

THREE ICONS: A Door; a Book; a Tomb *(new approaches to Wilde's work and life fostered by two recent exhibitions)*

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First Icon: A Door. It was utterly incongruous in its position at the centre of a wall of paintings: its starkness; the rotting, yellowing white wood; the metal rimmed spy-hole; and, lower, a rectangular covered opening to admit food. This was clearly no modernist “found object”, shockingly out-of-place on a wall amidst a collection of Victorian paintings. The label read: “Prison door from Reading Gaol, believed to be from Oscar Wilde’s cell”. For Wilde it had been a doorway to pain and humiliation, of loss and abjection; but also an entry to new modes of creative self-analysis and to the private confessionals that resulted in *De Profundis*. The resonances were profound and, in the wider context of the exhibition where it was displayed, profoundly far-reaching. *Queer British Art 1861-1967* was mounted by Tate Britain, London (5 April – 1 October, 2017), to celebrate fifty years since the decriminalising of consensual sex between gay men by Act of Parliament. It was London’s first openly gay (and bisexual) celebration of the arts of painting, sculpture, performance and photography as genres distinct in themselves in being shaped by the sensibilities and sensitivities of a distinctive minority culture. Within that larger conspectus, the door marked both a turning point and a dividing of the ways. The works on display by the likes of Frederic Leighton, Evelyn Pickering De Morgan, William Blake Richmond or Walter Crane that preceded the group of items relating to Wilde’s social disgrace exploited the artist’s conventional permission frankly to paint the nude while clearly relishing and making a specific feature of curvaceous or muscular flesh. The rendering of the body in their art is precise, celebratory, fearless. After Wilde’s departure for Reading Gaol, gay male art became more subtly an expression of what the catalogue termed “coded desires” (such as Edmund Dulac’s double-portrait of the life-long companions, Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, portrayed as sainted Cistercian friars in an Arcadian landscape) or a vision of excess as in the portrait photography of Cecil Beaton, the beginnings (alongside much of the theatrical design work of Oliver Messel) of a decidedly British form of kitsch. Music Hall offered a cover for gender-swapping and female imper-

sonation from the occasionally crude to the generally quite sophisticated, while Bloomsbury painters made the dangerous permissible by reducing grappling bodies to all-but abstract designs with colour and form. Lesbian art by contrast seemingly had no need, despite the trials for public indecency brought against Radclyffe Hall, the novelist, or Maud Allan, the dancer, to pursue such covert agendas as a spur to invention. Ethel Walker, Gluck, Dora Carrington, Dorothy Johnstone and especially Laura Knight pushed beyond tradition to express not just their sensual appreciation but more importantly their emotional response to the female body. There is nothing coded about Carrington's nude seen arching into ecstasy (*Female Figure Lying on her Back* of 1912) or Knight's *Self-Portrait* (1913) showing her with confident stance in the act of painting the naked Ella Naper. Both are radical and defiantly open, where the work of their male gay contemporaries is careful, always mindful of risk in its strategies of subversion. What a world of private pain separates Francis Bacon's fractured and contorted nudes, which ended the exhibition, from the exuberant joy of Carrington's or Knight's canvases, while David Hockney, later to be a master colourist, struggles to hide the word, Queen (or is the word maybe Queer) in *Going to be a Queen for Tonight* (1960) beneath a welter of darkly drab and messily tinted shapes, an image caught between defiance and fear. Here were disturbing intimations of the mindscapes that could lie behind that closed door. Moving around the exhibition brought ever-deepening significance to that early confrontation with the cell-door. By turns an emblem of cruelty but also of endurance, defiance and release into creativity, it came to determine the shape of the curator, Clare Barlow's vision and to epitomise the wide-ranging impact that Wilde's imprisonment had on cultural history for over seventy years.

Second Icon: The Book. One's first impression and lasting memory of the Wilde exhibition at the Petit Palais in Paris, *Oscar Wilde: l'impertinent absolu*, wittily translated into English as "Insolence Incarnate", was of the book that formed the catalogue (© Paris Musées, printed by l'imprimerie Geers, Ghent 2016, pp. 256). It was handsomely bound and sensuous to hold: printed with varying but always exquisite fonts. Interleaving photographs and extensive, richly pertinent notes on the exhibits with scholarly essays, it gave unparalleled insights into Wilde's life, thought and career while being always a thing of beauty. It tangibly and visually embodied the dominant theme of the exhibition: Wilde's quest for aesthetic beauty. The appearance of his own publications was calculatedly radical, when (thanks usually to the designs of Charles Ricketts) the bindings offered an enticing intimation, usually stamped in gold, of the contents within. Displayed here often to show both cover and a representative page, their beauty is distinctive, suggesting that reading would offer more than intellectual stimulus but rather encompass an all-embracing joy of mind and senses. Set within the larger context of the exhibition, here was a palpable embodiment of Wilde's evolving aesthetic and cult of beauty.

