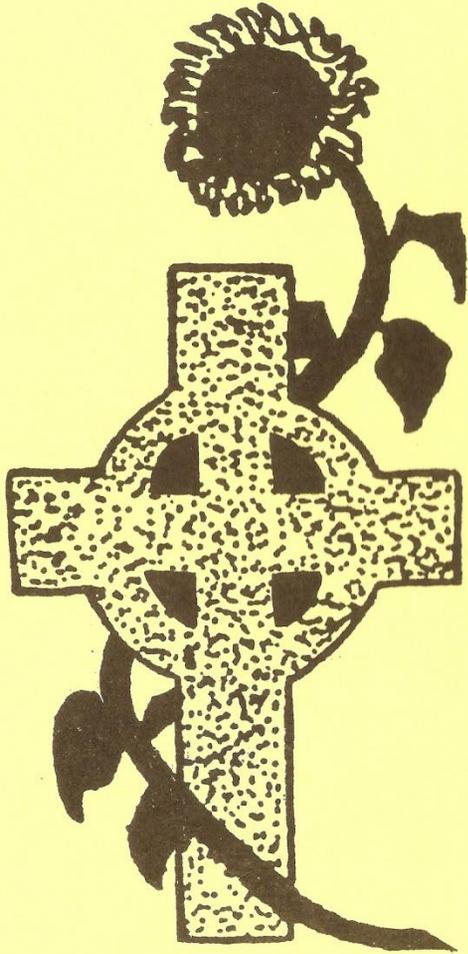


Wild About Wilde

Newsletter



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Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Mills Wilde

WILD ABOUT WILDE

Dear Wild Wildeans,

As our literary group grows and expands it is a great pleasure for me to hear from so many people, within the United States and abroad, who all share a fascination for the works of Oscar Wilde. While the world of the Philistine rages about us it is such a comfort to know that real Art and an appreciation for a great and luxuriant mind still survive. We seem, in this century, to have reached the point where the lowest common denominator is now paramount and mindless masses flock to the shrines of the nightly sit-coms, or worse. If Oscar found the nineteenth century to be lost he would positively shriek at what has become of ours: "The public is wonderfully tolerant. It forgives everything except genius."

Richard Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde* is now in paperback in Europe and sales, according to the publisher, are "brisk". Oscar would be charmed and would doubtless have something to say to Leonard Smithers - but we can only speculate. During my recent visit to Ireland there were two plays running concurrently in Dublin of Wildean interest. One was *Salome* directed by Steven Berkoff and the other was a play called *A Trinity of Two* about the trials written by Dubliner Ulick O'Connor. The Abbey Theatre, where *Trinity* played, kindly let me have the transcript and I am reproducing part of it in this edition. The copyright is in the hands of Mr O'Connor's agent Mr. Felix De Wolfe, Manfield House, 376/378 The Strand, London WC2. It is an interesting work playing up the theme of Wilde the Irish Nationalist versus Carson the Unionist battling with words. Also in this issue I am happy to feature an extract from the doctoral thesis of Susan Taylor Jacobs who also wrote me a small piece about how she came to study Wilde and his period. Gordon Blackwell, a prolific Wildean, has written two reviews which are of interest to all Oscar devotees.

There is unfortunately no further news about the Wilde museum in Westland Row, Dublin, but Oscar would understand that certain things cannot be rushed and indeed should be undertaken with care; as he would say "in modern life nothing produces such an effect as a good platitude."

I am always happy to hear from anyone who writes and I answer all letters. Some people have written to ask could we all arrange a meeting and while it is tempting to

want to gather together the great minds of the world it might not be an easy task and might indeed "lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square." Any thoughts?

And so to Oscar. Be inspired and write an essay for the next newsletter - "it is quite remarkable how one good action always breeds another."

All the best,



Carmel

from *De Profundis* ...

