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Wild About Wilde

Newsletter

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Number 14

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde



WILD ABOUT WILDE

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Dear Wild Wildeans,

I am sure many of you read the welcome news that Oscar Wilde was on the short list for winning the Reader's Digest sweepstakes. A letter informing him of this was sent to his old address in Tite Street, London in December of last year. Oscar apparently reached the third stage in the "Strike it Rich" draw and was on line for the top prize of \$300,000. In *Vera, or The Nihilists* Wilde said "There is always more brass than brains in an aristocracy." Business is undoubtedly the aristocracy of the 20th century!

There are some new publications in print of Wilde's work or pertaining to him and I am happy to bring you news of these. While practically everyone is familiar with Wilde's dramas not everyone knows about the breath of his genius
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so it is quite encouraging to see, for instance a new edition of the Fairy Tales recently published. Even Speranza is back in print (see page 5). She was certainly never out of date! From London comes word that to commemorate the birth of Shelley, Jeremy Mason has published a limited edition of Wilde's poem, *The Grave of Shelley* with hand coloured drawings (page 9 for full details).

As usual there is a lot happening in Europe. Interest in Wilde's work seems without limit there. As we go to press news comes of a huge meeting in Monaco to celebrate Wilde. Hundreds of Wildeans are gathering at the end of this month (May) to hear papers on the genius of this man. From this side of the Atlantic one can only watch and overhear with envy just as one has to listen with envy to the busy activities of the U.K. Society and the Irish Society and to long for such things here. But the truth is that one's real life is often the life one does not lead.

Have an interesting summer! If you travel remember to bring your diary so you can have something sensational to read in the train!

All the best,

Carmel

Carmel



OSCAR WILDE AND THE ULTRA-AESTHETIC BODY

Dennis Denisoff

In his essay "The Soul of Man under Socialism," Oscar Wilde claims that an increased appreciation of aesthetic beauty will reconcile the antithetical relationship between self-realization and social contingency. It is through ultra-aestheticism, a term coined by the *Pall Mall Gazette* to describe the lavishly sensual and vivid imagery of Wilde's tales (1888, 1891), that the author is able to conflate art and the body in order to signify the catalytic function of aesthetic individuality in an evolving society.

Wilde's views on utopian socialism began to take shape during his studies at Oxford. As a student, he wrote that the basis of emotion is the "desire for self preservation" but that "self" does not refer to "the individual self but what (William) Clifford calls the Tribal self" (*Oscar* 129).^{*} In Wilde's essay "The Critic as Artist", the character Gilbert similarly comments that "the soul that dwells within us is no single spiritual entity, making us personal and individual ... (The soul) is the imagination; and the imagination is the result of heredity. It is simply concentrated race- experience"(1040).

Though Wilde based individual emotion and imagination on a collective inheritance, a view supported by the image of social interdependence presented by the Irish folktales which influenced his work, he felt that the members of society not only could, but should want to, communicate their unique configurations of this inheritance through surface artifice. "Give the artist a mask," Wilde writes, "and he will tell you the truth" (1045), implying that the sincere individual enters the realm of social discourse through self-representation. Though the characters in Wilde's tales are often introspective, it is the outward image that they project to the community which is crucial.

The form of Wilde's tales is most obviously indebted to the works of John Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites, Hans Christian Andersen, and Irish folktales and antiquarian lore. His parent's, both of whom were sources of folkloric information for Wilde, had published books on Irish superstitions and legends. The tale form was ideal for communicating the importance of artifice because, as Max Luthi notes, artificiality is a staple of the genre (16). Luthi writes that the tale "prefers to speak of clothing and (golden or silver) armor rather than of bodies ... because

clothing and armor are artificial creations... further from nature, (and nearer the spirit" (41). In Wilde's tales it is often impossible to separate the body of art from the body of the artist - a trope reflected in the author's own dandyism.

