

OSCAR WILDE

THE UNCENSORED PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY



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EDITED BY

NICHOLAS FRANKEL

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Oscar Wilde's typescript of his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, remained unpublished until 2011, when it appeared under the title *The Picture of Dorian Gray: An Annotated, Uncensored Edition* as part of Harvard University Press's annotated series of classic literary works. Like *The Picture of Dorian Gray: An Annotated, Uncensored Edition*, this paperback edition is based on the typescript submitted by Wilde to *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in 1890, whereupon an alarmed J. M. Stoddart, the magazine's editor, quickly determined the novel, at least in its present form, would offend the sensibilities of his readership. Especially troubling to Wilde's editor were instances of graphic sexual—especially, homosexual—content he found in the typescript. In consultation with his publishing associates, Stoddart struck words, phrases, and whole sentences from Wilde's typescript. The introductory essays that follow explain the commercial, social, and legal imperatives that motivated the changes to both Wilde's typescript and the subsequent and expanded book edition of 1891, published by Ward, Lock, and Company. This edition restores all of the material excised by Stoddart and his colleagues.

Literary scholars often speak of publication as a process of collaboration between publishers and authors; however, the reality is often far different. The relations between Victorian journal editors and their authors presumed a sharp imbalance of power, especially where first-time novelists were involved. Thomas Hardy complained in 1890 that "the patrons of literature—no longer Peers with taste—acting under the censorship of prudery, rigorously exclude from the pages they regulate subjects that have been made . . . the bases of the finest imaginative compositions since literature rose to the dignity of an art." In the case of Wilde's novel, the evidence that Stoddart censored it is plain from the sexual and political nature of his deletions, such as his removal of Basil Hallward's confession: "There was love [for Dorian] in every line [of the portrait], and in every touch there was passion."

Further evidence can be found in Stoddart's panicked reaction upon receipt of Wilde's typescript: "Rest assured that it will not go into the Magazine unless it is proper that it shall," he told his employer, Craige Lippincott. "In its present condition there are a number of things which an innocent woman would make an exception to. But I will go beyond this and make it acceptable to the most fastidious taste." Before committing himself to publication, Stoddart assigned Wilde's typescript to no fewer than five publishing professionals for comment—one of whom he later charged with "picking out any objectionable passages." Wilde did not see these changes to his novel until after it appeared in print.

American literary critic Elaine Showalter has characterized the milieu in which Wilde lived and wrote as one of "sexual anarchy." Stoddart's edits must be seen within the wider context of the sexual paranoia and legal threat apparent in the late 1880s and early 1890s. The circumstances under which *Dorian Gray* was published are a far cry from those faced by the majority of English-language authors either before or since. The 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act outlawing "gross indecency" between men, the establishment of the National Vigilance Association in 1885 (it successfully brought about a jail sentence for Henry Vizetelly, translator of Emile Zola's works, in 1889), and the Cleveland Street Scandal of 1889–1890 all served to bring about a heightened atmosphere of paranoia and intolerance, particularly where upper-class and well-educated English homosexuals were concerned. Indeed, Wilde was the chief victim of this climate of repression—as was plain from the jubilation that greeted his imprisonment for gross indecency in 1895. Whether he acknowledged it or not, Stoddart's hand was directed by the courts.

Literature is an inherently social product, but it isn't always commensurate with its public face accepted manifestations, and the processes of publication aren't always as seamlessly collaborative literary scholars sometimes imagine. Are the sanitized texts of Osip Mandelstam presented by Soviet editors to be accepted on the grounds that they are collaborative products? Reclaiming works literature from the censorship they were subject to, often for the duration of their authors' lifetimes, not a Romantic endeavor, but rather an effort to reveal the social antagonisms and broader political forces shaping their accepted social face.

The remains of Oscar Wilde lie in Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. His sleek, modern tomb, designed by the British sculptor Jacob Epstein and commissioned by Wilde's lover and executor, Robert Ross, is one of the most frequently visited and recognizable graves in a cemetery notable for the many famous writers, artists, and musicians buried there (Balzac, Chopin, Proust, Gertrude Stein, Jim Morrison). The surface of Epstein's massive monolith is covered with hundreds of lipstick kisses—some ancient and faded, others new and vibrant. ("The madness of kissing" is what Wilde said Lord Alfred Douglas's "red-roseleaf lips" were made for.) Some observers decry the presence of these marks on Wilde's tomb as a form of defacement or vandalism, rightly pointing out that the lipstick's high fat content does real and lasting damage to the monolith. But to the many men and women, gay and straight, who journey each year to the site, the kisses are a tribute to the famous playwright, novelist, and wit—sentenced in 1895 to two years in prison, with hard labor, after being convicted of "gross indecency"—whom they see as a martyr to Victorian sexual morality.¹

Five years before his death, Wilde went, almost overnight, from being one of Britain's most colorful and celebrated figures to its most notorious sexual criminal. When he died from cerebral meningitis, in a seedy Parisian hotel room on November 30, 1900, at the age of forty-six, he had been living in exile in France for over three years, broken in spirit and body, bankrupt, and ostracized from respectable British society. In 1895, at the time of his arrest, he had been Britain's leading playwright and wit, feted in London's West End and intellectual circles, as well as in the country homes and London townhouses of England's ruling class (much of it unaware that Wilde originated from Ireland since, to use Wilde's own words, "my Irish accent was one of the many things I forgot at Oxford"). Even before his fame as a playwright and novelist, he had been the principal spokesman for the cult of "Aestheticism," or art for art's sake, which had swept much of England and America in the wake of Wilde's stunning arrival on the cultural scene in 1881. His death in 1900, little more than three years after his release from England's Reading prison (the "Reading Gaol" of his celebrated poem "The Ballad of Reading Gaol"), coincided with the end of a decade ("the Yellow Nineties," "the age of Dorian") more closely associated with him than with anyone else, as much for his large personality and life as for his considerable accomplishments as a writer and thinker.

Wilde's final years make for depressing summary. In exile he took the assumed name of "Sebastian Melmoth," invoking the martyrdom of St. Sebastian (a homosexual icon) and the eponymous protagonist of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, a gothic novel by Charles Maturin, Wilde's great-uncle. His wife, Constance, who had visited him just once while he was in jail, in 1896, to break the news of her mother's death, shunned him in his final years before her own premature death in 1898. After his incarceration, Wilde never again saw his two sons. Like their mother, they had adopted the last name of "Holland"; and they were taught by Constance and her relatives "to forget that we had ever borne the name of Wilde and never to mention it to anyone."² Four months after his release from prison, Wilde returned briefly to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas, who had barely escaped prosecution himself in 1895. Wilde was convinced that with Douglas he could find the happiness, love, and renewed creativity that he craved, but after a two-month sojourn together in Naples, Douglas abandoned him, leaving Wilde to face his impecunious, uncertain future alone. Harsh prison conditions had taken their toll on Wilde. Isolated and demoralized, he let himself go in the final months of his life: "I will never outlive the century," Wilde predicted. "The English people would not stand for it."

