32. Rosenberg, who also quotes these lines, provides the apposite gloss: "Yet these hands, which Tennyson has sought throughout the poem, are not Hallam's but those of the immortal Love of the Prologue." Rosenberg in *In Memoriam*, p. 214.
33. Eliot in Hunt, *Casebook*, p. 133.
34. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London, 1953–1974), vol. 14, pp. 244–45.
35. Ricks, *Tennyson*, p. 216.
36. Irigaray, *The Sex*, p. 193.
37. Tennyson quoted in Hallam, Lord Tennyson, *Alfred, Lord Tennyson: A Memoir* (London, 1897), vol. 1, p. 300.
38. Rosenberg, "Two Kingdoms," p. 216.
39. The present essay is a shortened version of a dissertation chapter that has benefitted from a number of readings; for these I want especially to thank Carol Christ, Catherine Gallagher, D. A. Miller, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Alex Zwerdling.

Representation and Homophobia in *The Picture of Dorian Gray**

Richard Dellamora

Although homosexuality in the nineteenth century was often perceived as a disturbance in gender-relations, twentieth-century writers have often regarded it *sui generis*.[1] In her recent book, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve Sedgwick proposes a persuasive case for viewing desire between men as part of the normal structure of gender-relations. According to Sedgwick, especially in the nineteenth century masculine privilege was sustained by male friendship within institutions like the public schools, the older Universities, clubs, and the professions. Because, however, the continuing dominance of bourgeois males also required that they marry and produce offspring, the intensity and sufficiency of male bonding needed to be strictly regulated. Sedgwick locates the regulating mechanism in homophobia, a term whose current prominence in literary discussions she is responsible for. Homophobia (or what she refers to as "male homosexual panic") regulates the limits of male friendship; the fear of ordinary males that they might be (or might be accused of being) homosexual compels them to direct their energies into marriage. "Because the paths of male entitlement, especially in the nineteenth century, required certain intense male bonds that were not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds, an endemic and ineradicable state of...male homosexual panic became the normal condition of the male heterosexual entitlement" ("The Beast in the Closet" 151). The resulting situation is a double bind in which "the most intimate male bonding" is prescribed at the same time that "the remarkably cognate" homosexuality is proscribed (152).

The opening of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* provides an instance of this contradictory situation. One of the novel's three male protagonists, the painter Basil Hallward, begins by confessing his passion–he calls it "idolatry" (11)–for his young model, Dorian Gray. In a passage that Walter Pater quoted with approval in his 1891 review, Basil codifies his infatuation in terms of the synthesizing cultural ideal prominent in the writing of Matthew Arnold and Pater.

> "I sometimes think, Harry, that there are only two eras of any importance in the world's history. The first is the appearance of a new medium for art, and the second is the appearance of a new personality for art also. What the invention of oil-painting was to the Venetians, the face of Antinoüs was to late Greek sculpture, and the face of Dorian Gray will some day be to me....His personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style. I see things differently, I think of them differently. I can now recreate life in a way that was hidden from me before....Unconsciously he defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek. The harmony of soul and body–how much that is! We in our madness have separated the two, and have invented a realism that is vulgar, an ideality that is void. Harry! if you only knew what Dorian Gray is to me." (9-10)

Hallward's portrait of Dorian prophesies a Renaissance that is both cause and effect of a new way of life capable of integrating responsibility with an open attitude towards experience. This ideal is based in turn on delight in the male body and on a celebration of masculine desire.

Although the ideal brings to mind the early writing of Pater, especially the essay on Winckelmann (see Dellamora), there is a crucial difference between the homosexual contexts in which Pater affirms the ideal of cultural renewal in *The Renaissance* and *Marius the Epicurean* and the context that Wilde establishes. Wilde chooses what Sedgwick would call a male homosocial context in which to frame Basil's version of Pater's ideal: Basil confesses his "secret" (5) not to Dorian but to an old Oxford friend, Lord Henry Wotton. By definition this context is heterosexual. Wotton is married and pursues actresses. Basil himself is a graduate of Oxford, a well-established artist, and respectable to a fault. Later, he repeatedly enjoins Dorian to conformity. Both older men live in a network of male friendships that ramify through the novel.

