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| All the Shades of Gray |
| Review by **Patrick Pollard** |
| Xavier Giudicelli*: Portraits de Dorian Gray*. Le texte, le livre, l'image. Préface de Pascal Aquien. Paris: Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 2016. Square 8vo (22 x 22 cm.). 404 pp. Illustrations. ISBN 979-10-231-0537-7. €36. |
| For centuries many works of literature have been illustrated with woodcuts and engravings. We are reminded by Xavier Giudicelli, however, that Flaubert wrote to Ernest Duplan in 1862 (quoted here to contrast him with Wilde), categorically refusing to have his works illustrated, because, as he put it, 'The finest verbal description is swallowed up by even the most paltry of images. Immediately a model is thus fixed on paper it loses its capacity to be universal.' The picture of a woman puts before us just a particular woman, but a verbal description leaves endless possibilities for our imagination. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* did not appear in an illustrated version until 1908, well after Wilde's death, but Wilde's letters to his publishers, including John Lane of The Bodley Head who published *Salomé*, show how concerned he very often was for the attractive decoration of his books. It is this paradox which Giudicelli explores in his well-argued and handsomely presented discussion of eighteen illustrated editions of The Picture of Dorian Gray from France, the United Kingdom and the U.S.A., together with a discussion of the *Nachleben* of the story in film and other media.  |
| Giudicelli's study is in two major sections, which are in their turn subdivided: 'Transpositions, or how the text becomes image', and 'The counter-effect of illustrations on the text'. The first section deals with the number, choice and location of illustrations within the book, be they to prefigure the text, as for example the frontispiece, or to act as a conclusion to the story (there are many variations of showing the corpse of Dorian). Not unexpectedly, it is the melodramatic scenes which elicit most attention. One suspects that often a financial or marketing decision has influenced their choice, especially in the case of the 1908 edition, which was published by Charles Carrington, a well-known purveyor of 'special' books who, although operating in Paris, had an eye on the English market. Among the different subjects to which various artists give their attention are stereotypes and caricatures (Mr Isaacs, a Jew; James Vane, a member of the lower classes; Lord Henry, a dandy and homosexual). There are so-called 'East End Girls' and 'West End Boys', as well as the imagined world of London as created by several writers including Wilde, and by artists from Gustave Doré onwards. Artists (and their publishers) were also drawn to the theatre and its doubtful world of disguise, travesty and crime. Sibyl Vane is variously portrayed as an innocent victim, as an attractive actress, and as a sexually ambiguous creature – especially in her role in boy's clothes as Rosalind in *As You Like It*. Dorian, we are reminded, dresses up as Anne de Joyeuse, one of the mignons of Henri III who appointed him Admiral of France in 1582 (the name 'Anne', which sounds to English and modern French ears suggestively gendered, was in the Renaissance and through until the nineteenth century used for men). The second section discusses representations of the Picture itself, including the problems of actually representing it on the page. It is relatively easy, asserts Giudicelli, to show ugliness, but to give us absolute beauty, as Wilde's text requires, is an impossible task for any artist (fortunately Basil Hallward is in the world of the fiction, and not in the publisher's printing house). Many have, however, attempted it, and their efforts range from attempts to reproduce the 'Greek Ideal' (a concept which naturally redefines itself as time and society change), to providing likenesses of Jean Cocteau's lover Jean Marais, to the extravagantly strange Imprint from Dorian Gray's Stomach by Jim Dine. Narrative time itself also provides a stumbling block, for, as Giudicelli recognises, rehearsing the theories which Lessing expounded in his Laocoon, a picture is an essentially static representation (ekphrasis), whereas narrative provides a progressive one. A painter has therefore to represent movement, either in the instant or over a period of time, and there are several ways of achieving this which the various illustrators under discussion have attempted. Most challenging, perhaps, is how to represent the pictorial form of movement from beauty to ugliness. A solution is attempted by Michael Ayrton, who, starting from a sketch based on Bronzino's ‘Portrait of a Young Man’, provides a series of reincarnations, each older and uglier than the one preceding it. (But on the evidence provided here, a reader might well decide that the earliest form of Dorian's beauty is far from attractive!) Even more ingenious is a series of five portraits by Lucille Coros. Other attempts to render simultaneity and temporal development have included Donia Nachsen's multiple imagery (1930), which contrasts with a Cubist approach, as in 'decomposition of movement as in Marcel Duchamp's Nu descendant l'escalier no 2' (1912, and not an illustration to Wilde's book).  |
| There are four informative short sections which are separate from the main text. After some observations on the Book as Object – that is something which, following William Morris and the arts and crafts movement of the 1890's, can be looked at as beautiful as well as useful – the 'Focus' falls on (1) The Bodley Head fine press and the Yellow Book as aesthetic ventures both in their physical appearance and in their textual ethos (there are details of other fine presses, such as Doves, Dale, and Eragny elsewhere in the book); (2) bibliophily, and the techniques of engraving at the turn of the nineteenth century. A later remark on bibliophily makes the point that such productions, frequent in the interwar period, seem to appeal to the principles of pleasure and desire in their purchasers; (3) on the life and work of Aubrey Beardsley, notably to be remembered here as the illustrator of *Salomé*. Several pages follow on the publishing history of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, with a full list of the illustrated editions; (4) describes in more detail the character and work of several other illustrators; (5) in addition to 'normal' editions of the printed text, this section deals with a surprisingly varied assortment of visual adaptations of the story which are described in detail – *Dorian Gray* in comic strip form, in the theatre, in film and television, in musical comedies, ballets and operas (these last in Australia in 1919 by William Arundel Orchard; in Switzerland in 1930 by Karl Flick-Steger, and in 1947 by Hans Schaeuble; in Monaco in 1996 by Lowell Liebermann). |