Richard Ellmann, Wilde's biographer, estimates that he was bedridden by the end of September 1900. On his deathbed, Wilde, who was unable to speak, assented to be received into the Catholic

Church by raising his hand and was administered Last Rites. According to Ellmann, Robert Ross present at Wilde's deathbed, admitted later that he only "made up his mind to get [Wilde] a priest so there could be formal obsequies and a ceremonial burial." Otherwise, Ross feared, the body might be taken to the morgue and an autopsy performed.³ "The coffin was cheap, and the hearse was shabby," Ellmann states succinctly (Ellmann, p. 584). According to the writer Ernest La Jeunesse, who was present at Wilde's funeral, only thirteen people followed the coffin to its resting place in Bagneux Cemetery, where Wilde was buried on December 3, his simple grave marked with a single stone on which was inscribed "Job xxix Verbis meis adere nihil audebant et super illos stillebat eloquium meum" ("To my words they durst add nothing, and my speech dropped upon them," from the Book of Job). In 1909 his remains would be moved to Père Lachaise, and three years later the Epstein monument erected over them. Ross's ashes were placed in a compartment in the Père Lachaise tomb after his own death in 1918. The inscription on the tomb is from "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (which was published under the pseudonym "C.3.3.," Wilde's prison identification, signifying cell block C, landing 3, cell 3):

And alien tears will fill for him
Pity's long-broken urn,
For his mourners will be outcast men,
And outcasts always mourn.

The Picture of Dorian Gray was published simultaneously in England and America in 1890 by the B. Lippincott Company of Philadelphia in the July issue of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, five years before the series of sensational trials that would lead to Wilde's incarceration. (The British edition of the magazine, copublished with Ward, Lock, and Company, appeared with a table of contents slightly different from that of the American edition.) Wilde soon set about revising and enlarging the novel for a book edition, which was published in 1891 by Ward, Lock, and Company. At the time of the novel's appearance in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, Wilde was already well known to the general public for his quick wit, theatricality, ostentatious dress, and the many poems, stories, lectures, and journalistic pieces he had written over the previous decade. But *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was the work that made him an iconic figure, in the eyes of both his supporters and his detractors, and that would later play a part in his downfall when it was used as evidence against him in court. The novel altered the way Victorians saw and understood the world they inhabited, particularly with regard to sexuality and masculinity. It heralded the end of a repressive "Victorianism," and, as Ellmann has remarked, after its publication "Victorian literature had a different look" (Ellmann, p. 314).

When the novel appeared in *Lippincott's*, it was immediately controversial. To be sure, appreciative and sensitive reviews appeared in Britain and America, but a significant segment of the British press reacted with outright hostility, condemning the novel as "vulgar," "unclean," "poisonous," "discreditable," and "a sham." In August 1890, Wilde claimed to have received 216 such attacks on his novel since its appearance in *Lippincott's* two months earlier.⁴ "Dulness and dirt are the chief features of *Lippincott's* this month," began the reviewer for the *Daily Chronicle*:

The element that is unclean, though undeniably amusing, is furnished by Mr. Oscar Wilde's story of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It is a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French decadents—a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction—a gloating study of the mental and physical corruption of a fresh, fair and golden youth, which might be fascinating but for its effeminate frivolity, its studied insincerity, its theatrical cynicism, its tawdry mysticism, its flippant philosophizings. . . . Mr. Wilde says the book has "a moral." The "moral," so far as we can collect it, is that man's chief end is to develop his nature to the fullest by "always searching for new sensations," that when the soul gets sick the way to cure it is to deny the senses nothing.⁵

One of the most pernicious reviews came from the *St. James's Gazette*: “Not being curious
ordure, and not wishing to offend the nostrils of decent persons, we do not propose to analyze *The
Picture of Dorian Gray*,” writes the anonymous reviewer. “Whether the Treasury or the Vigilance
Society will think it worthwhile to prosecute Mr. Oscar Wilde or Messrs. Ward, Lock & Co., we do
not know,” he continues. “The puzzle is that a young man of decent parts, who enjoyed (when he was
at Oxford) the opportunity of associating with gentlemen, should put his name (such as it is) to
stupid and vulgar a piece of work.”⁶ Another contemporary notice, which appeared in the *Scottish
Observer*, a respectable, even prestigious literary magazine edited by the poet and critic (and Wilde’s
onetime friend) W. E. Henley, merits fuller quotation:

Why go grubbing in muck-heaps? The world is fair, and the proportion of healthy-minded men and women to those that are
fallen, or unnatural is great. Mr. Oscar Wilde has again been writing stuff that were better unwritten; and while *The Picture
of Dorian Gray*, which he contributes to *Lippincott's*, is ingenious, interesting, full of cleverness, plainly the work of a man of letters,
it is false art—for its interest is medico-legal; it is false to human nature—for its hero is a devil; it is false to morality—for it is
made sufficiently clear that the writer does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health, and sanity. The
story—which deals with matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department or a hearing *in camera* [out of public
scrutiny]—is discreditable alike to author and editor. Mr. Wilde has brains, and art, and style; but if he can write for none but
outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph boys, the sooner he takes to tailoring (or some other decent trade) the better for his
own reputation and the public morals.⁷

Today we can easily recognize these references to unhealthiness, insanity, uncleanness, and
“medico-legal interest” as coded imputations of homosexuality. It is worth bearing in mind, however,
that in the Victorian era, sexual preference was less clearly seen as an identity; indeed, the word
homosexual did not enter the English language until 1892, when it was used adjectivally in
translation of Richard Krafft-Ebing’s book *Psychopathia Sexualis* (it was first used as a noun in 1912).
Wilde and the other men who participated in London’s homosexual subculture, many of them leading
secret double lives, would have been viewed by the majority not as homosexuals per se but as men
indulging in “unclean” vices. Even so, homosexual acts were generally considered repugnant and
deviant—and for the first time, with the passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, sexual
activities of any nature between men were not merely sinful but unlawful. (The criminalization
of homosexuality and the example of Wilde’s life and work are widely credited with instituting
homosexuality as a distinct sexual and social identity.) That outraged British reviews of *The Picture
of Dorian Gray* share the same coded language (unhealthiness, insanity, uncleanness, and so on), with
making allusions to criminal prosecution, shows very clearly that many early British readers were
cognizant of the ways in which the novel challenged conventional Victorian notions of masculine
sexuality, particularly through its preoccupation with the homoerotic and emotional relations between
the three main male characters (Dorian, Basil, and Lord Henry) and through its complex interest in the
potentially corruptive nature of interpersonal influence. (Britain’s largest bookseller, W. H. Smith &
Son, took the unusual step of pulling the July number of *Lippincott's* from its railway bookstalls as
result of the public outcry.) *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is one of the first novels in the English
language to explore the nature of homoerotic and homosocial desire, which is to say it is a subversive
novel, even if—or perhaps especially because—it plays a cat-and-mouse game of hiding and revealing
the fact that homoerotic desire is the force that animates its still gripping, macabre plot.

