburg: Institut Für Anglistik Und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1984. Dist. by Humanities Press. Pp. viii + 203. \$25.00 paper. "Materials in MS 708 have relevance to *Romola*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda*. There is one appendix to this volume: a list of George Eliot's reading as cited in Pforzheimer MS 708"

Browning, Robert. *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*. Ed. Roma A. King, Jr., Vol. 7. Athens, OH: Ohio UP; Waco, TX: Baylor U, 1985. Pp. xxiv + 322. \$48.00 Vol. 7 includes the first four books of *The Ring and the Book*.

Coggins, Paul E. *Egoism versus Altruism in Browning's Dramas*. Studies in Language and Literature. Troy, MI: International Book Publishers, 1985. Pp. xiii + 130. \$14.00 paper. Platitudinous; it is hard to imagine what audience this book is written for.

Dave, Jagdish Chandra. *The Human Predicament in Hardy's Novels*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1985. Pp. xii + 216. \$29.00 "The purpose of this book is to systematize Hardy's thought as it issues from the novels, not to consider how it gradually developed and what influences contributed to its making. All biographical interest is, therefore, held irrelevant, and excluded" (xii).

Dickens, Charles. *Selected Letters of Charles Dickens*. Ed. and arranged by David Paroissien. Boston: Twayne, 1985. Pp. xxx + 377. \$35.00 cloth, \$12.95 paper. Divided into "Personal Letters," "Social and Political Letters," and "Professional Letters," it includes a 14 page "Biographical Table" and introductions to the three parts. More than 200 letters or parts of letters, "this selection is based on the three volumes of letters that were published in 1938 under the direction of Walter Dexter" (ix) in the Nonesuch Edition of Dickens. A useful collection.

Downes, David Anthony. *Hopkins' Sanctifying Imagination*.

Lanham, New York & London: University Press of America, 1985. Pp. 129. \$19.75 cloth, \$8.75 paper. Downes starts "first with a brief recapitulation of the 'higher' tradition of the English Romantics which was Hopkins' artistic heritage. This summary is followed by a tracing out of Hopkins' adaptations of this tradition through the theological mediations of John Henry Newman and the philosophic spirit of John Duns Scotus. Finally [he turns his] attentions to some of the esthetic and religious patterns of the sanctifying imagination revealed in Hopkins' mature poetry" (2).

Harden, Edgar F. *Thackeray's "English Humorists" and "Four Georges."* Newark, DE: U of Delaware P, 1985. Pp. 278. \$34.50. Not an edition of these lecture-essays, but a commentary on them: "I try to read these works in the light of their composition, and their use of sources, when that is particularly distinctive or otherwise calls for comment, but especially in terms of their achieved nature as works of art" (34).

Hardy, Thomas. *Jude the Obscure*. Intro and notes by James Gibson. London & Melbourne: Dent, 1985. Pp. xxx + 418. \$2.95 paper. Uses as its text the Macmillan 1920 reprint of the 1912 Wessex edition.

Pinion, F.B. *A Hardy Companion: A Guide to the Works of Thomas Hardy and their Background*. London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984. Dist. by Humanities Press. Pp. xviii + 558. \$45.00. A reprint of the 1976 edition, originally published in 1968. A very useful compendium of miscellaneous information.

Szladits, Lola L. *Brothers: The Origins of the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library*. New York: New York Public Library, 1985. Pp. 60. \$10.00.

Vogeler, Martha S. *Frederic Harrison: The Vocations of a Positivist*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. Pp. xvii + 493. \$49.95. Harrison "is perhaps the most important Victorian personality lacking a modern critical biography" (5). Vogeler rectifies that omission with this nicely written work.

Victorian Group News

A. Announcements

The thirteenth annual Carolinas Symposium on British Studies will be held at Appalachian State University on October 18-19, 1986. The Symposium provides an annual forum for the delivery of scholarly presentations and the exchange of ideas relating to all aspects of British Studies, including history, literature, art, government, architecture, and music. While the Symposium is regionally based in the Southeast, participants are welcome from all parts of the country. The program committee invites proposals for individual papers, full sessions, and panel discussions. A \$100 prize will be awarded for the best paper from among those read at the Symposium and submitted to the evaluation committee by the following May. Proposals should be sent by April 15, 1986, to Professor Colin F. Baxter, Department of History, Box 22,660A, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee 37614. All who submit proposals will be notified of the decision of the program committee by early June.

The Annual Meeting of *The Victorians Institute* will be held Saturday, October 18, 1986 at the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA. The host committee of the meeting seeks papers of about 20 minutes that fit into the broad theme of "Religion and Literature in Victorian England." There are no further restrictions on subject or approach. Given the interdisciplinary interests of the Institute, papers from a variety of disciplines or combinations of disciplines will be particularly welcomed.

Please submit manuscripts for consideration no later than June 1, 1986. Notification will be made soon thereafter. Submissions may be made to Professor Terry L. Meyers, English Department, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA 23185.

The Department of English at the University of Kansas will hold a conference on the theme VICTORIA'S JUBILEES, 1887 AND 1897: A CENTENNIAL RECONSIDERATION from 26 March to 28 March 1987. Papers relevant to the period, to take twenty minutes each for delivery, are solicited from persons in English literature and such related disciplines as history, art history, music history, history of science, Irish studies, women's studies, intellectual history, social history, and popular culture. Send 500-word abstracts by 1 September 1986 to Professor Harold Orel, Department of English, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-2115, U.S.A.

B. Project: Request for Aid

Evelyn J. Harden would be grateful for information concerning the location of the archives of the *London Literary Gazette*. Please write to: Professor Evelyn J. Harden, Dept. of Languages, Literatures and Linguistics, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C. Canada V5A 1S6

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