As regards the other subject, the relation of the artistic life to conduct, it will no doubt seem strange to you that I should select it. People point to Reading Gaol, and say "There is where the artistic life leads a man." Well, it might lead one to worse places. The more mechanical people, to whom life is a shrewd speculation dependent on a careful calculation of ways and means, always know where they are going, and go there. They start with the desire of being the Parish Beadle and, in whatever sphere they are placed, they succeed in being the Parish Beadle and no more. A man whose desire is to be something separate from himself, to be a Member of Parliament, or a successful grocer, or a prominent solicitor, or a judge, or something equally tedious, invariably succeeds in being what he wants to be. That is his punishment. Those who want a mask have to wear it.

But with the dynamic forces of life, and those in whom those dynamic forces become incarnate, it is different. People whose desire is solely for self-realization never know where they are going. They can't know. In one sense of the word it is, of course, necessary, as the Greek oracle said, to know oneself. That is the first achievement of knowledge. But to recognize that the soul of a man is unknowable is the ultimate achievement of Wisdom. The final mystery is oneself.

Oscar Wilde

A WILDE INTEREST

SUSAN TAYLOR JACOBS

Rutgers University

I came to Wilde indirectly, from an early fascination with Max Beerbohm's irony. I was told, as a young student, that Beerbohm, Wilde, and others formed part of a group known as the "Decadents," a label I now find pretty useless. I picked up Wilde, looking for more of what Beerbohm does so well. Eventually I grew less interested in irony alone, and more in the resistance of Wilde's prose to the reader's effort to paraphrase its meaning.

Wilde's writing is inclusive; it encompasses enthusiasm and skepticism (and I should be ashamed of using a polarity like that in speaking of an author who eschews polarities). By this I mean that not only does he take up different subjects, Christian faith, hedonism, love, skeptical socialism, and so forth, but his manipulation of denotation and formal structure permits a statement to contain, and contradict, numerous points of view. He is not nihilistic: he does not lead us to the notion that language can mean nothing if conviction is impossible. The plot of "Mr. W.H." conveys, among other things, that conviction is a very real and significant part of the dialectic activity of the human mind, even if it evolves or ebbs.

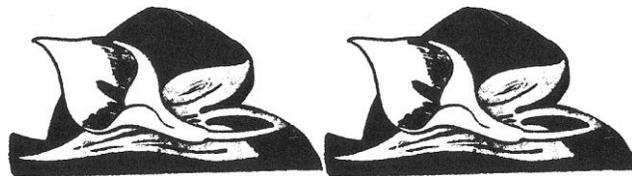
The slippery quality I find in his writing has a function. Wilde's goal seems to be to know the mind in all its manifestations, experiencing its passions, including intellectual ones, as important and informative however much they may be, in pragmatic terms, deluded. The desire to know the mind is Romantic, but his conscious respect for error is a more modern approach to knowledge.

Wilde works within, and adapts, many philosophical and literary theories. His use of Hegel, for example, is obvious, although I think he resists the concept of synthesis. In my dissertation, though, I hook Wilde onto fantasy, or the fantastic. Writers of fantasy often use similar formal techniques to Wilde's in forcing the readers to conceive of "new worlds."

I have to be explicit about what I mean by fantasy (Which some call "the fantastic" to distinguish it from stories that they consider lightweight). I am not interested in fantastic settings, plots or themes, but in the ways verbal structures are manipulated to puzzle, disorient, or otherwise prevent the reader from settling into an interpretation of the words in front of her. I've drawn upon Tzvetan Todorov, although I disagree with his historical bias (he limits the fantastic to the nineteenth century, saying conditions after then made it impossible to write the fantastic). I also refer to

a number of other critics, some but not all influenced by Structuralist or Deconstructive thinking. This is not, however, a Structuralist or Deconstructive dissertation, though I think Wilde would suit a Deconstructionist analysis beautifully.

As an example of the way fantastic structures suit Wilde, take Wilde's criticism. Wilde plays with criticism the way Dorian Gray plays with experience, to find what the mind he knows best his own, is capable of. He will say different things in different places, of course, but I find that a single sentence will have the same interesting effect. It is as if we heard all the parts of the mind talking at once, not separated from each other or prioritized by the reason. Fantasy writers will use, say, ambiguity, multiple possible meanings, contradictions which destroy a conceptual framework, in order to suggest a larger reality than we permit ourselves to be aware of. Similarly, Wilde's prose, I argue in the dissertation, disorients the reader more or less severely depending on the degree that she regards the act of reading as an act of finding or making meaning. His words have meaning, of course, in that they can be read, but the meanings are not stable, finite or consistent with other meanings. They enforce upon the reader a kind of understanding that is more inclusive, tolerant of contradiction, than exposition ordinarily requires.



