

The Abbey Theatre Stages Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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How might one set about adapting Oscar Wilde's novel for the stage? This is a pertinent question on two counts. First, surprisingly for Wilde, long sections of his novel are not consciously theatrical. There are the opening chapters that centre on dialogue while the basic premise is established and then there are passages of dialogue before Basil's murder and *passim* with Lord Henry, but a long and crucial stage of the narrative that is concerned with Dorian's moral collapse is conveyed by description rather than enactment, and in a manner that is closely modelled on Joris-Karl Huysmans' novels, *À rebours* (1884) and, to a lesser degree, *Là-Bas* (1891). The myth that underpins *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) is that of Faust who makes a pact with the devil for a prolonged life in exchange for his soul. The problem facing playwrights working with that myth is how to dramatise the period intervening between the commitment to the pact and the devil's ultimate pursuit of his reward. Christopher Marlowe (c. 1588) turned to satirical comedy to show how his Faust frittered away his gift of youth before meeting death and damnation; Goethe (in a two-part drama worked on extensively between 1772 and 1832) showed both the destructive and constructive potential in the gift of prolonged life as his Faust strives ever onward in the pursuit of knowledge and philosophical understanding of the nature of being. Dorian Gray's pact is with an unspecified figure of Fate and it is made without conscious awareness but rather as an idle whim; and he has to learn the dangers of acting on impulse. The novel intimates through rumours voiced by his critics that he has destroyed the reputation of numerous men and women but the narrative dwells in detail only on his callous treatment of Sybil Vane. There are scandalised whispers too about his low-life associations and his drug-taking. But they remain intimations, suggesting a dark undertow to Dorian's charm. Only the murder of Basil Hallward reveals how deeply Dorian's inner desperation and anguish run. Chiefly his moral

collapse is shown through Dorian's engagement in turn with all the interests that at the time of the writing of the novel characterised a decadent sensibility, as defined most exhaustively by Huysmans' novels. The cataloguing of aesthetic interests indiscriminately pursued to escape a prevailing ennui may carry conviction as a mode of characterisation in a novel (if the prose style is sufficiently compelling), but it totally resists dramatisation.

The second reason for questioning how one might dramatise *Dorian Gray* is that Neil Bartlett, the playwright and director of the newly staged version at Dublin's Abbey Theatre (first performed on September 27, 2012), has twice made the attempt (the first was staged at the Lyric Theatre Hammersmith in 1994)¹. The major difference between the versions relates to how that middle section of the novel, which by symbolist means portrays the nature of Dorian's inner self (the spiritual decline of which his remarkable physical appearance gives no intimation), is rendered in theatrical terms. In his first attempt at a dramatisation, Bartlett envisaged less a performance than a reading of Wilde's novel: some years after Wilde's death, his "sphinx", Ada Levenson, rents a room in the Savoy Hotel that Wilde once favoured for his liaisons, and calls together a group of his one-time friends and acquaintances to read the novel in the author's memory. The story-telling progresses haphazardly, since the focus is less on Dorian (a bored and boorish guardsman whom Robbie Ross has "rented" for the occasion) than on the dejection of those friends. The meeting suggests both a therapy session and a séance: "When we've all remembered [Ada advises the group], perhaps we'll be able to forget". Without Wilde's charisma and vitality, they have become frightened, isolated, fearful of intimidation by the police or the authorities, depressed and depressingly out-moded, as they sit in their uniformly shabby black clothes. Ada waspishly reminds Sidney "Jenny" Mavor, one of Wilde's boys who testified against him, of his life's history: "For a few red lampshades, a few scarlet sins and a supporting role at the Old Bailey, three decades of living alone in Croydon"². These friends, lost in their own misery, are the image of all the individuals in the novel, who, deprived of, or casually dropped from, Dorian's presence in their lives, have become dead things. They have become representative of all the tedious, lacklustre monotony that lies at the heart of conventional living, that grim *angst* which Dorian like his tutor, Wotton, seeks to escape in Wilde's fantasy fiction by creating an alternative, private and pleasure-centred world about himself. We are continually reminded how Wilde's own dream world disintegrated in a London dock, Reading Gaol, Naples and a bleak hotel room in Paris. The Sphinx's attempts to jolly the proceedings along fall increasingly flat, since Ada is no Wilde for all her wit and generosity. It is hardly surprising that the guardsman, distinctively different from the gathering in his scarlet, gold and black uniform, his youth and beauty, should so fear being trapped in this environment that he makes a violent bid for freedom, turning his pent-up desperation against Ross (who significantly in the reading is playing Basil Hallward).