A number of the tales' characters are enveloped in artifice, including the princess in "The Remarkable Rocket", whose "long ermine cloak reach(es) right down to her feet" (310) and the titular hero of "The Star Child," who is so swaddled in golden tissue that the woodcutters mistake him for gold (184). Wilde did not only choose to submerge the natural body in aesthetic clothing though, also signifying the "spirit" of the individual by describing the body itself in aesthetic terms. The orphan of "The Star Child" and the young student in "The Nightingale and the Rose" both have skin like ivory. The veins on the arms of the fisherman in "The Fisherman and His Soul" are like "lines of blue enamel round a vase of bronze" (248). The mermaid in the same tale has a body of "white ivory", a tail of "silver and pearl", and amethyst eyes (248). The list goes on.

The ultra-aestheticism which Wilde equates with his characters is ultimately defined as inherent to both the make-up of their individuality and the constructive dialectic of society. In "The Happy Prince", a body of art functions as a social catalyst through the dispersal of its aesthetic identity. Placed "high above the city, on a tall column" (285), the statue of the prince symbolizes not only the potential importance of art within the community, but also the dysfunctional social distancing which is applied to it. It is not until the statue and his friend, the swallow, de-objectify the statue's artistic beauty by dispersing its gold flesh and jewels among the destitute, that the two characters experience fulfillment. Like the nightingale in "The Nightingale and the Rose", and most of the fireworks in "The Remarkable Rocket", the statue acknowledges that its individual beauty can only be realized if its social contingency is addressed.

In "The Young King" a similar fusion of art and soul through ultra-esthetics occurs. After three anti-hedonistic dreams, the king-to-be experiences a psychological shift which leads him to attend his coronation without the robe, crown, and staff which had been prepared for him at the expense of the poor. The chamberlain, fearing that the hero's decision will cause a disturbance within the community, asks the young king "How shall the people know that thou art a king, if thou hast not a king's raiment?" (231). The question, which echoes Wilde's affiliation of identity with visage, proves to be unnecessary; the hero's social sympathy is communicated to the masses through an ultra-aesthetic transformation of the body during spiritual climax. Just as the town nobles are about to slay the hero for his fashion insult to the community, his body is enfolded in a robe of sunbeams "fairer than the robe that had been fashioned for his

pleasure" (223). Wilde similarly conflates the royal staff with the hero's body by turning it into a phallus consisting of roses "redder than male rubies" and blossoming with lilies "whiter than pearls." The symbol of domination becomes a symbol of virtuosity through the ultra-aestheticism of the hero's body. By defining the body as art, Wilde resolves the conflict between individuality and social contingency. Through a shift in perception, he redefines the two factors as a single catalytic force fostering social evolution.

*All quotations are taken from *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* unless noted otherwise.

Works cited:

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Wilde, Oscar. *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. Ed. J.B. Foreman. London: Harper & Row, 1989.

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Denais Denisoff is currently analyzing 20th Century revisions of Aestheticism. He teaches in the English Department at McGill University, Canada, where he is a doctoral candidate.



Speranza in print!

A book entitled *Irish Cures, Mystic Charms and Superstitions* has recently been published by Sterling Publishing Co., Inc. New York. It is a collection put together from the writings of Oscar Wilde's mother, Lady Wilde. It is available from bookshops. The price is \$5.95 and the ISBN is 0-8069-8200-4.

The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde
Illustrated by Michael Hague
Published by Henry Holt, 1993

Review by **Carmel McCaffrey**

Oscar Wilde once said that the only way to judge a book was by its cover. Well with that as an absolute given then the new edition of Wilde's *Fairy Tales* published by Henry Holt and delightfully illustrated by Michael Hague is an aesthetic triumph. The cover shows the little boy child with the prints of nails on his palms and feet who brought the Selfish Giant to Paradise surrounded by neo-Celtic designs woven with glimmering golden threads. The illustrations are described by the publisher as being "dusted with gold" and "printed with gold ink."

Each of the nine tales is illustrated in a way which would have won the approval of Wilde who was always most anxious that his work be presented in a tasteful and aesthetic manner. Michael Hague succeeds with excess.

Wilde's *Fairy Tales* need no introduction to those familiar with them and to those who are not it need only be said that they are as magnificent and as complex as Wilde himself. They can be read by young children, Wilde culled the stories from tales he told his two young sons, and they can be enjoyed by discerning adults who can see through the simplicity to the great questions that life poses. Wilde, refreshingly and atypical of our age, gives us some answers. Spiced with a mixture of Greek and Christian ethics with echoes of Irish lore and a yearning for social justice when these stories first appeared in 1888 the British press declared that they "could not be understood by the average British child." Wilde, typically, countered with "I do not write for the average British child." No indeed, and who would want to be average when encountering these enchanting tales?

