

# Wilde's Obscenity Effect: Influence and Immorality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Simon Stern

## ABSTRACT

Wilde's three trials in 1895 served, in effect, as an obscenity prosecution of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/1). Though the novel was not formally charged with obscenity, *Dorian Gray's* first reviewers suggested that it was obscene, and the book was not reprinted in Britain for nearly two decades after Wilde's trials. The novel's relation to Wilde's trials thus raises a number of questions about the use of fiction as legal evidence and about the ways in which a criminal prosecution might be taken to reveal the meaning of the defendant's writings. This article discusses the late Victorian campaign against obscene literature and the victims of that campaign; the reviews of the original version of *Dorian Gray* (in *Lippincott's Magazine*, 1890); the oblique manner in which the innuendo about its obscenity functioned during Wilde's three trials (1895); Wilde's own ironic engagement, at several key points in the novel, with the conception of influence at work in the legal test governing the evaluation of obscenity (*R. v. Hicklin*, 1868); the relation of the painting itself, and of the notorious French novel that Dorian borrows from Lord Henry, to that conception of influence; and Wilde's re-enactment of his ironic perspective at the narrative level.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published at a time when obscenity prosecutions in Great Britain were growing in frequency and were increasingly targeting 'borderline cases' involving works that had not traditionally been considered obscene.<sup>1</sup> Wilde's novel abounds in descriptions and scenarios that evoke the concerns fuelling the campaign against publications with a 'tendency to corrupt', and although Wilde is more concerned with the way this tendency is said to operate than with the nature of obscenity itself, he circles around the subject so intently that it seems surprising—particularly given the recommendations of some reviewers—that no charges were laid against the novel. Perhaps it avoided prosecution because Wilde's trials also served in effect as an obscenity trial. Just as the early reviewers' objections led one of the major British news-dealers to stop selling the issue of *Lippincott's Magazine* that featured the original version of the story, Wilde's conviction led his publishers to stop selling the book, and nearly twenty years would pass before another British edition appeared.

For comments and advice on earlier drafts, thanks to Gregg Crane, Sharon Marcus, and Stephen Waddams.

1 Katherine Mullin, 'Pernicious Literature', in David Bradshaw and Rachel Potter (eds), *Prudes on the Prowl: Fiction and Obscenity in England, 1850 to the Present Day* (Oxford, 2013), 34.

The case against the novel—first in the reviews and then in the courts—took its homoeroticism to be the most damning evidence of its corrupting tendencies, but Wilde's detractors were also responding to a proclivity that suffuses the novel more generally. As a reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* explained, 'We are conscious of a penetrating poison in the air, yet cannot see clearly whence it proceeds'.<sup>2</sup> Were it not for the implicit censure, Wilde would have appreciated this observation, which succinctly captures the novel's pervasive concern with the dynamics of the corrupting influence. Indeed, the comment might even have been inspired by Lord Henry's figuration of influence as a 'subtle fluid or a strange perfume', or by Dorian's sense, when he starts reading the French novel that will change his life, of being surrounded by a 'heavy odour of incense';<sup>3</sup> in both instances, Wilde hints at an almost imperceptible force that can be discerned mainly from its ramifying effects.

The final decades of the nineteenth century, as Katherine Mullin has noted, marked a rise in obscenity prosecutions in England, and 'the "artistic merit" defence against the law, never explicitly established, was increasingly under siege'.<sup>4</sup> In the late 1880s, Henry Vizetelly was tried twice for publishing English translations of Zola's novels, and there were also prosecutions in the London courts against a peddler who sold photographs of 'pictures publicly exhibited in the Paris Salon'; the publishers of the *Evening News* for featuring 'salacious details' of a society divorce case; and a publisher who had excerpted 'salacious highlights' from Boccaccio's *Decameron*.<sup>5</sup> In 1898, a few years after Wilde's conviction for 'gross indecency', the Bedborough trial would result in the suppression of the second volume (titled *Sexual Inversion*) of Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*.<sup>6</sup> When W. T. Stead was prosecuted for abduction in 1885, in the wake of his reporting on 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon', a columnist in the *Saturday Review* observed that the defence of having 'done good service by his publications' could hardly excuse the provocative 'rhetorical flourishes' that had garnished Stead's articles. The author concluded that the proceeding, though 'in form a trial for abduction', was correctly 'regarded by many as in substance a trial for obscene libel'.<sup>7</sup>

2 'Mr. Oscar Wilde's "Dorian Gray"', *Pall Mall Gazette* (26 June 1890), 3.

3 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Oxford, 2008), 33, 107. Future references are to this edition except where otherwise specified, and are given parenthetically.

4 Katherine Mullin, 'Poison More Deadly than Prussic Acid: Defining Obscenity after the 1857 Obscene Publications Act (1850-1885)', in *Prudes on the Prowl*, 12; see also Dawn Watkins, 'The Influence of the Art for Art's Sake Movement upon English Law, 1780-1959', *Journal of Legal History*, 28 (2007), 243-8; Julie Stone Peters, 'Performing Obscene Modernism: Theatrical Censorship and the Making of Modern Drama', in Alan Ackerman & Martin Puchner (eds), *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage* (Basingstoke, 2006), 216-18. Barbara Leckie has also discussed Wilde's preface to the 1891 edition of *Dorian Gray* in this context; see 'The Novel and Censorship in Late Victorian England', in Lisa Rodensky (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel* (Oxford, 2013), 172-4.

5 The other three prosecutions took place in 1886, 1888, and 1889 respectively; see Mullin, 'Pernicious Literature', 34. The *Evening News* case appears to have been unsuccessful, but the other two resulted in convictions. For more on these cases, see Anthony Cummins, 'Émile Zola's Cheap English Dress: The Vizetelly Translations, Late-Victorian Print Culture, and the Crisis of Literary Value', *Review of English Studies*, 60 (2009), 108-32.

6 Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds, *Sexual Inversion: A Critical Edition*, ed. Ivan Crozier (Basingstoke, 2008), 62-4.