Bartlett in this adaptation of Wilde has produced less a dramatisation of the novel than a sustained commentary on, and penetrating critique of its stated or implied themes: the profound futility that underpins the narrative; the lack of any spiritual basis for the alternative lifestyle that Wotton and Dorian pursue; the pointlessness of a solipsistic world view and its dangerous amorality that shades subtly but inexorably into immorality. But the novel is also, as the play implies, critical of a moneyed society that offers no viable outlet for creativity or intellectual brilliance and that consequently fosters the likes of Wotton and Gray, unwilling to commit themselves to the restricted and restricting habits of the upper-class tribe into which tragically they have been born. Wilde's novel, then, was in this dramatisation viewed through the distorting lens of history, social and private; the spectator was invited to engage with the performance on a multitude of levels (confusing perhaps to someone not well versed in the original fiction or in the lives of Wilde's circle), but there was no denying its cumulative theatrical power. Bartlett was offering a post-modernist interrogation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that suggested the novel offers through fantasy the realisation of a grimly petty hell on earth³. Where Huysmans took two novels to trace the path through decadence to hell, Wilde on Bartlett's showing managed the feat in one work of fiction: the relentless degeneration of the portrait is the hidden truth of the condition of Dorian's sensibility and of the society which shaped it.

The Abbey staging is more directly a dramatisation of the novel than that seen two decades ago at the Lyric, which means that the long section of Dorian's inner disintegration has to be represented onstage by some means; and Bartlett has found a challenging way in which to achieve this, but one that requires consummate skill in his actors and especially the two men playing Lord Henry Wotton (Jasper Britton) and Dorian (Tom Canton). Bartlett has appreciated the extent to which the novel is obsessed with time and its passing: Dorian seemingly (at least to everyone else's perceptions) has eluded the depredations of time, retaining his brilliantly youthful features. On the surface he is an ageless Adonis; and surfaces, as virtually all Wilde's writings testify, are what the fashionably-minded of his or any age are most preoccupied with. Bartlett's major insight into the novel is the realisation, which no one else attempting a dramatisation has appreciated, that, though the novel is set initially in the year in which it was written, the action develops over some thirty years into what would have been a future of Wilde's imagining. Bartlett's dramatic action moves steadily from the 1890s to the 1920s and the world of Noel Coward's society comedies, which the changing musical accompaniment over the two acts makes clear⁴. Of course one constant among the upper classes in their search for entertainment remained over that thirty-year period traditional evening dress (black tie and dress suits for the men and fancy, décolleté ball gowns for the women); worn by the chorus of aristocrats surrounding Gray in the play, that constant only emphasized the ageing physiques of the wearers