Understanding the general atmosphere of hysteria about sexuality that existed in Britain in the years
leading up to the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is important to understanding the hostility
that greeted the novel in 1890. The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, under which Wilde was
eventually prosecuted, originated in a panic over the corruption of young, innocent girls, following a
exposé of London’s white slave trade titled “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon,” by the
journalist W. T. Stead in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (for which Wilde also wrote regularly from 1884 until

1889). Statute 11 of the Act (termed the “Labouchère Amendment” after the radical MP Henry Labouchère, who proposed it), criminalizing “gross indecency” between men, was added only at the eleventh hour, shortly before parliamentary debate ended and a vote was taken, but it succeeded in driving homosexual practices further underground and only heightened anxieties about homosexuality in Britain. The key language in the amendment—“gross indecency”—was broad enough to encompass any sexual activities between men, regardless of age or consent, and it was under this statute that Wilde and many other homosexuals were prosecuted in Britain until the Act’s repeal in 1956 (under the terms of the Labouchère Amendment, homosexual acts, as well as the procurement or attempted procurement of those acts, were punishable by up to two years’ imprisonment with or without hard labor). The vagueness of the language in the Labouchère Amendment invited prosecution, while the criminalization of private acts between consenting adult males encouraged male prostitutes and domestic servants to extort money from patrons and employers (Wilde was himself the victim of several blackmail attempts). The conditions had been created for a series of homosexual scandals that would rock London and increase the level of homophobia in British society.

Prior to Wilde’s own downfall, the most notable such scandal to follow in the wake of the Labouchère Amendment was the Cleveland Street Affair of 1889–1890. In late 1889, when Wilde began writing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, rumors emerged in the press surrounding a number of aristocratic and military men and an address in the Fitzrovia neighborhood in central London. Police investigating a theft from the Central London Post Office had uncovered a ring of male prostitutes, “rent boys” who operated as telegraph messengers by day and as male prostitutes, working out of a male brothel at 19 Cleveland Street, by night (the “perverted telegraph boys” alluded to in the *Scots Observer* review). One of those most tarnished in the unfolding scandal was Lord Arthur Somerset, the Prince of Wales’s equerry, who fled to France in October 1889 for fear of prosecution (hence the reference to “outlawed noblemen” in the *Scots Observer* review). Rumor also linked Prince Albert Victor, the eldest son of the Prince of Wales, to the Cleveland Street brothel, though the British press did not dare to mention Prince Albert Victor’s name, and no evidence exists to suggest he ever patronized the brothel. But the circulation of the rumor indicates the general level of anxiety about homosexual behavior, now associated in the public mind with aristocratic vices and the corruption of lower-class youth. The scandal even reached the floor of Parliament in the form of heated debate, after allegations were made of a government cover-up to protect the reputations of aristocratic patrons. It was in this heated atmosphere of hysteria and paranoia that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was greeted by the British press. In the wake of the Cleveland Street Scandal, Wilde’s emphasis on Dorian Gray’s youthfulness, or susceptibility to the “corruption” of an older aristocratic man (Lord Henry), is one of the features of the novel that most outraged reviewers. The reception of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1890 was a hint of what was yet to come.

It is not surprising that Wilde’s novel is a highly “coded” text, given the necessary secrecy and caution that governed England’s homosexual community following the passage of the Labouchère Amendment and the Cleveland Street Scandal. The very name *Dorian* is a veiled reference to “Dorian” or “Greek” love—to the Ancient Greek tradition (first openly discussed in Karl Müller’s *History and Antiquities of the Doric Race* [1824; English translation 1830]) of an older male “lover” taking a younger man in his charge. [Chapter IX](#) of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* especially contains numerous coded allusions to homosexuals and criminal sexual activity throughout history; and such depravity contains a “horrible fascination” for Dorian Gray, we are told, representing to him not evil but rather a “mode through which he might realize his conception of the beautiful.” The painting, which is itself a veiled record of Dorian’s secret vices and crimes, is similarly cloaked and locked away in an old studio so as to be “secure from prying eyes,” though Dorian has the key and goes to it repeatedly in order to comprehend the nature and depth of his own depravity. Lord Henry and Dorian rent a small house

Algiers, a vacation place frequented by British homosexuals, though the nature of their relationship never fully revealed. And there is much other “circumstantial evidence” that points obliquely to the fact that the three principals are engaged in acts of “gross indecency.” Above all, Wilde’s frequent recourse to terms like *personality*, *romance of feeling*, and even *friendship* to describe the intense attraction felt by the painter Basil Hallward for Dorian, is a way of encoding its specifically homoerotic nature. Wilde was cross-examined about his use of such terms when the novel was used against him in court.

To be sure, the *Lippincott’s* version of the novel—and still more the typescript that Wilde originally submitted to *Lippincott’s*, from which some 500 words were excised prior to publication (restored in the present edition)—is more explicit in its sexual references and allusions than the revised 1891 book version, in which Wilde, in response to his critics and at the insistence of his publisher, toned down the novel’s homosexual content. In the *Lippincott’s* text and the original typescript, for instance, Basil Hallward says to Lord Henry (speaking about Dorian), “I find a strange pleasure in saying things to him I know I shall be sorry for having said. I give myself away. As a rule, he is charming to me, and we walk home together from the club arm in arm.” Similarly, Wilde’s narrator tells us in the 1891 *Lippincott’s* edition and the typescript that “rugged and straightforward as he was,” there was something in Hallward’s nature “that was purely feminine in its tenderness.” Most revealing of all, perhaps, in the present typescript version Hallward says to Dorian: “It is quite true I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man should ever give to a friend. Somehow I have never loved a woman. . . . From the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me . . . I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly. I was jealous of everyone to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you.” This telling confession (altered very slightly by the editor of *Lippincott’s* before publication in the magazine) was deleted from the 1891 version, in which the intensity of Hallward’s “worship” is at once lessened and transformed into something more innocuous: the painter’s quest for a Platonic ideal in art.⁸ Wilde made other, similar deletions when preparing the book version of the novel for Ward, Lock, and Company.

In the wake of the Cleveland Street Scandal, Wilde had particular reason to be cautious in his published writings. Like Dorian, he was harboring his own secrets. Since at least 1886, Wilde had been leading a secret double life, designed to conceal his sexual orientation and extramarital affairs from close family members and “respectable” society. In that year he had allowed himself to be seduced by the boyish Robert Ross, with whom he embarked on a two-year love affair, though this did not preclude either man from taking other lovers.⁹ The event has traditionally been viewed by Wilde scholars as a critical turning point in Wilde’s life. From this time onward, he consciously recognized and acted upon his homosexual predilections and began, in the words of Richard Ellmann, “to think of himself as a criminal, moving guiltily among the innocent” (Ellmann, p. 278). As Ellmann observes, the event may even be coded into the plot of *Dorian Gray*, since in late 1886, around the time Wilde met Ross, Wilde turned thirty-two, and there is little other explanation for why he felt impelled to change the date on which Dorian Gray commences a life of unprecedented criminality, from “the eve of his own thirty-second birthday,” in the 1890 *Lippincott’s* version, to “the eve of his thirty-eighth birthday” in the 1891 book version.