7 Quoted in Mullin, 'Pernicious Literature', 33.

Wilde's trials had much the same result for *Dorian Gray*. During the three rounds of litigation, the only explicit characterization of the novel as an obscene work appeared at the very outset, in the pre-trial pleadings filed in Wilde's libel suit against Queensberry. Charles Gill, one of the defence counsel, sought to justify Queensberry's language by calling *Dorian Gray* an 'immoral and indecent work' that described the 'passions of certain persons guilty of unnatural practices', adding that the novel was 'calculated to subvert morality and to encourage unnatural vice', and that Wilde himself had had a 'corrupting influence' on half a dozen young men, named in the plea.<sup>8</sup> Gill's allegations about the novel, although not repeated in court during the libel trial, would figure as an underlying theme in the defence arguments of Queensberry's lawyer Edward Carson. In Wilde's first criminal trial, Gill (now acting as prosecution counsel for the Crown) had Carson's arguments from the libel trial inserted in the court record, but the judge ultimately struck out this 'literary evidence' when the case was sent to the jury. Gill's accusation migrated from one liminal site to another in the course of Wilde's trials while nevertheless continuing to play a vital role. During the two criminal trials, in particular, Gill's description of the novel saturated the atmosphere of the courtroom like the 'penetrating poison' described in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, hovering in the background and conspiring with the prosecution's more direct and visible efforts to reveal the corrupting influence of money on the relations that Wilde sought to portray as noble and virtuous.

Despite the reductive logic that fixes on the characters' 'practices' and ascribes them to the author, this characterization of *Dorian Gray* attends to important aspects of the novel that were legible, in the 1890s, as indices of obscenity, whose legal analysis turned on assertions about influence and the work's potential to corrupt 'the young person'.<sup>9</sup> These questions are central to the long passage from *Dorian Gray* that Carson read out to the jury at the libel trial—the passage that includes the twenty-year-old Dorian's spellbound reaction to Lord Henry's first, fateful speech. Indeed, Carson began by emphasizing that at this point in the novel, Dorian is an 'innocent young man'.<sup>10</sup> Yet in copying and applying the presuppositions of contemporaneous obscenity law, Wilde also ironizes them, on the one hand endowing Lord Henry's words with an intoxicating power just as magical as the alchemy that controls Dorian's picture, and on the other hand hinting at the more circuitous ramifications that Linda Dowling and others have analysed as an erotics of influence.<sup>11</sup> What Lord Henry sees as a subtle and elusive trace is presented to the reader in a very different guise. When subjected to the pragmatic scrutiny of a lawyer assigning blame,

8 Plea of justification, entered by Charles Gill on 30 March 1895, repr. in Merlin Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* (New York, NY, 2004), 290–1; see also Mullin, 'Pernicious Literature', 40–3. Ironically, Gill's knowledge about these matters was derived in part from his work as counsel for some of the defendants in the Cleveland Street trial; see 'West End Scandals', *Illustrated Police News* (11 January 1890), 2; 'The Cleveland Street Scandals', *Morning Post* (1 March 1890), 1.

9 The point was gratefully familiar to contemporaries; Havelock Ellis, for instance, in a discussion of Hardy's fiction, sarcastically exhorted his fellow writers, 'Remember the Young Person'. Havelock Ellis, 'Concerning *Jude the Obscure*', *Savoy Magazine*, 6 (October 1896), 46.

10 Holland, *Real Trial*, 259.

11 Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), 124–5; Dennis Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody, 1840–1940* (Cambridge, 2006), 87–9; Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters* (Philadelphia, PA, 2013), 126–7.

Lord Henry's hypnotic effect on Dorian appears so immediate and direct as to make the issue of causation seem self-evident. Using the language of Wildean aphorism, one might say that a lawyer's influence is always a bad one because the only variety he can discern is the kind that operates as if it were an influenza.

Throughout the narrative of *Dorian Gray*, and particularly in the scenes that show Dorian interacting with the painting and the French novel lent to him by Lord Henry, Wilde interweaves themes of influence, corruption, and addiction—and at the same time that he retraces the logic by which jurists and legislators purported to diagnose the agency of obscene works, he also makes this legal logic appear utterly fantastic. In each of these scenes, Wilde plays on contemporary characterizations of the obscene work as a kind of ingestible 'poison' that performs its alchemy effortlessly and immediately, and in doing so he casts doubt on the supposed efficacy of this process, while only occasionally hinting at the more oblique and elaborate routes by which literary or erotic influences might operate. When seen as the easy prey of whatever immoral influences come his way—as the novel often invites us to see him—Dorian presents a thoroughly ironized portrait of a young person complying with the predictions of the obscenity police. The irony stems from the observation—trite today, but perhaps not in 1890—that anything might provoke an erotic reverie, including a discourse on the immorality of influence, if only it finds the right ear, and hence this reaction becomes the touchstone for identifying obscene works, while the subtler effects that Lord Henry prefers to contemplate can escape legal notice. The legal test translates a quality of the reader into a quality of the work and brands all such efficacious texts as obscene. Wilde's ironic perspective on the agency of art is developed, in part, through an ironic account of the agency of the obscene work, a work that appears to dominate the imagination without the intervention of the will.

### I. DORIAN GRAY IN THE COURTROOM

While Carson's interpretation would cast a long shadow over the novel, *Dorian Gray's* first critics were already reading it in the censorious, prosecutorial fashion that Wilde would confront at his trials. When *Lippincott's* published the original version on 20 June 1890, the *St. James's Gazette* responded four days later with a review asking whether 'the Treasury or the Vigilance Society will think it worth their while to prosecute Mr. Oscar Wilde or Messrs. Ward, Lock & Co.', and 'hop[ing] they will not'—by which the reviewer evidently meant that nothing would have pleased him more.<sup>12</sup> (The National Vigilance Association, organized in response to the same journalistic revelations by W. T. Stead that led to the passage of the 1885 statute, was a private group concerned with the regulation of 'criminal vice and public immorality', while the Treasury Department was charged with initiating obscenity proceedings for the Crown).<sup>13</sup> A few weeks later, a reviewer for the *Scots Observer* called

12 Samuel Henry Jeyes, 'A Study in Puppydom', *St. James's Gazette* (24 June 1890), 3. After Wilde's conviction, Jeyes recalled with satisfaction that he had 'pointed out that a book of this writer's seems less worthy the attention of the critic than the policeman'. Samuel Henry Jeyes, 'Over-Tolerance', *St. James's Gazette* (27 May 1895), 3.

13 On the NVA, see Mullin (notes 1 and 4 above), and E. J. Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance* (Dublin, 1977), 112–31. A firm of solicitors retained by the NVA had initiated the charges against Zola in 1888 and again in 1889.

*Dorian Gray* a ‘medico-legal’ fiction replete with ‘matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department or a hearing *in camera*’. The story, he observed, was ‘dis-creditable alike to author and editor’ and constituted an affront to ‘the public morals’.<sup>14</sup> Concluding that the novel was written primarily for the ‘outlawed noble-men and perverted telegraph-boys’<sup>15</sup> who had recently figured in the Cleveland Street trial, he implied that *Dorian Gray* deserved the same kind of treatment as the defendants in that case.

