OSCAR WILDE'S OXFORD NOTEBOOKS

A Portrait of Mind in the Making

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Edited, with a commentary, by
Philip E. Smith II
and
Michael S. Helfand

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
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Portrait of Oscar Wilde taken 19 March 1881.

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Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

For Mary Tucker Smith.
For the Helfands, living and unliving, who made the work possible and endured its creation.

A Note on Collaboration

Because our collaborative writing speaks with one voice but is the product of two minds, it is impossible to separate individual contributions from the whole. We have worked together on the subject of Oscar Wilde since 1973, when we team-taught a graduate seminar in Victorian literature and began research on Wilde's short fiction. As the scope and focus of the project evolved as a result of our discoveries of Wilde's notebooks and his interests in idealist philosophy, evolutionary theory, and Hellenism, we continued, in our joint research and writing, to stress Wilde's seriousness and coherence as a critical theorist and author. Each of us brought different expertise to the enterprise; sometimes our varying perspectives produced disagreement, but our respect for each other's positions produced, we believe, a stronger essay.

Our method of writing derives from discussion, which produced composition and revision. We have, quite literally, sat together and jointly spoken and written every sentence in the commentary. We have also shared in the research which informs the commentary and the annotations for the notebooks. At academic conferences we have shared the reading of portions of our work in progress.

We claim equal authorship and joint responsibility for our writing. The order of our names on the title page is not intended to suggest primary and secondary contributions.

Preface

The critical essay and the notebooks which follow it describe and present a far different Oscar Wilde than the dandy, aesthete, and homosexual who has become a myth for modernist sensibilities. The Wilde of the notebooks is a precocious Victorian humanist, an Oxford undergraduate studying in the *Literae Humaniores* program and later, a postgraduate competing for a faculty position at Oxford, immersed in a year's research and writing for the Chancellor's English Essay Prize of 1879. He studies a number of controversies which concerned contemporary intellectuals; for instance, evolution and human descent, historical criticism, and the opposition of philosophical idealism and materialism.

In our critical essay we reinterpret Wilde's work in the context of this moment in nineteenth-century intellectual history. We argue that the foundations of his later work were laid in the reading and writing he did during and shortly after his years at Oxford. Our primary evidence for this claim comes from Wilde's previously unpublished Commonplace Book and Notebook Kept at Oxford, which we have edited for this volume. These neglected documents contain the records of Wilde's education and serious reading in the late 1870s and early 1880s, as well as raw materials, drafts, and fragments used for his later writing. We have spent years identifying many of Wilde's sources for notebook entries; they include writers often associated with Wilde—Plato, Aristotle, Baudelaire, Swinburne, Pater, Ruskin—as well as humanists, philosophers, and social scientists not usually associated with him—H. T. Buckle, W. E. H. Lecky, Benjamin Jowett, William Wallace, T. H. Huxley, John Tyndall, W. K. Clifford, E. B. Tyler, Herbert Spencer, Ernest Renan, Theodor Mommsen, J. A. Symonds, G. W. F. Hegel, and many others.

We argue that Wilde's later critical and creative works have been misunderstood and undervalued because critics and scholars have not taken Wilde's education as seriously as he did.[1] Wilde's aestheticism, usually thought of as derived from Pater, Arnold, Ruskin, and the French decadent poets, is shown by the notebooks to be based on a carefully reasoned philosophical and political stance, a synthesis of Hegelian idealism and Spencerian evolutionary theory which fundamentally shaped his criticism and fiction. We believe that publication and interpretation of this material will provide the basis for a revaluation of Wilde's significance in the history of literature and criticism.

Our critical essay is divided into three sections: "The Text," "The Context of the Text," and "The Text as Context." In "The Text" we present a brief physical description of the manuscripts, historical evidence for dating, and the editorial principles which have guided our practice. We begin "The Context of the Text" by describing the vital intellectual influence of Wilde's parents and their circle in Dublin and of his later association with J. P. Mahaffy at Trinity College. Even before he entered Oxford, Wilde was introduced to subjects he continued to study: classical literature, philology, history, the newly developing social sciences, and the history of ancient and modern philosophy. While he may have abandoned some early theories, he nevertheless derived from them an expectation that any account of human experience had to have systematic and synthetic explanatory power. This theoretical expectation can help explain Wilde's interest in the theories of two of his teachers at Oxford, Max Müller and John Ruskin. In different ways both men attempted to accommodate their idiosyncratic idealist beliefs with certain findings of modern science about historical philology, myth, and the racial inheritance of morality, imagination, and the "art-gift."