Recent scholarship has speculated that Wilde’s secret homosexual life dates from an even earlier period than 1886—that Wilde was not merely conscious of his homosexual desires as early as the mid-1870s, when he was an undergraduate at Oxford, but that he also acted upon them.¹⁰ Certainly it was at Oxford that Wilde met and befriended one of the most notorious sodomites of his day, the artist and connoisseur Lord Ronald Sutherland Gower, eleven years his senior, now generally regarded as a

important real-life model for the character of Lord Henry Wotton; and it was shortly after leaving Oxford that Wilde began a two-year cohabitation, in London, with the man who had introduced him to Gower, the onetime society portraitist Frank Miles. (Miles died obscurely in 1891 and is sometimes said to be the real-life figure on whom the painter Basil Hallward is based.) But the need for deception and concealment was undoubtedly heightened by Wilde's marriage to the beautiful Constance Lloyd with whom Oscar fathered two sons shortly after their wedding in 1884. His marriage to Constance may have been a genuine attempt on Wilde's part to overcome or deny his existing homosexual proclivities. But there can be little question that, especially after his affair with Ross had begun, Wilde was play-acting the roles of dutiful husband and father, and increasingly allowing himself to be drawn into homosexual relationships and modes of behavior that he knew threatened to expose his double life. If he had not known it before he met Ross, certainly Wilde must have felt afterward that, as Lord Henry puts it, "there are certain temperaments that marriage makes more complex" and that "the charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception necessary for both parties." According to Constance's brother, Otho, it was not until 1895 and the months leading up to Wilde's arrest that Constance began to suspect her husband's real sexual orientation.

Following the cooling off of his affair with Ross in 1888–1889, and possibly even before that, Wilde entered into a number of other erotic liaisons with men, two of which possess special importance as far as *Dorian Gray* is concerned. From 1889 onward, Wilde began actively courting a young poet named John Gray, twelve years his junior but looking even younger than his years, famous among both men and women of his day for his unearthly good looks: "What a fascinating man," one besotted female admirer remarked upon seeing Gray at the opera; "I never knew that anybody could be so beautiful."¹¹ There is no evidence to suggest that Wilde's desire for Gray was consummated or even reciprocated before the completion of *Dorian Gray*. And in February 1890, when Wilde's composition of the novel was at its fiercest, Gray converted to Catholicism in a conscious attempt to quash his own "sinfulness." But by Gray's own account, he thereafter "immediately . . . began a course of sin compared with which my previous life was innocence."¹² As with the unspecified crimes of Dorian Gray, we can only speculate on the nature of Gray's "course of sin." But his intimacy with Wilde lasted until late 1892, when, following an intense personal crisis, he renounced Wilde for good in favor of a Catholic religious devotion that would eventually lead him to the priesthood. Gray is often said to constitute a real-life model for Dorian Gray, and at one point he even signed a letter to Wilde, "Yours ever, Dorian." As Ellmann says, for Wilde to call his leading character "Gray" was, as far as the real Gray was concerned, almost certainly a form of courtship (Ellmann, p. 307).

The other crucial erotic relationship into which Wilde entered was the long, complex affair with Lord Alfred Douglas, which would prove to be disastrous for Wilde, as we shall shortly see, though the affair did not start until one year after the publication of *Dorian Gray*. Ironically, it was the novel that was, at least in part, responsible for bringing the two men together: Douglas, who was obsessed with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, longed to meet its author and, according to Ellmann, read the novel nine times over before the friendship began. Flattered by his young admirer's praise, Wilde carefully inscribed a deluxe copy of the book version to Douglas at their second meeting, in July 1891. At any rate, it was Douglas who initiated Wilde into London's homosexual subculture of procurers and "reb-boys": previously Wilde had sought the company, chiefly, of male poets, attracted as he was to an ideal of masculinity embodied by the beautiful male protagonist of his own poem "Charmides" named after a character in Plato's *Dialogues*. Passionate in his pursuit of "rough trade," Douglas led Wilde down a path of risky, dangerous, and even reckless behavior that would eventually incriminate him. While serving his prison sentence, Wilde famously recalled that he had been "feasting with panthers" and that "the danger was half the excitement."¹³

To identify the continuities between *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the relationships in Wilde's own life is not to say that the novel must be considered a *roman à clef* or an allegory of Wilde's life. Acknowledging that Dorian and Lord Henry contain elements of John Gray and Lord Ronald Gower does not begin to account for the complexity of these characters or for their vibrancy on the page, and it is a cliché of criticism that novelists draw upon experiences and relationships that are familiar to them personally. Nonetheless, the novel does have numerous autobiographical elements, and Wilde on one occasion remarked that it "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." Wilde's comment suggests that the novel is a work of art that embodies his own "secret," just as Hallward's portrait of Dorian encodes the painter's illicit love for his younger subject. Wilde's phrase "in other ages" reminds us—like the name *Dorian* itself—that love between men was tolerated and celebrated openly in Ancient Greece but that in Wilde's own day, by contrast, a "harsh, uncomely Puritanism . . . is having . . . its curious revival." Wilde was conscious that the novel reflected the multiple strands of his personality and sexual life. As importantly, he was acutely aware that, like himself, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* stood at odds with an age of heightened intolerance and repression when it came to sexual matters.

That intolerance was, tragically, to be made powerfully manifest in the spring of 1895, when, at the height of his fame, Wilde was to be arrested, convicted, and sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labor for the new crime of "gross indecency." The arrest, at least, was partly of his own making. Douglas's father, the Marquess of Queensberry—the "screaming, scarlet Marquess," as Wilde called him, a pugnacious paranoiac whose deep aversion to Wilde and homosexuals was matched only by his passion for the "manly" sports of hunting and boxing (he was the originator of the "Queensberry Rules" in boxing)—had been bridling at his youngest son's involvement with Wilde since its inception. In June 1894, Queensberry appeared unannounced at Wilde's house, accompanied by a prize-fighter, and had to be forcibly ejected from the premises; and then on February 14, 1895, on the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde had got wind of, and foiled, an attempt by Queensberry to enter the theater and publicly denounce Wilde from the stage. On February 15, 1895, Queensberry left a calling card at Wilde's club, the Albermarle Club, on which he had scrawled (with the word "sodomite" misspelled), "For Oscar Wilde, posing somdomite."¹⁴ Ten days later the club's porter handed the card to Wilde, who felt that Queensberry, having failed to surprise him at his theater, was now invading his club. Because sodomy (the ancient, biblically derived term for "unnatural" sex) was a criminal offense under both the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act and the 1861 Offences against the Person Act, Queensberry's scrawl formed the legal basis for libel charges. Encouraged by Douglas, Wilde decided to prosecute Queensberry for criminal libel in an effort to stop Queensberry's virulent harassment. But Wilde had seriously misjudged his opponent; in advance of the libel trial, while Wilde and Douglas vacationed in Monte Carlo, Queensberry and his lawyers were employing private detectives to scour London's homosexual underworld to prove that Wilde was not merely a "posing" but a practicing sodomite. Right up to the commencement of the libel trial, a number of close friends—Frank Harris, George Bernard Shaw, George Alexander—urged Wilde to abandon the prosecution. But Wilde's judgment was seriously impaired by his love for Douglas, who wanted vengeance on his father, as well as by the virulence of Queensberry's persecution, and he foolishly allowed the prosecution to proceed: "My whole life seems ruined by this man," he confessed to Ross on the night Queensberry had left the offensive card. "The tower of ivory is assailed by the foul thing. On the sand is my life spilt."

