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Wild About Wilde

Newsletter

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Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Mills Wilde

WILD ABOUT WILDE



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Dear Wild Wildeans,

Here we go with another WAW. It's hard to believe that we are in our seventh year yet it is true nonetheless. But enough of this because "it is very vulgar to talk about one's business. Only people like stockbrokers do that, and then merely at dinner-parties."

My summer in Dublin proved to be full of interesting meetings with other Wildeans. As you can see on page 14 there is a second Oscar Wilde Society there. Oscar is charmed to have so many admirers! "Geniuses ... are always talking about themselves when I want them to be talking about me." Don't worry, Oscar, we did!

Also in Ireland I gave a talk to the County Meath Arts Council on Wilde's life and work and hopefully made some new converts and convinced some old fans to persist in their fascination. Persisting in this fascination is quite easy too with so many of his works prominent on the shelves in Irish bookshops. Quite a change from the U.S.!

The other Irish O.W. society, the Trinity Oscar Wilde Society, which is the one working on the Westland Row project, is also doing well and progressing towards its goal of opening a museum sometime in the future in the house that Oscar was born in. For anyone interested in helping with this particular project or in making a donation the person to contact is Deirdre Byrne, 1 Martello Tee., Sandycove, Co. Dublin, Ireland.

We have some interesting articles. Michael Morris is sharing his work on the Beardsley illustrations for *Salomé*. As you will see from reading his work and from the small bio on him he has uncovered a lot of information concerning the film version of *Salomé* made in the U.S. in 1922.

Patrick Horan writing on paradox brings Wilde to his Irish roots. Where else would he be? To be Irish is to be a paradox. The early Irish texts which are written in the Irish language and give us the oldest vernacular literature in Western Europe are full of this fascination with complexity and paradox. As Oscar said in *Pen, Pencil and Poison*: "A mask tells us more than a face."

I hope you all enjoy this issue. As usual, I enjoyed putting it all together.

All the best,



Carmel



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THE BEARDSLEY ILLUSTRATIONS FOR *SALOMÉ*

An extract from the thesis

Michael Morris

Beardsley's original drawing for the cover of *Salomé* is perhaps the only work in the commission which is truly faithful to the spirit of Wilde's play (see next page). It is constituted by a symmetrical design of peacock feathers which crowd the surface with pictorial energy, a feature with strong parallels to Islamic art and Persian miniatures. This serpentine extravagance was dropped, however, in favour of a more austere calligraphic emblem typical of the Far East. Slightly asymmetrical with its decorative leaves and foreboding root, this creation which was stamped in gold on the green silk cover of the deluxe edition also has six diagrammed roses which appear throughout the *Salomé* illustrations.

Beardsley's spatial liberties are again seen in his drawing of *John and Salomé* wherein a number of lines penetrate the body of the prophet as though he were transparent. The sharp masses of black forming the garments accentuate the tension between the two figures.

Beardsley has skillfully utilized jagged and pointed lines to create this emotional response. Here, as elsewhere in the *Salomé* drawings, the *femme fatale* wears an oriental headdress and a Japanese girdle which leaves exposed her navel and breasts with their decorated nipples. Large dots accent the thin lines of her robe and pulsate intermittently.

In *Salomé on Settle*, the cut-off perspective, the unusual back view, the decorative silhouette and ornamentation are yet other devices which find their origin in Japanese prints. Yet Salomé's coat fringed with lace and her ballooning undergarments are not Japanese but contemporary.

The further lack of Oriental costume in the second version of *Salomé's Toilet* and the *Black Cape* was attacked by some critics as being inconsistent and inappropriate.* Indeed, the change in costume is jolting. It was at this time that Beardsley was tiring of Japanese convention and decided to experiment with new possibilities in his design. Although Salomé's *Black Cape* is derived from a contemporary fashion similar to that worn by the singer Irene Abendroth in a Painting by Georg Papperitz of 1893, the stylization is still quite evidently Japanese.

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Beardsley's original drawing for the cover of *Salomé*

Continued from page 3

Whether in contemporary dress or not, Beardsley's interpretation and economy of line still deviated from the Byzantine adornment desired by Wilde. On this point, if one were to place Beardsley's *Salomé* in an artistic context it would not be placed in the company of works by Flaubert, Mallarmé, Moreau or Huysmans with their heavy laden imagery. Rather this premier Japanese style interpretation of the *Salomé* legend follows sympathetically in the more austere *amor vacui* tradition cherished by Puvis des Chevannes and Whistler.

