

Richard Ellmann

OSCAR
WILDE



Alfred A. Knopf New York

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R.E.

St Giles', Oxford
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Introduction

Oscar Wilde: we have only to hear the great name to anticipate that what will be quoted as his will surprise and delight us. Among the writers identified with the 1890s, Wilde is the only one whom everyone still reads. The various labels that have been applied to the age—Aestheticism, Decadence, the Beardsley period—ought not to conceal the fact that our first association with it is Wilde, refulgent, majestic, ready to fall.

From as early as 1881, when he was in his late twenties, to the middle of 1895, when he was forty, literary London was put out of countenance by this outrageous Irishman from Dublin (via Oxford), who declared he was a socialist and hinted he was a homosexual, while patently mocking wise saws on all subjects. He declined, in a public and ceremonious manner, to live within his means, behave modestly, respect his elders, or recognize such entities as nature and art in their traditional apparel.

He won admiration, and denigration. Legends sprang up about him, and unsavory rumors too. He was accused of sins from effeminacy to plagiarism. That he was the kindest of men was not so widely known. Instead, at the very moment he was writing his best and *The Importance of Being Earnest* had crowned his career, what the law picturesquely calls sodomy was imputed to him. He was sentenced in the end to two years of hard labor for the lesser charge of indecent behavior with men. So much glory has rarely been followed by so much humiliation.

The hardships of prison life, and of subsequent exile in France and Italy, left Wilde a broken man. A spendthrift on his uppers, slighted by old acquaintances, he pursued on his release the life for which he had been jailed. He wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and after that nothing. In 1900 he died in an obscure Paris hotel. He left behind him a sort of testament, *De Profundis*, in the form of a prison letter to his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas. It skirted penitence and, while acknowledging faults (not those cited in the

courtroom), vindicated his individuality. Published bit by bit over sixty years, it reawakened the quarrels of old friends, who continued to dispute their sometime place in his life as long as they lived.

Other contemporaries snubbed Wilde as an ex-convict, but entertained him gladly enough in their memoirs. Many a dull chronicle, as in life many a dull table, was posthumously enlivened by this boulevardier. As for the reading public, it never failed in devotion to him, within the English-speaking countries or abroad, where his genius shines through translation.

When Wilde left Oxford in 1878 he called himself a professor of aesthetic, and aestheticism is the creed which is usually attributed to him. Yet his theme is not, as is often supposed, art's divorce from life, but its inescapable arraignment by experience. His creative works almost always end in unmasking. The hand that adjusts the green carnation suddenly shakes an admonitory finger. While the ultimate virtue in Wilde's essays is in make-believe, the denouement of his dramas and narratives is that masks have to go. We must acknowledge what we are. Wilde at least was keen to do so. Though he offered himself as the apostle of pleasure, his created world contains much pain. In the smashup of his fortunes rather than in their apogee his cast of mind fully appeared.

Essentially Wilde was conducting, in the most civilized way, an anatomy of his society, and a radical reconsideration of its ethics. He knew all the secrets and could expose all the pretense. Along with Blake and Nietzsche, he was proposing that good and evil are not what they seem, that moral tabs cannot cope with the complexity of behavior. His greatness as a writer is partly the result of the enlargement of sympathy which he demanded for society's victims.

His language is his finest achievement. It is fluent with concession and rejection. It takes what has been ponderously said and remakes it according to a new perspective and a new principle. An older generation's reassuring platitudes and tired certainties are suddenly infused with youthful intransigence, a sort of pontifical impudence that commands attention. We have the pleasure of affirming the *ancien régime* and of rebelling against it at the same time. Long live the king, we cry, as we cut off his head.

As for his wit, its balance was more hazardously maintained than is realized. Although it lays claim to arrogance, it seeks to please us. Of all writers, Wilde was perhaps the best company. Always endangered, he laughs at his plight, and on his way to the loss of everything jollies society for being so much harsher than he is, so much less graceful, so much less attractive. And once we recognize that his charm is threatened, its eye on the door left open for the witless law, it becomes even more beguiling.

Some of his interest lies in a characteristic that, along with his girth, he shared with Dr Johnson. He occupied, as he insisted, a 'symbolical relation'

to his time. He ranged over the visible and invisible worlds, and dominated them by his unusual views. He is not one of those writers who as the centuries change lose their relevance. Wilde is one of us. His wit is an agent of renewal, as pertinent now as a hundred years ago. The questions posed by both his art and his life lend his art a quality of earnestness, an earnestness which he always disavowed.