The libel trial began on April 3, and as it proceeded the evidence against Wilde became overwhelming. Edward Carson, Queensberry's counsel, began defending his client by using passages from the *Lippincott's* text of *Dorian Gray*—Carson was aware that such passages were considerable

mutated for the 1891 book edition, and in court he referred to the latter as “the purged edition.”¹⁶ He also used excerpts from the British press’s outraged reactions to *Dorian Gray* to prove that Wilde was “posing as a sodomite,” in his writings at least, and that his client’s charge was in fact legally justified.¹⁷ Wilde defended himself and his novel vigorously. But a few minutes later, Carson had moved onto surer ground, interrogating Wilde about his relationships with a series of blackmailers, male prostitutes, and the procurer Alfred Taylor, as well as with the bookseller’s clerk Edward Shelley. This line of interrogation was especially damaging to Wilde’s case and would have had implications beyond the libel trial. Wilde and his attorney were unaware that Carson had secured depositions from a number of these figures, who were willing to turn witness against Wilde; but before Carson had even mounted his case for the defense, the trial collapsed with Wilde agreeing to his counsel’s advice to abandon the proceedings. Wilde evidently hoped that his adversary would be content with a judgment of “not guilty.” In the event, he had to listen in court to the judicial ruling that Queensberry’s charge was legally justified, or “true in fact,” and that it had been “published for the public benefit.”

It had become increasingly clear in the course of the libel trial that, as a result of the evidence arrayed in defense of Queensberry, Wilde had opened himself up to criminal prosecution under Statute 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act. Moreover, at one point, Wilde’s counsel had quoted from a letter, written from Queensberry to his father-in-law, ostensibly about Queensberry’s ex-wife, as an “encouragement” of Lord Alfred Douglas, in which the names of Lord Rosebery and William Ewart Gladstone—respectively Britain’s prime minister and his predecessor—were mentioned. By reading from the letter in court, Wilde’s counsel had meant to imply that Queensberry was paranoid and vindictive for suspecting the two high-ranking politicians of covering up a homosexual affair between Rosebery and Queensberry’s oldest son, Francis Douglas, Viscount Drumlanrig, who had committed suicide in dubious circumstances in 1894. But according to Carson’s biographer, once Rosebery’s and Gladstone’s names were introduced in court, it was inevitable that Wilde would be tried, in order to avoid the appearance that Rosebery and Gladstone were intervening on Wilde’s behalf to protect themselves.¹⁸ Realizing that the inevitable was coming, Wilde’s counsel offered to protract the libel trial by calling further defense witnesses, to give his client (who was not legally obliged to remain in court) time to flee the country. But Wilde declined, and though some hours intervened between the end of the collapsed libel trial and the issuing of an arrest warrant, Wilde was arrested at the Cadogan Hotel at 6:20 P.M. on April 5, 1895, a half-packed suitcase on his bed and a book with a yellow cover in his hand.¹⁹

Wilde was tried twice on the criminal charges against him. The first trial opened at the Old Bailey on April 26, 1895. Two days before the start of the trial, the entire contents of Wilde’s family home were sold off at public auction, by bailiffs sent in by Queensberry to collect the court costs awarded against him. Around this time Wilde’s name was removed from the billboards and programs of the theaters where his plays *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband* were running. The Crown made extensive use of the evidence gathered by Queensberry’s detectives and lawyers, and this time the witnesses were produced in court. An array of young male prostitutes, hotel servants, and others were called to offer evidence for the prosecution—some of it quite lurid in its details. “[P]erhaps never in the nineties was so much unsavory evidence given so much publicity,” Ellmann writes (Ellmann, p. 462). Charles Gill, the Crown’s attorney, also read aloud to the jury Edward Carson’s cross-examination of Wilde about *Dorian Gray*. The judge, however, took a dim view of the prosecution’s use of literary evidence, and later enjoined the jury not to base their judgment on the fact that Wilde was the author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and not to allow themselves “to be influenced against [Wilde] by the circumstances that he has written a book of which you, in so far as

you have read extracts from it, may disapprove.”²⁰ During his cross-examination of Wilde, Gray questioned Wilde about another literary work—Lord Alfred Douglas’s poem “Two Loves.” He asked Wilde to explain the meaning of the phrase “the love that dare not speak its name” (now of course little more than a clichéd euphemism for homosexuality). Wilde’s answer provided what is perhaps the most indelible moment of the two criminal trials:

“The Love that dare not speak its name” in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo. . . . It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the “Love that dare not speak its name,” and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so, the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it.²¹

Wilde’s words were met with a spontaneous outburst of applause from the public gallery. When a hung jury was declared, on May 1, matters might have ended there, with Wilde utterly disgraced in the public’s eye. Even Edward Carson is said to have appealed to the Crown to let up. But the politics of a highly publicized trial demanded the Crown proceed afresh, with Sir Frank Lockwood, the solicitor general, leading Wilde’s prosecution this time. A verdict of guilty on all counts was delivered on May 25, four days after the second criminal trial had begun. The presiding judge, Justice Wills, called it “the worst case I have ever tried” and imposed a sentence of two years in prison with hard labor, the maximum sentence allowed under the law. Addressing Wilde directly, Justice Wills said, “In my judgment [the sentence] is totally inadequate for a case such as this.” Amid the cries of shame heard in the court, Wilde was reported to have said, “And I? May I say nothing, my lord?”—but Wilde was dismissed, indicating with a wave of his hand that the warders should remove him from the courtroom.²²

That *Dorian Gray* was used as evidence in Wilde’s court trials underscores again how incendiary the novel really was and how much Wilde risked in bringing it before the public. I have already indicated how, at his publisher’s insistence, Wilde toned down much of its homoerotic and sexual explicit material when he revised and enlarged the novel. Some of his other revisions at this time were also attempts to deflect criticism—introducing into the 1891 book version more patently melodramatic and sentimental elements of plot; expanding Lord Henry’s witty repartee so that the novel might be seen as a work of “silver-fork” fiction, not unlike the novels of Disraeli and Bulwer-Lytton; incorporating material designed to suggest that Dorian’s “sins” consisted at least partly of financial malfeasance and opium abuse; and bringing the novel to a clearer, more conventional moral conclusion.²³ The process of purging the novel of its most controversial elements, however, had begun even earlier, before the novel’s appearance in *Lippincott’s*. When the typescript of the novel, containing over 3,000 words of handwritten emendations by Wilde, arrived at the Lippincott offices in the spring of 1890, it caused immediate alarm. J. M. Stoddart, the editor of the magazine, had commissioned Wilde to write a fiction of 35,000 words, but he could not have anticipated the occasionally graphic nature of the novel that finally appeared on his desk. After consulting with a handful of advisors to determine whether—and if so how—the novel might be published, Stoddart decided to proceed cautiously. He now set about making or overseeing numerous changes to Wilde’s typescript, including the excision of some 500 words that he feared would be objectionable—or worse. As the response by the British press and W. H. Smith & Son would soon demonstrate, Stoddart’s anxieties were entirely justified, at least from the standpoint of what British readers would tolerate. We can imagine that Stoddart, when he learned of the outcry against the novel in Britain, must have

felt he hadn't removed quite enough of the "objectionable passages." For reasons explained in the Textual Introduction that follows, Wilde almost certainly never saw any of the edits to his novel until he opened his personal copy of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*. Had he been given the opportunity to review Stoddart's edits, would he have approved them? Such a question cannot be answered with certainty. It is entirely possible that, as a still relatively inexperienced author, he would have been governed by his editor's judgment. On the other hand, Wilde, always the aesthete, might have taken the aesthetic high ground, as he was to do with critics of the novel soon after its publication, and objected to Stoddart's tampering with his "art." In his life and writing, Wilde was playing a dangerous game of hiding and revealing his sexual orientation.