*Macfall, Haldane. *Aubrey Beardsley; The Man and His Work* Bodley Head Ltd., London 1928

Unpublished manuscript. Copyright Michael Morris.

*Michael Morris received his Ph.D. in art history from the University of California at Berkeley in 1986. His earlier M.A. thesis on the **Salomé** collaboration of Beardsley and Wilde (extracted above) led to his discovery of the 1922 film made of Wilde's play in a style a la Beardsley. The film's costume and set designer was a brilliant woman named Natacha Rambova (born Winifred Shaughnessy in Salt Lake City) who later married and helped create the silent screen god, Rudolph Valentino. Professor Morris's biography of the multi-faceted woman who became an actress, spiritualist, couturiere, physical therapist, author, and Egyptologist is entitled **Madame Valentino: the many lives of Natacha Rambova**. It is published through Abbeville Press (488 Madison Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10022). **Salomé** is now considered to be America's first art film (Wilde would indeed be pleased!). Jonathan Sanger, the Hollywood producer of **The Elephant Man** and **Frances**, is presently negotiating to bring **Madame Valentino** to the cinema.*

WILDE AND JOYCE: THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PARADOXICAL

Patrick M. Horan

Oscar Wilde and James Joyce, Irish nonconformists, shared more than just nonconformity: both portrayed the artist as an exiled martyr, both developed theories of aesthetics, and both believed that humanity was paradoxical. Wilde's life fascinated Joyce: "In every man's mind there are figures which recur, always inquiring and sometimes adding to his understanding of them; and Wilde was to be such a figure for Joyce" (Howarth 183).

Although Joyce respected Wilde and identified with him, he seldom praised him; actually, Wilde became more and more a scapegoat for Joyce to parody. Several factors apparently deterred Joyce from a simple position of defending Wilde: "The first factor was his fear of sentimentality ... (the second factor was that) Oscar Wilde was an Irish master of the generation immediately preceding Joyce's and that made Joyce view his as a rival ... the third factor ... is a datum of Joyce criticism that when he thought directly about carnal male relationships, his conservative feelings prevailed." (Howarth 185). Joyce ridiculed Wilde, but he also identified with him in the same way that he identified with Charles Stewart Parnell: for him both were Irishmen condemned for sexual crimes by an unjust, hypocritical morality and both, paradoxically, were condemned by humanity for merely being human.

Although Joyce admired Wilde's nonconformity and his ability "to break the lance of his fluent paradoxes against the body of practical conventions" (Mason 201), he understood that Wilde's condemnation was inevitable and that the public was not ready to accept Wilde's unconventional life-style. Joyce concludes in his article "The Poet of Salomé" that Wilde's downfall was the result of convergent, conformist public opinion and "was greeted by a howl of puritanical joy." At the news of his condemnation, the crowd gathered outside the courthouse and began to dance a pavane in the muddy street.

Richard Ellmann, the biographer of both Wilde and Joyce, emphasizes that Joyce also lived a paradoxical life. He spent much of his life as a man about town, even though he was constantly in debt. The woman he loved most was the one person who could least appreciate or understand his literature and his exile from Ireland, in many ways, constantly forced him to return there mentally.

Although Wilde and Joyce both acknowledged that their humanity made them contradictory, Joyce accepted his contradictory personality more easily, primarily because he neither craved society's approval nor felt obliged to wear a social mask as Wilde did. Consequently, Wilde's inability to accept or to integrate contradictory elements of the self and thereby achieve harmony of the soul disappointed Joyce. Wilde, however, fascinated Joyce even if he did disappoint him and Joyce alluded to Wilde in many works but most obviously in his masterpiece *Ulysses* which stresses that Wilde's life and philosophy were

dominated by paradox. Significantly, Wilde's fondness for and frequent use of paradox to explain human behaviour foreshadowed Joyce's paradoxical world of *Ulysses*.

Although both writers depict the world as paradoxical, Wilde (at least in his plays) uses paradox more frequently and more humourously. Joyce's characters (not Joyce himself) criticize Wilde's light, comic use of paradox. Buck Mulligan mocks Wilde's "Irish art" with its romantic paradoxical rage at not seeing its own face in the mirror and Mr. Best, the librarian, describes Wilde's *Portrait of Mr. W. H.*:

The most brilliant of all is that story of Wilde's, Mr. Best said, lifting his brilliant notebook. That Portrait of Mr. W.H. where he proves that the sonnets were written by a Willie Hughes ... Of course it's all paradox, don't you know ... but it's so typical the way he works it out. It's the very essence of Wilde, don't you know. The light touch. (Ulysses 163)

Joyce knew however, that Wilde's paradoxes are profoundly serious as well as comic. In *De Profundis* Wilde writes: "A week later I am transferred here (Reading Gaol). Three months go over and my mother dies. No one knew how deeply I loved and honoured her. Her death was terrible to me but I, once a lord of language, have no words in which to express my anguish and my shame." Significantly Wilde's paradoxical situation parallels that of Stephen Dedalus. When Stephen thinks about his mother his words become syntactically scrambled and incoherent. Later, he remembers Wilde's *Requiescat*:

...Coffin Board, heavy stone,
Lie on her breast,
I vex my heart alone,
She is at rest.

