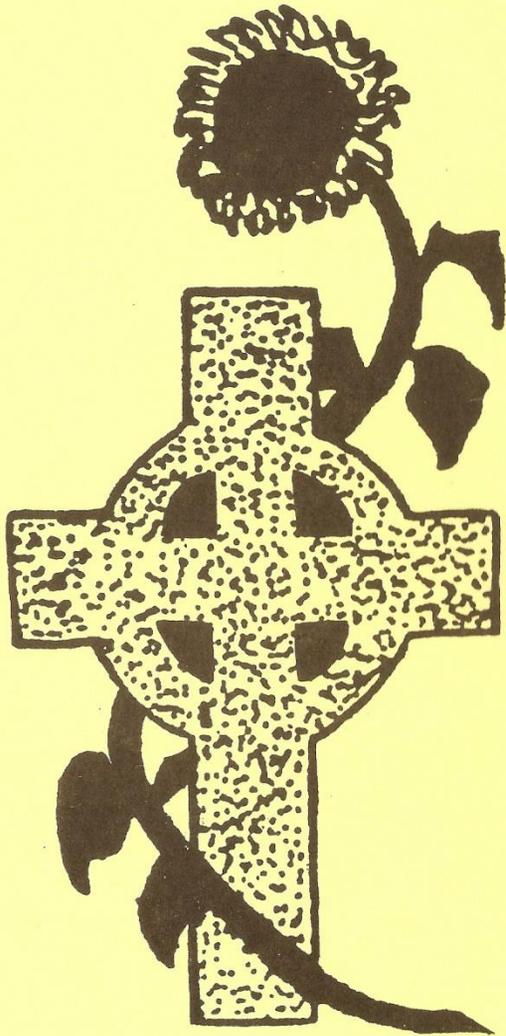


Wild About Wilde

Newsletter



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Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde

Dear Wild Wildeans,

Well, it seems that Richard Ellmann has done something to make the name Oscar Wilde more familiar to a lot of people. His book has gone into a third printing in the United States and was actually on the best seller list! Oscar would probably insist that "there is something vulgar in all success" and indeed some of the reviewers did "confuse vulgarity with truth" but the interest that the book generated can only be regarded as a triumph. Sylvia Day's essay on Wilde written for this edition makes a point which is still tragically valid today and apparent from many of the reviewers of the Ellmann book: Oscar Wilde is not always understood in America and therefore not taken seriously as a great scholar and artist. The remarks made to me were interesting: some people who were totally unfamiliar with O.W. or his art had difficulty understanding the book (ah, yes) while some of the cultivated enjoyed the book but wanted more.

Personally I don't believe it possible to ever have enough literary criticism or discussion on Oscar Wilde. Now I have something special to share with you. When I last visited Dublin I spoke (and shared a bottle of pink champagne!) with Senator David Norris and I was thrilled to discover that there is a possibility that the Wilde house at 21 Westland Row may be turned into a national museum of Wilde memorabilia. This year Dublin is celebrating 1,000 years of history and all Irish writers are being honoured in various ways. There is, I learned, a chance that the house Oscar was born in could be used to house whatever can be gathered together of books, letters or personal items of his. It would be such a marvellous thing and I shall keep you all informed of any developments. The house is presently owned by Trinity College Dublin, Oscar's Alma Mater, and is centrally located for tourists. (What a thought though! Tourists ploughing through the house of The Great One! We shall have to assume that they will all be aesthetic tourists with impeccable taste and charm and not the usual unfortunate kind!) But it really would be a great thing for those among us who know and understand that "nothing that is worth knowing can be taught," or acquired. I would therefore like to ask anyone who has any suggestions to make regarding this to please write and tell me. I would very much like to hear.