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Beginnings



CHAPTER I

Toil of Growing Up

The soul is born old, but grows young. That is the comedy of life. The body is born young and grows old. That is life's tragedy.

LADY BRACKNELL: *Prism! Come here, Prism! Prism! Where is that baby?*

First Words

Oscar Wilde first emerges for us into articulate being in 1868, when he was thirteen, in a letter he wrote to his mother from school. Portora Royal School, in Enniskillen, which prepared pupils for Trinity College, Dublin, was a good school, though to call it 'the Eton of Ireland,' as the headmaster and Wilde's mother did, was pretentious.¹ In later life Wilde told D. J. O'Donoghue, the tireless compiler of an Irish biographical dictionary, that he had spent 'about a year there.' The actual period was seven years, from age nine to sixteen. Facts were for bending: interviewed for *The Biograph*, an English annual which published his 'life' in six pages when he was only twenty-six, Wilde said that he had been privately tutored at home.² Portora was not a resonant name, and it seemed preferable to have attended no school rather than one that had to be laboriously identified. 'I have forgotten my schooldays,' says Mrs Cheveley in *An Ideal Husband*. 'I have a vague impression that they were detestable.' Then too, Wilde found it imaginatively seductive to deconstruct his nurture, to obliterate by whim all those sums and paradigms. No school on earth produced Oscar Wildes. But Portora, which flourishes still, must be credited with having prepared not only Wilde but Samuel Beckett.

The letter Wilde wrote from there unfortunately survives only in a fragment. Still, as a hieroglyph of his adolescence, it is valuable:

September 1868

Portora School

Darling Mama, The hamper came today, and I never got such a jolly surprise, many thanks for it, it was more than kind of you to think of it. Don't please forget to send me the *National Review*. . . . The flannel shirts you sent

in the hamper are both Willie's, mine are one quite scarlet and the other lilac but it is too hot to wear them yet. You never told me anything about the publisher in Glasgow, what does he say? And have you written to Aunt Warren on the green note paper?³

The rest of the letter is said to have referred to a cricket win over a regimental side, and to 'that horrid regatta.' Accompanying the letter was a sketch, now lost, captioned, 'ye delight of ye boys at ye hamper and ye sorrow of ye hamperless boy.'

The person we think of as Oscar Wilde is assembling here. He is on excellent terms with his darling mother, and keen to be on better ones, perhaps because his elder brother Willie is distinctly a rival for her attention. Oscar will unseat him later. With a precocious sense of the ridiculous he pictures the scene of felicity and misery which the delivery of the hamper had created. His appetite for dramatic presentation is whetted. Other predilections are clear: cricket interests him mildly, rowing not at all. Since the school was situated on the river Erne, the antipathy to regattas must have been unfashionable and individual. His liking for cricket was to flag, and later he would tease his robust biographer, Robert Sherard, by pretending to find the players' attitudes 'indecent' and 'not Greek.'⁴ Eventually he dismissed these two team sports as 'bats and boats,' preferring riding, shooting, and fishing.

The letter reveals that his thirteen-year-old tastes in clothing were a dandy's, discriminating between his own scarlet and lilac shirts and the unmentionable colors of Willie's. (Wilde was wearing a lilac shirt, with a heliotrope tie, when the two women who halved the pen name of 'Michael Field' came to see him in 1890.⁵) His predilection for scarlet and related tints was shared with his mother, who is reported as wearing into her sixties a scarlet dress, and whom a Dublin observer, Lord Rathcreedan, claims to have seen flaunting a red shawl.⁶ 'Vermilion' was a word that Wilde liked to draw out lingeringly, in his inflection of tints and shades. (On the other hand, he had a horror of magenta.⁷) In *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, the last indignity suffered by the condemned man is that he cannot be hanged in his scarlet coat. When it was pointed out to Wilde that the regiment to which the man belonged was the Blues, he offered instant revision:

He did not wear his azure coat
For blood and wine are blue.⁸

More than aesthetic preference lay behind his eagerness to read his mother's new poem in the *National Review*. It bore the patriotic title 'To Ireland' and renewed a plea that Lady Wilde had made in her youth, for someone

to blow the trumpet of rebellion. A new edition of her poems was to appear from a Scottish publisher, and the new poem would replace the dedication in the first edition of 1864, which read,

Dedicated to my sons Willie and Oscar Wilde

‘I made them indeed
Speak plain the word country. I taught them, no doubt,
That country’s a thing one should die for at need’

lines of her own with more fervor than style. The young Wilde had a taste for both her poetry and her politics.