Peace, peace, she cannot hear
Lyre or sonnet,
All my life's buried here,
Heap earth upon it.

May Dedalus (Stephen's mother) like the dead girl (Wilde's sister) in *Requiescat* who cannot appreciate Wilde's sonnets, cannot appreciate her son's philosophical theories. Love is paradoxical for both Wilde and Joyce because it does not console but usually destroys. Wilde's famous line from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* that "all men kill the thing they love" is echoed in the plot of Stephen Dedalus. Stephen (like the lover in *Reading Gaol*) had killed his mother not with a sword but with a kiss, and her ghost rises in the novel from, among other things, a sense of guilt that Stephen has.

Neither writer, however, is cynical about the paradoxical nature of art. Joyce shares Wilde's belief that "A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true" because both writers stress that what is popularly considered ugly is really beautiful. Conventionally repulsive subjects (scatology, sexual perversion, etc.) are quite beautiful for Joyce while for Wilde, ugly images juxtaposed with the beautiful can increase an object's artistic worth. Lord Henry Wotton in *Dorian Gray* observes that "It is the feet of clay that makes the gold of the image precious."

Finally, both Wilde and Joyce enjoyed paradoxical statements simply because they were masters of rhetoric. In Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lord Augustus states, "Mrs. Erlynne has a future before her." Dumby replies, "Mrs. Erlynne has a past before her." Joyce parodies this in *Ulysses* and states of Moses, "And yet he died without having entered the land of promise ... And with a great future behind him." Again, Joyce alludes to Wilde through paradox, and again his version of Wilde's paradox is more cynical. Oscar Wilde's paradoxical characters appeal to us because they are comically absurd and bigger than life. Ultimately, both fictional worlds mirror our world because both writers illustrate an essential truth: our lives are tragicomic. For both writers, therefore, the importance of being human is synonymous with the importance of being paradoxical.

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Patrick Horan teaches College literature and is a Doctoral candidate at Drew University, New Jersey.

OSCAR WILDE on *SALOMÉ*

from a letter written to William Archer, 1892

I am here taking the waters and have not a copy of *Salomé* with me, or would gladly lend it to you, though the refusal of the Licensor to allow the performance of my tragedy was based entirely on his silly vulgar rule about no Biblical *subject* being treated. I don't fancy he ever *read* the play, and if he did, I can hardly fancy even poor Pigott objecting to an artist *treating* his subject in any way he likes. To object to that would be to object to Art entirely - a fine position for a man to adopt, but a little too fine for Pigott, I should imagine.

I want to tell you how gratified I was by your letter in the P.M.G., not merely for its very courteous and generous recognition of my work, but for its strong protest against the contemptible official tyranny that exists in England in reference to the drama. The joy of the ordinary dramatic critic that such tyranny should exist is to me perfectly astounding. I should have thought there would be little pleasure in criticising an art where the artist was not free. The whole affair is a great triumph for the Philistine, but only a momentary one. We must abolish the censure. I think we can do it. When I come back I must see you.

Ever yours,

Oscar Wilde



OSCAR WILDE'S SKIN DISEASE

The following is from a paper just published in The Netherlands from the Dept. of Occupational Dermatology, University Hospital, Groningen.

J.P. Nater

Until now, few attempts have been made to give a satisfactory explanation of the skin symptoms accompanying Oscar Wilde's terminal disease. A new theory is proposed, based on the data now available ...

In addition to his ear complaints, Wilde developed a skin disease ... The eruption itched intensely. Wilde apologized to his friend Robert Ross for scratching himself: "Really I'm more like a great ape than ever, but I hope you'll give me a lunch, Robbie and not a nut"(1) ...

Wilde's skin disease was apparently localized to his face, arms, chest and back. Some weeks later, during a visit to Rome, the condition of his skin improved, coinciding with a visit on Easter Sunday to the Vatican. Wilde claimed that his skin had been cured by the blessing of the Pope. Although he managed to be blessed by the Pope half a dozen times during his stay in Rome, the miraculous cure did not last.

