

Kerry Powell

Oscar Wilde 'Acting': The Medium As Message in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

From the point of view of form, the type of all arts is the art of the musician.

From the point of view of feeling, the actor's craft is the type.

Oscar Wilde, "A Preface to 'Dorian Gray,'" 1891.

Optimists likening the world to a stage have historically depicted man as an "actor" in the God-authored drama of salvation, while pessimists like Macbeth have shaped the flexible metaphor to represent man's absurdity as a "poor player" whose grandiose style is belied by the pathetic brevity and futility of his part. In the self-styled decadent contingent of the 1890's all sympathy went with Macbeth whenever (which was frequently) the plumed authors of that bizarre "movement" wrote traditional *theatrum mundi* formulae. Arthur Symons, theoretician of the group, was not, but might have been speaking for all his *Yellow Book* confreres when he variously announced life to be no more than "a theatre of marionettes" or "the ultimate farce." But Symons—and decadents generally—went a radical step further than positing life as (in the phrase of the Duchess of Malfi) a "tedious theatre." Just as Symons renounced the sordid show of the life-drama to embrace the tinselly illusions of the music hall (a diverting "play" within the play), so Oscar Wilde disavowed the world-stage and turned inward to act out in the theatre of his mind admitted illusions so palpable and seductive that they seem more "real" than depressing daylight reality itself. Nowhere does Wilde more strikingly and literally adopt the pose of an actor than in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a novel whose entire form and structure are theatrically based and *subversive* of the reality principle, and whose characters, above all, must finally be regarded as reincarnations of their maker—multiplications of Wilde's own frustrated personality.

Wilde had exposed the theoretical superstructure of this daring strategy in *Intentions*, where the Wilde-surrogate Gilbert urged the extreme view that "those great figures of Greek or English drama that seem to us to possess an actual existence of their own, apart from the poets who shaped and fashioned them, are, in their ultimate analysis, simply the poets themselves, not as they thought they were, but as they thought they were not; and by such thinking came in strange manner, though but for a moment, really so to be."¹ Intensely realized fictional characters, therefore, serve as "masks" for their creators who seek release from the limitations and failures of their mundane identities. Thus does the artist brashly defy and improve upon nature, disguising himself in the lineaments of an imagined character of his own design and, for one moment, seeming to be—and in a sense *being*—that which objectively he is not. Wilde's most successful stage play comically reinterprets this Protean aesthetic: Jack Worthing, pretending to be a man named Ernest, is discovered in the end to have become the part he played. The object is to supersede base nature with art, or rather to transmute life into a self-imagined drama by acting (premonitory of Yeats) a role alien to one's "real" or natural self. The key to enriching one's impoverished selfhood through this alloy of life and art is to be discovered primarily in the theatrical impulse—for as Wilde once remarked elsewhere, "the drama seems to me to be the meeting place of art and life."²

Of course his insistence on a dramatized selfhood found expression in Wilde's dandyism of dress—the flowing locks, the velvet doublet, the elegant buttonhole—but his difficulties were too deeply rooted to be solved alone by this means. Richard Ellman, among the most acute of recent critics of Wilde, fruitfully argues that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* furnishes the author with various "masks": idle dilettante Lord Henry Wotton to vent Wilde's "Paterian" side with its amoral lust for sensation; painter Basil Hallward to express the "Ruskinian" component which repined guiltily and longed to confess publicly the outrages committed by the other self, including the homosexual alliances with sundry degenerates which Wilde began to form as early as 1886.³ Epifanio San Juan, Jr., writes in his long analysis of the novel that, viewed allegorically, Lord Henry Wotton represents Wilde's "intelligence" while Dorian emblemizes his "sensibility."⁴ Christopher S. Nassar presents a more ingenious scheme in suggesting that Hallward should be regarded as a symbol of moral, Ruskinian art; Dorian as the evil-obsessed decadence which overtakes and finally "kills" it; Lord Henry Wotton as an amoral but timid Walter Pater, afraid to practice the scandal he preaches; and

the actress Sibyl Vane as—well, Lord Alfred Tennyson, or rather the moral and “innocent” artistry practiced by Victoria’s laureate.⁵ Recently, in short, critics have tended to read the novel generally as an allegory and particularly as the kaleidoscopic posing of the man who wrote it.