Others, without suggesting that legal action was warranted, nevertheless implied that the novel verged on the obscene. The *Pall Mall Gazette*, as noted above, cast its condemnation in the toxicological register that often accompanied accusations of obscenity, complaining about a ‘sickly atmosphere’ and ‘a penetrating poison in the air’, and adding that if Wilde had not contributed openly to the ‘literature of perversion’ available to French readers, that was only because of the ‘necessities of the market’ in England.<sup>16</sup> The London *Daily Chronicle* called *Dorian Gray* ‘a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French *Décadents*—a poisonous book. . .heavy with the mephitic odours of. . .putrefaction’, and darkly hinted that the novel included ‘one element which will taint every young mind that comes into contact with it’.<sup>17</sup> (The proofreader of the 1891 edition, Coulson Kernahan, echoed these sentiments, objecting that Lord Henry’s ‘patchouli-scented’ and ‘poisonous’ whisperings about yielding to temptation were also ‘whisper[ed] into the ears of readers, possibly of impressionable age and inflammable passions’; Kernahan evidently persuaded Wilde to excise the passage, but later observed ruefully that ‘other influences, whether within himself, or in the form of so-called friends’, led Wilde to change his mind.)<sup>18</sup> On 10 July, W. H. Smith and Son informed *Lippincott’s* that they felt ‘compelled to withdraw’ the magazine from their bookstalls.<sup>19</sup> If the National Vigilance Association had been contemplating an obscenity action, the opportunity had vanished once the magazine was no longer available for sale.

In its opening pages, *Dorian Gray* itself takes up the subject of litigation, when Lord Henry ruefully recalls the popular outcry against ‘poor Southwark’ when he

14 ‘Reviews and Magazines’, *Scots Observer*, 4 (5 July 1890), 181. The article has been ascribed by some to W. E. Henley, the paper’s editor, and by others to Charles Whibley, one of its reviewers. This review would be quoted by Carson at Wilde’s libel trial. After Wilde’s libel claim failed, the same paper (renamed, but still edited by Henley), described Wilde as an ‘obscene impostor’. ‘Notes’, *National Observer* (6 April 1895), 547.

15 ‘Reviews and Magazines’, 181.

16 ‘Mr. Oscar Wilde’s “Dorian Gray”’, 3.

17 *Daily Chronicle* (30 June 1890), 7. Various other papers responded with similar comments; see Karl Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1970), 67–82.

18 Coulson Kernahan, ‘Introduction’ to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York, NY, 1925), ix, x; see also Rupert Hart-Davis, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (New York, NY, 1962), 288 (letter from Wilde to Kernahan, 7 March 1891).

19 Letter from Ward, Lock, & Co. to Wilde, 10 July 1890, quoted in Neil McKenna, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (London, 2003), 138 (the original letter, which has not been reprinted in full, is in The National Archives, ref. CRIM 1/41/6). In 1899, the same fate would befall *Shams*, an anonymous novel about an artistic young man who is ‘taken up’ by an older gentleman of means. In this case, however, Smith’s boycott apparently did not harm the sales of the book, which went through four impressions in two months according to the publisher, Arthur Greening; see the introductory material in the fourth impression (London, 1899), [iv], [vi], ix. The book has been attributed to C. Ranger Gull; see David Wilkinson, ‘Guy Thorne’: *C. Ranger Gull* (High Wycombe, Bucks, 2012), 105.

'got into the Divorce Court'. Though not a criminal dispute, Southwark's case is at least potentially within the vicinity of the reviewers' complaints, because some unspecified form of 'immorality' is among the possible causes of his marital difficulties, according to Lord Henry. Offered as an urbane reflection on the tendency of 'the masses' to claim a monopoly on vice and to lash out at the 'upper orders' for 'poaching on their preserves' (13), this comment anticipates the class dynamics of the criminal trials in which Wilde was prosecuted for having sex with young men of a lower social class. *Dorian Gray* would figure as a crucial piece of evidence—one whose forensic significance was nebulous at the outset and became increasingly muted, but whose lingering presence retained the same power as Lord Henry's 'strange perfume'.

Although the novel played an ever-receding role in the course of Wilde's legal battles, his conviction had nearly the same result as a finding that the book was obscene.<sup>20</sup> At the libel trial, Carson quoted *Dorian Gray* at length, both when cross-examining Wilde and when making closing arguments to the jury. At the first criminal trial, Charles Gill ended the case for the prosecution by reading into the court record the transcript of Carson's cross-examination, but the judge instructed the jury to ignore the 'literary part of the case' because it was improper, especially 'in a criminal case', to 'confound [an author] with the characters of the persons he creates'.<sup>21</sup> That case ended in a hung jury, and at Wilde's second criminal trial, which finally yielded a conviction, the novel was not cited at all. Wilde's conviction was for 'gross indecency', not obscenity. *Dorian Gray* was at best a palimpsest in the prosecution's cache of evidence by this time. Many of Wilde's other writings continued to be published in London, albeit by Leonard Smithers, whose reputation was somewhat dubious.<sup>22</sup> Yet after the guilty verdict on 25 May 1895, *Dorian Gray* would rapidly become a scarce commodity in Britain. The novel's original publisher, Ward, Lock & Co. had prepared a second edition in late 1894 but did not issue it; according to Christopher Millard, 'it was sold off to the booksellers as a "remainder"' in October 1895.<sup>23</sup> This account finds some confirmation in a series of ads that ran for several months in the *Publishers' Circular*, starting in October 1895. Edward Baker, a second-hand book dealer in Birmingham, claimed that after Wilde's trial, *Dorian Gray* 'was suppressed by the publishers, who declined to sell another copy, although they were inundated with orders' and that, having 'purchased the whole of the few existing copies that were left for sale', he now had 'only a limited number'.<sup>24</sup> The next authorized

20 Michael S. Foldy, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (New Haven, CT, 1997) remains the best overall account of Wilde's trials.

21 'The Oscar Wilde Scandal', *Glasgow Herald* (2 May 1895), 4; 'Stuart Mason' (pseud. of Christopher Millard), *Oscar Wilde: Art and Morality*, rev. edn (London, 1912), 298. See also Foldy, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, 37.

22 A former solicitor, Smithers published numerous books by decadent writers; beginning in the 1880s, he was part of a small group of publishers (including Charles Carrington) known for publishing pornographic books, and he was involved in the publication of *Teleny*, a novel that has been associated with Wilde. Lisa Z. Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2002), 82-4; James G. Nelson, *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, Dowson* (University Park, PA, 2000), 34-6, 291.