and their increasingly jaded faces⁵. Bartlett solved the problem of whether or not to deploy onstage an actual portrait, the dilemma which confronts any director of *Dorian Gray*, by showing audiences only a huge but empty frame; instead the decline into middle or old age of everyone onstage except Dorian was its representation and particularly so in the case of Sir Henry. As spry and dandified as Dorian at the time of their first meeting, Wotton grew with the passing years into an emphysema-ridden old duffer, raddled and gross. He, living the lifestyle in which he tutored the young Gray, embodied its tragic consequences; his visible deterioration made the need for an actual picture in the attic quite redundant. (It required a tour de force from Jasper Britton in the role subtly to catch the stages of Wotton's decline by a close attention to details, physical and vocal; he became rougher and gruffer on each appearance in the second act). It is characteristic of Bartlett's alert reading of Wilde's text to note how repeatedly Wotton lights a fresh cigarette on first encountering Dorian in the opening chapter of the novel and to make it a kind of *leitmotiv* throughout his production: the harmless pleasure that transformed into a crippling addiction. His first gift to Dorian in the play as in the novel is a gold cigarette case: its acceptance, emphasized in the production by a prolonged kiss between the two men, is the mark of Dorian's commitment to Wotton's philosophy of life and a token that in their relationship Sir Henry is the Mephistopheles to Gray's Faust⁶. Their relationship is symbiotic: they are almost (but not quite) mirror-images of each other at the start with their identically curled and flowing locks and their spirited carriage of the body, despite the one being all-knowing and the other a dewy-eyed innocent; but as Dorian grows in experience, it is Wotton who visibly pays the penalty. How fitting it is then that a proffered cigarette from the gold case is the last thing an audience sees as the lights dim: a temptation, glittering in the half-light, seductive but lethal! Dorian has been as much Sir Henry's undoing as Wotton has been Gray's. Wotton's transformation onstage from a dandy into a living embodiment of what the hidden picture depicts was how Bartlett in this second dramatisation negotiated the challenge of representing the growth of Dorian's inner paralysis and soullessness.

It would be wrong to give the impression that Britton alone shouldered the burden of communicating the symbolic structuring of the production: Tom Canton as Dorian also faced considerable demands on his technical expertise to parallel what Britton was achieving. It is all too easy in reading the novel to view Dorian as being as beautiful and feckless as Bosie in time was to prove to be in Wilde's life especially after his arrest and until his death⁷. But, if that portrait in the attic emblematises Dorian's conscience, are we to suppose it has no impact on him whatever, simply because it in no way disturbs his physical beauty with signs of corruption? If that were so, then why is Dorian overwhelmed with bouts of ennui alternating with bursts of frantic desperation in the final stages of Wilde's narrative? Bartlett asks for a

more subtly insidious decline than Wotton's to overtake Dorian: he requires his actor to show a man corroding from within while never ceasing to be an object of attraction to others. Canton's was a bravura performance: he contrived to suggest that his own good looks had become a mask through which only the eyes (by turns furtive, wild, coldly withdrawn, empty, dead) invited a different interpretation of the sensibility within; and, though his body with its long limbs and balanced proportions was that of a man the actor's own age, its movements increasingly lacked either grace or the purposive energy that had once stirred it into motion. When he reclined (lolloped would be a more accurate description), he looked like an exquisitely fashioned doll that had been tossed idly aside by a thoughtless child. At times he is suddenly galvanised into frenetic activity: "He is sweaty, jumpy, messy; busy, aggressive, off-hand, snappy. An addict who needs his next fix" (Wilde 2012, 69)⁸. In him a body and a mind were in total opposition; the voice became steadily colder, harsher, devoid of sympathetic tonalities; and only the beauty lived on in this cipher of a man, as he came to know the precise extent of the hell he had all too casually willed into being in his youth ("If only it were I who was always to be young, and your picture that was to grow old. For that – for that I would give everything. Everything in the world. I think I would give my soul", 16). The initial conception on Bartlett's part and the creative invention on Canton's that went into realising this break-up of an individuality into this shocking dissonance was remarkable and powerfully underscored the moral vision that shapes Bartlett's adaptation. What impressed in viewing the production was Bartlett's ability to shape that vision by exploiting the arts of the theatre, above all through the virtuosity of his players. The production was played out on a virtually bare stage reaching right to the exposed back wall of the theatre; there were only absolutely necessary properties; atmosphere, period detail had to be created by the performers (though, as Bartlett prescribes in the final words of his *Introduction* to the published text, the costumes were "sensational", and there was a sound score)⁹.