As to the cause of Wilde's complaints, all his biographers believe that Wilde suffered from tertiary syphilis. His most recent biographer Richard Ellmann is almost certain on this point. He remarks correctly, however that Wilde's rash was not due to syphilis, since syphilitic rashes do not itch, but he offers no solution to this problem. Wilde's own diagnosis of mussel poisoning is wide of the mark. An allergy to mussels does not manifest itself as a stubborn chronic dermatitis ...

Reference:

1. Critchley, M. Oscar Wilde, a medical appreciation. *Med. Hist* 1:199

For a copy of the full article and Dr. Nater's fascinating conclusions you may write to him at: Dept. of Occupational Dermatology, State University Hospital, Oostersingel 59, 9714 EZ Groningen, The Netherlands

SALOMÉ ON BROADWAY

Gordon Blackwell

Al Pacino and a capable cast infused life into Oscar Wilde's one act drama *Salomé* on alternate nights in June and July last at the Circle in the Square in New York City. The rich, varied production lasted an hour and 42 minutes.

Usually a renowned actress revives this play to interpret the part of the young Judaeen princess. In this case, Sheryl Lee provided attractive youth and good diction in the title role. But real excitement was generated by Pacino, who played Herod as it had not been done before. Rather than obese, as is often the case, he is slight of build. His performance was larger than life. Aging make-up with exaggerated red lips transformed his familiar face. In arch, well-controlled speech, sometimes singsong in tone, he displayed weariness, even in the line when he maintains that he is happy. He verged on madness in the long speech that includes the line, "Why do I not see this bird?"

Wilde wrote *Salomé* in French. Most of this production came from the Lord Alfred Douglas translation, which we assume Wilde touched up. For Broadway, probably for ease of speech, some lines were rewritten or shortened. The above quotation in the Douglas version reads, "Why can I not see it, this bird?" An excellent translation by Richard Ellmann published in *The Picture of Dorian Gray and Other Writings by Oscar Wilde* (Bantam, 1982), was not used. Many of Douglas's "thee, thou, shalt" etc. were modernized in the Broadway version, although "Thy" (hair, mouth, body) were retained. Ellmann substituted "your" in those utterances by Salomé.

Her long dance was angular in gesture but lacking in passion. She was flanked by two handmaidens who clapped, ululated and otherwise assisted her. Lar Lubovitch, instead of one of the many experts in Middle-East dance, created the disappointing choreography.

The fine set was Noguchi-like with platforms and stairs painted old-gold. The actors performed admirably, especially Suzanne Bertish as Herodias. Give credit to Robert Allan Ackerman, a stage director active in New York, London and Tokyo, for allowing the actors in *Salomé* to play a few lies for humour, such as Herod's edict, "No man shall raise the dead. It would be terrible if the dead came back."

NEW YORK GETS A WOMAN

Vito Lanza

Can OW's domestic, social dramas of the 1890s have anything to say to us a century later? Anyone viewing the West Side Repertory recent persuasive revival of *A Woman of No Importance* (August 20 - September 27) will probably have mixed feelings.

Most of the trademark epigrams withstand the test of time quite well, despite some seriously dated, sentimental stretches with their obvious talk of love, honour and duty.

Can any comment be more current than "Don't have one law for a woman and one law for a man"? Can it only be high comedy, as some have said, to call purity the "one subject of national importance" or to state that the English aristocracy "sits there like a dead thing smeared with gold"? One must constantly remember that these outpourings are 100 years old. The play is riddled with them.

Even the critical reception for the current revival matched the original one. In 1893 the play attracted the praises of people as diverse as William Archer and William Butler Yeats. Even the Prince of Wales went to see it (on the second night, in fact) and it ran for five months.

Writing a century later in the New York Post, Jerry Tallmer compared Wilde's plot (of a woman trying to keep her son away from the man who jilted her 20 years earlier) to the Woody Allen - Mia Farrow scandal without mentioning their names. Those and other comments in his review caused packed houses. When this reviewer saw it (September 5) there were 25 people on the waiting list for the 37 seat, basement theatre.

Writing recently Richard Ellmann found the play the weakest of Wilde's serious dramas of the 1890s and called the story of the fallen woman defying her seducer "stale". What about Murphy Brown on television whose unwed pregnancy duplicated Mrs. Arbuthnot's and caused so much political commentary?