By the way, there is now in Dublin, facing Trinity College, an Oscar Wilde pub! It is quite an extraordinary establishment with Oscariana plastered all over the walls to be enjoyed, no doubt, with a pint of Guinness! Seriousness is the refuge of the shallow! Photographs of Oscar and people in his life also adorn the walls and two very large green carnations are painted on the outside sign. George Bernard Shaw, a fellow Dubliner of Oscar's said of him "Oscar Wilde ... was at root a very Irish Irishman and as such a foreigner everywhere but in Ireland." Maybe the pub owner is preparing a place for Oscar's second coming!

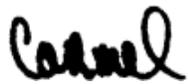
This issue, to me, is a very special one because I have three wonderful essays to share with you. All three authors share enthusiasm, warmth and artistic understanding of Wilde which can very obviously only come from their appreciation of the great artist.

This is something I feel very strongly for. It really is what our group is all about - a coming together of people who share an intense common literary interest and I want to take this opportunity to thank the three people very sincerely for sending in these essays. I hope you all enjoy them and that they will inspire others to also put pen to paper or fingers to typewriters or computers and do the same.

Lastly I wish to thank Jyll Kossoris who did the art work for the cover of our very first edition and also did the front cover for number three. I was let down at the last minute of going to press and Jyll's front cover was an improvisation which turned out beautifully. She is a very talented artist in the style of Beardsley but with her own flair as I have previously mentioned.

Also, we have grown! We are now 12 pages! Enjoy them all!

All the best,



Carmel

from **The Critic as Artist ...**

"Society demands of each of its citizens that he should contribute some form of productive labour to the common weal, and toil and travail that the day's work may be done. Society often forgives the criminal; it never forgives the dreamer. The beautiful sterile emotions that art excites in us are hateful in its eyes, and so completely are people dominated by the tyranny of this dreadful social ideal that they are always coming shamelessly up to one at Private Views and other places that are open to the general public, and saying in a loud stentorian voice, "What are you doing?" whereas "What are you thinking?" is the only question that any single civilised being should ever be allowed to whisper to another. They mean well, no doubt, these honest beaming folk. Perhaps that is the reason why they are so excessively tedious. But someone should teach them that while, in the opinion of society, Contemplation is the gravest sin of which any citizen can be guilty, in the opinion of the highest culture it is the proper occupation of man."

Oscar Wilde

SALOME AT THE SHAW FESTIVAL

Vito A. Lanza

Throughout its checkered history, including encounters with the censors of several countries, productions of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* have been sporadic indeed. The one-act play, often criticized for debauching the Bible which does not even mention Salome by name, has actually suffered the indignity of being eclipsed by Richard Strauss' subsequent opera which was also banned in its first production. Strauss jettisoned half of Wilde's script and set the remainder almost word for word in German to a cacophonous, sensuous, noisy score which is not for every taste. The latter has held the stage all over the world for over 80 years, while the play, although 11 years older and much richer in text, has been relegated to undeserved oblivion.

It was not until 1973 in Toronto that Canada saw its first-known professional production of the play. The Shaw Festival, which performs the output of Bernard Shaw and his contemporaries from April through October in three theatres in Niagara-on-the-lake, Ontario (near Buffalo, New York), offered the play last summer on a double bill with August Strindberg's comedy, *Playing with Fire*, under the overall label of "Hothouse Plays from the 1890s." This was the Festival's first attempt at Wilde even though the Stratford, Ontario, Shakespeare Festival had great success several seasons ago with *The Importance of Being Earnest*; so much so that it was revived twice with one of Canada's major actors, William Hutt, playing Lady Bracknell all three times.

The indignities, however, persist. For the past few seasons, the Shaw Festival has offered a "risk" series of plays at reduced prices on a limited schedule and small budget in one of its smaller theatres. *Salome* was dumped into this category. According to Artistic Director Christopher Newton, these plays, "have, on the surface at least a qualified appeal." Newton is one of Canada's leading theatrical figures, and if this is the prevailing opinion about *Salome*, it is no wonder it is never performed there.