This emphasis on the relationship between Dorian and Sir Henry inevitably detracted from that between Dorian and Basil, much as in the novel, a situation not entirely helped by Frank McCusker's decision to underplay the role of Hallward. In a world where everyone else is acting a role, except perhaps the luckless Alan Campbell, one can see why McCusker might be disposed to make this decision, since Basil is the one individual with an exacting degree of personal integrity and clearly should be performed with a marked difference in acting style from the rest of the cast. He is the voice of rectitude in novel and play, but to underplay the role is to risk undermining Hallward's moral status within the narrative. It is a difficult challenge facing the actor: how to avoid rant or melodrama yet establish a meaningful presence onstage, especially given Wilde's detestation of earnestness. The decision McCusker chose, however, made the role appear lacklustre in performance: it was to play Basil much as

Dorian must see him, as an irritating man whose moralising is so devoid of a sense of fashionable propriety that he and it are best ignored or systematically avoided as utterly *de trop*. What one lost was the sense (strong in Marlowe and Goethe's versions of the Faust myth, of Dorian's soul being fought for by a Good Angel [Basil] and a Bad [Sir Henry]). But that could be seen as a weakness in the novel: one perhaps explained, if not justified by Wilde's eagerness to eschew writing a novel with a message in the high Victorian manner, as the Preface to the original edition of 1891 makes abundantly clear. But this does not help the adaptor, director or actor to make something dramatically significant of Basil's role. McCusker may have aimed for a quiet, contained sincerity as the token of that significance but, given the technical brilliance of Britton and Canton's performances, his understated efforts appeared rather amateur, simplistic; his attempted naturalism seemed misjudged and out of place¹⁰.

This effect was augmented in the production by the one element where Bartlett as adaptor and director had radically departed from the novel: his use of a chorus. Any absolutely faithful dramatisation of the novel would require a huge cast: servants, aristocratic observers, Dorian's lovers and casual acquaintances, his fellow addicts, theatre personnel, prostitutes (male and female) and so forth, of whom at least fifteen have named identities. Doubling is possible in the theatre; but, if all these individuals and the countless unnamed persons briefly appearing in the narrative were impersonated in a production, most would have a ridiculously short time onstage. The appearance and rapid disappearance of such presences in the novel is Wilde's way of intimating Dorian's thoughtless indifference to others, whom he casually picks up for his own ends and then as casually discards; Basil too is so treated and, in time, even Lord Henry. (When they both die in the production, the actors join the chorus but stay in character, the first appeasing, the second always seductively tempting). Bartlett populates his stage with some fourteen black-garbed actors, seven men and seven women, who emerge from the group to take on brief roles before returning to the ensemble; sometimes the women appear as a group in ostentatious gowns to create a suitable ambience of aristocratic indolence, hauteur, disdain (they are reminiscent of the bored assemblage of house-guests in *A Woman Of No Importance* of 1893); some appear for the Sybil Vane episodes in fustian motley appropriate for the backstage of a Victorian theatre; the men are generally in understated black uniforms as servants of various ranks or in dark shabby suits when playing working-class characters or East End down-and-outs. Appearing and disappearing is easily effected by them all stepping in and out of pools of focused light; but they never quite disappear entirely: however bright the lighting on the central trio of characters (Dorian, Basil and Lord Henry), there are always dimly perceived faces hovering in the gloom, watching, expectant, judgemental, always at hand, like the most exemplary of servants, to come into the light when the situation suddenly requires them. They are like the audience in the theatre, sitting in

darkness, watching but always outside the charmed, illumined life that Lord Henry tempts Dorian to create out of his deepest longings and urges, because he has unparalleled wealth to buy himself anything and anyone he covets and to buy himself out of any threatened scandal that might ensue. (This is seen at its worst in Dorian's manipulation of Alan Campbell's fear of sexual exposure to make him dispose of Basil's corpse).