The version of the novel that appears in this book follows Wilde's emended typescript: it represents the novel as Wilde envisioned it in the spring of 1890, before Stoddart began to work his way through the typescript with his pencil and before Wilde's later self-censorship of the novel, when he revised and enlarged it for Ward, Lock, and Company. The result is a more daring and scandalous novel, more explicit in its sexual content, and for that reason less content than either of the two subsequently published versions in adhering to Victorian conventions of representation. *The Picture of Dorian Gray: An Annotated, Uncensored Edition*, published in 2011, on which this edition is based, marks the first time Wilde's typescript has been published, more than 120 years after its author submitted it to *Lippincott's* for publication—a fitting, timely embodiment of what Wilde meant when he confessed that Dorian Gray is "what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps."

When defending *Dorian Gray* against the attacks to which it was subjected in the British press, Wilde repeatedly took the aesthetic high ground in his exchanges with newspaper editors, at least initially, before his resolve was worn down and he felt at last browbeaten into addressing—as openly as he could—charges of the novel's immorality. But early in these exchanges, we see him insisting again and again on the separation of art and ethics ("I am quite incapable of understanding how a work of art can be criticised from a moral standpoint. The sphere of art and the sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct and separate . . .") and asking readers to attend to the artistic merits of his novel. His preface to the 1891 edition and his essay "The Soul of Man under Socialism" also constitute responses to critics of the novel, and in these writings Wilde resorted to the same kind of exalted pronouncements on art that typify his early correspondence with the papers ("They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty." "There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all." "The true artist is a man who believes absolutely in himself." "The artist is never morbid. He expresses everything.").²⁵ On one level of course, Wilde was trying to deflect criticism from the novel's more controversial elements (he knew very well what kind of book he had written); on the other hand, these pronouncements are entirely in concert with the aesthetic principles he had been espousing for years. Art and its proper relationship to life are after all the central preoccupation of Wilde's fictions, plays, essays, and lectures. It is worth keeping in mind, too, that Wilde was a lecturer on art and aesthetics long before his fame as a fiction writer and playwright. An understanding of Wilde's enduring artistic concerns is as important to a large appreciation of *Dorian Gray* as some knowledge of his biography and the circumstances in which his novel was published.

No reader perhaps can fail to appreciate that *Dorian Gray* is a novel that abounds in commentary on painting and portraiture (Chapter I is an extended conversation between Lord Henry and Basil Hallward about the painter's portrait of Dorian). Wilde was greatly influenced in his writing of the novel by the cult of aesthetic portraiture that then dominated the transatlantic arts scene and that stands at the imaginative center of his novel (the novel takes its title not from its central character but from a *picture* or portrait of him). Artistic portraiture was undergoing a major renaissance in the late Victorian era: it reached its apogee in the early 1890s in the celebrated portraits of John Singer

Sargent, James McNeill Whistler, and G. F. Watts. These artists were all early members of the Society of Portrait Painters (now the Royal Society of Portrait Painters) established in 1891. They were less interested in a strictly faithful depiction of their subjects than in a more interpretive rendition, and they often exaggerated their sitters' beauty or the lavishness of their dress and surroundings. They were greatly influenced by the poet-painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who, in the 1860s and 1870s strove to capture a transcendent, unearthly ideal in his portraits of his lovers Fanny Cornforth, Alexander Wilding, and Jane Morris. Rossetti's paintings—and those of his fellow Pre-Raphaelites—emphasized an aesthetic of beauty for its own sake, and for that reason Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites are often said to be precursors to the Aesthetic movement and an important influence on the thought and writings of Wilde.

The Pre-Raphaelites were also interested in the decorative arts. In 1861, Rossetti and the painter Edward Burne-Jones joined William Morris's design firm, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. (later Morris & Co.), renowned for its stained glass, furniture, textiles, wallpapers, and jewelry. William Morris, a versatile poet, novelist, designer, and printer, was devoted to handcrafted work and a decorative arts ideal that took its inspiration from the workshop practices of late-medieval Europe. His firm was founded in response to what Morris saw as a growing gap between fine and applied art and the shoddy machine-made products then making their way into English homes with the expansion of the Industrial Revolution. He also promoted the idea of a completely designed and unified living environment—which explains in part the wide range of Morris's interests in the industrial arts. In his emphasis on such an environment and the need to beautify everyday existence, he was enormously influential on Wilde. "Your work comes from the sheer delight of making beautiful things," Wilde told Morris: "no alien motive ever interests you," so that "in its singleness of aim, as well as in its perfection of result, it is pure art."²⁶ Wilde's early lectures "Art and the Handicraftsman," "The House Beautiful," and "House Decoration" owe a clear debt to Morris. Morris's more indirect influence on *Dorian Gray* can be felt in the novelist's careful attention to domestic interiors and furnishings. Wilde often decorates the rooms in his novel according to the principles of the "house beautiful."

In his letter to the *Daily Chronicle* of June 30, 1890, when Wilde called *Dorian Gray* "an essay on decorative art," he was signaling his indebtedness to Morris and Rossetti. He was making a claim, too, about the novel's departure from nineteenth-century realism and the fact that its real power lay in its language:

Finally, let me say this—the aesthetic movement produced certain colours, subtle in their loveliness and fascinating in their almost mystical tone. They were, and are, our reactions against the crude primaries of a doubtless more respectable but certainly less cultivated age. My story is an essay on decorative art. It reacts against the crude brutality of plain realism. It is poisonous if you like, but you cannot deny that it is also perfect, and perfection is what we artists aim at.²⁷

"A lover of words . . . will avail himself of . . . the elementary particles of language . . . realized in colour and light and shade," the critic Walter Pater declared in his essay collection *Appreciations*, a book Wilde enthusiastically reviewed for the *Speaker* in March 1890. "[O]pposing the constant degradation of language by those who use it carelessly," Pater said, "he will not treat coloured glass as if it were clear."²⁸ Taking his cue from the Pre-Raphaelites and from Pater, Wilde sought to lend color and texture to language by accentuating the rhythms and imagery of his own, often decorative prose. We can see this most clearly perhaps in [Chapter IX](#), the novel's most intractable and difficult chapter, where Wilde largely abandons dialogue and narrative technique in favor of language that approaches prose poetry:

There was a gem in the brain of the dragon, Philostratus told us, and "by the exhibition of golden letters and a scarlet robe" the monster could be thrown into a magical sleep, and slain. According to the great alchemist Pierre de Boniface, the Diamond

rendered a man invisible, and the Agate of India made him eloquent. The Cornelian appeased anger, and the Hyacinth provoked sleep, and the Amethyst drove away the fumes of wine. The Garnet cast out demons, and the Hydropicus deprived the Moon of her colour. The Selenite waxed and waned with the Moon, and the Meloceus, that discovers thieves, could be affected only by the blood of kids. Leonardus Camillus had seen a white stone taken from the brain of a newly-killed toad, that was a certain antidote against poison. The bezoar, that was found in the heart of the Arabian deer, was a charm that could cure the plague. In the nests of Arabian birds was the Aspilates, that, according to Democritus, kept the wearer from any danger by fire.