Director Sky Gilbert, who leads the Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto, a company devoted to "innovative" Canadian plays, usually with gay themes, saw *Salome* as a punk nightmare. In his program notes, he termed his ego-trip vision as "very personal." This meant that he could rewrite the lines and update the action. The major props were closed-circuit televisions. As he states, "... we have set the play in a parallel reality where sexual idols exist on TV (a reality much like our own reality)" Soldiers in black leather, punk-rock uniforms adorned with chains rolled the televisions around the spare set depicting off-stage action, including Jokanaan's (Dwight Koss) execution before a firing squad. This left Salome kissing a television screen instead of the disembodied head, which elicited giggles instead of gasps from the audience at the performance caught (August 20, 1987), and scant applause when it ended. (If memory serves, Herod's final line, "Kill that woman," was also cut.)

Barry MacGregor, one of Canada's leading actors, looked embarrassed since he was called upon to play Herod as an effeminate, lisping fool, whose lust for his stepdaughter seemed even more peculiar. Camille Mitchell, as seen from the first row, appeared too old for Salome and seemed physically more suited for Herodias. All references to the Dance of the Seven Veils, probably Wilde's invention, were cut, and she only disrobed to a slip covered by one veil. Sporting a platinum fright wig, Robin Craig's Herodias was too young and shrill. Patrie Massurkevitch's Syrian, also in black leather and chains, spewed blood after his suicide in the form of a long red scarf over which Salome danced. His relationship with Herodias' Page (Steven Sutcliffe) was also played up. Terry Nicholls' set consisted of a few broken pillars and of course the televisions.

In the director's words, *Salome* "makes choices beyond the moral order." Unfortunately the Jews in the play became "theologists" of no religion, which tamed the thrust of the words and their stabilizing influence. The production quickly and finally degenerated into a mangled exercise in aimless, sexless debauchery. Let us hope that Canada and the rest of us will not have to wait too long for another stab at Wilde's favorite play.

Let us leave these mystic visions to European opera directors whose egomania often prevails at the author's expense. Devotees of this sort of thing may get their chance next season in New York when one of Europe's most controversial opera producers, Nikolaus Lenhoff, directs the Strauss work at the Metropolitan Opera on a single bill, as usual. The great Hungarian soprano, Eva Marton, will play the title role, supported by the Americans Richard Cassily, (Herod) and Neil Rosenshein (Narraboth, the Syrian), and the Germans Helga Dernesch (Herodias) and Bernd Weikl (Jokanaan). Jurgen Rose will design the sets and the costumes. The Met has not announced its television offerings yet, but will broadcast the opera live on March 11, 1989, at 2 pm (check local radio listings). The premier will be on February 21, 1989, in Lincoln Center.

To L.L

I remember I never could catch you,
For no one could match you,
You had wonderful, luminous, fleet
Little wings to your feet.

I remember your hair - did I tie it?
For it always ran riot -
Like a tangled sunbeam of gold:
These things are old.

I remember so well the room,
And the lilac bloom
That beat at the dripping pane
In the warm June rain;