The 23 year old West Side Rep, one of the few remaining "off-off-Broadway" companies still specializing in the classics, offered a streamlined (not eviscerated) version of the play with some cuts combining the first two acts and performing the whole thing on two uncredited sets instead of the specified four.

Director Norman Rhodes kept events moving swiftly but could not avoid some awkward blocking when the entire cast was on the miniscule, square stage. He also saw fit to eliminate Archdeacon Daubeny and Farquhar. The omission is

unfortunate, since we never see the play in this country and it would have been more useful to get it complete.

As for the performance of the mostly youngish cast of 11, John R. Reid (Lord Illingworth, whom some call OW's self-portrait) and Eleanore Tapscott (Lady Hunstanton, one of the "dowagers and dowdies" who serve as a chorus to the action) performed their English roles with an assurance few Americans can manage.

It remained for Rayna Baker in the title role to dominate the others with a characterization of great dignity and power. Clad in Lucy Keyes' jet-black gowns (which looked rented), she played down the sentiment and made one of Wilde's indomitable females seem very current and sympathetic.

Apparently times have not changed all that much since the Victorian era. This group revived the play twice previously (in 1973 and 1985) and found substantial success both times. The company - incredibly in this country - also performed the other two dramas in the series (*Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*) with equal aplomb. fact, the ever-popular *Earnest* will show up December 10 - January 24. Tickets are \$12 at 252 West 81 Street, New York City. Tel: (212) 874- 7290.



THE IRISH WILDEANS

A message from WAW editor:

Such is the enthusiasm for Oscar Wilde in his native Dublin that that city has spawned two societies in his name. In our last issue we featured the Trinity Oscar Wilde society which is doing wonders about getting a Wilde museum established in his birthplace at Westland Row. On a recent trip to Dublin I had the surprise of being introduced to the second society which calls itself the Dublin Oscar Wilde Society and concentrates on Sunday afternoon meetings in Bewley's Cafe, famous in Dublin for literary gatherings, and organizes trips to places of interest to Wilde or his life.

*On a recent trip this society went to the Aran Isles (islands off the west coast of Ireland) to trace some evidence of the connections there with Sir William Wilde (Oscar's father) and the O'Flahertie family. Patrick O'Flahertie was one of Oscar's godfathers. **Colin Grindley**, a member of the society describes some of the happenings:*

A coterie of five ladies and a solitary man chose to visit Inishmor, one of the Aran Islands, to trace the connections that Sir William Wilde and the O'Flahertie family had with the locality. It was also an excuse to visit a delightful area and was a first time visit for some members of the party.

Readings from Oscar's works on the steps of Joe Mac's bar in brilliant sunshine were interspersed with a trip around the island by pony and trap and discovering how the O'Flaherties came to be in Aran. Inevitably there was conviviality in the bar in the evenings and a host of new acquaintanceships were forged. Almost everybody seemed to know of, and many admired, the works of Wilde, regardless of nationality or language. They came from Dublin, Galway, Ennis, Strasburg and Florida. The Oscar Wilde Society quickly became part of the local scene, if only for a few days.

A fascinating hour was spent in the house originally owned by the O'Flahertie family who came to Inishmor from Aughnacore in Connemara. A tapestry Coat of Arms, thought to be 200 years old, early portraits, etchings and other memorabilia were shown by Mr. Johnson Heron who now owns the house and runs it as a B & B.

Just before the party left Inishmor the occasion was marked by the Ceremony of the Stones and Flowers, each stone bearing a reference to one of the Wilde family or Oscar's works. Each member cast a stone into the harbour and the flowers followed: a token of the visit on behalf of one of Ireland's most

distinguished literary figures. The stones had been collected at 6 am on the morning of the departure at Bray, County Wicklow, just opposite the Strand Hotel, built by Sir William Wilde.

Dolphins and whales escorted the ferry back to Rossaveal to add to memories of a delightful weekend.

For further information on this society you may contact Joan de Freyne. "Aisling", Cuala Road, Bray, Co Wicklow, Ireland. Tel: 01 2864005.



from **The Soul of Man Under Socialism:**

Oscar Wilde

... But in the case of Shakespeare it is quite obvious that the public really see neither the beauties nor the defect of his plays. If they saw the beauties, they would not object to the development of the drama; and if they saw the defects, they would not object to the development of the drama either. The fact is, the public make use of the classics of a country as a means of checking the progress of Art. They degrade the classics into authorities. They use them as bludgeons for preventing the free expression of Beauty in new forms. They are always asking a writer why he does not write like somebody else, or a painter why he does not paint like somebody else, quite oblivious to the fact that if either of them did anything of the kind he would cease to be an artist.

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