Like *Le Secret de Raoul*, the novel that comes to exert such an intoxicating influence over Dorian Wilde's language in [Chapter IX](#) possesses a "curious jewelled style, vivid and obscure at once, full of argot and of archaisms, of technical expressions and of elaborate paraphrases." Foreign and esoteric objects abound in the chapter, and it is a well-documented fact that many of Wilde's descriptions of textiles, jewels, and musical instruments draw heavily from published sources such as William Jones's *History and Mystery of Precious Stones* (1880). Claims that such passages are instances of plagiarism are misplaced, however. Wilde's creative appropriations from nonfiction works are motivated by the imaginative possibilities of the fact—or what Lord Henry would call the "mystery of the visible." Wilde wants to render both the perceptual reality of things and their suggestiveness of mystery. For this reason he uppercases words such as "Diamond," "Cornelian," "Hydropicus," and "Selenite," the unusual capitalization giving them a symbolic value we associate more often with poetry than with prose. Unlike the realist writer, Wilde does not seek to render a familiar world. He seeks to capture the world's strangeness—to *defamiliarize* it, as the Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky would say, since "art exists that one may recover the sensation of life: it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known."²⁹

Wilde could hardly have escaped the influence of the classicist, historian, and philosopher of art Walter Pater (1839–1894), a fellow in Classics at Brasenose College, Oxford, whose controversial reputation as an aesthete was widely known when Wilde enrolled as an undergraduate at Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1874. Pater was not, as Denis Donoghue observes, an original thinker, but his presence is everywhere felt in the late Victorian era (the Aesthetic movement, Pre-Raphaelitism, Decadence), and he "set modern literature upon its antithetical—[Pater] would say its antinomian—course."³⁰ Pater's insistence on "experience itself" as an end and the "free play" of the human imagination, his cultivation of intense receptivity to beauty, and his advocacy of a quickened sense of life in the face of mortality—all expressed in highly eroticized language—had great appeal to his devotees (mostly young men), but it put him at odds with both the utilitarian values of the industrial era and contemporary moral reserve. And his embrace of art for art's sake was against the grain of the Victorian belief, articulated by Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin, in art's social and moral functions. Shy and reserved by nature, Pater was appointed to his fellowship at Brasenose College in 1864, and for many years he was known only among a small circle at Oxford for his scholasticism and critical views of Christianity. There is little to suggest in his early career that this retiring Casaubon-like scholar would become a countercultural figure and lightning rod.

But in 1873, one year before Wilde's matriculation at Oxford, Pater published *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, a book that proved immediately offensive to some of its readers and resulted in controversy that eerily prefigures that surrounding Wilde and *Dorian Gray*. The essays in *Studies* do not form a "history" in the usual sense of the word but rather attempt to define a Renaissance sensibility, locating in some of the greatest paintings, sculptures, and poems of the Italian and French Renaissance, as well as in the career of the eighteenth-century German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, a secret Hellenistic tradition. That tradition, both the book's detractors and admirers understood, embraced both an aestheticism and homoeroticism. (The scandal surrounding Pater intensified when, in the year following the publication of *Studies*, he was reprimanded by the master

of Balliol College for engaging in inappropriate correspondence with William Hardinge, an undergraduate student.) It was the “Conclusion” to Pater’s *Studies*, adapted from an earlier review of various poetry by William Morris, that caused outrage:

Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end . . . To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life . . . What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy . . . For our one chance lies in expanding [this] interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy, sorrow of love.³¹

For Pater, always the aesthete, art was best suited to generating such ecstasy and heightened consciousness. But the highly eroticized language and the emphasis on courting new impressions created an outcry against the book that took him by surprise. Reviewers feared the book’s corrosive moral effect on the young. When the second edition of the book was published in 1877, Pater chastened, silently withdrew the “Conclusion,” an act of self-censorship that prefigures Wilde’s own revisions to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Pater’s book was retitled, with the second edition, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*). For the third edition, Pater restored the “Conclusion,” and with the fourth he added a short note to his readers that explained that the “‘Conclusion’ was omitted in the second edition of this book, as I conceived it might possibly mislead some young men in whose hands it might fall.” In his novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), Pater put it in slightly different terms: “A book, like a person, has its fortunes with one; is lucky or unlucky in the precise moment of its falling in our way, and often by some happy accident counts with us for something more than its independent value.”³² For Marius, Pater’s adolescent Roman hero, that “golden book” is the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius. But here, more generally, Pater means any book that comes to exert a powerful influence over the lives of its readers—particularly adolescent male readers. He also casts a backward glance at the scandal surrounding his own earlier book and its alleged corrosive influence on youth.

Wilde was one of the young men into whose hands the book “had fallen” soon after its publication. He never ceased referring to *The Renaissance* as “my golden book” (Ellmann, p. 47). And later, writing in *De Profundis*, he called it “that book which has had such a strange influence over my life.” He read it for the first time in 1874, during his first term at Oxford, though he was not to meet Pater personally for another three years. According to Richard Ellmann, Wilde knew much of *The Renaissance* by heart, and under Pater’s general influence Wilde became, in the words of one of his fellow students, an “extreme aesthete” (Ellmann, p. 84). Wilde would spend much of the next fifteen years reacting to Pater’s writings in print and in private. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be seen as the climax in a long dialogue between Wilde and Pater. The novel dramatizes Pater’s ideas, radicalizes them, and in doing so offers itself as a critique of Pater’s aestheticism. Some readers see the novel, which is full of allusions to Pater, as a parody of his ideas. Lord Henry in particular seems intimately familiar with Pater’s *Renaissance*. Ellmann suggests that the unnamed book that “revealed much [to Lord Henry] that he had not known before,” when he was sixteen, is *The Renaissance*: “Lord Henry is forever quoting, or misquoting, without acknowledgment, from [*The Renaissance*]. . . . He brazenly takes over the best known passages” (Ellmann, p. 317). In [Chapter II](#), for example, when Lord Henry urges Dorian to pursue a life of sensation, he paraphrases from Pater’s infamous “Conclusion”:

Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing.

A new Hedonism! That is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol. With your personality there is nothing you could not do. The world belongs to you for a season.

Lord Henry’s call for a philosophy of “new Hedonism” also alludes to a chapter in Pater’s *Marius the*

Epicurean called “The New Cyrenaicism,” in which Pater describes his young protagonist’s attraction to a life of cultivated sensuousness and his determination to “fill up the measure of that present with vivid sensations, and those intellectual apprehensions which . . . are most like sensations” (*Marius*, 96). If “actual moments as they pass” are to “be made to yield their utmost” (*Marius*, p. 97), Pater’s narrator says, it will sometimes be necessary to “break beyond the limits of the actual moral order, perhaps not without some pleasurable excitement in so bold a venture” (*Marius*, pp. 99–100). By calling Lord Henry’s philosophy the “new Hedonism,” Wilde offers an explicit rebuke to Pater, whom he increasingly saw as far too timid in both his life and his work (after Pater’s death, Wilde is reported to have said to Max Beerbohm, “Was he ever alive?” [quoted in Ellmann, p. 52]). Ever sensitive to the charge that his ideas about sensation lacked any solid ethical basis, Pater had masked them behind such respectable Classicist terms as *Cyrenaicism* and *Epicureanism*.³³ To the point, Pater took issue with the application of the term *hedonism* to his thought on the grounds that the “reproachful Greek term” is “too large and vague” to be conducive “to any very delicately correct ethical conclusion” (*Marius*, p. 100). Wilde’s “new Hedonism” was a slap in the face to his former mentor.