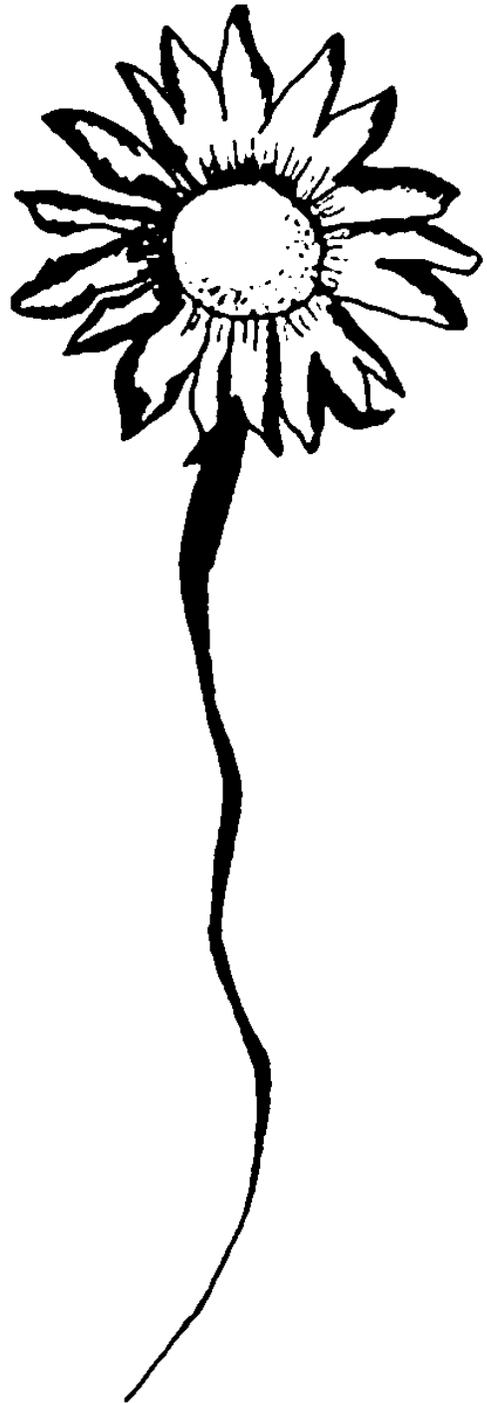
And the colour of your gown,
It was amber-brown,
And two yellow satin bows
From your shoulders rose

Could we live it over again,
Were it worth the pain,
Could the passionate past that is fled
Call back its dead!

Well, if my heart must break,
Dear love, for your sake,
It will break in music, I know,
Poets' hearts break so.

But strange that I was not told
That the brain can hold
In a tiny ivory cell,
God's heaven and hell.

Oscar Wilde



A FEW COMMENTS ON WILDE IN AMERICA

Sylvia Day

Eighty-eight years after his unspeakably cruel death - or in a true sense, his murder - Oscar Wilde continues to outlive the calumny of the small minds of self-righteous judges who instead of revering him as the supreme genius of their age, persecuted him mercilessly thereby retaining their own ignominious place in history as his brutal inquisitors, legal lackeys of a spiritually crippled era.

Oscar Wilde and his work remain hallowed. The man, because of the rare beauty of his character, and the work, because it has joined that incandescent body of world literature, knowledge of which affords delight and enlightenment. Everything that he did and created bear the impress of an individual whose critical eye and unblemished perception of the human condition remain unparalleled in the literary world. This is not to say that certain other playwrights, poets, essayists and critics do not share the empyrean where the great masters of the written word hold court, I pray, but that there is a certain measure of *joie de vivre*, an impeccable and distinctive style in Wilde and his work that captivates all those who admire him.

Although already famous in Europe for a personality and writings unique among his peers, there were still to come the plays, poetry, essays and criticism whose charm and wit overlay a profundity and depth that are now beginning to win recognition.

Little delineates the strength of his convictions and the elegance and dignity of his person more than the manner in which he withstood the mockery and derision of his critics (no less than his English ones) as he crossed the American continent during his year-long visit, lecturing to audiences who were often ill-equipped to understand him but felt qualified to judge him, in the manner of the ignorant. He made no adjustments in the style of his unusual dress or the content of his lectures all of which dealt with his own aesthetic view of life.

Lampooned in England because of those views and caricatured as many have learned in the operetta, *Patience* by Gilbert and Sullivan, D'Oyly Carte, agent for the theatrical duo, decided to capitalize on the ridicule levelled at Wilde and sought him out for an American tour where *Patience* was to be performed. Wilde assented in spite of Carte's motive.