OSCAR WILDE'S USES OF FANTASY

An extract from the dissertation

SUSAN TAYLOR JACOBS

The structure of "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." forces us to question the relation Wilde's exposition has to truth. The lengthy presentation of the Willie Hughes theory is a piece of nonfictional, expository prose. It is only its fictional frame that invites us to view it as anything else, and during a large part of "Mr. W.H." the fictional frame recedes. During that time the reader may be tempted to treat the Willie Hughes theory like an ordinary piece of interpretive criticism, testing it against his reason and experience of literature, then accepting or rejecting it. Ironically, however, it is in working out his exposition, producing internal evidence in rational form, that the narrator becomes wildly detached from facts and common sense. When he tells how he came to lose his faith in the Willie Hughes theory, he suggests a different relationship between exposition and its readers:

What was it that had happened? ... Perhaps, by finding perfect expression for a passion, I had exhausted the passion itself. Emotional forces, like the forces of physical life, have their limitations ... Or perhaps I had become tired of the whole thing, wearied of its fascination, and, my enthusiasm having burnt out, my reason was left to its own unimpassioned judgment ... Had I touched upon some secret that my soul desired to conceal? Or was there no permanence in personality? .. Were we at the mercy of such impressions as Art or Life choose to give us? It seemed to me to be so (WH 212-213).

An important question of Wilde's time was whether the personality was permanent, or whether it was not, to use William James' term, a "primary quality" at all. The narrator suspects here that his personality changes with his fluctuating emotions. He cannot control these emotions, so he cannot conserve any particular configuration of personality, even the "rational" one which produces and reads exposition. Reason, which ought to perceive independently of emotion, has little to do with knowledge; "Art" and "Life," neither of which is founded on reason, are the true arbiters of knowledge. In fact, the narrator's single mention of reason in a passage replete with words like "passion," "emotional forces," and "impressions" is to associate reason with a kind of lassitude that succeeds emotion. Thus, the narrator does not disbelieve the Willie Hughes theory for rational reasons, even though the essay, as exposition, presents itself to the reason with its meticulous and logical display and interpretation

of evidence. He loses his faith because of emotions that the essay evokes, even though it does not acknowledge them - it is only in the fiction that the irrationality involved in the act of reading non-fiction is openly admitted to. Through the emotions that the supposedly rational exposition raises, the essay merges with irrational, emotional, false fantasy.

During this period of fantastic immersion in that which "had taken the place of personal experience," the narrator sloughs off his common sense, empirical self. This is the self that Kafka undermines in the lunatic logic of his claustrophobic fantasies, where we learn, as Sartre points out, that finally nothing is so alien to us as our own selves. Such alienation is not tragic, according to Wilde, but liberating. Erskine's greatest mistake is to reject Cyril Graham's theory once he learns it cannot be verified. The forgiving Wilde gives Erskine a comic, not a tragic, death, resulting in a convoluted way in new life for the theory. Dying of consumption, Erskine leaves a suicide note for the narrator, hoping that the "pathetic fallacy of martyrdom" (WH, 219) will bind his friend to the theory of Willie Hughes. The narrator cannot help but learn the facts when he arrives at Erskine's home. Such a futile, eccentric act is ludicrous, as the narrator sadly acknowledges, rather than heroic and tragic, but in the long run Erskine succeeds in preserving his theory. Though he does not win the narrator's belief, his mock suicide, however grotesque, draws the theory into the playful world of fantasy. The theory is a set of ideas and experiences whose value is reinforced by the fact that they are not objectively true. We are thus free to be affected by them however we choose.

WAW Editor's note: The entire dissertation (1987 Rutgers University) may be ordered from U.M.I. tel: 1-800-521-0600.



from .. **The Harlot's House**

We caught the tread of dancing feet,
We loitered down the moonlit street,
And stopped beneath the harlot's house.