But if Lord Henry Wotton and Basil Hallward, rudderless aesthete and rigorous moralist, represent two different strains in Wilde’s personality, what—or whom—is really prefigured by the title character? “Basil Hallward is what I think I am,” Wilde once confided, “Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps.”⁶ What could be plainer? Wotton and Hallward represent together an unresolved confusion brewing ominously in the volatile stew of Oscar Wilde’s personality. But if the central question the book poses (like all great art, Wilde says) is not “Who is the artist?” but “Who is the artist *not*?” then Dorian Gray is, as the title implies, the centerpiece of the fiction and also an answer to a dilemma, i.e., a dramatic role created to harmonize the opposing drives of Wilde’s divided self. Not only would Wilde combine his warring energies in a harmonized new personality, he would prefer to live that idealized life “in other ages, perhaps” than the storm-clouded nineteenth century. Wotton and Hallward, the bifurcated constituents of Wilde’s identity crisis, seek equally to escape their apportioned roles in the life-drama by creating new ones in the person of Dorian. That necessarily empty-headed youth becomes a role for each to play—and a role for Wilde, who struggles within the limits of these layered poses, surrogates of himself, to achieve an internal peace. All three, therefore, are actors in an elaborately allegorical drama whose point of reference is, quite obviously, the author’s own psychology. Drama, the “meeting place of art and life,” adopts as its business, like all art for Wilde, the transfiguration of life. Dorian embodies such an aspiration, but ultimately his almost heroic effort collapses because his “performance” (like all performances) is temporary and illusory and cannot *really* reconcile the contrarities of life (i.e., Wotton and Hallward and all they represent). When at the close of the novel Dorian has emphatically rejected first Hallward (by stabbing him) and then Wotton (by denouncing his “new Hedonism”), he simply collapses like an empty sack. No longer the dashing young man whose days were his sonnets, he magically fades into a gnarled and ugly man stretched out dead on the floor—his real self. At that moment Dorian Gray becomes a martyr without portfolio in the decadent crusade to recreate life in the image of art.

Wilde initiates this boldly theatrical design early in the novel as Basil Hallward discusses himself as a suffering character in the drama of life.

"The ugly and the stupid have the best of it in this world. They can sit at their ease and gape at the play," he tells Lord Henry. "Your rank and wealth, Harry; my brains, such as they are—my art, whatever it may be worth; Dorian Gray's good looks—we shall all suffer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly."⁷ Like the hero of "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime," he feels predestined to some unenviable end as "one of the puppets of a monstrous show." Criticizing his friend Harry for not being his natural self—"you never say a moral thing and you never do a wrong thing" (p. 4)—Basil proceeds nevertheless to reveal a secondary identity of his own: Dorian Gray is not only a motive to his art, he threatens to absorb "my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself" (p. 6). Motivated, moreover, by his fascination with Dorian Gray, Basil has executed a masterpiece which is really a sublimation of himself into an artistic and idealized conception of the youth. "There is too much of myself in the thing, Harry—too much of myself," the painter laments (p. 11), confirming Gilbert's observation in *Intentions* that the artist becomes, psychologically, the thing he creates.

Thus the artist, recreating Dorian on canvas, has recreated himself, too. Basil has redirected his selfhood into an ideal Dorian of his own imagining, not the languid and dull Dorian Gray the reader met at the outset of the book, but rooted in that flesh-and-blood reality. Indeed, when Lord Henry begins to assert control over Dorian Gray, Basil objects and insists that his own self-projection in the painting is after all "the real Dorian" (p. 29). Having recognized his involuntary role in the tragic *theatrum mundi*, Hallward has responded through his art to create a different character for himself, what he calls a "visible ideal," into which he can pour his own identity and so purify and reshape the unwholesome life-drama. Though the Puritan Basil already has condemned Wotton for play-acting, it is precisely this same role-playing which is indispensable to his own life as an artist. As the persona of *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (written just before the novel) expressed it, artistic endeavor is "a mode of acting, an attempt to realize one's own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammelling accidents and limitations of real life."⁸ This, of course, is no less true of Wilde than Hallward, whose contribution to the theatrical character of Dorian (as opposed to the real-life Dorian who quickly fades from view) is a concern with the ethical and even the ideal. Dorian Gray himself recognizes the importance of Basil to this remodeled identity. When Dorian declares himself ready to trade his soul for the attributes of the picture, he assures a horrified Basil Hallward that to destroy the portrait

now (as the artist nearly does, perceiving it as a snare to Dorian's virtue) would be nothing less than murder. "It is part of myself. I feel that," Dorian insists (p. 27).