At Oxford Wilde also found in Hegelian philosophy a variety of idealism better suited than Müller's and Ruskin's to incorporate the materialist assumptions and findings of science—especially evolutionary theory. Two of the Oxford Hegelians, William Wallace and Benjamin Jowett, recognized, taught, and wrote about the affinities between the theories. Wilde tested their suggested synthesis of idealism and science primarily by investigating the philosophical writings of critical materialists like Huxley, Tyndall, and Spencer. He found support for the synthesis in the scientists' own admission of the limitations of their knowledge and theories. However, he also found in Spencer's evolutionary theory—and especially in W. K. Clifford's revision of it—a scientific explanation for the development in history of Hegel's "Idea" namely, the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Wilde developed a position very close to Clifford's, but he added to the latter's incipient reconciliation of idealism and positivism the conception of absolute idea slowly evolving toward perfection in history. The inheritance of acquired characteristics provided the mechanism for this progressive development, and the assumption of a unity between mind and matter, ego and non-ego, "mind-stuff" and the organic molecules of the brain gave him the physical and spiritual location in individuals for absolute mind. These ideas also supported Wilde's belief in a racialist theory of cultural improvement. By adopting the Spencer-Clifford line of evolutionary theory, Wilde embraced an essentialist tradition of biological explanation (organic purposiveness) which began with Aristotle. His revisions to the tradition in his notebooks, criticism, and fiction demonstrate his critical practice of Hegelian theory.

Wilde's philosophical position led him to theoretical disagreements with Pater concerning philosophy and the function of art. In the notebooks Wilde copied from, and disagreed with, Pater's essay "Winckelmann." Other comments in the notebooks show that in the intellectual controversy regarding the interpretation of Aristotle's *Ethics*, Wilde adopted an idealist position, while Pater joined the philosophical materialists. Wilde therefore differed with Pater over the nature and power of art in society. He believed that Aristotle's *theoria* (ethically informed contemplation) yielded wisdom, the true basis for the good and spiritual life. Pater, however, believed that *energeia* (heightened consciousness) was Aristotle's highest good. For Wilde imaginative contemplation provided the basis for ethical, social behavior and was in itself the good, a manifestation in the individual of Hegel's idea and Aristotle's unmoved mover. For Pater contemplation was a self-centered act, informed by a materialist and utilitarian ethic in which the good is defined as "being present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their present energy."[2] Wilde differed with Pater, in short, over the fundamental theoretical issue of evolutionary idealism.

In "The Text as Context" we use Wilde's synthesis and the notebooks to reinterpret his published criticism and fiction. He relied on them to write "The Rise of Historical Criticism" (1879); this early essay, generally ignored by Wilde's critics,[3] is a Hegelian description of the origins and development of a scientific historical method. He argues that the idea of uniform sequence came to the Greeks by inspiration and was developed into a self-conscious critical method through the dialectical interplay of materialist and idealist philosophers and historians.

In his lectures in America, which also draw upon the notebooks, Wilde again quotes from, and implicitly disagrees with, Pater's position. Upon this disagreement he builds his recommendations for an aesthetic and ethical approach to integrating the arts with the activities of life and work. He adopts and modifies the Hegelian paradigm for the historical development of art to explain the English Arts and Crafts and aesthetic movements as rebirths of the Hellenic spirit.

Intentions, Wilde's collected major criticism, represents the fullest statement and development of his synthesis. We study the essays individually, locating statements and uses of Hegelian and evolutionary ideas. Our analysis of his revisions shows Wilde's development of formal modes which fuse subjective and objective expression into what he calls "art-criticism." Wilde's creation of criticism that is art, and art that is criticism, was his attempt to symbolize in written form the idealist dialectical theory developed from his synthesis.

In our discussion of "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" and "A Chinese Sage" we consider the utopian social implications of Wilde's synthesis and explain the coherence of his cultural and political criticism. We also contrast Wilde's ideas with Matthew Arnold's earlier attempts to put cultural criticism on a scientific basis.