Inside, above the din and fray,
We heard the loud musicians play
The "Treues Liebes Herz" of Strauss

Sometimes a clockwork puppet pressed
A phantom lover to her breast,
Sometimes they seemed to try and sing.

Sometimes a horrible marionette
Came out, and smoked its cigarette
Upon the steps like a live thing.

Then, turning to my love, I said,
"The dead are dancing with the dead,
The dust is whirling with the dust."

But she - she heard the violin,
And left my side, and entered in:
Love passed into the house of lust.

Then suddenly the tune went false,
The dancers wearied of the waltz,
The shadows ceased to wheel and whirl.

And down the long and silent street,
The dawn, with silver-sandalled feet,
Crept like a frightened girl.

Oscar Wilde



A TRINITY OF TWO

An Extract from the play

By ULICK O'CONNOR

FADE TO CARSON STAGE RIGHT

CARSON: It was the English way of saying one thing and doing another that I couldn't cope with. It undid me in the end. It was a part of the system that had no meaning for me.

I wanted Ireland in the Empire but as equal partners. But if we did choose to speak our mind in our own way, or run our part of the affair in our own way without Machiavellian devices that they found necessary, then that was our business

You see, the Ireland I loved and belonged to is a special one. The majority of Irishmen are of the other kind, the sort Wilde and his mad mother hankered after. They live in the Celtic Twilight and the Celts have left nothing but disorder

Through Ulster I had hoped to show what our countrymen North and South could achieve in alliance with the Empire. But I played the game straight. I didn't reckon with the hypocrisy of Englishmen when they deal with their Irish kin across the Channel.

FADE TO WILDE STAGE LEFT

WILDE: Of course, I played into their hands. One of the few members of the House of Lords who wasn't a bugger happened to be the father of my dearest friend. This was the Marquis of Queensbury who among other things invented the rules of boxing, he pursued foxes, women and me with the same intensity in between intervals of beating his wife and threatening his three sons in public streets with revolvers. Alfred was his third son and a man of extraordinary beauty, also a true poet. What really galled Queensbury was that his eldest son was having an affair with the Prime Minister, the Earl of Rosebury - but of course he couldn't interfere with that one. It was too much to take on a Prime Minister. So he chose me instead as a lesser target.

Actually, and this is purely between me and you, apart from a few schoolboy familiarities early on with Lord Alfred Douglas there was no sexual content in our friendship. He simply delighted in my company and I in his. He was a very handsome young man and in addition I suppose the snobbish side of my Dublin background rather appreciated finding such a friendship with a Lord. But if Alfred loved me, and I believe he did, with the fervour of a young man for what I really must call with due

modesty the genius of an older one, the greatest passion of his life was his hatred of his father. Every time that repulsive and ogre-like figure the Marquis, appeared on the horizon, Alfred would deliberately act in every way possible to annoy him. I think he could cheerfully have killed his father if he could have avoided going to trial. This ghastly hatred between the two of them had one result. I was drawn into the middle of it. Queensbury left a card at my club. Nothing much on it. The card suggested that I posed as what he called a "somdomite". Spelling wasn't the Marquis's strong point.

I wanted to put the whole thing aside. It seemed to me to be of no importance. But Alfred urged me on. It was a way, he thought, of getting at his father. We could put the Marquis in prison for criminal libel and above all Alfred would have a chance to go into the witness box and proclaim in open court how his father had treated him, beaten his mother and assaulted his other brothers. Of course I should have won the case. And I would have won it if I hadn't the misfortune to be cross-examined by Ned Carson. God knows if I had a tongue like a silver razor he had one like a hatchet.

FADE TO COURTROOM WHERE CARSON'S CROSS-EXAMINATION OF WILDE IS CONTINUING ...

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AN IDEAL HUSBAND

Airs on BBC radio

GORDON BLACKWELL

Dramatic success in presenting a classic play depends on who performs in it and how they do it. In 1948 Alexander Korda directed a lavish production of Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* starring Michael Wilding and Paulette Goddard. It may have been good but according to one review, this London Films release was boring.