Outsiders in Dorian's story these people might be, peopling the margins of his awareness, but they have all been touched and marked by him in some way and, like the chorus of a Greek tragedy, they wait for his demise. At moments of high tension and crucial change in Dorian's fortunes, they severally or in unison speak Wilde's descriptions of Gray's inner responses as an accompaniment to Dorian's silent movements. When, for example, Dorian first sees Basil's painting, it is the servants who speak from the shadows:

DORIAN looks at the picture; he recoils in shock. The Chorus amplifies his breath –

PARKER, FRANCIS, MRS. LEAF: *Ah!*

FRANCIS: *He had never really felt it before. His beauty – but now...*

MRS. LEAF: *Ah! Now...*

PARKER: *– His amethyst eyes deepened in a mist of tears.*

MRS. LEAF: *(Viciously) As if he recognised himself for the very first time... (15)*

Later and again in Wilde's phrases they describe the changes that come over the picture. The male chorus give voice to the furious outpouring of sentiment in the letter Dorian writes when he decides to offer to marry Sybil, which the female chorus disrupt with cries of derision: "Beautiful, of course, but – / [...] Warped / [...] Corrupted" (41). After Basil's murder, the chorus picks up the Lord's Prayer, the opening phrases of which are his final words and they continue the prayer "*(Sotto voce)*" until his body ceases to writhe (59). When James Vane hesitates over killing Dorian in revenge for the death of his sister, since Dorian has asked him whether his face could be that of a man Vane has been seeking for twenty-five years, the Female Chorus urge him: "Do it now!" (74). Becoming the conscience Dorian has suppressed over the years, the Chorus hound him to the attic to attack the picture and meet his death; they urge him on by again reciting the Lord's Prayer as if in revenge for the innocent Basil. The term, chorus, may imply a somewhat restrained, even static grouping of individuals; but this chorus is active, malevolent and increasingly vicious in the tone it adopts towards Dorian once he begins to listen to and not ignore their utterances. Mrs. Leaf's tone, implied by the adverb "viciously" in the first passage quoted above, begins to infiltrate the group till it predominates.

This tone and the mounting crescendo of choric sound is complex in its effect in performance. As audience, we appear to be witnessing a rebellion as the figures traditionally compelled by the narrative to inhabit the margins seem to be taking over the stage, but the antagonism also has a class motiva-

tion, the tone is that of the angry underdogs protesting against their self-styled masters. Bartlett is perhaps suggesting through the chorus that there is a place within the novel and his adaptation for the Wilde who wrote *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (the essay was published the same year as the novel) and who penned subtle but trenchant critiques of the English upper classes in his *Society Comedies*¹¹. But might that vicious tone also be interpreted as akin to the heterosexist hysteria meted out to Wilde after his trial and on his journey to Reading Gaol, the decrying like the baying of wolves of the majority against the lifestyle of a homosexual minority, whatever its class status? By drawing the parallels with the legend of Faust, which exist in the novel but which are strengthened in the adaptation, Bartlett is also defining how profound though unassertive a morality underlies the structure of the narrative. (On this reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* should decidedly not have been admissible evidence such as the book became in Wilde's second trial, where it was used to exemplify the insidious corrupting influence he had over Lord Alfred Douglas to whom he had given a copy). The mounting excitement of the chorus as Dorian's demise approaches may be paralleling a spectator's response to the production to the experience of any reader embarked on a tense novel, that of willing a particular ending into being, once a sense of its imminence becomes apparent. Whether viewed together or singly, these possibilities show diverse ways of interpreting the role of the chorus in the production: political, social, moral, aesthetic, engaged in the analysis of modes of literary and theatrical reception. Bartlett in other words has shaped through his deployment of the chorus a post-modern framework around his staging of Wilde's period piece that offers spectators multiple perspectives from which to enter, experience and critique both the novel and his adaptation. Wilde's words and his narrative structure are a literary constant; what has changed over the passage of time are the cultural constructs underpinning readers' (and in the theatre spectators') modes of reception that determine interpretation. Bartlett has found a theatrical means of freeing audiences from their habitual manner of judging by showing the wealth of ways in which his central narrative and its dominant icon (the picture that is the novel's title) may be approached and interrogated. Consequently the strength of the adaptation as a *Wildean* experience in the theatre is that Bartlett has no insistent design upon us. It is a theatre piece, but it is far more than an entertainment.