Accordingly, even though Sedgwick remarks that "the triangular relationship of Basil, Dorian, and Lord Henry makes sense only in homosexual terms" (*Between Men* 176), one might more accurately say that homosexuality exists here within a heterosexual framework which demands that desire between men be negated. The demand is doubly ironic since the portrait in which Basil has revealed his secret is prominent both at the start and at the end of the novel. The painting suggests how the masculine desire that propels the action may be both acknowledged and objectified in ways that permit it to circulate and yet to be ever evaded in the form of genital contact between men. As a substitute for the desire that motivates it in the first place, the picture functions as a sign of economic, social, and gendered privilege: "the gracious and comely form" (1), a description redolent of the stylish portraiture of Wilde's friend, John Singer Sargent, contrasts to the plebeian awkwardness of the brother of Dorian's fiancé later: "He was thick-set of figure, and his hands and face were large, and somewhat clumsy in movement. He was not so finely bred as his sister" (61).[2] The form, face, and color that attract Sybil Vane signify the wealth, status, and power of Dorian and other men of his class. Her brother responds instinctively with a self-protective hatred of the "gentleman" (66) while just as spontaneously Basil, Sir Henry, and Dorian worship the representation.

*This paper was delivered at the conference "The New Gender Scholarship," U of Southern California, Feb. 14, 1987.

1. For nineteenth-century views see Weeks ch. 6.
2. Albert Boime makes detailed comparisons between Sargent and Basil Hallward in an essay included in the catalogue of the current exhibition of the works of John Singer Sargent.

The portrait serves yet another function as the noble image of a masculine superego, simultaneously celebrating the male form while forbidding touch. This peculiarly male, homosocial ego-ideal is one aspect of what may also appear as the vengeful "conscience" that in different ways constrains all three men (cf. Wilde, *Letters* 263-264). Later it returns in the obfuscating rhetoric of Platonic idealization. Just before Dorian kills Basil, the painter says: "You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream" (114). But Basil's self-deception is transparent.

The portrait is also a visible sign of self-alienation. When Dorian first sees the completed painting, he is both delighted and roused to self-consciousness: "A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time" (24). Wilde normally regards self-consciousness positively because it implies a more complex awareness, but here it functions negatively, alienating Dorian from spontaneous self-delight.[3] He faces what he calls a "shadow" (25) of himself. "Yes, there would be a day when his face would be wrinkled and wizen, his eyes dim and colourless, the grace of his figure broken and deformed. The scarlet would pass away from his lips, and the gold steal from his hair. The life that was to make his soul would mar his body. He would become dreadful, hideous, and uncouth" (25). Dorian's perception of himself as a representation has as an immediate consequence contempt and fear of the body. The instantaneous awareness of temporality is apt too since the conditions of masculine desire in male homosocial culture rule out the possibility of a passionate physical and affective connection between men. Duration loses whatever value it might otherwise have in terms of the development of such relationships. As well, Dorian's revulsion suggests anxiety about the disease that is liable to accompany sexual activity. Wilde himself was syphilitic, and during the 1890s fear of syphilis was a major concern among both male and female novelists (Ellmann 27; Showalter).

Had Wilde written *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1865 instead of 1890, he likely would have resolved the male triangle by arranging a marriage between Dorian and a strong young woman. Charles Dickens uses this solution in his novel *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865) (Sedgwick, *Between Men* ch. 9). In that book, the effete, useless male protagonist, Eugene Wrayburn, though physically broken, is saved from drowning by a young working-class heroine, Lizzie Hexam, whom he marries in defiance of respectable opinion. Wilde parodies this sort of improbable yet normalizing conclusion in Dorian's attraction to a young East-End actress, whom he discovers while trying to evade the "exquisite poison" (48) of Lord Henry's influence. As Dorian says to Henry: "Your voice and the voice of Sybil Vane are two things that I shall never forget. When I close my eyes, I hear them, and each of them says something different. I don't know which to follow" (50).