He also enjoyed his mother’s practical jokes. ‘Aunt Warren’ in the letter was Lady Wilde’s much older sister, Emily Thomazine, who in 1829 had married Samuel Warren, then a captain, and later, like his brother Nathaniel, a lieutenant-colonel in the British Army. Mrs. Warren, her Unionist politics befitting an army wife, frowned on her sister, who as a nationalist frowned back. Irking Aunt Warren with green notepaper was a shared subversive delight. Emily Warren, except as co-owner with the Wildes of certain properties, does not appear on the scene again. Her husband had died about 1850, and she herself in 1881. Like her older brother, who became a judge in Louisiana, she kept her distance from sister Jane. Yet perhaps a bit of Emily Thomazine Warren survives in Aunt Augusta Bracknell, whose husband’s brother is a general with a first name, Ernest, more solemn than Samuel and Nathaniel. Lady Bracknell issues English commands which are promptly disobeyed by Irish hearts.

(*Jane*) *Speranza Francesca Wilde*



*All women become like their mothers. That is
their tragedy. No man does. That’s his.*

The mother to whom this boy of thirteen addressed himself was no ordinary person. Lady Wilde had a sense of being destined for greatness, and imparted it. Her son subscribed to her view, and treated her with the utmost consideration and respect, almost as though he were her precursor rather than she his. Four years before she received that letter from school, her husband had been knighted. The title helped, because she had always been uneasy about her first name, which was Jane, and had modified her second

name, almost certainly Frances, into Francesca, regarding the new name as a brilliant vestige of the Elgee family's origins in Italy, where—according to what she maintained was a family tradition—they had been called Algiati. From Algiati to Alighieri was an easy backward leap, and Dante could not save himself from becoming Jane Elgee's ancestor. (Her son in turn was to claim a visual resemblance to and a spiritual kinship with both Shakespeare and Nero.) What signature to use became a complicated matter. To tradesmen or correspondents of no consequence, she signed herself Jane Wilde; to those she liked she was Francesca or J. Francesca Wilde. But she had another forename as well, altogether of her own devising. This was Speranza. It was part of the motto with which her notepaper was embossed: *Fidanza, Speranza, Costanza*. In her correspondence with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, translator of Dante, she signed herself Francesca Speranza Wilde.⁹

That she found a certain humor in her *nom de plume* is evident from a cheering letter she sent to the Irish novelist William Carleton: 'In truth I cannot bear this despondency of yours—*unrecognised genius* may name its miseries, deep and poignant, but not yours. . . . Let St. Speranza, if you will allow my canonisation, work the miracle of your restoration, for your gloom is all imaginary. . . .' Carleton responded by praising 'the great Ocean' of her soul.¹⁰

The rivering waters that formed that great Ocean have been traced. Among her ancestors, if not Dante, there was on her mother's side the Reverend Charles Maturin, whose *Melmoth the Wanderer*, with its mysterious, satanic hero, exercised fascination upon Scott, on Balzac, who wrote a sequel to it, on Baudelaire, who found in Melmoth an alter ego, and on Oscar Wilde, who would one day take Melmoth as his own name. Lady Wilde's maternal great-grandfather, Dr Kingsbury, was a well-known physician and friend of Jonathan Swift. Her father, Charles Elgee (1783-1821), took up the law, and his father, John Elgee (1753-1823), was a rector and archdeacon in the Church of Ireland. Her mother, Sarah, was the daughter of another cleric, Thomas Kingsbury, who besides being vicar of Kildare held the secular post of Commissioner of Bankruptcy. Further back, Lady Wilde's paternal great-grandfather, Charles Elgee (1709-87), was a well-off farmer in County Down; another ancestor on her mother's side was English: a bricklayer (died 1805) who emigrated from County Durham in the 1770s because of the Irish building boom.¹¹ Given these unexceptionable antecedents, Lady Wilde still opted for her hypothetical Tuscan origins.

Like her son, she enjoyed improving upon reality. She allowed it to be understood that she had been born in 1826. When pressed, she responded airily that her birth had never been recorded, no Registry Office having