The last section extends our analysis to include Wilde's critical fiction, "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. We argue that "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." develops a Hegelian interpretation of Shakespeare and his sonnets as the essential expression of the Renaissance spirit, that it fictionalizes the development of the critical and historical method Wilde described in "The Rise of Historical Criticism," and that it dramatizes the dialectical process involved in the perception and understanding of art. The three major characters in the story enact methods of interpretation which correspond to the stages of critical development Wilde describes in the "Rise" and "The Critic as Artist."

We interpret *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a criticism of the materialist interpretation of ethics (viz. the pursuit of the greatest pleasure for the self) offered by Lord Henry Wotton. Instead Wilde affirms the reality and power of the spirit or

soul in both art and criticism, a belief based on his acceptance of an idealist theory of art, the inheritance of acquired characteristics, and on W. K. Clifford's theory (recorded in the notebooks) that individual conscience is a manifestation of a powerful "tribal self."

In sum, our study presents a radical reinterpretation of Wilde's work based on our reconstruction, from the notebooks, of his synthesis and critical principles. We show the development of Wilde's dialectical understanding of history, criticism, and art from "The Rise of Historical Criticism" and his lectures in America to its fullest expression in *Intentions*, "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. We also provide an explanation for the formal innovations in his later criticism and fiction, namely, his fusion of subjective and objective modes, creation and criticism, in *Intentions*, "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

While Wilde's creative and critical achievements were unique, his education and general interests—his intellectual formation—were typical of the small group of serious Oxford students of the time. For this reason the notebooks and commentary provide a representative case study in late-Victorian thought. The notebooks also demonstrate the powerful synthetic impetus of humanistic education at Oxford and the consequent integration of scientific, philosophical, political, and aesthetic theories characteristic of this time. Wilde's readings and interpretations of major philosophers, literary figures, scientists, and social scientists offer a corrective to the reduced significance which they now have in histories of thought.

Our book title points to important aspects of this work. The main title is self-evident: it simply identifies the documents which are the object of our analysis and the basis for our reinterpretation of Wilde's work. The subtitle identifies three foci of our commentary. "Mind in the Making" suggests (1) Wilde's early education, his mind in the process of formation; (2) his interest in those aspects of Herbert Spencer's evolutionary theory and Hegel's philsophy which are concerned with the development of mind; and (3) Wilde's mature mind as it shaped his own literary criticism and fiction. We use the word "Portrait" because we recognize and acknowledge the interpretive nature of our scholarly and critical work.

Pittsburgh, Pa.
August 1988

P. E. S.
M. S. H.

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James Boren, who fits all three categories, tried his best to teach me to think and write clearly. Frederick P. W. McDowell taught enormously wide-ranging and stimulating courses in mid- and late-Victorian literature. Sherman Paul introduced me to English and American cultural criticism and to the work of Raymond Williams. In China Irving Thalberg and Mary Farquhar took time from their teaching or research to read substantial parts of the commentary and to offer helpful editorial advice. My collaborator, Phil Smith, assumed administrative stewardship of the project after the writing and research were substantially done, but with much necessary and tedious work remaining. His work enabled me to spend two years abroad as a Fulbright lecturer. My largest professional debt is to Robert Scholes, who taught me as an undergraduate and shaped my graduate education in important ways by developing, and encouraging me to enter, an interdisciplinary Ph.D. program in modern letters at the University of Iowa. He has continued to support and encourage my work since I earned that degree.

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Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks

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The Text

This is an edition of two holograph notebooks by Oscar Wilde now housed at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library of the University of California at Los Angeles. The longer of the two Wilde has entitled "Commonplace Book." It is a manuscript notebook (10.75″ × 8.5″ × .75″, now kept in a red morocco slipcase) of 133 pages with 2 inserted pages of a smaller size. The other, a manuscript notebook (9″ × 7″ × 1″, bound in roan back and marbled boards) catalogued as the "Notebook Kept at Oxford Containing Entries Dealing Mostly with Philosophical, Historical, and Literary Subjects," is a manuscript of 84 pages.[4] Neither was intended for publication, and both contain mostly quotations and paraphrases of other writers, along with Wilde's own analytical and descriptive comments, jottings, and fragmentary drafts. These notebooks probably were among the manuscripts listed for sale as Lot Seventy in the catalogue of the auction following Wilde's trial in 1895: "Manuscripts, a parcel."[5]