Readers of the novel usually remember that Sybil plays the role of Juliet on the evening when she loses both her ability to act and her ability to fascinate Dorian. Less often do they recall that on the evening when he proposes to her, she is playing Rosalind, Shakespeare's cross-dressing heroine. Dorian enthuses: "When she came on in her boy's clothes she was perfectly wonderful" (75). While the homosexual subtext is evident, the passage continues in a way that makes clear the homophobia impelling Dorian's rush into Sybil's arms. Dorian envisages her in a variety of roles in which she is murdered or driven to suicide by a lover:

> One evening she is Rosalind, and the next evening she is Imogen. I have seen her die in the gloom of an Italian tomb, sucking the poison from her lover's lips. I have watched her wandering through the forest of Arden, disguised as a pretty boy in hose and doublet and dainty cap. She has been mad, and has come into the presence of a guilty king, and given him rue to wear, and bitter herbs to taste of. She has been innocent, and the black hands of jealousy have crushed her reed-like throat. I have seen her in every age and in every costume. (50-51)

The poisonous lover's touch suggests Dorian's guilt about playing the role of heterosexual lover (in point of fact, he does drive Sybil to suicide). But the passage while literally denoting heterosexual love also suggests his fear of being seduced by Wotton. Dorian fears that a male lover will poison him too.

Of course, Sybil's cross-dressing might suggest an imaginative response to sexual difference; but the possibility is submerged by Dorian's sexual panic. The aesthetic image of Sybil proves to be just as estranging and estranged from relationships in time as is Dorian's portrait. Wilde mordantly points out how limited are the possibilities of relationship between the pair. Sybil projects marriage in an infantilizing rhetoric in which she casts Dorian as "Prince Charming." Wilde casts her in the context of fin-de-siècle naturalism. Her family is a reservoir of intense and unresolved sexuality. Her mother hopes to fulfill both her and her son's ambitions by means of Sybil's success; and her brother James has an incestuous regard for her. The stylistic incongruities between these portions of the narrative and Dorian's upper-middle-class and aristocratic milieu indicate how impossible marriage between the two is. Given Dorian's gender, wealth, and status, he is more likely to take Sybil as his mistress, a possibility to which Sir Henry alludes and that appears to be on the mind of "the horrid old Jew" (52) who offers to take Dorian backstage to meet her. The conversion of Sybil by this means into a commodity, though parallel to the similar conversion of Dorian by way of the portrait, would negate her worth to Dorian as a figure of imaginative mobility.

Dorian himself has a plan for Sybil which inadvertently shows again the tendency to substitute the representation of desire for desire itself, although in this case for feminine desire. He hopes to make Sybil the star of a West End theater that he will buy. The plan unwittingly makes clear his intention to take possession of Sybil's marvelous vitality: "I want to place her on a pedestal of gold, and to see the world worship the woman who is mine" (77). In this instance, however, the representation will be public not private since, as the object of Dorian's desire, the actress will reflect his power and attractiveness, a desirability that can be transformed into the literal gold of commercial success. In devising this scheme, Wilde knew whereof he spoke; among several leading actresses who were friends of his, one, Lillie Langtry, had become a star after first being mistress to the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII (Amor

3. Cf. Haley's discussion of Wilde's view of self-consciousness.

66). Dorian, however, has no opportunity to put his plan into action. Predictably, the sudden engagement propels Sybil out of the world of play and into a world at once of sentimentality and calculation. In that reduced environment, she loses the allure of difference that she had momentarily possessed; and to Dorian she becomes nothing.

> "Yes," he cried, "you have killed my love. You used to stir my imagination. Now you don't even stir my curiosity. You simply produce no effect. I loved you because you were marvellous, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art. You have thrown it all away....You have spoiled the romance of my life. How little you can know of love, if you say it mars your art! Without your art you are nothing. I would have made you famous, splendid, magnificent. The world would have worshipped you, and you would have borne my name. What are you now? A third-rate actress with a pretty face." (86-87)

Dorian's remarks make clear that Sybil has mattered for him not for herself or even for her interpretative powers but because she realizes and gives shape to the poetry of genius. The specific genius relevant in context is Shakespeare, whom Wilde if not Dorian is acutely aware of as a bisexual writer.[4] But, leaving bisexuality to the side, genius here denotes masculine genius. And Sybil has been most significant in roles like that of Desdemona, Ophelia or Juliet where she expresses love and desire for men. Sybil lends desire to men by making them objects of desire–a process that lends a sense of reality and "romance" to young Dorian. Naturally, he identifies himself ("my name") with the object of her erotic energy, energy earlier imagined and penned by another male, named Shakespeare. When Sybil fails her designated role as realizer of Shakespeare, she falls back into her identity as metonymically conceived in terms of ethnic, social and economic origins and milieu. She is, in Dorian's phrase, "third-rate."