On arrival in America Wilde was hailed less for his reputation as a literary figure than as an eccentric who would afford amusement. He took the temper of his critics quickly and easily saying to Sarah Bernhardt, "caricature is the tribute which mediocrity pays to genius." But if there was a minuscule literary community to value his presence, the woman of America were intrigued with the tall, richly apparelled Irishman whose manner and courtesy were in such contrast to that of their own menfolk.

Across the continent Wilde spoke on themes that were of paramount interest to him, mainly, art, taste in home decor and the education of children in developing good taste. It is a measure of Wilde's assessment of the American intellectual climate that he was fully cognizant of its presence and limitations. He was familiar with the work of that small coterie of writers and thinkers on the east coast but whether he was prepared for the Philistinism of broad sections of America may be doubted. That American materialism which he eventually decried and which continues to characterize America, would remain a barrier toward easier communication.

In Chicago he said "You in America don't want that we should look upon you as a mere collection of money-making merchants. You would like to influence the civilization of Europe. You are ambitious and should be so, but the only way you can influence us is by producing noble art and a noble civilization. Believe me that we value your American poets much more than your American millionaires." Gladstone had warned Wilde that "America's danger lies in its rich men." Almost a century after Wilde's visit as we observe the deterioration of the American infra-structure and the deindustrialization of this once proud country, the prophetic sentiments of both men are borne out.

Wilde's pronouncements on American men and women bear evidence of his acute insight. On man he said "at home the American man is the best of companions - the young are especially pleasant ... They seem to get a hold on life much earlier than we do ... they know men much better than they do books, and life interests them more than literature."

He appeared to have more to say on women: "Indeed it is only the women in America who have any leisure at all," and he presciently went on to say, "and as a necessary result of this curious state of things, there is no doubt that within a century from now, the whole culture of the new world will be in petticoats."

He went on to say "If the English girl ever met an American man she would be happy. For though he may be rough in manner and deficient in the picturesque sincerity of romance yet he is invariably kind and thoughtful, and has succeeded in making his own country the Paradise of Women". And continuing, "So paramount is female influence that it is the man who is never forgiven. America is the only country in the world where Don Juan is not appreciated."

In a lecture on the English Renaissance Wilde sought to clarify the message of his mentor, Ruskin, as being practical in his aestheticism, and recounted an episode that occurred in Oxford where he and several students met with Ruskin who "urged them to do good." "We," Wilde said, "were moved and told Ruskin we would do whatever he asked whereupon Ruskin told us of two villages between which lay a swamp. Ruskin asked us to make a good road between the villages, and for two months following Ruskin's instructions, who also worked with us, we went out day by day and learned

how to lay levels and dig and break stone along a plank. Our friends and enemies mocked us but we did not mind them much."

Derided as a light-headed dandy by the press and audiences who were bored by the brilliance of Wilde whom they refused to take seriously and instead saw as an entertainer, there was nevertheless a group, admittedly small, which entertained him on a lavish scale and who were impressed by him. A reporter of the Buffalo Courier reported that "his (Wilde's) thought is presented with a clearness and beauty that fairly captivates the intellect." Thomas Wentworth Higginson noted that Wilde was "a master of good and melodious English," and when he returned to the University of Rochester where he was originally mocked, he received the encomiums of the students.

At the Bohemian Club in San Francisco the solely male members tried to outdrink their Irish visitor but he left them all gasping at an all-night affair for men while he, who had an awesome capacity for liquor, simply embarrassed them. It was not too uncommon for American men to perceive Wilde's fastidiousness as unmanly.

This is too brief to recount the reports of his contacts with the press and the people but epigrams abound. "America has no humour nor lightheadedness of youth." But though he was critical he did not denigrate the quality of the American mentality. "There is no such thing as a stupid American," he said, but he did decry his manners and lack of courtesy. The standard reply was "we are still a young nation where we are raw and crude. The finer arts will come with time."

Wilde travelled 15,000 miles in America and Canada and confessed that "my mission to the barbaric shores had been substantially a failure." He lectured in 60 cities and returned home where his great plays and other work were still to come as well as his fateful humiliation.