We have adopted editorial policies based on some of the guidelines and rationale for a genetic text provided by the Modern Language Association and the Center for Scholarly Editions,[6] but by their standards this is not a "pure" genetic text representing as nearly as print allows every feature of the manuscript. We have attempted to compromise between the needs of scholars and general readers by preserving the fragments and discontinuities, additions and deletions, idiosyncrasies, informality, and personal "feel" of Wilde's language and layout while also presenting an easily comprehensible text. Occasionally we have added bracketed punctuation marks when such changes clarify phrasal or sentence boundaries. We have added editorial explanations or conjectures in brackets. While we have represented most of Wilde's words exactly as written, some consistently misspelled words and scribal errors in the manuscripts are corrected; for example, Wilde's script often shows "e" for "a" in words like "what" or "that." We have accepted the penciled pagination of both notebooks because there is no need to change it and scholars have already used it to refer to entries. Since Wilde's

entries were often brief, some of them consisting of only a line or two per page, we have frequently grouped several manuscript pages on a single page of this edition. Manuscript pages are separated from one another by an ornament and by the original pagination printed in brackets.

We also reproduce much of the visual layout of each manuscript page, including indentations and the various markings, such as underlining, marginal crosses, or the Greek semicolon [•] that Wilde used for emphasis or internal divisions on the page. We do not preserve the original line lengths within paragraphs. On a few manuscript pages which contain widely separated short remarks, we maintain the separations while compressing the blank spaces.

Wilde customarily wrote on the pages on the right side of the open notebook, and reserved the pages on the left for additional related comments. This practice is clear from the pagination of essays and quotations which cover more than one manuscript page. Pages containing additional comments thus occasionally interrupt the flow of a single extended entry. For the purposes of clarity, we indicate editorially where these interruptions occur. We also omit all blank pages separating entries and the blank pages at the end of the notebooks.

All annotations are separated from and follow the text. The major purpose of our annotations is to identify, where possible, the sources which Wilde quotes and paraphrases and his later use of these notes in published works. Since many readers of these documents will be scholars with interdisciplinary interests in fields such as literature, philosophy, history, and classics, we assume broad but not intimate historical knowledge of the various persons and subjects Wilde studied. We provide translations of Greek and Latin passages in the text and briefly identify, gloss, or explain relatively obscure entries.

Since Wilde seldom specifically identified his sources, the search for them has entailed a long, tedious, and humbling process of scholarly detective work. We have read systematically where the manuscripts provided some hints. We have pursued our own hunches and the suggestions of other scholars. We have inspected the recommended reading lists for the examinations in the *Literae Humaniores* program ("Mods" and "Greats") in which Wilde took first-class honors at Oxford, and consulted the letters, biographies, and auction catalogue of Wilde's library for other records of his reading. We have looked in other unpublished manuscripts for clues and read relevant works by Wilde's teachers and contemporaries. And much more. Scholarship is long, but life is short. We have not identified all of Wilde's sources and uses for the materials in the notebooks, and would appreciate and acknowledge any suggestions readers of this edition could provide.

One of our editorial problems has been to distinguish among confirmed, probable, and possible sources for Wilde's entries. Whenever we have found in the notebooks a direct or indirect quotation, paraphrase, or summary of a passage from another work with clear and definite correspondence of vocabulary and idea, we have labeled that work a "confirmed source." When the correspondence is less definite, but there are indications of indebtedness, we have identified that work as a "probable source" and have explained our reasons in the notes. Finally, we have made some educated guesses which we label "possible sources" when

no definite source has been identified, no contextual evidence exists, but when there is a general correspondence of ideas or some similarity in phrasing.

Another editorial problem is the accuracy of Wilde's direct quotations from confirmed sources. Even when he indicated direct quotation, Wilde often made slight changes in the text. Since we have identified the sources and locations of the original passages, and since almost all are available in university collections, we have in most cases decided not to reprint them. In order to provide as clear a text as possible, we have keyed our notes to Wilde's text by using elided passages rather than by adding superscript marks or numbers.

The extended title, "Notebook Kept at Oxford Containing Entries Dealing Mostly with Philosophical, Historical, and Literary Subjects," gives a general sense of the range of subject matter in both manuscripts. A more detailed list would also include anthropology, sociology, chemistry, biology, psychology, political science, mathematics, religion, aesthetics, and the classics. But modern divisions of knowledge should not blind us to the ease with which educated Victorians moved freely and assumed connections among subjects that were only beginning to be recognized as disciplines. Wilde's own interests in such diverse subjects and his attempts to synthesize them exemplify these habits of mind. The titles Wilde gives his notebook entries often identify his subjects in terms of relations: "Matter and Mind," "Use of the poetic faculty in science," "Survival of Fittest in thought," "Moral Chemistry," and "Social and bodily organism."