Pater declined to review the *Lippincott’s* version of *Dorian Gray* in 1890, fearing that doing so would be too dangerous, and we know he expressed reservations to Wilde about the earlier published version of the novel. In his 1891 review of the novel, which can justly be read as an exercise in damage control, Pater goes out of his way to distance himself from the Paterian mouthpiece Lord Henry Wotton, who has (according to Pater) “too much of a not very really refined world in and about him” and whom Wilde can “hardly have intended . . . to figure the motive and tendency of a true Cyrenaic or Epicurean doctrine of life.”³⁴ Wilde himself viewed Lord Henry as “an excellent corrective of the tedious ideal shadowed forth in the semi-theological novels of our age” and probably classified *Marius* as a semi-theological novel.³⁵ It was a book that greatly disappointed him. Essentially a revision of Pater’s *Conclusion*, it attempts to show the moral limitations of Cyrenaicism or Epicureanism, and its conclusion brings *Marius* into contact with a group of Christians: “while [Marius] remains a pagan connoisseur and is not formally converted, he dies in their arms, as baptized by desire.”³⁶ Wilde later wrote that as a result of his effort to “reconcile the artistic life with the life of religion,” Pater had made his central character “little more than a spectator.”³⁷

No such criticism can fairly be made of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian remains a vibrant and dynamic character. And Wilde’s novel, at least in the two earlier versions, offers no reconciliation. Wilde seems intent on showing up Pater for his timidity and on pushing the philosophy of “the new Hedonism” to its logical conclusion. When preparing the book edition of 1891, Wilde brought the novel to a moral conclusion that he thought would silence his critics. He did so, in part, by heightening Dorian’s monstrosity toward the novel’s conclusion, making clearer the suggestion that Dorian’s destruction of the portrait was only an attempt to destroy “the evidence” against him, so that he might continue his hedonistic pursuit of sensation and experience with impunity. As a result Dorian is finally a less sympathetic and complex figure than he is in the earlier versions. The earlier Dorian is visited by self-doubts toward the novel’s end, though they come too late to be of much use to him. He abandons his plan to seduce the virginal Hetty Merton and to keep her as his mistress, despite the fact that he has taken a house in the city for her; and he is troubled by the thought that “something more than vanity, curiosity, or hypocrisy had prompted his renunciation of her. But hints of compunction persist despite Wilde’s efforts at eradicating them from the ending of the 1891 version, and they are prefigured in Dorian’s belated sense of guilt about his cruel treatment of Sybil Vane. “Good resolutions are simply a useless attempt to interfere with scientific laws,” Lord Henry tells Dorian. “Their origin is pure vanity.” Perhaps. But such vanity makes us human.

Wilde’s effort to surpass Pater, then, is complicated, and perhaps even thwarted, by a

accompanying and persistent sense of the human and moral price the aesthete must pay for pursuing his life of ecstasy. For this reason Dorian remains a tragic figure in both published versions. The playwright John Osborne, who adapted the novel for the stage in 1973, calls it “a morbid entertainment.”³⁸ Richard Ellmann sees the novel as an indictment of aestheticism, intent on “exhibiting its dangers” (Ellmann, p. 315). If one leads a beautiful, shallow life, it will end tragically in an ugly death. A life lived in the untrammelled pursuit of sensation must lead ultimately to anarchy and self-destruction. Ellmann, like Osborne, finds a moral lesson in Wilde’s novel that the vast majority of Wilde’s own contemporaries found lacking. In a memorable phrase, he calls Dorian “aestheticism’s first martyr” (Ellmann, p. 315).

Ellmann is right that *Dorian Gray* is a tragedy but certainly wrong in asserting that the novel is a condemnation of aestheticism. Wilde never ceased to be an aesthete in his writings and pronouncements. His only novel, written in decorative prose that works upon the senses, and full of acknowledgments to its aesthetic precursors, is the fiction of an aesthete, whatever else it is. From an artistic point of view, Wilde felt that emphasizing the human and moral cost of pursuing pleasure and its logical conclusion was the novel’s central weakness: “far from wishing to emphasise any moral in my story,” he writes, “the real trouble I experienced . . . was that of keeping the extremely obvious moral subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect. . . . I think the moral too apparent.”³⁹ According to the artistic tenets that Wilde had articulated for a considerable time by 1890—and that he was to reiterate in the 1891 Preface—Dorian’s (and our own) willingness to be judged by the portrait to see it as the document of his inner corruption, is to misunderstand that “the sphere of art and the sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct.” Dorian has, in truth, misconstrued the nature of the portrait from the start, gazing at it as if it were a mirror of his true being or soul. Had he understood the portrait from a more purely “Wildean” perspective, seeing it (like any artwork) not as a truth-telling entity so much as a purely imaginative one, he would never have come to be so haunted or possessed by it, allowing it to dominate his existence at the expense of what makes him human. “Art never expresses anything but itself” and is best understood for its absolute indifference to life, Wilde maintains in “The Decay of Lying.”⁴⁰ By confusing the relations between life and art—to the degree that he *becomes* the work of art and feels he can act with impunity as a result—Dorian has allowed not merely his humanity to become diminished and shrunken but his “aestheticism” as well.⁴¹ He has morphed, in effect, from an aesthete into a mere decadent. The destruction of art, as of civilized culture more broadly, Wilde writes, begins not when “Life becomes fascinated with [art’s] new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle” as a result, but when “Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness.”⁴²

Dorian is no more an exemplar of Wildean aestheticism than Camus’s Mersault is a model of existentialism. Aestheticism, at least initially, promises to fulfill Dorian’s human potential, not to thwart it. A life dedicated to sensation and art needs to be lived fully and openly, Wilde suggests; but we should never forget that art “is not meant to instruct, or to influence action in any way.”⁴³ The minute life mistakes its object and tries to *be* sensation or art, to act wholly according to it or separate itself from those broader elements that define humanity as such, a kind of corruption sets in and both life and art become inescapably spoiled in consequence.

Of course, the freedom to live fully and openly, whether dedicated to sensation, art, or anything else, varies enormously according to time, place, and politics. Dorian living today in London’s Mayfair district would not need to live a secret double life. His pursuit of beauty and sensation would not bring him into conflict with a “harsh uncomely Puritanism.” As Harold Bloom has suggested, in a different age Wilde himself might have been an “aesthetic superstar” like Andy Warhol or Truman Capote.⁴⁴ For all the novel’s aesthetic concerns, it is impossible for contemporary readers to see *The*

Picture of Dorian Gray apart from Wilde's life and the circumstances in which it was written and brought forth into the world. The novel's potent mixture of high-minded ideas about art and pleasure on the one hand, and sexual transgressiveness, on the other, suggests at the very least that we need to look at the novel with a kind of double vision. It is a book that admits multiple interpretations. *Dorian Gray* is a lesson about the consequences of confusing life and art, it is also its embodiment since the novel would become in the hands of Wilde's contemporaries a way of reading and judging its author's own conduct. Life—cruel, inhospitable, and more powerful than Wilde had ever supposed—would gain the upper hand. Aestheticism's first martyr at the hands of life was not Dorian Gray. It was Oscar Wilde himself.

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