Research and careful enquiries into loans enabled the curator, Dominique Morel, assisted by Merlin Holland and Ömer Koç, to assemble a remarkably full collection of artefacts to give body to Wilde's thinking, by illustrating the precise influences on it and the literary outcomes deriving from it; the intellectual, artistic, theatrical and social milieux in which Wilde moved were particularly well represented and defined. One could in consequence read writing on or to the actresses Ellen Terry, Lily Langtry and Sarah Bernhardt beside full-scale portraits of them, which offered notable discriminations between them, showing that Wilde did not pursue a *type* of beauty. If Shakespeare was right to image the human face as a revelatory book, then in each actress's case physical beauty was ably supported by a considerable depth of character that made for a unique sensibility.

Though it is possible to read Wilde's art criticism, it deepens one's experience to view the range of actual paintings he criticised. On loan from galleries around the world, Dominique Morel gathered together the canvases that featured in the Grosvenor Gallery shows that he reviewed. Relying no longer on just Wilde's printed words or small-scale, monochrome reproductions of the kind to be found in monographs or art journals, one's whole perspective on his criticism shifted. Comments on a distant prospect of landscape in a painting or the flowers seen as foreground, the particular opaline colour of a sky or the backward curve of a fainting body could easily be *read* as somewhat effete dilettantism. Confronted by paintings of some size and scope, however, one's value-judgements were challenged. Most of the canvases in the Grosvenor Gallery shows fall into the narrative genre; but Wilde's remarks draw a viewer's attention to painterly detail. Beauty comes to rely less in a comforting recognition of a specific narrative climax (in William Blake Richmond's depiction of Electra mourning with her slaves over the tomb of Agamemnon; or George Frederick Watts' of Eurydice at the moment of her vanishing away into the darkness of Hades) than on the technical accomplishments that work together to make the narrative interpretation possible and immediate: depth of perspective, the colour palette selectively deployed to a purpose, the play of light over textured surfaces, the patterning of shapes that gives significance to form. Wilde is teaching the viewer to read painting with a complex, layered response, noting how detail is subsumed within a total concept. In so doing, he is encouraging the viewer to honour fully the artist's technical virtuosity but also, as with reading a book of poetry, to relish nuance, suggestion, the enigmatic and symbolic.

When Wilde married Constance Lloyd and they moved into a house in Tite Street, he had the opportunity to realise the creating of his own House of Beauty, based on his studies in the writings and practice of Ruskin, Morris, Godwin and the exemplars of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Tite Street itself was an address that required living up to, since Whistler had made it a Mecca amongst bohemian artistic circles. Being comprised largely of Eng-

lish and American rather than French artists, this is one feature of Wilde's life that is not given due weight of representation by Dominique Morel. This is unfortunate, since in devising his home as a Temple of Beauty, Wilde clearly put his reading in French literature (Huysmans) and viewing of French painting (Moreau) to as good a use as the English influences on his choices of décor and spatial arrangements. Books, conversations and images shaped his decisions, but Wilde's home never quite rivalled the drawing power of Whistler's White House in its heyday. This was partly because of his increasing involvement with matters theatrical, with Bosie and the shady side of London's underworld. It was out of this strange juxtaposition of the House Beautiful and the Underworld that Wilde shaped the narrative of his masterpiece, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. For Ward Lock's edition of 1891, Ricketts again devised the cover, but one that strangely lacks the clarity of his earlier work, being a kind of inverted cone made by a repeated design taking the form of minute semi-circles of six or seven downward-facing pen strokes. It intimates a decline but is too vague to engage the imagination in the way of his previous covers.