So the meeting place of Basil and Dorian's diverse identities is the portrait. While on one hand it is said to comprise "too much" of Basil, it is "part of" Dorian as well. Thus when Basil autographs his handiwork in long vermilion letters he signs not just a picture, but a new artifact of personality, the refurbished Dorian in which Basil Hallward will play a significant part. But there is another "artist" in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—Lord Henry Wotton, styled metaphorically as a painter who uses "sin" as *his* chief pigment because it is the "only real colour-element left in modern life" (p. 29)—in contrast, no doubt, to happier other ages. Wotton sets out, like Hallward, to recreate himself in the image of a Dorian Gray who ultimately will bear only the vaguest resemblance to the mediocre youth introduced in Chapter I. He begins his seduction of Dorian by warning him against becoming one of the aged and "hideous puppets" in the theatre of the world and by urging him to rebel against "the sickly aims, the false ideals, of our age," to strive through sensation-seeking to become a "visible symbol" of a much-needed "new Hedonism" (pp. 22, 23). Thus having designed that Dorian take on the symbolic function usually associated with works of art—not people—Harry muses on the notion of himself as artist and Dorian as the medium he works in:

Talking to him was like playing upon an exquisite violin. He answered to every touch and thrill of the bow . . . There was something terribly entralling in the exercise of influence. No other activity was like it. To project one's soul into some gracious form, and let it tarry there for a moment; to hear one's own intellectual views echoed back to one with all the added music and passion of youth; to convey one's temperament into another as though it were a subtle fluid or a strange perfume: there was a real joy in that—perhaps the most satisfying joy left to us in an age so carnal in its pleasures, and grossly common in its aims.

(p. 35)

Curiously like his nemesis the painter, Wotton is an artist working through Dorian to seen an antidote for a fallen and fatuous modern world. Whereas Basil in the first chapter soiced the nineteenth century for its "mad" separation of body and soul, Harry faults it for being earthbound, boring, and deluded in its ideals. Shadowed here—and this is the significant point—is Wilde's own aspiration to be Dorian Gray, but "in other ages, perhaps," outside the unhealthy pale of the

nineteenth century and exquisitely free of time's tyrannical rule. Wotton now sees himself as being in control of his perceived drama of Dorian Gray: "There was nothing that one could not do with him. He could be made a Titan or a toy" (p. 36).

Again like Basil Hallward, who jealously assumes proprietary rights over *his* Dorian Gray, so Harry aspires not just to breathe a "symbol" in Dorian but to make Dorian's recreated spirit "his own" (p. 36)—and he hopes to be more successful in dominating Dorian than Basil has been. Gilbert maintains in *The Critic As Artist* that life "cheats us with shadows, like a puppet-master," while art calls into play a "transference of emotion" which allows us to transcend our unhappy selves and live the lives of others.⁹ Therefore Lord Henry's "exercise of influence" is really an artistic endeavor; he posits Dorian Gray as a figure "in a pageant or play" (p. 58), himself as creator and actor of the part and author of the show. Dorian Gray, who "to a large extent . . . was his own creation," is in the process of being molded into one of life's "elaborate masterpieces," one of those "complex" personalities who from time to time "took the place and assumed the office of art" (p. 57). The thought that his own counsel is shaping the character and actions of Dorian Gray brings a flush of pleasure to Lord Henry Wotton, artist, whose canvas is life and whose palette is laid out with sins and passions. He thereby gains the freedom of a self-created role at the same time he becomes one of Gilbert's god-like men, "watching with the calm eyes of the spectator the tragi-comedy of the world that they have made."¹⁰

Self-dramatized as Lord Henry and Basil, Wilde establishes a third pose (Dorian Gray) in which the other two coalesce and create a new identity, "what I would like to be." Dorian is merely a handsome and vacuous model when he first appears in Basil's studio, but Hallward's completed portrait and Wotton's artful "influence" arouse a new, if vicarious, life in him. He becomes essentially a work of art, the hybrid product of Basil and Harry's respective media; and because art for Wilde is always theatrical, "a mode of acting," Dorian soon sheds his natural identity and becomes purely a theatrical character. Adapting himself to the old Faust drama, he bargains away his own "soul" in exchange for the artistic qualities of the painting—notably, beauty immune to time and change.