This edition makes a wonderful addition to anyone's library and a great gift for a child waiting to be introduced to the magic that is Oscar Wilde.

Published by Henry Holt and available from bookshops. ISBN 0-8050- 1009-2.
Price \$19.95.

LISTENING TO OSCAR

Gordon Blackwell

Oscar Wilde's early dedication to poetry and upbringing in Ireland inspired mellifluous sentences to flow from his pen - prose, poetry and drama that can surprise and delight the ear. Like other authors of his era he was aware that many people read books aloud. This tradition faded with the rise of home entertainment at the flick of a switch.

Yet technology has made possible a revival of reading aloud.

Thousands of books, plays and dramas are issued on audio cassettes.

Several of Wilde's important works can be heard on tape, whether you listen to these in the automobile, living room or as I do, while walking or gardening. Most of the readers are skilled actors. For anyone who wants an introduction to the Wilde canon and has never gotten around to it on the printed page, this is a pleasant approach. For those who have read the works, reliving them this way is a revelation.

Of course, a must to enjoy is a complete version of Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. This is available in two important recordings. The classic one has Sir John Gielgud and Dame Edith Evans, with a supporting cast of variable quality (Durkin Hayes Publishing Ltd.). The other recording has the talented but less stellar Alec McCowan and Gladys Cooper as Algernon and Lady Bracknell, with Joan Greenwood (who was in the shortened movie version) and Lynn Redgrave giving able support (Harper Audio). Check your library's audio cassette holdings to borrow these.

Several of Wilde's short stories have been done on cassettes. A Recorded Books set narrated by the masterful Frank Muller is currently not listed but is still in some libraries.

The best reading of "The Canterville Ghost" was done by Anthony Quayle on Caedmon, a long-playing record that is unfortunately discontinued. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been recorded complete several times (Books on Tape; Cassette Books; Audio books, etc.) in versions that last 7 to 8 hours. However, the best reader

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HÉLAS

(from *Poems*, published in 1881)

To drift with every passion till my soul
Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play,
Is it for this that I have given away
Mine ancient wisdom, and austere control?
Methinks my life is a twice-written scroll
Scrawled over on some boyish holiday
With idle songs for pipe and virelay,
Which do but mar the secret of the whole.
Surely there was a time I might have trod
The sunlit heights, and from life's dissonance
Struck one clear cord to reach the ears of God:
Is that time dead? lo! with a little rod
I did but touch the honey of romance -
And must I lose a soul's inheritance?

Oscar Wilde



Of Wilde interest:

To celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Shelley Jeremy Mason is publishing *Oscar Wilde - The Grave of Shelley*.

These facsimiles of the original draft and final manuscript of Wilde's poem have an introduction and three hand-coloured line drawing by Jeremy J. Mason. Also included are four other illustrations. Hand-set in Bembo type and printed on Ingres d'Arches paper. This is a limited edition of 140 copies of which 120 are for sale. The price is £25 sterling. The current exchange rate is approximately \$1.50 to the pound.

For further information please contact Jeremy J. Mason, Hayles House, 24 Putney Bridge Road, London SW18 IHS.



Horst Schroeder in *Notes and Queries*:

In the March 1993 edition of *Notes and Queries*, Wilde scholar Professor Horst Schroeder of the Technische Universität Braunschweig, Germany, has a number of interesting articles on recent Wilde publications including Richard Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde* and Wilde's Commonplace Book published as *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks* and edited by Philip Smith and Michael Helfand. For a copy of this OUP publication you may write to Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP, England. Individual copies of *Notes and Queries* cost \$18.

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I have heard of the novel is Peter Egan (currently from Durkin Hayes Pub., originally Listen for Pleasure). This actor played Oscar Wilde in the British television series "Lily" seen in the States on Public Television. His almost perfect interpretation of this condensed *Dorian* lasts two hours. Many libraries have this set. The only sin you must forgive Egan is his pronunciation of the word "picture" as if it were "pitcher". Alas, it comes up with disturbing frequency.