After the failure of this romance, Dorian's erotic direction becomes more decidedly homosexual. As an indirect consequence of her suicide, Basil confesses his infatuation; and Dorian realizes for the first time the strength of his hold over men of homosexual orientation. As another result too, Lord Henry sends him a copy of Huysmans' *À Rebours* (125-126), a novel whose protagonist, Des Esseintes, at one point strikes up a homosexual relationship with an adolescent (ch. 9). Dorian's subsequent relationships with Singleton, Campbell, and "that wretched boy in the Guards" (150) among others hint that Dorian becomes actively involved.[5] Like the prospect of marriage or the possibility of keeping a mistress, however, these homosexual entanglements occur at the expense of an awareness of difference. Affairs with other men simply provide Dorian with another pre-scripted role to play. As he says in comparing himself with Des Esseintes: "The hero, the wonderful young Parisian, in whom the romantic and the scientific temperaments were so strangely blended, became to him a kind of prefiguring type of himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it" (127).

Eventually, Dorian kills first Basil and subsequently himself. At this point, the portrait once again is important. When the servants enter the room, they find "hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was" (224). At the moment of Dorian's death, the portrait is magically restored to its pristine state. Magic here means the reasserted symmetry of social and economic power (mastery) with masculine desire ("youth and beauty"). Dorian's bodily presence, however, is reduced to an incongruous jumble of signs: on the one hand of privilege (the evening dress, the rings) and on the other, of venereal disease (cf. Showalter 103).

The restoration of the painting might be taken to suggest that Basil's idealism can surmount its failure in life and continue to remind aware viewers of the possibilities of a more varied and tolerant way of living. Yet the refusal of homosexual love among the three men undermines this ideal. Deprived of implications of social change, the ideal like the portrait masks a continuing homophobia in the rhetoric of high culture. Viewed ironically, the portrait continues to be an idol to which Dorian–and other young men and women–may be sacrificed. It hypocritically conceals the power of an oligarchy to corrupt those who are less clever or advantaged.

Wilde draws the orthodox moral fable of the novel to this sharp, ironic edge. Not surprisingly, literary critics at once attacked both the novel and its author. But in one of the letters to the press that he wrote in defense of himself, Wilde suggests an alternative reading of the novel for a second and covert readership. "The real moral of the story is that all excess as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment, and this moral is so far artistically and deliberately suppressed that it does not enunciate its law as a general principle, but realises itself purely in the lives of individuals" (263). Wilde's statement directs attention to deliberate suppression of significance in the novel but in a way that permits the withheld meaning to be communicated. Basil and Sir Henry both err by renouncing masculine desire, and both are punished.

In his later career, Walter Pater wrote a number of studies in which he updated the myth of Dionysus as an allegory of homophobic assault on young men.[6] One might draw a number of connections between these works and Wilde's novel, which also contains a dark allegory of the sacrifice of young men to preserve the *status quo*. In this respect, the novel protests against the destruction of relationship and desire between men. Yet Wilde's novel insists on representations and surfaces. In it homosexual reference remains within a heterosexual discourse that focuses on male friendship and on homophobic anxiety about masculine desire, whether homosexual or not. Wilde portrays and to a considerable extent analyzes this unhappy situation, but he does not transform the action in such a way as to suggest that masculine desire might have a place

4. See Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr. W. H."
5. Symonds in his *Memoirs* reports being accosted at night in the West End by a grenadier (186-187).
6. "Denys L'Auxerrois" (1886); "Apollo in Picardy" (1893); see also "A Study of Dionysus" (1876) with its allusion to the homosexual painter, Simeon Solomon, who was arrested in 1873.

in the constructive lives of men who recognize and accept their homosexuality and that of others. Instead in "The Artist's Preface," signed not by Wilde but by Basil, the painter returns, not dead at all, but continuing to swim in the milieu that Pater, reviewing the novel, refers to as "the elaborately conventional, sophisticated, disabused world Mr. Wilde dissects so cleverly, so mercilessly" (144). Of course, Mr. Wilde too is present in Basil's studio; and here we are told "the germ" of the novel is sown. In this atmosphere of contagion, novels like *The Picture of Dorian Gray* may be sown; but a worthy life between men of homosexual orientation cannot be lived.

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Trent University