A book (maybe a copy of *Dorian Gray*, maybe Huysmans' *A Rebours*) was to be submitted as evidence in the case against Wilde: a book with a beautiful cover, exquisite prose, but lethally subversive content, which was in part to effect Wilde's undoing. The House Beautiful had been too escapist, a dangerous sanctum; but now the dark side of its exclusiveness gained a steady momentum in the process (ironically but aptly the French word for "trial") of Wilde's undoing. The exhibition realised this turning point with a disturbing leap of the imagination. A screen showed excerpts from two films of *Dorian Gray*: that directed by Albert Lewin in 1945 and that by Massimo Dellamano in 1970. What was featured were the two realisations on film of the moment when Dorian destroys the portrait and dies a hideous corpse: on a loop the two versions faded in and out like an obsessive nightmare. Simultaneously, on the floor of the same room filmed excerpts of Salomé's dance before Herod were projected in a similarly endless cycle (Rita Hayworth performing for Charles Laughton in William Dieterle's version of 1953 and Jessica Chastain with Al Pacino in Pacino's *Wilde Salomé* of 2011). Within the orderly confines of the exhibition hall, one suddenly found oneself immersed inside an enveloping antinomian world. Something of the shock-value of these two works for Victorian readers or theatregoers was brilliantly evoked in preparation for the final room where the elegance of those aesthetic interiors with their meticulously matched colour-schemes had given way to the harsh monochrome images of Wilde's cell in Reading Gaol, to cartoon imaginings of Wilde on the treadmill from *Le Quotidien Illustré* of 7 June, 1895, to photographs of the Parisian hotel room in which he died (spartan in its functionalism, but for the hideously patterned wallpaper made infamous by Wilde's last words). After the grandly self-presentational poses of the ear-

lier portraits, it was saddening to view the bloated figure captured in lithograph or crayon-sketch by Lautrec and Ricard Opisso i Sala respectively, or the wistful figure with haunted eyes in what is presumed to be Sickert's rapid crayon-sketch of a lonely Wilde travelling incognito in Dieppe.

Books had accompanied Wilde's rise to fame and social distinction and made possible his possession of the House Beautiful. Ironically it was a book, chosen by Edward Carson, that was cunningly deployed in part to engineer his undoing and his loss of a vision of Beauty. Determining the centrality of the art of the book to an interpretation of Wilde's career was the significant achievement of the exhibition at the Petit Palais. Dominique Morel's catalogue, perceptively researched and fittingly printed in a fashion that demonstrates the degree to which at its best publishing is itself an art, should become a collector's item and a goal of Wildean scholars.

Third Icon: A Tomb. The French exhibition did not end on a tragic note. Wilde's reputation has after all undergone a transformation and recovery: his plays are continuously in production (there are productions of groups of comedies with *Salome* and readings of *De Profundis* currently being staged throughout 2018 in London and Milan); there has been a magisterial collected edition of his works published by Oxford University Press; and his writings are continually reissued, while changing social attitudes to sexuality and gender-definition have undergone manifest changes such that "queer" is an accepted epithet and no longer a term of abuse. The exhibition chose to reflect this by devising a final room, fully illustrated in the catalogue, which examined the creation of Wilde's tomb for Père Lachaise cemetery. Here were Epstein's preliminary sketches, showing him exploring how to get the right balance of width and length and the most graphic form for the central features of face and wings. Interestingly a scheme for an attendant group of mourning Greek youths was abandoned so the focus remains entirely on the image of the Sphinx, so appropriate a choice to emblemise Wilde's life and thought: subtle, challenging, teasing, enigmatic, exotic, dangerous (as most of his writings are). Aptly the sphinx was one of Wilde's favourite images, deriving from myth but containing the potential for modern application and resonance. In terms of conventions in funeral gravestones, it is neither wholly Christian nor Classical; the wings are folded not spread; the sleeping eyes indicate a being at rest ("brooding on silence", to use Yeats's words) rather than watchful like the guardian angel of tradition; yet the sheer power in the conception suggests a latent, soon-to-be-unleashed, awesome strength, which the sheer size of the statue augments. There were period photographs of the statue under construction in Epstein's studio and veiled in the cemetery in October, 1912, awaiting inauguration. However, the final dominant image was of the Sphinx before its recent cleaning, where it is seen covered in lipstick tinted kisses; myriads of them, fresh ones overlaying those that are rap-

idly fading. All are anonymous. Those kisses elevate the tomb to a shrine, visited by those who admire Wilde's work, who have been influenced by his flamboyantly presentational skills in their own modes of self-expression, or simply by those whose lives, whatever their gender and sexual preferences, have been touched by his cultural presence. It is fitting that in the catalogue the last words are left to Wilde's grandson in an essay entitled, "Posterity". The tomb is not a dead thing; rather with all its kisses it is an image of resurgence, renewal, endurance and hope.