In contrast, the British Broadcasting Corporation undertook the same play on radio and came up with a winner. It was beamed abroad on short-wave on June 4 (repeated June 5). To fit it into an hour, they cut about half the text, but the condensation gave urgency to the drama. Happily most of the witty interludes between serious scenes were preserved.

The proficient cast contributed much. Margo Boyd played Lady Markby in the droll tones and traditions of Edith Evans' dowagers. Her distaste for clergymen in fashionable circles remained intact: "I can't understand this modem mania for curates. In my time, we girls saw them, of course, running about the place like rabbits. But we never took any notice of them, I need hardly say. But I am told that nowadays country society is quite honeycombed with them. I think it is most irreligious."

Michael Cochran acting the part of Lord Goring, the eligible bachelor, shifted easily from flippancy for his imperious father to concern for his endangered friends. This character is unique in Wilde's plays. I like to think it reflects more of himself than he put into any of his clever talkers who scorn serious conduct or his serious people who scorn clever talk.

Lord Goring's remarks in the lighter scenes draw on Wilde's humour of inverse logic, such as, "When one pays a visit it is for the purpose of wasting other people's time, not one's own." Asked if he read something in the *Times*, he scoffs, "I only read The Morning Post. All that one should know about modem life is where the Duchesses are; anything else is quite demoralizing."

The BBC production of *An Ideal Husband* showed that it plays well if cast right. The polished dialogue helps us accept a plot convention like a stolen brooch produced at the right moment to confound the thief. Today we can recognize how a ruthless woman could blackmail a politician with a letter revealing that he profited from insider trading information.

Geraldine McEwen portrayed the scheming woman, Mrs. Chevely. She coolly tossed off cynicisms like: "To expect the unexpected shows a thoroughly modern intellect." McEwen over emphasized the obvious wickedness at times but she and Cochran built excellent tension in their verbal struggle over the stolen brooch.

The director of the radio play, Walter Da Costa, gave it high style. The BBC is to be commended. Our Public Radio stations ought to rebroadcast the excellent BBC classics that are being done. In New York City WNYC used to do that but this seems to have stopped. As it is, only the few who have short-wave receivers can hear BBC radio plays and then only if weather conditions permit good reception.

SPENDTHRIFT OF GENIUS

Documentary of a Life

GORDON BLACKWELL

An excellent Irish documentary, directed and produced by Seán Ó Mórdha and called *Oscar Wilde: Spendthrift of Genius* opened in a theatre in New York on June 15, having appeared on Irish television in 1986.

Like the documentaries about Walt Whitman and other American poets in the acclaimed series on Public Television, this one contained vintage black-and-white photographs and sketches of Wilde and people he knew, interspersed with contemporary colour movies of locales where Wilde lived.

The scholarly narration of this production was written by Richard Ellmann and read sonorously by Denys Hawthorne. The familiar and unfamiliar quotations of Wilde are read with fervour by Alan Stanford.

Near the end of *Spendthrift* an arresting voice reads two stanzas of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. The sound is faint and scratchy because it was recorded in 1900 on an Edison Talking Machine at the Paris Exhibition. This is Oscar Wilde's own voice, a fascinating bonus.

If *Spendthrift of Genius* comes your way on the big screen or on the small screen, see it for a delightful hour in Wilde territory.

from.. **A FEW MAXIMS FOR THE INSTRUCTION OF THE OVER-EDUCATED**

Public opinion exists only where there are no ideas.

It is a very sad thing that nowadays there is so little useless information.

In old days books were written by men of letters and read by the public. Nowadays books are written by the public and read by nobody.

One should never listen. To listen is a sign of indifference to one's hearers.

A subject that is beautiful in itself gives no suggestion to the artist. It lacks imperfection.

The only thing that the artist cannot see is the obvious. The only thing that the public can see is the obvious. The result is the Criticism of the Journalist.

What is abnormal in Life stands in normal relations to Art. It is the only thing in Life that stands in normal relations to Art.

Art is the only serious thing in the world. And the artist is the only person who is never serious.

Oscar Wilde

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