There are various reasons why Wilde would be interested in these subjects. He was required to study some for university examinations and for fellowship competitions.[7] He was drawn to some by the practical considerations of writing "The Rise of Historical Criticism." In keeping a Commonplace Book, he probably intended to collect thoughts and quotations on significant and controversial subjects of the times.

These purposes suggest that the dating of both manuscripts needs to be modified.[8] The suggested beginning date for the Notebook Kept at Oxford (1874) is the earliest reasonable time Wilde could have started keeping the two notebooks; Wilde's Demyship at Magdalen College began in October of that year. There is substantial evidence which suggests that the concluding date for the College Notebook and the range of dates for the Commonplace Book are in error. The notebook sources with the latest publication date (1879) are T. H. Huxley's *Hume* and W. K. Clifford's *Lectures and Essays*, and there are quotations from several other works published after 1876.

We can also date the primary use of the College Notebook because much of the subject matter is relevant to, and several of the entries are incorporated in, "The Rise of Historical Criticism," which Wilde entered in the competition for the Chancellor's English Essay Prize of 1879. Wilde must have compiled and used these entries during the year that elapsed between the summer of 1878, when the topic for the competition ("Historical Criticism Among the Ancients") was announced, and the following summer, when the jury voted to make no award.[9] Of course, this does not prove that Wilde ceased using the College Notebook after that date. Although there are entries related to the essay throughout the notebook, there are also entries like those in the Commonplace Book concerning theoretical

questions of science, history, philosophy, and art, subjects which Wilde continued to think and write about.[10]

Dating the Commonplace Book is more problematic. Wilde could have begun it as early as 1874, but he certainly kept it during 1878–79 since there are a few scattered entries which Wilde used when he wrote the "Rise."[11] While Wilde may have continued to keep the Commonplace Book during the 1880s, as the Finzi catalogue suggests,[12] we have so far no confirmed source later than 1879. However, we believe the influence of this manuscript cannot be determined by that last date since Wilde, like many writers, kept his Commonplace Book to preserve significant passages, important and shaping ideas, which he would later consult and review as he prepared to write. For example, Wilde's lecture given in America, "The English Renaissance in Art" (1882) contains passages and references which correspond to Commonplace Book entries, and in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." (1889) Wilde's narrator recalls a Greek phrase from his Oxford days which appears as one of the "two Greek ideals" in the Commonplace Book (CW, 1195; CB, 40).

2

The Context of the Text

I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. I had realised this for myself at the very dawn of my manhood, and had forced my age to realise it afterwards.

—*De Profundis*[13]

Until recently these notebooks have been dismissed as an interesting jumble of seemingly unrelated entries. We will argue that they have coherence and importance within the historical context of the philosophical, scientific, and literary movements that Wilde followed at the time. They serve as a map which charts his intellectual interests. For example, Wilde defines several topics, such as "mind and matter" or "historical methodology," in the notebooks. By tracing the various entries under these topics to their sources, we can, through contextual analysis, determine what he found relevant. This procedure leads back to the wider intellectual controversies Wilde confronted. By their very informality the notebooks are invaluable in further determining his intellectual position. They are like a compass which pointed Wilde (and so can point the reader) in directions which his later work followed.

Another context for the notebooks is Wilde's essay "The Rise of Historical Criticism." Because Wilde used the Commonplace Book and kept the College Notebook to write the "Rise," we use the published essay to analyze issues and questions he studied in the notebooks, as well as his conclusions. In the "Rise" Wilde addressed the assigned topic "Historical Criticism Among the Ancients" by considering the function of criticism through a historical critique of historical criticism. We will analyze this essay later in more detail in "The Text as Context," but because of the many relationships among Wilde's education, the essay, and the notebooks, we will introduce here some of the common themes. Most important are the origin of the critical spirit in the Hellenic race, the dialectical realization of this spirit in early historical and philosophical writings, and the systematic practice and theory of later Greek and Roman writers like Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, Polybius, and Plutarch. As Wilde describes "the nature of the spirit of historical criticism itself in its ultimate development," he

uses a Hegelian historical method to inform an analysis which "is not merely confined to the empirical method of ascertaining whether an event happened or not, but is concerned also with the investigation into the causes of events, the general relations which phenomena of life hold to one another, and in its ultimate development passes into the wider question of the philosophy of history" (CW, 1106).