New recordings are continually being issued. Look under Wilde in the author's section of the annual R. R. Bowker's *Words on Cassette* which also lists addresses of the recording companies. Tapes can be rented from some of the firms and also from a few bookstores. They can, of course, also be purchased.

For a new dimension in appreciating Oscar Wilde, I recommend audio tapes. You may want to savour some of them again and again to hear the clever, brilliant, exciting words of the master.



ON READING OSCAR WILDE'S LETTERS

Sylvia Day

Among the many collections of letters of literary personages few, if any, have been as expressive of the writer's total personality as is the case of those of Oscar Wilde. His genius for language permeates every word, so evident in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, edited by Rupert Hart-Davis and published in the U.S. by Harcourt Brace & World, 1962. There in the compendium of 1,098 letters to more than 300 correspondents is the veritable autobiography of a uniquely brilliant individual.

For sheer clarity and pertinence, they are unparalleled. From the precocious epistles at the age of 12 to the tragic *De Profundis* and the later ones so heartbreakingly revealing the anguished fate that beset him, they eclipse the works of his biographers.

Wilde's cultured Irish parents left their mark on him as did the influence of his studies at Oxford. It was there that he found his metier which ultimately catapulted him into the realm of the most important writers of his time. It was there too that all he wrote became infused with his love for Greece and acted to form his genius of expression.

In a letter to his father while Wilde was only 21, he describes, in a visit to Florence, San Lorenzo and the two adjoining chapels. His prose already contains the mastery his future writing possessed, prose that never lost its lustre. In that letter he exhibited a more than precocious ability to describe the architectural ornamentation and sense of place. His rapt interest in art and the artifacts he observed was transmitted impeccably.

"I was shown wonderfully illuminated missals and unreadable mss. and autographs," he wrote. "I remarked the extreme cleanness of the initial letters in the missals and bibles, so different from those of the Book of Kells, etc. ... " His aesthetic sense at so youthful an age was already finely honed, and as he continued to write he forged the timeless body of work that remains to us.

In so brief a paper it would be foolhardy to attempt a definitive overview of all but a very few of Wilde's letters. This is a handicap that only a thorough reading of those letters can dispel. But there were certain periods in which

he was deeply engrossed in issues that counter such descriptions of him as "fin de siècle", or "Victorian" among others which narrow minds sought to impose upon him.

One series of letters exchanged during this period occurred as he had accepted the post of editor to the publication, *Woman's World*, and demonstrates that far from being "Victorian" his attitude toward women particularly was far ahead of his time. The correspondence he carried on with the various women contributors to the magazine clearly exhibit his own emancipated view of the opposite sex.

In a letter to a prospective contributor, Louise Chandler Moulton, an American poet and journalist, a student at school with Whistler and a lifelong friend, Wilde writes ... "I have been asked to become literary adviser to one of the monthly magazines and am anxious to make it an organ through which women of culture and position can express their views."

In letters to other prospective contributors, Wilde suggested topics to them such as "How to teach Children Biology," "Colonial Society", "The Value of Political Economy in Education" among others. He sought out women of achievement (and there were even then a remarkable number) in order to make *Woman's World* a journal that would be representative of women's views that were not yet in the mainstream.

Writing to the publisher of the magazine, originally called "Lady's World", Wilde urged him to change the name to "Woman's World", that the former name "has a certain taint of vulgarity."

Characteristically Wilde was without malice and he was often severely criticized and misunderstood by those deficient in judgement. The *Picture of Dorian Gray* unleashed an outpouring of censure. In response to the critic of *The Scots Observer* who flayed the work, Wilde replied in his inimitable gracious manner, quoting Keats who remarked he had "as great pleasure in conceiving evil as he did in conceiving good."

In that same letter Wilde expressed his view of writing, "I write because it gives me the greatest pleasure to write. If my work pleases the few, I am gratified; if it does not, it causes me no pain. As for the mob, I have no desire to be a popular novelist. It is far too easy." Wilde continues in this vein to another (unidentified) correspondent: "A work of art is useless as a flower is useless. A flower blossoms for its own joy. We gain a moment of joy looking at it."