| There is a fascinating play of mirrors between Wilde's text and the vision of pictorial artists, publishers, and readers (or viewers) of the story as it unfolds. The Portrait, as Mallarmé wrote to Wilde, is at the heart of the matter, and so we should expect the illustrations to be appropriately seductive and terrifying. The story, as Giudicelli points out, invites illustration, but the ethos of the work lends itself to it with difficulty. The artists and the readers are up against the aphorism in Wilde's Preface: 'All art is at once surface and symbol'. Several questions arise when we consider the text as a characteristic product of its time. Not only is it part of the English aesthetic movement and inheritor of both the Pre-Raphaelite and Gothic-Romantic traditions, but it is profoundly influenced by French Symbolism. Many of the book's descriptive passages derive from J.K. Huysmans's *A rebours* [commonly translated as *Against the Grain*] and the aestheticism of its hero Des Esseintes. And, as the Goncourt brothers were not slow to point out, Wilde plagiarised French literature quite unashamedly. But it was not only to Baudelaire and the satanic tradition that Wilde turned. A major starting point for him was, as we know, the very Portrait itself. In Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* a portrait features at the beginning and end of the long narrative of the hero's troubled existence. Hints of witchcraft are accompanied by gloomy gothic elements, but the traveller continues on his way with no change in his appearance. Within a locked and jealously guarded closet, hangs a concealed portrait, the eyes of which instil horror and fear in the beholder. Old Melmoth on his deathbed has hands which are reminiscent of Dorian's – hands which have tantalised and obsessed the artists whom Giudicelli brings to our attention, hands which 'let go their short and quivering grasp, and lay extended on the bed like the claws of some bird that had died of hunger, – so meagre, so yellow, so spread [...]'. Moreover, a phantom visitor has 'in his face the living original of the portrait' of the dead elder Melmoth, and the concluding chapter XXXIX contains a detailed account of the horror of the sudden change in Melmoth's appearance: 'he was the very image of hoary, decrepit debility'. Dorian is his avatar, and I would have welcomed a more extended discussion of this fascinating textual relationship. |
| Giudicelli also explores the similarity between Wilde and Dorian, although another of the opening aphorisms gives us due warning: 'To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim'. There are, of course, comparisons to be drawn between Lord Henry and Wilde, and even – for Wilde is the 'painter' of Dorian – between Wilde and Basil. However, all these must be matters of sentiment, and not matters of fact. But there is, of course, something in a gentleman's library which will reveal his character: this is true of Des Esseintes, and it is true of the library described in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.  |
| An illustration may well be considered as a 'duplicate' of the text it accompanies (but if this was literally and exactly true it would be redundant); or, as Giudicelli prefers, it can be thought of as a transforming mirror which illuminates more facets of the narrative than a simple reading would reveal. His study therefore aims 'to describe the dialogue which arises between two systems of signs', namely those of the verbal text and the visual image. But the 'conversation' which is imagined in this criticism is, surely, more one of mutual reinforcement than of argument and contradiction. The process of 'mise en abyme' is also invoked, as a means by which the parent text can see itself reflected back upon through the reflexivity afforded by the illustration. The 'Portraits' of Giudicelli's title include the portrait which has been imagined (and constructed) by Wilde, and the various possibilities offered by the text for illustration. This raises the question whether the text can be considered as truly autonomous. Modern criticism would most often assert that, in line with various interpretations of reception theory, it is not a self-contained unit of signs. Consequently, the act of reading, with the support of illustrations, is a necessarily creative act beyond the intention or wishes of the author. Does a full interpretation therefore depend on the pictorial additions? Giudicelli puts this opinion to the test with an appeal to what Wilde says in The Critic as Artist. In fact he sees the basic paradox of the text as inherent in the function of the portrait itself as allusion in the sense which Mallarmé gave to the term. As Basil says in the opening pages of the story: 'I have put too much of myself into it', and: 'we shall all suffer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly.' One can almost hear the classicist Wilde reciting the words of Menander ('Those whom the Gods love die young'). There is, one might add, another, rather bitter-sweet, paradox, depending on how one sees it. The text which was called upon at his trial to convict Wilde is now widely available in a format which the young may read: Penguin Books in 1949, Penguin Classics in 1985 – and Gallimard 'Jeunesse' in 2000.  |
| The volume concludes with an excellent set of indices and an extensive bibliography which includes editions of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, works of criticism, background works and monographs on the illustrators mentioned. |
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