His triumphant legacy must offer consolation to his posterity. For his growing numbers of devotees he constitutes a scintillating landmark in the realm of literature and thought.

EARNEST GETS ITS ACTS TOGETHER

Gordon Blackwell

At last Wilde's *original* four-act version of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is found - more about that at the end of this article. A serious question remains: Did Wilde prefer this longer play or the shorter three-act version, the one he published a year before he died and a classic ever since? The history of the play's text gives some clues.

Why It Was Condensed

1894. At his zenith, Wilde composed his greatest comedy in a burst of creative energy. He wrote four bountiful acts, as in his other three comedies, for a fun-filled evening. He sent his hand-written manuscripts to Mrs. Marshall's Type Writing Office, a new service in London. They finished two complete dated copies. The one marked "31 Oct. 94" he sent to Charles Frohman, a New York producer who had bought the American rights. The other marked "1 Nov. 94" he sent to George Alexander, an actor-producer in London. Wilde's accompanying letter warned Alexander that as a "romantic" actor he was unsuited to either Jack or Algernon, the equally important male leads, but he would let Alexander decide for himself.

1895. Alexander, after realizing the play was a winner that he had to appear in, chose the role of Jack. He proceeded to cut or persuaded Wilde to cut out many lines, two short scenes and a longer one which featured the other role of Algernon. Wilde fought him at rehearsals, arguing for an hour over the loss of the longer scene. This scene had a solicitor, Gribbsby, try mistakenly to have Algernon arrested for debts that in truth *Jack* had failed to pay. This amusing byplay discredited Jack, so Alexander refused to keep it. He combined the now severely truncated acts II and III into one act. After many deletions in the other acts, the play added up to a skimpy evening. So Alexander appended a curtain raiser by a hack author. Imagine what Wilde thought about that absurdity!

The three-act *Earnest* was a resounding success at its premier. Alexander exulted to Wilde backstage, "Wasn't I right?" Wilde replied ironically that the evening was "charming, charming," and it reminded him of a play he had once written called *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He obviously didn't like the cut version then. A seeming discrepancy occurred in his boast to Sherard to the effect that *Earnest's* first act was ingenious, second act, beautiful and third act, abominably clever. Notice that he did not say he preferred the three acts to the original four acts.

1898. After two years in prisons (including one that, alas, he had named in the Gribbsby scene!) destroyed Wilde's creative career, Robert Ross, his literary executor, urged him to write a new comedy that he, Wilde, had composed a scenario for. However, Wilde was afraid that audiences would try to uncover unpleasant "meanings in every phrase" that he might write. So instead, Ross pushed him to get Earnest ready for printing. A London publisher was willing to take a chance on it if

Wilde would let him omit his name and credit it merely to "the author of *Lady Windermere's Fan*". Ruefully, Wilde agreed to the latter condition.

In severely reduced circumstances during his exile in France, Wilde had no complete copy of the play and wrote to Alexander. The actor sent what he had: the act I typescript from his four-act original (the rest has never come to light) and his prompt typescript of the three-act *Earnest*. If Wilde had any copy of the Gribsby scene, he would have cringed at its light hearted banter about gentlemen being arrested and imprisoned. Wilde had limited energy and struggled with the missing parts of the scripts at hand. Filling in these missing links was harder for him in his poor health than composing the whole play had been. In the end, he polished the three-act version, adding brief but inimitable improvements. When it was published, the London press, with one exception, boycotted the book of *Earnest* with silence. Ross sent Wilde a copy of the review in the *Outlook*. Wilde saw that it left out his name but he replied that it was a "good notice, well written."

The Literary Sleuths

1903. Somehow the Germans combined various versions of the four-act *Earnest* and performed it around the turn of the century. They published this pastiche in 1903 in Leipzig.

