

READING OSCAR WILDE IN POST-WAR SPAIN: *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY* UNDER THE MICROSCOPE¹

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When Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* first appeared on 20 June 1890, in the July issue of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, some reviewers were outraged by what they took to be the story's advocacy of perverse behaviour and immorality. A critic in the *St. James's Gazette* called the work "vulgar" and suggested the possibility that the Treasury or the Vigilance Society might "think it worthwhile to prosecute" (qtd. in Beckson 68-69). Another anonymous reviewer of the *Daily Chronicle* called it "a poisonous book" that abounds in "moral and spiritual putrefaction" (qtd. in Beckson 72).² However, the story of a beautiful young man who sells his soul in exchange for eternal youth was praised by a reviewer of the *Christian Leader*, who believed that Wilde's intention was laudable and added that the novel "may be the means of preserving many young lives from the temptations by which they are surrounded" (qtd. in Mason 137-138). When *Dorian Gray* appeared in book form in 1891, Wilde had added a preface and six chapters and had revised the story so as to omit some overly explicit allusions to homosexuality in the relationship between Basil Hallward and Dorian Gray (Raby 69). These changes did not substantially affect the nature of the novel, and controversy continued for some years.

The author argued that some readers had not understood the meaning of *Dorian Gray*. He stated that the novel included a clear moral teaching, arguing that "the real moral of the story is that all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment" (*Letters* 263). Although Dorian's tragic end suggests Wilde's critical view on sensual and aesthetic pleasure, from the number of contradictory sentiments the novel awakened in its readers it seems that the narrator did not provide clear guidance to these conclusions. As one reviewer in the *Scots Observer* remarked, "it is not made sufficiently clear that the writer

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2 The story was used as evidence of Wilde's "immorality" in the trial that ended in his imprisonment for a breach of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which made indecencies between men, even in private, a criminal offence; see Ellmann.

does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health and sanity” (qtd. in Beckson 75). Undoubtedly, the preface contributed to the moral ambiguity of the novel by contending that “there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” (xxiii). What is more, the fact that Wilde’s personality can be identified in the three main characters of the story – Basil Hallward, the painter obsessed with his model; Dorian Gray, the handsome young vicious gentleman; and Lord Henry Wotton, the witty hedonistic observer – surely adds to the moral ambivalence of *Dorian Gray*.³ Perhaps the most damaging similarity is the latter. The biographer Hesketh Pearson, for instance, suggested that the novel “contains a full-length portrait of [Wilde] as a talker in the character of Lord Henry Wotton, with many of his most searching comments on life” (145). If Wilde is to be associated with this amoral dandy, who corrupts Dorian with hedonistic counselling such as “live the wonderful life that is in you,” or “be always searching for new sensations” (18), then it is perhaps understandable that some Victorian critics found both the novel and the author disgraceful. But how was *Dorian Gray* received in Spain? How did the Spanish censors operating under Franco’s regime react? Taking into account the severity of the censorship policy established by Franco in 1938 and Wilde’s reputation, this essay examines the files from the censorship office to see how the censors read and understood Wilde’s novel in post-war Spain.⁴

Dorian Gray first arrived in Spain in a 1918 translation by Julio Gómez de la Serna, published by Biblioteca Nueva. It would appear that there was a receptive reading public, as the publishing house Atenea brought out another version of the novel the following year, in a volume of the *Obras completas de Oscar Wilde* (“Complete Works of Oscar Wilde”), this time in a translation by the well-known literary critic and journalist Ricardo Baeza. A Catalan version by Rafael Tasis Marca was issued in 1930, together with a new Spanish edition in *El Libro de Todos* (“Everyone’s Book”), a popular publication that appeared on a fortnightly basis. The number of editions and reprints of this novel during the first decades of the twentieth century speaks for its popularity in Spain. Wilde also caught the attention of several Spanish critics of the time. In her article “Oscar Wilde in Spain,” Lisa Davies discusses the reception of

3 The author himself saw the three characters as reflections of his own life: “Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian is what I would like to be – in other ages, perhaps” (*Letters* 352).