23 Millard, *Oscar Wilde*, 283.

24 The language is taken from Baker's advertisement in *The Publishers' Circular and Booksellers' Record*, 63 (26 October 1895), 488. In a touch that might have been inspired by a reading of the novel, the ad

edition to be published in Britain did not appear until 1913. In the interim, as would befit an obscene book, English-language editions of the novel were published in Paris, and in a surreptitious English edition with a false imprint.<sup>25</sup> When Wilde's friend Robert Ross edited Wilde's *Complete Works* in 1908, thirteen volumes were published in England by Methuen, but *Dorian Gray* was published in a matching format in Paris by Charles Carrington, 'an indefatigable pornographer' and 'a stalwart of expatriate-produced pornography destined for the English market'.<sup>26</sup> By Ross's account, in fact, Methuen would have been happy to leave the novel out of the series altogether.<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere in Europe and North America, new editions and translations of *Dorian Gray* continued to appear during the years after Wilde's trials, and the novel faced very few censorship challenges.<sup>28</sup>

At the libel trial, *Dorian Gray* was hardly the only resource that the defence drew on, and Carson's use of the book depended more on imputation than argument. Nevertheless, his resort to a work of fiction as a means of legal evidence was unprecedented and even now has very few parallels.<sup>29</sup> Wilde's trials have often been seen as a crucial episode in the formation of a modern homosexual identity, and the opposing counsel's novel strategy highlights the legal creativity involved in framing Wilde as a type of person inclined towards certain acts—that is, as someone who so consummately embodied a type that the imprint of his identity could be discerned in his writing as well as his conduct. The creativity of this approach is also apparent from the judge's refusal to allow the jury to consider it, in the next round of litigation.

specified that 'the binding is half parchment and is ornamented and lettered after an aesthetic and curious design by the author'. Baker ran similar ads nearly weekly between 5 October and 28 December 1895. He also claimed that in six weeks he had already sold 600 copies, which were 'eagerly purchased at from two to three guineas each'. In the three ads published in December, Baker reported that 'the whole edition of 1,500 is rapidly getting exhausted' and that 'the book is likely to rise in value shortly'.

- 25 In 1904 an English piracy was published, dated '1890' on the title page. Millard, *Oscar Wilde*, 303. In an edition published in Austria four years later, but with the text in English, the editor remarked on its out-cast status: 'For a protracted period this remarkable book of the picture of Dorian Gray [has] strayed about in foreign countries like an exile'. Egon Friedell, 'Introduction', *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Vienna, 1908), v. The 1913 edition was printed in London by Simpkin Marshall. For a fuller discussion of *Dorian Gray*'s publication history, see Joseph Bristow (ed.), *The Picture of Dorian Gray: The 1890 and 1891 Texts* (Oxford, 2005), xi–xliii; Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession* (Oxford, 2000), 56–9.
- 26 Gregory Mackie, 'Publishing Notoriety: Piracy, Pornography, and Oscar Wilde', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 73 (2004), 986.
- 27 When negotiating over the reprint rights, Carrington (who owned the copyright at this point) held out for what Ross considered an unreasonable sum, and in a letter to Christopher Millard, Ross wrote, 'Methuen highly disapproves of *Dorian Gray* and is delighted that there are so many difficulties'. Maureen Borland, *Wilde's Devoted Friend: A Life of Robert Ross* (Oxford, 1990), 114. See also Rod Borroughs, 'Oscar Wilde's Translation of Petronius: The Story of a Literary Hoax', *English Literature in Transition*, 38 (1995), 27–30.
- 28 On the proliferation of new editions, see Stefano Evangelista (ed.), *The Reception of Oscar Wilde in Europe* (New York, NY, 2010), xxiii–xxxiv; Millard, *Oscar Wilde*, 293–310. After Wilde's conviction, *Dorian Gray* was removed from library shelves in St Louis and Newark, and was banned in Russia. Evelyn Geller, *Forbidden Books in American Public Libraries, 1876–1939* (Westport, CT, 1984), 51; Marianna Tax Choldin, *Russian Censorship of Western Ideas under the Tsars* (Durham, NC, 1985), 111.
- 29 There are some resemblances, but also important differences, in Clarence Darrow's recourse to Nietzsche in the Leopold and Loeb trial in 1924, and the prosecution's reliance on *Amok* in the 2007 trial of Krystian Bala. See Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche* (Chicago, IL, 2012) 145–6; David Grann, *The Devil and Sherlock Holmes* (New York, NY, 2010), 116–21, 125–30.

Of course the jurors at the first criminal trial were hardly likely to ignore that part of the case simply because the judge had instructed them to; indeed, Gill's effort to incorporate the transcript of the first case was probably extraneous, given the widespread press coverage of the libel trial, which effectively ensured that the jurors at both of the criminal proceedings would be aware of the earlier litigation even if the prosecution had made no reference to it.<sup>30</sup>

Carson's strategy was particularly apposite in a libel trial, where the question of reputation was paramount. Thus two inferences could be conveniently blended: namely, that only a person with intimate knowledge of these practices would write about them, and that in any case, the author of such a work is cultivating the reputation of someone who engages in the conduct it portrays. The novel's alleged obscenity was a premise for both inferences, which in turn would help to establish that the author was not entitled to a decent reputation, so that anyone who accused him of immorality had not uttered a libel, or had inflicted only a trivial injury (thus warranting 'nominal' damages of forty shillings, or 'contemptuous' damages of one farthing).<sup>31</sup>

The legal standard set out in *R. v. Hicklin* (1868) had provided that 'the test of obscenity is... whether the tendency of the matter... is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences, and into whose hands [the] publication... may fall'.<sup>32</sup> This was precisely the test that Carson implicitly invoked. In an argument that compacts a series of narrative frames, Carson read to the jury the passage in chapter two that begins with Lord Henry's musings, in a 'low, musical voice', on the possibility of living 'fully and completely', and ends with his memory of 'a book that he had read when he was sixteen, a book which had revealed to him much that he had not known before' (18–19).<sup>33</sup> Explicating the passage, Carson then painted Dorian as a classic example of a young person ruined by corrupting influences, observing that the novel describes 'that boy's life' from the time when 'corruption [is] implanted in his mind from his conversation with Lord Henry Wotton' up to the point when Dorian has indulged 'all the vices that can be imagined'—a span that includes, along the way, sections 'which might refer to the vice of sodomy'.<sup>34</sup> Carson seems to have regarded this opening tableau as merely an instance of what we might call the 'obscenity effect', depicted within the story and capable of corrupting the reader in precisely the same way that Lord Henry corrupts Dorian. (Having already suggested that *A Reboours* was a 'book... dealing with undisguised sodomy', Carson presumably would have

30 Potential jurors could, of course, be disqualified if they had already formed an opinion about the defendant's guilt, but at this time there was not an established practice of disqualifying jurors because of what they had read about a case. A judge who was concerned about pre-trial publicity might prohibit the newspapers from covering a particular hearing, under threat of being found in contempt of court. See Galia Schneebaum and Shai J. Lavi, 'The Riddle of *Sub-judice* and the Modern Law of Contempt', *Critical Analysis of Law*, 2 (2015), 173–98.