Life therefore imitates art, as Vivian, in *The Decay of Lying*, insisted it does. Basil Hallward of course objects on moral grounds to the Faustian arrangement concluded in chapter II—although, ironically, the art of painting the portrait mixed up his own selfhood with the picture in just the type of shape-shifting for which he now condemns Dorian-

Faust. At all events Basil tries throughout the novel to infuse moral content into the new Dorian Gray who is partly his own creation and therefore (in Wilde's aesthetic) partly himself. But Lord Henry Wotton also shares in Dorian's new character, since his art as well as Basil's created it, and Wotton it is who escorts Dorian to the theatre after the painting is unveiled (of course the theatre, more than anything else, provides a suitable ambiance for this youth transmogrified in chapter II to a stage character). Dorian thus rejects Hallward's entreaties at the end of the pivotal second chapter to stay with him in the studio; indeed he frequently spurns Basil in the novel, but he can never wholly expell the painter from his new self without destroying the thing he has become.

The new Dorian is a product of art and, inevitably for Wilde, a dramatic role for the artist(s) who created him. Wilde signals the important metamorphosis first by removing Dorian quickly to the opera with Lord Henry and later by making him fall in love with (what else?) an actress. Dorian's relationship with Sibyl Vane manifests his new character; she recognizes him only "as a person in a play," a stage personality. Just as the actress "knows nothing of life" and never is simply herself, so she sees Dorian as "Prince Charming" instead of an actual person. The locale in which Dorian Gray discovers Sibyl reflects Wilde's idea of the depressing *theatrum mundi*: it is "an absurd little theatre, with great glaring gas-jets and gaudy play-bills," where a cigar-smoking "hideous Jew" presides over "dingy" stalls, a "dreadful" orchestra, and "grotesque" actors (pp. 48-50). But Sibyl, performing roles from Shakespeare, manages to transform her actual surroundings, the sordid life-drama, with performances that take us back to Gautier's conception of a marvellous and unreal "*théâtre pour les fées*":

One evening she is Rosalind, and the next evening she is Imogen. I have seen her die in the gloom of an Italian tomb, sucking the poison from her lover's lips. I have watched her wandering through the forest of Arden, disguised as a pretty boy in hose and doublet and dainty cap. She has been mad, and has come into the presence of a guilty king, and given him rue to wear, and bitter herbs to taste of. She has been innocent, and the black hands of jealousy have crushed her reed-like throat. I have seen her in every age and every costume.

Dorian rapturously adds later that while watching her act "I sat in the dingy box absolutely enthralled. I forgot that I was in London and in the nineteenth century. I was away with my love in a forest no man had ever seen" (p. 75), thus recalling not only Gautier's "fairy theatre" but Wilde's own pronouncement: that he would like to be Dorian in some

other time than the crude contemporary one. Sibyl's performances transcend the grimy theatre that contains her—she soars above "*la grossière réalité*," Gautier would say—but the Hallward in Dorian invests the phenomenon with moral as well as aesthetic value. "When I am with her I regret all that you have taught me. I become different from what you have known me to be," he tells a skeptical Lord Henry Wotton. "I am changed, and the mere touch of Sibyl Vane's hand makes me forget you and all your wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories" (p. 77).

Harry of course approves of acting—"it is so much more real than life," he comments epigrammatically (p. 79)—but his reasons are perfectly amoral. Acting for him is insincerity, a way of being false to one's real-life situation, and therein resides its chief appeal; it turns reality around, like one of his paradoxes, and establishes an alternate truth, one more attractive and, for the moment at least, seemingly more substantial. There are no moral, religious or ontological absolutes in Lord Henry's mental galaxy, and acting is simply a means to compensate for the void. At the home of his aunt, the Duchess, Harry fascinates a dinner party with his paradoxical assaults on East End slums, American girls, and conventional pieties. His epigrams revolve around a "praise of folly" treated in terms of a public performance: "He played with the idea, and grew wilful; tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy, and winged it with paradox" (p. 41). Says the narrator, "it was an extraordinary improvisation" until "Reality" intervened at last, "liveried in the costume of the age" (p. 42), i.e., a servant has entered to tell the Duchess her carriage is waiting. But Harry's literally dramatic paradoxes, like Sibyl's acting and Basil's painting, escape the bondage of a dismal epoch and achieve, by having "charmed his listeners out of themselves," a transformation of identity as well.