4 On censorship in post-war Spain, see Abellán, Beneyto, and Cisquella. Most censorship files of this period can be found in the Archivo General de la Administración Alcalá de Henares, Madrid). I am indebted to the archive staff for their unstinting help and friendly guidance on how to find my way through the complexities of these files.

Wilde at the turn of the twentieth century and shows that the generation of Pío Baroja, Unamuno, Maeztu, and the Machados were already familiar with Wilde, although the heyday of Wilde's popularity in the Peninsula coincided with the years of the First World War (137).⁵

The interest in Wilde continued during the first years of Franco's regime. The Biblioteca Nueva edition was reprinted in 1939 and 1941. By then, the Spanish Civil War was over and the censorship system had already been established.⁶ In both cases, *Dorian Gray* was authorised without any problem. The same can be said of two other editions that the publishing house La Nave issued in 1940 and 1941. The confidence that the publisher had of obtaining the authorisation was such that for the 1940 edition he did not even send the text for the censor to read, as was the usual practice. The following note was included in the application form: "we only have one copy of this book. Given the popularity of the author and the novel, we think that it would not be necessary to send it" (File T-473-40).⁷ Indeed, Wilde and his novel must have been considered very well known, as authorisation was granted the following day. The explanation for this permissive attitude of the Spanish censors towards a story that had caused so much commotion in England might lie in the image of the author and the novel outlined in the prologue included in these editions (File Y-313-41). This prologue, entitled "Los tres momentos de la vida de Oscar Wilde" ("The Three Moments of Oscar Wilde's Life"), was a piece by the Catalan writer Agustí Calvet, also known by the pseudonym of "Gaziel." There he maintains that Wilde never tried to cause any scandal with his novel and that he had been unjustly accused of immorality, since his only aim had been "to narrate a story whose fundamental issue or plot had an edifying exemplary nature" (Calvet y Pascual 19).⁸ Quoting Wilde's words, Calvet stresses the existence of a clear final moral: all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment. This is why, it is explained, the painter Basil Hallward, who is obsessed with beauty, dies at the hands of his own creation; Dorian Gray, who leads a dissipated life, kills himself when he tries to eliminate his conscience; and Lord Henry Wotton tries to be a mere observer.

5 For a list of articles and reviews on Wilde in the Spanish press, see Toro Santos and Clark.

6 It is interesting to note that the application form for the first reprint is dated 17 April 1939, just a few days after the end of the war (File C-914-39).

7 "No tenemos más que un solo ejemplar de este libro. Dado lo conocido del autor y la novela, estimamos que no sería necesario enviarlo." All translations from the Spanish are my own.

8 "Narrar una historia cuyo fondo o armazón tuviese una ejemplaridad edificante."

In this way, Calvet emphasises the poetic justice of the ending and argues that the amoral and corrupting character of Lord Henry Wotton does not bear any resemblance to Wilde, even if some contemporary critics erroneously tried to see autobiographical traits in the story (Calvet y Pascual 20). The Spanish censors seemed to accept the “edifying exemplary nature” of the novel and did not question its publication. Even another edition by the Madrid publisher Aguilar, included in *Obras completas*, was authorised in 1941 (File Z-147-41).

Nevertheless, not all censors were convinced of the positive potential of *Dorian Gray*. The first problems with the Spanish censorship office occurred in 1944, when the publishing house Aguilar wanted to issue the second edition of Wilde’s complete works. Though it had been authorised three years previously, the censor’s report now hinted at some kind of objection, stating, “since it is a luxury edition, unattainable for the untrained reader, I believe it can be authorised.”⁹ This implied that, if it were a more popular edition with large-scale distribution, they would reconsider the decision. It is difficult to know with certainty which of Wilde’s works included in the collection might have been controversial, but a look at the later files suggests that perhaps *Dorian Gray* had something to do with that censor’s judgment. When one year later, in 1945, the same publishing house requested permission for the publication of *Dorian Gray* and *Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime* in one volume, the censors raised no objection to the short story, but banned the publication of the novel (File 1869-45). Unfortunately, the censor’s report is missing, so the grounds for this change of opinion cannot be ascertained. However, there is a detail that may throw some light on this mystery. The file includes the galley proof of the book and, though it is the same translation by Gómez de la Serna that had already been authorised on several occasions, a new piece entitled “Prefacio del artista” (“The Artist’s Preface”) had been added. It is signed by one of the characters of the story, the painter Basil Hallward, with a footnote in which the translator explains that the preface was taken from the American volume of *Novels and Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*¹⁰ and was included in a Spanish edition for the first time. Gómez de la Serna explained:

I publish it because I find it amusing and interesting and because it represents a small “fiction, superior to reality,” according to the repeated theory, so pleasing to the author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. If Basil Hallward, the painter, did

9 “Por tratarse de una edición de lujo, no asequible al lector poco formado, creo que no hay inconveniente en su autorización” (File 6141-44bis).

10 The edition referred to is *Novels and Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, published in New York in 1915 by H.S. Nichols.

not write this Preface, he should or could have written it. *That is all*, as Wilde would say.¹¹

When first considered, this preface does not seem to contain anything immoral or politically incorrect. It simply explains what might have been the origin of the novel in the words of the painter, Basil Hallward.¹² He remembers one spring day of 1884, when he was painting a young man of exceptional beauty called Dorian Gray in the company of Wilde, who was a regular visitor to his studio. At one point, while watching the work advance, Wilde says that it is a pity that such a glorious creature should ever grow old. Basil agrees and wishes Dorian could remain as beautiful as he is, while the picture should age instead of him. After some time, the book about Dorian's tragic story falls into Basil's hands, and he imagines that it was written by his friend Wilde. In this seemingly innocent preface one might find the reason why the Spanish censors banned the novel. Until then, the text had been read and understood, according to Agustí Calvet's essay, as the story of the moral decadence of the protagonist, who eventually takes his well-deserved punishment. However, the moralising message disappears as soon as Wilde is associated with Lord Henry, the cynical and immoral character of the novel who is present when Basil paints Dorian's picture and convinces him to look for eternal youth and to enjoy the pleasures of life. If the censors saw in this wicked character Wilde's *alter ego*, their reading of the novel would surely come closer to that of the Victorian critics who branded the story as filthy and immoral.

From this moment, other attempts to publish *Dorian Gray* in Spain were frustrated. In July 1946, the importation of 1,000 copies of an Argentine edition of the novel was banned (File 2623-46). That same month, the publishing houses Albón and Bruguera also received a negative answer from the censorship office (File 2644-46 and File 3009-46 respectively). In the first case, it was Baeza's translation; the other one was by Gómez de la Serna, though with some modifications by the writer Eugenia Serrano Balaña.¹³ It is important to note the explanations given by Eugenia Serrano in the application form. She pointed out, for instance, that some of the changes in this translation had been made to modify "the nuance of the words, replacing the word 'love'

11 "Lo publico por parecerme gracioso e interesante y porque representa una pequeña 'ficción, superior a la realidad,' según la repetida teoría, tan grata al autor de *El retrato de Dorian Gray*. Si Basilio Hallward, el pintor, no escribió este Prefacio, debió o pudo escribirlo, *That is all*, que diría Wilde" (galley proof of the book, see File 1869-45).

12 The passage is similar to the episode referred to by the biographer Hesketh Pearson as the 'real' origin of the novel (44-45).