31 William Blake Odgers, *A Digest of the Law of Libel and Slander*, 2nd edn (London, 1887), 294.

32 *R. v. Hicklin*, (1868) L.R. 3 Q.B. 360, 371.

33 Holland, *Real Trial*, 259–60.

34 *Ibid.*, 261.



included it among Lord Henry's tools of corruption.)<sup>35</sup> According to this view, the reference to Lord Henry's own experience at an even younger age serves as yet another illustration of the same effect.

The concern about how readily the work 'may fall' into the wrong hands had made cheaper publications especially vulnerable under the *Hicklin* test—as the prosecutions of Vizetelly and the newspaper publishers would attest<sup>36</sup>—and Carson picked up on this point as well. Vulnerable readers, he observed, might easily suffer the same corrupting effect depicted in the plot, because rather than ensuring that 'the book never came into the hands of those' whom it could harm, Wilde had allowed it to be 'published at every bookstall. . . published and sold originally for one shilling. . . published in *Lippincott's Magazine*. . . [which] is. . . sold very largely in this country'. The magazine's low price and wide sales were irrelevant to Carson's ostensible point, namely that a writer must be 'actually posing as a sodomite' if he tells 'the story of a man corrupted by another man and who by such corruption is brought to commit. . . this sodomitic vice'.<sup>37</sup> The magazine's circulation would, however, be relevant to the implicit charge that *Dorian Gray* had the tendency and opportunity to corrupt vulnerable readers. As noted earlier, Carson's imputations were not allowed to figure in the criminal case against Wilde, but their ongoing significance may be gleaned from the chorus of approval after Wilde's conviction. For example, one commentator observed that 'this whole case has stamped as pernicious the kind of literature with which Wilde's name is closely identified', and another observed that while *Dorian Gray's* 'abominable immoralities' were aimed at 'the upper circles of the reading world', they had the same kind of 'corrupting influence' as more popular works 'which incite a less cultivated section of the reading public to even more dangerous crimes'.<sup>38</sup> The 'literary evidence' evidently had a lasting impact: twenty-six years later, in another trial for 'gross obscenity', involving defendants who had referred to *Dorian Gray* in their letters to each other, the judge recalled that 'Oscar Wilde had been cross-examined in regard to

35 Ibid, 96. Possibly as a result of Wilde's trials, *A Rebours* would not be published in Britain until 1926, and then only in a limited edition under the imprint of R. A. Caton's rather disreputable Fortune Press, although British editions of some other novels by Huysmans (such as *The Cathedral* and *En Route*) appeared in the late 1890s.

36 The point was highlighted in an article about a prosecution for selling photographs of French art works (see above, n. 5): 'It was a strange irony that one afternoon the court could be arguing as to the valuable copyright of very similar works—dignified by the name of art when exhibited in the windows of West-end shops—and that the next morning a wretched little trader like the prisoner should be brought into custody'. 'Selling Indecent Photographs', *Reynolds's Newspaper* (12 August 1888), 1. As Christopher Hilliard notes, 'High prices and limited editions could. . . place a volume out of the reach of working-class readers', and if these 'vulnerable readers. . . were unlikely to have access', the book would probably escape prosecution. Christopher Hilliard, 'Obscenity Law and the Politics of Reading in Modern England', *American Historical Review*, 118 (2013), 655.

37 Holland, *Real Trial*, 261.

38 'Oscar Wilde's Case', *Reynolds's Newspaper* (5 May 1895), 1; Hugh Chisholm, 'How to Counteract the "Penny Dreadful"', *Fortnightly Review*, 58 (1895), 765. Kirsten MacLeod has discussed the calls for legal regulation and prosecution of decadent literature in general, which appeared in papers such as the *National Observer* and the *Star* after Wilde's trials. Kirsten MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence* (Basingstoke, 2006), 135–48.

that book during his trial at the Old Bailey—a comment that led immediately to a discussion of the novel's 'indecen[cy]'.<sup>39</sup>

## II. 'OPEN TO . . . IMMORAL INFLUENCES': DORIAN GRAY AS READER

Carson's view takes the plot literally, as a member of the National Vigilance Association might. However, in prefacing the story of Dorian's career with this elaborately self-conscious display of the corrupting influence at work (and with its workings recorded in real time by Basil Hallward), Wilde renders the episode in a more equivocal fashion than the prosecutorial account would suggest, showing us Dorian under Lord Henry's spell while also offering an ironic perspective on the efficacy of the obscene work. To resist temptation, Lord Henry asserts, is to make the soul 'sick with. . . desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful' (19). Reflecting on these words, Dorian begins to experience 'entirely fresh impulses' (19), in a process whose workings are manifest to all. The extraneous reference to Lord Henry's own bookish past only amplifies the irony, substituting a sixteen-year-old in case the twenty-year-old Dorian appears too mature to count as an object of the law's solicitude. Indeed, one may wonder whether this touch was inspired by a letter published in the *London Sentinel* in 1888, whose author, shocked at the sight of a fourteen-year-old boy gazing at Zola's *La Terre* in a bookshop window, demanded its immediate removal because 'any young men who had not learned the Divine secret of self-control' could not 'read it without committing some form of outward sin within twenty-four hours after'.<sup>40</sup>

Lord Henry's words have an instantaneous and visible effect on Dorian, as if their mere utterance were sufficient to reshape his personality completely, and not merely to 'influence' him (in the fashion that Lord Henry has just condemned as 'immoral' [18]). Lord Henry's first speech produces a 'sudden impression' that leads Dorian to reconsider 'things in his boyhood' with fresh eyes.<sup>41</sup> This impression is readily apparent to Basil, who notes it and acknowledges the source: 'I don't know what Harry has been saying to you, but he has certainly made you have the most wonderful expression' (20). When Lord Henry resumes his seminar on youth, in the artist's garden, his comments again register immediately on Dorian, causing him to 'start' and to display a 'look of fear, such as people have when they are suddenly awakened' (21). Finally, just a page later, Lord Henry delivers an extended lecture on the genius of beauty and the horrors of ageing, and Dorian's 'open-eyed and wondering' reaction (23) is rapidly translated into words when he blurts out a series of indictments utterly 'unlike [the] Dorian' whom Basil knows (25). Wilde underscores the

39 'No Women Jurors for "Link" Case', *London Times* (8 June 1921), 9. For more on this trial, see H. G. Cocks, "'Sporty" Girls and "Artistic" Boys: Friendship, Illicit Sex, and the British "Companionship" Advertisement, 1913-1928', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 11 (2002), 460.