Notes

¹¹ There is no printed text of Bartlett's first dramatisation of Wilde's novel. The second version staged at the Abbey was printed and sold in the theatre as part of the programme for the production. Bibliographical details of this publication are given below in relation to the citing of quotations from it. This second adaptation took virtually all its text from Wilde's own prose, deploying not only the first book-formatted edition of 1891 but also the version that had appeared in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in 1890 and the typed manuscript, now

in the public domain, that preceded it, which was cut and to some extent bowdlerised by the editor of *Lippincott's* before he would consider publishing the novel.

² Given the lack of a printed text of Bartlett's first dramatisation of Wilde's novel, these quotations are from the author's notes made during two viewings of the production at the Lyric Theatre Hammersmith in 1994. Interestingly this adaptation and staging seem to have been expunged in recent years from the canon of Bartlett's works: there is but one mention of it currently in Bartlett's online *curriculum vitae*, where it is pointedly described as "After Wilde" (see <<http://www.neil-bartlett.com/cv.php>>, 10/13).

³ Bartlett's last production in November 2005 before leaving his post as Artistic Director of the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, was a production of Molière's *Don Juan*, the poster for which carried an image of the open-shirted torso of a young man over the injunction, "Go to Hell". There was an unmistakable resonance here of his work on Oscar Wilde.

⁴ This time-scheme is apt: thirty years is the duration of the term that Mephistopheles pledges himself to answer Faustus's every desire in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (c. 1588). For Bartlett's explanation for this scheme, see his *Introduction* to the published text: N. Bartlett, *Introduction*, in O. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, adapted with an introduction by N. Bartlett, London, Oberon Books, 2012, unpaginated preliminary.

⁵ The elaborate frocks designed for the production by Kandis Cook caught the changing lines of women's fashion from the 1890s to the 1920s but the sense of evening dress as theatricalised wear, a kind of fancy dress that rendered the wearers somewhat grotesque (particularly since, as they aged, the women wore heavier and more elaborate make-up that made them look increasingly garish), was sustained throughout.

⁶ Jasper Britton has had a distinguished career in classical theatre. Notably in the context of Bartlett's production was Britton's recent casting as Satan in a dramatisation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, directed by Rupert Goold for Headlong Theatre Company in 2006.

⁷ This is in part the burden of accusation against Bosie that Wilde voices in *De Profundis* (written during his imprisonment in Reading Gaol 1895-97, but published posthumously and in a shortened form in 1905; a full edition containing the previously suppressed parts was published by Robert Ross in 1913).

⁸ O. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (2012) adapted with an introduction by N. Bartlett; subsequent references are in brackets.

⁹ *Ibidem*, unpaginated preliminary. The sound score was by Ivan Birthistle and Vincent Doherty.

¹⁰ The only other weakness in the production was the staging of Dorian's eventual death on mutilating the painting, when Bartlett's exuberant creativity seemed to fail him. Gothick sensationalism took over, as Dorian was replaced by a double, impersonating the "monster" the stage directions describe, with a hideous mask on his face; he struggled bloodily to wrench it off, as he collapsed to die by the footlights (88-91).

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of this critical aspect of Wilde's creativity in his comedies, see Cave 2006, 213-224.

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