Events take a different turn, however, when Sibyl Vane, madly in love with Dorian, loses interest in her stage roles from Shakespeare because of her preoccupation with flesh-and-blood romance. Consequently she offers a deplorable performance of Juliet on the night Dorian has invited Harry and Basil to witness her much-vaunted acting. "What have I to do with the puppets of a play?" she asks a crestfallen and angry Dorian after the show. "I hate the stage. I might mimic a passion that I do not feel, but I cannot mimic one that burns me like fire. Oh, Dorian, Dorian, you understand now what it signifies? Even if I could do it, it would be profanation for me to play at being in love" (p. 86). Seduced from art by life, Sibyl confronts a Dorian Gray who remains essentially a

character in a play and regards her now as from a faraway eminence. Dorian coldly breaks off their engagement to marry, then on his return home notices that the portrait, a "visible emblem of conscience" and all else that Basil represents (pp. 91-92), has responded to this outrage against his lover: "The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth" (p. 90). This unlooked-for transformation of the picture not only astounds Dorian, it makes him feel regret—not unlike the shame once inspired in Basil Hallward by his own reflection in the painting.

But Dorian's musings must be suspended when Wotton visits with news of Sibyl's unexpected suicide and urges him to view the situation dramatically, "as a strange and lurid fragment from some Jacobean tragedy, as a wonderful scene from Webster, or Ford, or Cyril Tourneur. The girl never really lived, and so she never really died" (p. 103). She was to Dorian, theorizes Lord Henry, always a "dream," a "phantom" from Shakespearean drama, and so "the moment she touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her." Rather than mourn for Sibyl Vane, he urges, respond to her death as to the death of Cordelia or Ophelia, "for she was less real than they were" (p. 103). Accordingly Sibyl's death begins to impress Dorian as "a wonderful ending to a wonderful play," one that has "all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a great part, but by which I have not been wounded" (p. 100). Thus does Dorian give outward form to Harry's argument that such apparent catastrophes can be fine dramas that cause no pain if we become "spectators" as well as "actors" and so interpose aesthetic distance between us and them. Basil predictably scolds his former model for adopting this unscrupulous logic, but temporarily he has lost control of Dorian's joint-stock personality. The hero now has nothing to do but go out for the evening—to the theatre, of course—with Lord Henry Wotton.

Dorian's "performance" continues largely under the tutelage of Lord Henry, who sends him a yellow-bound novel, "the strangest book that he had ever read," in which the sins of the world passed "in dumb show before him" (p. 125). Actor and spectator, Dorian views the book as "the story of his own life, written before he lived it," and he identifies intensely with the young Parisian hero, often taken to be Des Esseintes in Huysmans' *A Rouboirs*, as "a prefiguring type of himself" (p. 127). Life is Dorian's art, it turns out, to him "the first, the greatest, of the arts" (p. 129), a continuous dramatic action starring himself. It is "the creation of such worlds as these" that preoccupies Dorian at the zenith of his odd career, and consequently "he would often adopt certain

modes of thought that he knew to be really alien to his nature, abandon himself to their subtle influences, and then, having, as it were, caught their colour and satisfied his intellectual curiosity, leave them" (p. 132). So at one moment he dresses in disguise to commit strange, unnamed sins, while at another he takes part in the Catholic Mass, stirred by its symbolism of "the external pathos of human tragedy" (p. 132). He attends a production of *Tannhauser*, "seeing in the prelude to that great work of art a presentation of the tragedy of his own soul" (p. 135); or he seeks "myriad lives and myriad sensations" in self-consciously identifying his personality with those of his forebears and various literary figures, whose lives thus become his own (p. 143). His unlikely collections of jewels, stringed instruments, and ecclesiastical vestments are of similar use, "for these treasures, and everything that he collected in his lovely house, were to be to him means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape, for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne"—the fear, namely, of the portrait, hanging now in a deserted locked room, alternately fascinating and horrifying him, but always signifying "the real degradation of his life" (p. 140).

In short Dorian is always an actor in a role. Wilde himself was to instruct the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* that "the actor's aim is, or should be, to convert his own accidental personality into the real and essential personality of the character he is called upon to impersonate, whatever that character may be."¹¹ Dorian long ago lost "his own accidental personality" to the machinations of Wotton and Hallward, and the narrative voice now lauds his "extraordinary faculty of becoming absolutely absorbed for the moment in whatever he took up" (p. 137). Ultimately his acting capabilities are a vehicle through which Wilde's divided self (projected in the bipolar personalities of Hallward and Wotton) might strive to fuse a balanced new identity. Dorian wavers for awhile between his two mentors, first attempts to ignore the Hallward in him and then the Wotton, and even tries perverse reconciliations of the two by, e.g., gazing at the picture so that "the very sharpness of the contrast" between his own unaged face and the evil mask on the canvas would "quicken his sense of pleasure" and make him spellbound by "the corruption of his own soul" (p. 128).