40 Quoted in National Vigilance Association, *Pernicious Literature, Debate in the House of Commons, Trial and Conviction for the Sale of Zola's Novels* (London, 1889), 6.

41 Others have commented on the speed of Dorian's response, associating it with contemporary pictorial technologies: Daniel Novak likens this 'sudden effect' to the creation of a 'photographic negative', while Adam Parkes considers it in relation to painterly techniques for 'conveying the momentary impression'. Daniel Novak, *Realism, Photography, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge, 2008), 142; Adam Parkes, *A Sense of Shock: The Impact of Impressionism on Modern British and Irish Writing* (Oxford, 2011), 58, 100.

significance of this transformation by emphasizing that the other two men have hardly changed at all since their youth: Lord Henry has already been shown in a pose ‘characteristic of him. . . [since] his Eton days’ (18), while Basil still ‘toss[es] his head back in that odd way that used to make his friends laugh at him at Oxford’ (6). Dorian, however, quite uncharacteristically, now declares that his ‘first wrinkle’ will cost him Basil’s friendship and that ‘Lord Henry Wotton is perfectly right’ about the supreme value of youth (25). To say that Lord Henry has exerted an influence would be an understatement; he is evidently correct when he muses, in the following chapter, that ‘there was nothing that one could not do with [Dorian]. He could be made a Titan or a toy’ (34). Dorian seems to be the very embodiment of the impressionable youth whose mind is ‘open to. . . immoral influences’.

One reason for considering Dorian’s behaviour in the light of the *Hicklin* test, instead of associating it with a more generalized conception of influence, involves the erotic power that flows from the painting. Its erotic force is apparent not only from Basil’s anxieties about having revealed too much about himself in it, but also from Lord Henry’s initial reaction, which is to wish that he could be accompanied both winter and summer by the ‘beautiful, brainless creature’ who ‘looks as if he was made of ivory and rose-leaves’ (6). During the moments of its final completion, the portrait seems to gain a further charge from Dorian’s demeanour. Standing mute as he ponders Lord Henry’s words, Dorian for some minutes remains ‘motionless, with parted lips, and eyes strangely bright’ (19). If the picture’s absorptive ability, displayed in the course of the novel, has anything to do with the vectors of desire passing between Basil, Dorian, and Lord Henry, the effect might be ascribed to the feature that occasions these ricocheting rays—namely, Dorian’s sensual expression, inspired by Lord Henry’s ‘bittersweet Paterian nothings’<sup>42</sup> and captured by Basil during Dorian’s final sitting. In case the narrative description did not sufficiently highlight the magnetic power of Dorian’s face, Basil also calls attention to it, exclaiming that he has ‘caught the effect’ he was after: ‘the half-parted lips, and the bright look in the eyes’ (20). Lord Henry, whose responsibility evidently cannot be too greatly emphasized (despite Basil’s acknowledgement just a few pages earlier), again demands credit for Dorian’s expression, insisting that it ‘is entirely due to me’ (24). The image is summoned up again in the following chapter, when after reflecting on the fascinating and tragic family background that ‘posed the lad, made him more perfect as it were’, Lord Henry recollects another, equally satisfying pose—Dorian’s ‘startled eyes and lips parted in frightened pleasure’ at dinner the previous evening (33).<sup>43</sup> Given that Lord Henry is so adept at eliciting this reaction and finds it so gratifying, we may wonder how often the same expression appears in the seventeen or eighteen photographs of Dorian that he keeps at home (41).

In capturing Dorian’s gaze during those crucial minutes after Lord Henry’s fateful and disturbing remarks, Basil catches Dorian in an erotic reverie, a slowly developing

42 Christopher Craft, ‘Come See about Me: Enchantment of the Double in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*’, *Representations*, 91 (2005), 122.

43 In *Teleny*, Des Grieux similarly dwells on this erotic effect when he beholds Teleny’s ‘beautiful mouth and parted lips’. *Teleny, Or, The Reverse of the Medal*, ed. Amanda Mordavsky Caleb (Kansas City, MO, 2010), 45. Wilde is said to have read it in manuscript around the end of 1890, some months after *Dorian Gray* was published in *Lippincott’s*. Bristow (ed.), *Dorian Gray* (cited in n. 24), xxi–xxii, n. 22.

awareness of a 'secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses' (19). Just as Wilde makes a point of repeating the description of Dorian's sensual expression (and of repeating that Lord Henry's words are its cause), he also develops this musical metaphor in a way that underscores Lord Henry's ability not simply to influence Dorian but to control him. The vibrating chord, presented here as a feature of Dorian's internal sensation, takes on even more sensual force when Lord Henry appropriates the theme. At the same time that he recalls Dorian's enchantingly coltish and impressionable reactions at the dinner table, Lord Henry also recalls the pleasure of hearing his own 'intellectual views echoed back. . .with all the added music of passion and youth', and this reflection, in turn, leads him to muse on his longing to 'dominate' Dorian, a longing that he fuels by contemplating the prospect of 'project[ing] one's soul into some gracious form, and let[ting] it tarry there for a moment', and of 'convey[ing] one's temperament into another, as though it were a subtle fluid' (33). It is while considering this languorous, leisurely means of insinuating himself that Lord Henry pictures Dorian responding with 'startled eyes and lips parted in frightened pleasure', an expression that reveals to Lord Henry the same exquisite sensitivity as a violin that 'answer[s] to every touch. . .of the bow' (33). Once again, these thoughts harken back to the meeting in Basil's studio, but in imagining Dorian as a sensitive instrument responding on cue to his companion's probings, Lord Henry is not repeating his own earlier perception, but instead is taking up Dorian's earlier perception of himself, formed after Lord Henry has finished speaking and has chosen 'the precise psychological moment when to say nothing' (20). Even at their first meeting, he seems to understand his new friend so well as to determine the effect of his own words on Dorian, who responds in a register that the older man has already anticipated.

Can Lord Henry's rapid and corrupting effect simply be ascribed to the power of his own personality? Basil suggests as much, remarking that the indolent cynic 'has a very bad influence over all his friends, with the single exception of myself' (18). Yet Basil also suggests that even before meeting Lord Henry, Dorian has already displayed a sadistic streak, sometimes 'tak[ing] a real delight in giving me pain' (14). As Pamela Thurschwell observes, Dorian's extended meditation on Lord Henry's speech 'is a passage precisely about the difficulty of mapping the workings of influence. . .Although Dorian believes that Lord Henry's words are entirely fresh and new to him, he simultaneously sees his influence as waking up something that was dormant in himself'.<sup>44</sup> The novel hints at various causes that might explain Dorian's propensities, such as the boyhood spent in solitude (which Lord Henry considers to be so significant [33]) or perhaps a hereditary tendency, a 'strange poisonous germ' that 'crept from body to body till it had reached his own' (121).<sup>45</sup> Wilde hints at these explanations but refrains from endorsing any of them. His emphasis is not on

44 Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, 2004), 62; see also Parkes, *A Sense of Shock*, 59-60.