Wilde organizes his essay on the principle of a dialectical development from unconscious motive to self-conscious awareness of criticism, from an instinctive, skeptical attack on religion and mythology by early Greek writers to Aristotle's rational development of a deductive-inductive historical methodology. He claims that the historical spirit can be best understood chronologically because Greek "intellectual development, not merely in the question of historical criticism, but in their art, their poetry and their philosophy, seems so essentially normal . . . so peculiarly rational, that in following in the footsteps of time we shall really be progressing in the order sanctioned by reason" (CW, 1106).[14] Wilde claims that Greek historiography anticipates its modern counterpart; except for a few modern contributions, "we have added no new canon or method to the science of historical criticism. Across the drear waste of a thousand years the Greek and the modern spirit joins hands" (CW, 1148).

Wilde offers Polybius as the historian who synthesizes in practice the theories Aristotle and Plato expounded: "He is the culmination of the rational progression of Dialectic" (CW, 1133). Wilde appreciates Polybius' uses of such modern historical assumptions as the Spencerian organicist notion of the Instability of the Homogeneous and the principle of heredity in organic life. Polybius also practices "modern methods of investigation" which require the empirical development of evolutionary norms as a basis for analyzing "social and political truths" (CW, 1136). Wilde ends the essay with a brief and dismissive account of Roman philosophers and historians, remarking that "Italy was not a pioneer in intellectual progress, nor a motive power in the evolution of thought" (CW, 1147). By minimizing Roman contributions and insisting on the unity of the Greek and modern spirits, Wilde consolidated the evolutionary idealist position which informs the essay.

Wilde's Irish Education

With this brief summary of the "Rise" as a guide to Wilde's ideas and interests, we can broaden the context for the notebooks by identifying the figures in Wilde's early life and education who shared and might have shaped his interests, opinions, and attitudes. Wilde's parents and their intellectual circle, as well as his education at Trinity College, Dublin, exposed him to ideas which appear both directly and indirectly in the notebooks and the essay.

He profited from the diverse but complementary scientific interests of his parents. Sir William and Lady Wilde studied and wrote about philological, ethnological, and archeological sciences, which they believed were crucial for social and political improvement. Sir William Wilde, renowned as a physician and statistician, "was one of the first to undertake the study of [the prehistoric Irish] in a precise and scientific manner."[15] He belonged to the Royal Irish Academy and the Celtic and Archeological societies: "[H]is three-volume catalogue of the contents of the Royal Irish Academy has been described as a monumental work of archaeological erudition and insight. . . ."[16] Among his acquaintances were the important archeologists John Gilbert and Sir George Petrie and their staff; William Rowan Hamilton, a mathematician, scientist, Astronomer Royal for Ireland, and classical and oriental philologist; and numerous others who made the Wilde's Merrion Square residence an intellectual center. Lady Wilde, known in the 1840s as the radical political writer "Speranza," shared her husband's interests and collaborated on some of Sir William's philological research; after his death she published essays on social, political, and literary subjects. Both parents, in differing ways, supported Irish political nationalism and the Celtic cultural revival. This family environment exposed Wilde to scientific, historical, cultural, and political analyses of modern and ancient societies.[17]

It is no surprise that Wilde, coming from such an intellectual environment, distinguished himself at Trinity College, Dublin. He belonged to the College Historical Society and the University Philosophical Society, where scientific and literary subjects were studied and debated. For work in the classics with J. P. Mahaffy he won the Berkeley Gold Medal and other awards at Trinity, and a Classical Demyship to Magdalen College, Oxford. Mahaffy's influence was both scholarly and personal: He helped guide Wilde's education in Greek language and culture and employed him as an editor for one of his books, *Social Life in Greece from Homer to Menander* (1874). After Wilde had gone to Oxford, Mahaffy included his ex-student on trips to Italy in 1875 and to Greece in 1877. The latter included visits to the excavations of Olympia and Mycenae, which provided Wilde with firsthand observation of the importance of archeological methodology in the study of Greece.[18]

Mahaffy was also a humanist who wrote widely and frequently on history, philosophy, mythology, anthropology, and philology. Even if the teacher and his pupil finally held different positions about certain theoretical problems, Mahaffy must have introduced many of the subjects and issues which Wilde takes up in the notebooks. For instance, in his *Twelve Lectures on Primitive Civilizations* (1869) and *Prolegomena to Ancient History* (1871) Mahaffy analyzes the practice of historical writing, the qualities of a good historian, and discusses the relative strengths of the "permanent causes"—language, geography, and race—which shape history. He describes and contrasts the methodologies developed by idealist philologists and materialist historians to interpret mythology.