13 She is the author of novels such as *Perdimos la primavera* (1952) or *Antonio: novela napolitana* (1954), and the biography *El libro de las siete damas* (1943).

with 'friendship' or 'affection' there where the term might seem equivocal."¹⁴ In this way, Serrano attempted to remove any trace of homosexuality from the original text. On the other hand, she tried to convince the censors, once more, of the significance of the novel's moral message, insisting on Dorian's final punishment and the fact that Wilde carefully depicted this character as "loathed by all honest people." She added that the story did not contain "the slightest sign of crudity or morbidity," although she admitted that there was a snag in the manner in which the character Lord Henry is drawn: the villain and the cynic are portrayed as witty people. Nevertheless, she explained that the honest characters of the story were similarly represented and that thus the novel was just a reflection of real life.¹⁵ Still, despite these justifications, a reminder that the book had already been authorised to other publishers before, and the fact that the "The Artist's Preface" was not included, the response of the censors was negative once more. Although, curiously enough, the censors' reports of the three 1946 files are missing, from other documents included in the files I am inclined to think that this ban may be related to, firstly, the image of immorality represented by Lord Henry, now clearly associated with the author, and, secondly, to the suggestive language of the first chapters of the novel, which points to an intimate relationship between Basil and Dorian.

At the end of the 1940s, Wilde's fortunes changed and censors again gave the green light to publishing *Dorian Gray* in Spain, first in a luxury edition entitled *Novelas de Oscar Wilde* ("The Novels of Oscar Wilde"), which comprised Wilde's novels and short stories (File 144-47), then on its own by Ediciones Siglo XX, after the publisher had insisted once more on the moral values of the story (File 4052-47). From this moment, the censors authorised many other editions of the novel, sometimes, admittedly, with a number of cuts here and there. In 1952, for instance, a censor asked the publisher to remove a critical comment on bishops in Chapter 1 and a negative view of religious beliefs in Chapter 11 (File 5213-52). It comes as no surprise that, in a regime that supported the traditional values of the Catholic Church, censors did not like Henry Wotton's witty remark about successful intellectuals never being phys-

14 "[...] el traductor ha cambiado el matiz de las palabras, sustituyendo donde el término amor pudiere resultar equívoco por amistad o afecto" (see File 3009-46). A look at the new version shows that these changes were indeed made. See, for instance, the famous dialogue between Basil and Lord Henry at the end of the first chapter.

15 "El autor tuvo buen cuidado de pintar a Dorian Gray execrado por todas las personas honradas. [...] No hay en toda la novela la mínima crudeza o morbosidad, ni siquiera eso que hoy se llama 'fuerza' y suele ser grosería. Cierto, creo que este es su único pero, los 'malos' y los cínicos, se pintan como ingeniosos, pero también se hace lo mismo con las personas honradas. Y en eso, la novela es pintura de la vida. O pretende serlo" (see File 3009-46).

ically attractive, “except, of course, in the Church. But then in the Church they don’t think. A bishop keeps on saying at the age of eighty what he was told to say when he was a boy of eighteen, and as a natural consequence he always looks absolutely delightful” (2). Similarly, the censors asked for that passage to be removed in which the narrator stresses that Dorian “never fell into the error of arresting his intellectual development by any formal acceptance of creed or system [...]” (109), thus countering rumours that he was to join the Roman Catholic Church. Once these two cuts had been made the book was eventually authorised and published.

All this goes to show that, despite the gaps in some of the files I have discussed, the surviving data offer an interesting insight into the way *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was read and understood in post-war Spain. The same kind of controversy and objection stirred up by Victorian critics reappeared in Spain during the first years of Franco’s regime, as the novel’s moral ambiguity was once again at the centre of controversy. If there was no agreement among nineteenth-century British reviewers as to the author’s moral or “poisonous” intentions, interpretations of the work by Franco’s Spanish censors were not in agreement either. While some read the novel as an edifyingly exemplary story in which all excess is eventually punished, a view sustained in Spanish prefaces to the novel at the time, other censors banned the book, clearly associating Wilde with the amoral and corrupting character of Henry Wotton. Undoubtedly, the novel’s multiple levels of meaning produced conflicting interpretations of Wilde’s moral and ethical outlook, both in Victorian Britain and in Francoist Spain. Therefore, the fluctuations in the censors’ decisions over the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Spain should not be explained by the arbitrariness of the censorship office or by a change in the degree of control exerted by the regime, but rather by the novel’s multiple interpretive possibilities.

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