45 Both explanations have found interested commentators; see, e.g., Esther Rashkin, 'Art as Symptom: A Portrait of Child Abuse in "The Picture of Dorian Gray"', *Modern Philology*, 95 (1997), 68-80; Michael Wainwright, 'Oscar Wilde, the Science of Heredity, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*', *English Literature in Transition*, 54 (2011), 494-522. Stephen Kern considers both possibilities in *A Cultural History of Causality* (Princeton, NJ, 2004), 39, 86.

the cause of Dorian's propensity for corruption but on the intensity of Dorian's willing submission. Just as Lord Henry's first words 'hit the mark' like an arrow finding its target (20), Dorian adopts the French novel as his guidebook, having 'almost entirely lost control' over himself because he has ceded control to this manual (108), and he commits murder at (what he imagines to be) the painting's behest: 'suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over him, as though it had been suggested to him by the image on the canvas, whispered into his ear by those grinning lips' (133). Whatever corrupting enticement comes his way—a jaded voluptuary, a French novel, a painting of himself in an erotic pose—is sure to take hold immediately and to dominate his life.

While the prosecutorial emphasis on this theme focused on Dorian's unnamed sins and the possibility that sodomy might be among them, the novel actually shows us Dorian rehearsing an erotic ritual with the painting. In revising the text, Wilde erased the occasional references to hand-holding that might suggest physical intimacy among the male characters,<sup>46</sup> but he did not remove a similar detail from the scene that describes Dorian's sexual bond with the picture. Though delineated only once, the ritual is presented as one that Dorian enacts many times:

[H]e. . . would. . . stand, with a mirror, in front of the portrait. . . looking now at the evil and aging face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his sense of pleasure. . . He would examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead. . . He would place his white hands beside the coarse bloated hands of the picture, and smile. He mocked the misshapen body and the failing limbs. (109)

This passage shows Dorian luxuriating in the erotic pleasure the encounter affords, as if he were one of Ellis and Symonds's case studies, caught in the act of developing a paraphilia.<sup>47</sup> The picture, with its 'aging' face and 'wrinkling' forehead, grows more hideous as Dorian gazes at it, while his own static beauty remains impermeable. He seems to be provoking this change, using his beauty to intensify the painting's hideousness—an instance, in real time, of the dynamic that leaves him 'filled. . . with [the] pride of individualism. . . and smiling, with secret pleasure, at the misshapen shadow that had to bear the burden that should have been his own' (109). Dorian's mode of domination, like Lord Henry's, operates rapidly and its erotic effect is even more direct. As Christopher Craft observes, 'The sheer recursivity of this process—from sin to altered image; from altered image to image-altering sin—only enhances the uncanny power that holds Dorian in thrall to portrait and mirror alike. . . The abyssal intensities generated throughout this process constitute Dorian's central romantic and erotic experience'.<sup>48</sup>

46 See Bristow (ed.), *Dorian Gray*, xxxvi, lii, 13 (note to line 13).

47 His mockery has already been given a sexual tinge when, 'in boyish mockery of Narcissus', Dorian 'feign[s] to kiss' the painting's lips (90).

48 Craft, 'Come See about Me', 116.

Dorian smiles at both his own imperviousness and his power to generate, and witness the effects of, the ravages that are properly his. His pleasure at escaping the terrible 'burden' is intensified by seeing it foisted on the 'misshapen shadow'.<sup>49</sup> Revelling in his power and the picture's increasing degradation, Dorian fails to recognize that he has made himself dependent on the painting as a means of affirming his sense of control. His horror of 'be[ing] separated from the picture', his compulsive need to 'rush back to town' from his country estate, his inability to 'endure to be long out of England' (119)—these reactions all reveal the shaky foundation that undergirds his 'pride of individualism'.

Indeed, when he enacts his self-absorbing drama before the painting, Dorian is merely repeating, with visual props, the same process of addiction that captivates him when he becomes a devoted reader of the 'fascinating' novel lent by Lord Henry, the book whose hero seems to Dorian 'a kind of prefiguring type of himself' (108). Whereas Dorian mocks the painting, he emulates the novel, obsessively re-reading certain chapters and treating the hero's investigations into various 'passions and modes of thought' as an inspiration for his own experiments in sensual pleasure (107). Unwilling ever to be out of sorts with the book, Dorian obtains 'nine large-paper copies of the first edition. . . bound in different colours, so that they might suit his various moods' (108). And whereas Dorian enjoys the mastery he exerts over the painting, he prefers to subject himself to the novel's spell: 'For years, Dorian Gray could not free himself from the influence of this book. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he never sought to free himself from it' (108). Like a character in William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, methodically comparing the effects of different drugs in search of the one that will produce the most powerful fix, Dorian sets about studying the logic of addiction—an addiction rendered more explicit by the 'hunger for opium' that consumes him near the story's end (156).<sup>50</sup> If he 'seem[s], at times, to have almost entirely lost control' over his nature, that is because he appears intent on surrendering that control, on cultivating a habit that will take away his self-control.

In each of these scenarios, as with Dorian's spellbound response to Lord Henry's first words, Wilde makes Dorian react almost reflexively. Whether he is motivated by predisposition or not, the corrupting stimulus inevitably yields the legally predicted effect. It is not simply that Wilde eschews the realist mode, as he had recommended in 'The Decay of Lying' (1889), when objecting that 'the transformation of Dr. Jekyll reads. . . like an experiment out of the *Lancet*' and that 'by trying to make it too true', Stevenson had merely made his tale plausible while 'robbing [it] of its reality'.<sup>51</sup> Even if we accept the fantastic premise of *Dorian Gray*, Wilde continually undermines the 'reality' of his plot by rendering Dorian as a kind of automaton who behaves as if he considered the *Hicklin* test to be a set of operating instructions, as if it

49 A burden that Basil is also implicitly forced to share, when his corpse casts a 'grotesque misshapen shadow on the spotted carpet' (146).

50 For a helpful discussion of the novel's treatment of narcotic consumption, see Phyllis Weliver, 'Oscar Wilde, Music, and the 'Opium-Tainted Cigarette': Disinterested Dandies and Critical Play', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 15 (2010), 315–47.