1956. Dr. Sarah Dickson edited what she called "The Original Four-Act Version" of *Earnest* from early drafts and typescripts of the play, including amusing lines which Wilde later omitted. The New York Public Library published 500 copies of it. This was not the original, as she claimed.

1957. Vyvyan Holland, Wilde's son, took another approach at restoration. He took the German *Earnest* and where possible matched it with Wilde's own texts from various stages of the composition. This he accepted as valid in the absence of Wilde's final typescript (except for that first act from Alexander's file). Holland's play in four acts is still in print in England. It was staged occasionally there and in Ireland for delighted audiences. Richard Ellmann in his recent biography of Wilde referred to "the" four-act *Earnest*, presumably meaning Holland's. He made no mention of the important research of Ruth Berggren.

Finding Wilde's Original

1984. Ruth Berggren, an American computer expert, started to collate the available drafts and typescripts of *Earnest*. In 1977 she ran across a complete four-act typescript of the play, stored away and unheralded in Lincoln Center's Library for the Performing Arts. It was part of a collection of 4,000 manuscripts that included Charles Frohman's extensive library. These had been purchases in a huge lot in 1953. No one noticed before Berggren that the Oscar Wilde typescript had the revealing stamp: "Mrs. Marshall's Type Writing Office. 31 Oct. 94." She had found what others

had given up looking for: the full play that Wilde had originally sent to Frohman! It was untouched and ready for performance.

Berggren wrote her 1984 doctoral thesis on this version. (Still in print from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor MI 46106. # 8410260; 324 pp.; unjustified typewriter-like print; hardcover price last year, \$66.92, postpaid in the U.S.) She included the full play, her long introductory essays and an appendix with much of the Wilde-deleted material from Dixon's book.

1987. Dr. Berggren edited and published her thesis and Wilde's text in a commercial book called *The Definitive Four-Act Version of Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest*, released this year in hardcover (illustrated, 192 pp.; \$19.89, including postage from Vanguard Press, 424 Madison Ave., N.Y., NY 10017). This valuable reference work, like her thesis, lacks those priceless gems from Wilde's 1899 edition that our conditioned minds yearn for. In the new book she does include two famous lines that conclude act four (act three in the short version) and gives a logical reason for adding them. She ought also to include the major 1899 improvements as footnotes when her book goes into a new edition. Her excellent introductory essays are shorter than formerly and she now includes only a smattering of the Dixon material, shorn of its useful indication of where the lines used to be located.

Therefore, for a complete study of the four-act *Earnest* scholars will want Berggren's thesis, although it is less attractive and expensive. For a handsome book of the same Wilde text at a good price, most people will welcome Vanguard's version. In either case, you have the play as Wilde first intended it. It is about 25% longer than the standard three-act *Earnest*. Inevitably, some modernists will prefer the faster moving condensed play. Others will applaud Dr. Berggren's accomplishment in giving us this invaluable addition to the Wilde heritage.

from **The Decay of Lying** ...

“Art never expresses anything but itself. This is the principle of my new aesthetics; and it is this, more than that vital connection between form and substance, on which Mr. Pater dwells, that makes basic the type of all the arts. Of course, nations and individuals, with that healthy natural vanity which is the secret of existence, are always under the impression that it is of them that the Muses are talking, always trying to find in the calm dignity of imaginative art some mirror of their own turbid passions, always forgetting that the singer of life is not Apollo but Marsyas. Remote from reality and with her eyes turned away from the shadows of the cave, Art reveals her own perfection, and the wondering crowd that watches the opening of the marvellous many-petalled rose fancies that it is its own history that is being told to it, its own spirit that is finding expression in a new form. But it is not so. The highest art rejects the burden of the human spirit, and gains more from a new medium or a fresh material than she does from any enthusiasm for art, or from any lofty passion, or from any great awakening of the human consciousness. She develops purely on her own lines. She is not symbolic of any age. It is the ages that are her symbols.”

Oscar Wilde

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