As a member of the Church of England and a Kantian idealist, Mahaffy sought and often found the *via media* in these controversies. In his analysis of "permanent causes" in history, he introduces H. T. Buckle's materialist environmentalism as an alternative to the generally held view that race alone could explain national differences. He reconciles materialist and racialist theories by asserting the predominance of physical causes in prehistory and of racialist causes in civilized societies. He asks rhetorically, "[W]as there ever a civilization purely material? . . . Consider the nobler Semites and the Greeks . . . can any honest

inquirer deny that here, indeed, are phenomena dependent not upon brute causes, but upon spiritual agents—not upon Matter, but upon Mind?"[19]

He takes a similar position in the controversy between historical and philological approaches to myth. In "The Value of Legends and Critical History," Mahaffy questions the materialist historicism of George Grote's approach to myth, but he also cautions against uncritical acceptance of the idealist methods of comparative mythology. Mahaffy's position, finally, is closer to F. Max Müller's philological idealism, which does not reject the possibility of historical sources but still finds the origins of myth in primitive imagination and language: "It will make a close attention to similarity of names in both sound and etymology, of absolute necessity in convincing us of the single origin of parallel legends. But even beyond this, it will open to us a new page in the forgotten life of pre-historical ages, and will show us that, as every other part of our nature obeys its laws, so even the riotous faculty of the imagination is checked by some secret rein and guided unconsciously upon beaten paths."[20]

This belief takes on added significance when Mahaffy discusses the nature of history and the qualities of a good historian. True history, he says, is more than a collection of facts about kings, battles, and sieges. Historical materials required analysis and appreciation informed by a "historic sense." This historic sense is a "quality inborn in some men . . . . It is of course trained, improved, and corrected by study and experience, but no ordinary man will ever create it within himself . . . the faculty is a sort of instinct."[21] He defines this historic sense as a combination of "ruthless skepticism and a vivid imagination," qualities which, he insists, are not contrary but complementary and "constantly combined in great historians."[22]

Wilde at Oxford: The Influence of F. Max Müller

Wilde's study with Mahaffy was the capstone of his educational experiences in Ireland; he arrived at Oxford in 1874 with an extensive background in the histories of classical and Irish civilizations and an introduction to the problems and controversies surrounding historical interpretations. "My dear Oscar," his teacher is said to have remarked, "you are not clever enough for us in Dublin. You had better run over to Oxford."[23] While it is doubtful that Oxford made Wilde cleverer, it certainly furthered his education in significant ways. For his degree Wilde studied ancient and modern philosophy (i.e., ethics, metaphysics, logic, and political theory), philology, divinity, the classics, and history. The most important influences from this program of study came in philosophy, where Wilde adopted Oxford Hegelianism, and in philology, which he studied with F. Max Müller. In both philological and philosophical studies, Wilde learned of the possibility of reconciling evolutionary science with philosophical idealism. The faculty at Oxford made the curriculum of *Literae Humaniores* relevant by relating it to modern controversies. Like many Victorian teachers, they examined the past from modern analytical perspectives, often turning it into a mirror for contemporary debates over theology, aesthetics, politics, and philosophy.[24] In the 1870s theories of human evolution were central to controversies in scientific, social, and humanistic disciplines; philologists drew upon approaches from all three areas.

The most eminent comparative philologist at Oxford, indeed in all of England, was Müller, whom Wilde knew and studied with during his first year. "Max Müller loves him," Lady Wilde wrote to a friend in 1875.[25] Müller, educated in Germany in the 1840s, brought to Oxford his historical research in comparative languages, religions, and mythologies, as well as a belief in philosophical idealism that grew out of his German university experience and was partly based on an extensive knowledge of Hegel's work.[26] During the controversy over Darwin's theory of natural selection, Müller found himself in an ambivalent position. He had used the theory to explain the growth of Western languages and had accepted Darwin's explanation of the development of nonhuman species. But he differed with Darwin's materialist explanation of human nature and origins. Language, which was inseparable for Müller from all mental activity, was "the one great barrier between the brute and man: Man speaks, and no brute has ever uttered a word. Language is our Rubicon, and no brute will dare to cross it. . . . Language is something more palpable than a fold of the brain, or an angle of the skull. It admits of no cavilling, and no process of natural selection will ever distill significant words out of the notes of birds or the cries of beasts."[27]