51 Richard Ellman (ed.), *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde* (Chicago, IL, 1969), 295.

were a guide to action rather than a test of the qualities that supposedly inhere in a work.

Dorian himself betrays at least a slight awareness of this effect when he complains about having been ‘poisoned’ by a book. The term (as noted earlier, a favourite epithet of the vice crusaders) is one that Wilde makes a point of repeating, lest its application to the plot be missed through lack of emphasis. This verdict on the French novel is pronounced three times—twice in narrative prose, and once in dialogue. Towards the end of chapter 10, in the paragraphs that describe Dorian’s first delirium under the spell of the ‘yellow book’, with its ‘curious jewelled style’ and its drug-like ability to ‘trouble the brain’ and to produce ‘a malady of dreaming’, the narrator interrupts the winding, byzantine sentences with a single declarative one: ‘It was a poisonous book’ (107). At the end of the following chapter, after the elaborate inventory that documents Dorian’s collecting mania, the narrator again provides a short summation: ‘Dorian Gray had been poisoned by a book’ (124). These descriptions might seem authoritative and unequivocal, were it not for the already thoroughly ironized mode in which Wilde renders the other obscenity effects in the novel.

Moreover, the apparent certainty of this narrative assessment is missing from the scene near the end of the novel in which Dorian tells Lord Henry, ‘[Y]ou poisoned me with a book once’, adding that he must never ‘lend that book to any one’ because it ‘does harm’ (183). In the original version of the story, Lord Henry lets the accusation pass unchallenged, and hence if it is to serve as a means of retrospectively highlighting the ambiguity of the first two assessments, it does so only implicitly.<sup>52</sup> When Wilde revised the text for book publication, possibly dissatisfied with the result—particularly in light of the early reviewers’ frequent and pugnacious use of the term in their indictments of the story—he added a response by Lord Henry: ‘As for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. . . [Art] is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame’ (183). Dorian is left to connect the dots, and to conclude that his favourite novel, like his picture, is ‘harmful’ only because it shows him his own shame. Notably, he has not characterized the book as ‘immoral’, yet Lord Henry implies that Dorian’s protest amounts to the same thing, and hence that it deserves the same mockery that the preface (also added to the 1891 text) lavishes on readers whose ‘dislike of realism’ is merely ‘the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass’ (3). In what is probably *Dorian Gray*’s most direct engagement with the conventional legal template of the obscene work, Wilde both affirms and denies the poisonous effect of the French book, aligning Dorian’s reaction with the novel’s other treatments of the immoral influence.

52 Robert Sherard noted that although Wilde himself talked about having been poisoned by a book, this biographical detail only added another level of irony: ‘Wilde used to make the same silly, self-deceiving statement about himself, and attributed to some “poisonous book” which he had once read many of the abnormalities of his conduct. In this, no doubt, he was prompted by the story which he had heard at home as a boy, how [his] mother. . . had been prompted to action and to an entire renunciation of early principles and creeds by the reading of a single book’. Robert Sherard, *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (New York, NY, 1906), 66.

That Wilde's ironized portrayal of the corrupting influence would be taken literally, when subjected to forensic scrutiny, is hardly surprising, because despite the many subtleties that legal analysis affords, irony is not among its tools. Indeed, Wilde's habit of ironic reversal suffuses the novel as a whole, and thus offers numerous opportunities for a legally inclined observer to catch the narrator incriminating himself.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps nowhere are Wilde's elaborate equivocations more explicit, and more succinctly rendered, than in a moment of narrative self-display and self-concealment that occurs towards the end of the chapter that details Dorian's efforts, under the sway of the French novel, to adorn himself in 'modes of thought that he knew to be really alien to his nature' (112). After describing the historical worlds that Dorian fastidiously reconstructs and the sensual experiences that he cultivates, the narrator intrudes to justify these experiments:

Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities.

Such, at any rate, was Dorian Gray's opinion. (121)

No sooner has the otherwise disembodied narrator inserted himself—in open violation of the rules of omniscient narration—than he seems to withdraw, implying that he has merely been voicing Dorian's views. By interposing 'at any rate', the narrator attempts to disavow ownership of the sentiment. What is 'at any rate' someone else's opinion is not necessarily the speaker's after all, and when hedged with this concession, the utterance is cast in a more diffident form. All the same, the effect of the qualification is not to cancel out the first statement but to multiply its forms, presenting it as both Dorian's *and* the narrator's. The half-hearted retraction achieves what could not be achieved if the statement were rendered, through indirect discourse, as Dorian's from the outset, nor if the narrator simply allowed Dorian to agree (by writing, for example, 'such was *also* Dorian Gray's opinion'). By purporting to disavow the statement, the narrator highlights his own insincerity, calling attention to an attitude of duplicity that comports with the novel's many equivocations about the consequences of Dorian's exposure to the immoral influences he encounters.

This episode perfectly exemplifies a tendency that Wilde's legal opponents would find irresistible. His elaborately staged admission appears, from a forensic perspective, to be inadvertent, making it an ideal piece of evidence for the prosecution.<sup>54</sup> Its apparently accidental revelation is the complement, in a sense, to Wilde's famously 'regrettable slip' at the libel trial (a slip that by most accounts changed the course of the trial proceedings, which until then had seemed favourable to Wilde)—his admission that he had never kissed Walter Grainger because the sixteen-year-old 'was a peculiarly plain boy'.<sup>55</sup> The strategy of Gill and Carson, to search Wilde's

53 Henry James anticipated precisely this kind of reader when he wrote, in a letter to Florence Bell, that '[e]verything Oscar does is a deliberate trap for the literalist', and that it was 'discourag[ing]' to see how reliably 'the literalist [would] walk straight up to it, look straight at it and step straight into it'. Letter of 23 February 1892, in Leon Edel (ed.), *The Letters of Henry James* (Cambridge, MA, 1974–1984), 3:373.

54 Indeed, Kernahan (note 18) called the shift into the first person a 'slip' (xii) and then speculated that it may have been 'intentional' because for Wilde, 'laws' of both 'art and morals' existed 'only to be broken at will' (xiii).

55 Foldy, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, 17.



fiction for evidence of his inclinations, follows logically from the premises that the author cannot help revealing himself in his writings, and that when a statement appears to be probative according to the assumptions of evidence law, it can be interpreted accordingly. As we have seen, the literary evidence in fact was not legally admissible, but that did not lessen its ability to incriminate Wilde, nor, in turn, the ability of his conviction to confirm the perception that *Dorian Gray* was an obscene work. That the novel itself played such an instrumental role in the three trials was one of the ironies flowing from Wilde's delineation of the obscenity effect.

*University of Toronto*