The publication of Wilde's plays, in rapid succession, was hailed by critics and theatre goers everywhere. It was a heady period for Wilde who reigned undisputed as a dramatist of the highest distinction. Alas, he was to fall from the great height and suffer a fate bleaker than those described in his beloved Greek mythology. During the grim days that followed, his letters to his numerous friends reveal the shock and even the horror that confronted him.

Wilde's imprisonment is unequalled in the annals of art. Nowhere in literary history is there played out a drama of such scope. In *De Profundis*, ostensibly Wilde's letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, there is revealed a searing litany of suffering. There Wilde's description of the wretchedness of prison life contrasted with his paeon to the Church and his musings on Christ's compassion for sinners weaves a testament to both; the cruelty of man as exemplified by the State's injustice and its jailers together with the terrifying frustration that Wilde was helpless to meliorate, and his own need to retain something of the dignity and thought and feeling that constituted his former life. *De Profundis* stands as a document that has no precedent, a document that must melt the hardest hearts.

The letters to his friends that followed Wilde's release from prison are equally deeply affecting. Sick, poor, never to recover his great genius, the last letters reveal a battered god, but one who had sung with the angels.

Sylvia Day contributes regularly to this publication.



THE IRISH OSCAR WILDE SOCIETY PRESENTS AWARD TO AUTHOR



Joan de Freyne, on the left of the picture, helps Tom McCaughren cut a celebration cake. The author's wife, Frances, is on the right.

The Oscar Wilde Society of Dublin awarded Irish children's author Tom McCaughren with its first Literary Recognition Award. Presenting him with the award Joan de Freyne, one of the founders of the society said, "Tom was our automatic choice for our first award because like Wilde, he is a brilliant writer of children's books, and, again like Wilde, these books can be read with great pleasure by adults as well as children." Tom McCaughren's books are now in Penguin and Puffin and have been translated into German, Swedish and Japanese. Translations into Dutch and French are pending.

Anyone interested in finding out more about Tom McCaughren and his writing can receive complimentary information by sending a stamped addressed envelope (or funds to cover postage) to: Wolfhound Press, 68 Mountjoy Square, Dublin 1, Ireland.

RESULTS FROM THE LONDON SOTHEBY'S SALE, DECEMBER 1992

Lot 192 Oscar Wilde. Signed photograph with an autograph Greek quotation on the verso expressing a characteristically aesthetic viewpoint. Wilde is photographed in fur lined coat. The quotation translates "For we are lovers of the beautiful yet simple in our tastes." (Circa 1894-95). Sold for £900.

Lot 193 Oscar Wilde. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. First edition. Presentation copy. Inscribed by the author to Lady Dorothy Nevill. Very good copy. Ward Lock and Co. 1891. Sold for £3,400.

Lot 194 Oscar Wilde. *The Importance of Being Earnest*. First edition. Number 12 of 100 large paper copies signed by the author to More Adey. "Feby '99 In friendship: In gratitude." Very good copy. Leonard Smithers and Co. 1899. Sold for £3,500.

Lot 195 Oscar Wilde. *Children in Prison and other cruelties of Prison Life*. First edition. Murdoch and Co, 1898. Together with a copy of the fourth edition of the *Ballad of Reading Gaol* and two small playbills for performances of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, both torn with some loss. Unsold. Valued at £500 -£600.

Lot 487. Alix Stone. Four fine ink and water colour costume designs for Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Each signed and captioned. For production at the Young Vic, 1976 - 1977. Sold for £550.

U.K. Society News

The society is growing in leaps and bounds and reports membership to be up. However, owing to the takeover of Methuen Ltd. by Reed International the planned Literary Memorial Prize had been postponed indefinitely. Methuen Limited had originally promised to publish the winning entry but because of the takeover and the recession they now feel that they can not fund the project. More news will be forthcoming when the dust settles.

from **De Profundis**

Oscar Wilde

... All trials are trials for one's life, just as all sentences are sentences of death, and three times have I been tried. The first time I left the box to be arrested, the second time to be led back to the House of Detention, the third time to pass into a prison for two years. Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole ...

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