Basil Hallward forces a crisis, however, when at length he encounters Dorian after a long separation and urges him to kneel in prayer and repent. The intended penitent, frenzied at last, drives a knife into Basil's head—but the portrait remains to assert more shrilly than ever the influence Hallward represented. Dorian

continues to oscillate; alternately he can express the view that "Harry is never wrong" (p. 197), then spares the dubious virtue of a country girl in an effort to be "good," an ambition which predictably withers under attack from Lord Henry. He even verges on confessing the murder of Basil as he describes to Wotton the "terrible reality" of the soul (p. 215), but Harry tugs the strings in another direction: "No: we have given up our belief in the soul. Play me something. Play me a nocturne, Dorian" (p. 215). But Dorian, almost insensible now to Wotton's influence, retires to his quarters with a troubled mind. There he seizes a gift from Lord Henry, a mirror with laughing Cupids carved on it (which reflects in its polished surface another "picture" of Dorian Gray), and flinging it on the floor "crushed it into silver splinters beneath his heel" (p. 220). Next he proceeds upstairs to the locked room containing the portrait, takes up the knife that slew Basil, and stabs "this monstrous soul-life" (p. 223), the painting itself. Thus rejecting not one, but *two* pictures of Dorian Gray—the painting and the unaging face reflected in Harry's gift mirror—Dorian shows himself unable to integrate the explosive combination of Hallward and Wotton in a single pose. Dorian Gray, like Sibyl Vane before him, rejects his theatrical character and falls headlong into everyday reality; his ageless beauty gives way to a wretched ugliness which signals for the first time since the beginning of the novel the appearance of Dorian in the habiliments of his natural self.

That the novel is structured by theatrical concepts is further exemplified by the chapters Wilde added to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the year after its initial publication in 1890 in Lippincott's *Monthly Magazine*. While the new portions of the book serve several other long-recognized purposes, they also reinforce the dramatic warp and woof of the novel, particularly in those chapters dealing with Harry's paradoxical conversations as "improvisational" performances; in added material (chapter V, especially) dealing with Sibyl's mother and brother Jim as melodramatic performers *off* as well as *on* stage; and in chapters XV-XVIII of the modified version, which depict Dorian in various attitudes of "escape" from reality.¹² Everything about the novel, in short, shows Wilde effecting theories developed in *Intentions*, in his letters, and elsewhere to bring life and art together under the aegis of dramatic illusion. Existence in the raw is like the old Jew's rattletrap theatre in the East End, wherein, however, a Sibyl Vane is able to transfigure reality and overleap the boundaries of time through her acting. Art, in Wilde's vocabulary, is itself a mode of acting, an imaginative performance rooted in fact but

soaring beyond it. His novel is just that kind of performance, the author himself being the actor who builds on his divided personality the roles of Wotton and Hallward, who in turn project a third and composite character, Dorian Gray, a creature of art and complete actor (like Sibyl before her demise). Typically of decadent artificial paradises spun from thin air, Wilde's here succumbs to the reality it momentarily transforms. Pretense has practical limits this side of madness, and Dorian, like Huysmans' Des Esseintes before him, finally reverts to the sphere of nature, the realm of death, whence he came.

NOTES

1. Richard Ellman, ed., *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 389.
2. Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), p. 146.
3. "Overtures to Salome," *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Ellman (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 88-89.
4. *The Art of Oscar Wilde* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 64.
5. *Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 37-73.
6. *Letters*, p. 352.
7. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Isobel Murray (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 3. Subsequent references to the novel are from this text.
8. *The Artist as Critic*, p. 152.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 375-79. It may be worth mentioning what perhaps is obvious—that this and other like expressions by Wilde are not statements of Romantic transcendentalism. There is no sense here that art rejects gross reality in order to discover some higher truth, or even that it creates something "new" which had not existed before. Art is a role-playing medium which enables the artist to forsake a depressing if only tenuously "real" life in order to embrace a more attractive but objectively even less "real" alternative. This is why Wilde's obsession with "masks" and "acting" is antiromantic and escapist, whereas Yeats' is obviously carried out within the mainstream of the Romantic tradition.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 384.
11. *Letters*, p. 311.
12. "Textual Notes," pp. 230-37 in the Murray edition, summarizes the differences in the magazine and book versions of the novel. Of course the later rendition also serves to tone down the homosexual overtones of Basil's attachment to Dorian and to fill out the comparatively thin narrative line of the magazine publication.