After tracing the elements of all languages to their four to five hundred original "phonetic types," Müller asked, "How can sound express thought? How did roots become the signs of general ideas?" He answered, "They are *phonetic types* produced by a power inherent in human nature. They exist, as Plato would say, by nature; though with Plato we should add that, when we say by nature, we mean by the hand of God" [emphasis in original] (SL, I, 384).

Müller's idealism also informed his comparative philological method and his histories of linguistic origins and development. Based on his study of the earliest Indo-European languages, including Greek and Sanscrit, he claimed that a lost parent language was created by divinely inspired, imaginative, and rational members of the Aryan race. The original language was then transformed by racially related nomadic groups into later languages and mythologies, fallen versions of the original tongue. Thus, he called mythology a "disease of language" (SL, I, 21). This "golden age" theory of language had significant implications for ethnologists, etymologists, and interpreters of myths. It gave support to Wilde's belief that the critical spirit was a racial characteristic originating with the Aryan Greeks. For etymologists, and for Müller's acquaintance John Ruskin, the theory implied that the true meaning of any word could be determined by finding its root, since that root was the purest expression of the language.

Müller's comparative linguistic analysis had considerable impact on the study of philology and myth in the second half of the nineteenth century, constituting "probably the most influential academic view of myth to appear before the turn to anthropological theory,"[28] even though many of his assumptions, conclusions, and methods were challenged and proven erroneous. Müller used this academic prestige and specialized knowledge to defend religious belief and reconcile it with Darwin's materialist explanation for nonhuman life.

This reconciliation, which seems so contradictory and strange today, was quite

typical of a *via media* reached by mid-century religious and secular intellectuals. Two historians that figure significantly in Wilde's notebooks, W. E. H. Lecky and H. T. Buckle, are typical of rationalist, secular thinkers in accommodating the possibility of God, the spiritual, and the soul with practical assumptions that deny divine intervention in history. Noel Annan suggests that, unlike their continental counterparts, these rationalists—along with more famous ones like Herbert Spencer, T. H. Huxley, and W. K. Clifford—refused to push materialism to its logical conclusions for political and social reasons.[29]

Wilde at Oxford: The Influence of John Ruskin

When Wilde studied with Müller, he also met John Ruskin, then Slade Professor of Fine Arts. Ruskin's well-known influence on Wilde, we will suggest, extends beyond art and aesthetics: The College Notebook shows that Wilde read *The Queen of the Air* (dealing with the myth of Athena) and was particularly interested in the relationship of the imagination to science, mythology, and poetry. In that study Ruskin acknowledged the importance of Müller's philological and mythological theories in reshaping his own method of interpretation.[30] An idealist like Müller, Ruskin freely adapted the findings and hypotheses of modern science but opposed its materialism. He believed that the origin of myths could be found in historical events or natural phenomena like sun, sky, cloud, or sea.

While "the root, in physical existence," might be a helpful warrant for interpreting the meaning of a myth, Ruskin disagreed with Müller about the root as real meaning and about mythology as a disease of language; instead he found the "real meaning" of a myth "at the noblest age of the nation among whom it is current. The farther back you pierce, the less significance you will find, until you come to the first narrow thought, which, indeed, contains the germ of the accomplished tradition; but only as the seed contains the flower."[31] Ruskin, like Müller, did not believe that the meaning of a word or a myth was readily available to any reader or, indeed, to its writers or originators. To create or interpret great myths both the poet and the reader must go beyond "frigid scholarship" and have "true imaginative vision" because it alone provides truth which is "vital, not formal . . . and it is this veracity of vision [of the men who tell myths] that could not be refused, and of moral that could not be foreseen, which in modern historical inquiry has been left wholly out of account: being indeed the thing which no merely historical investigator can understand, or even believe; for it belongs exclusively to the creative or artistic group of men, and can only be interpreted by those of their race, who themselves in some measure also see visions and dream dreams" (QA, 309). "Right reading of myths" requires a relationship between an imaginative writer's text and an imaginative reader, "the understanding of the nature of all true vision by noble persons. . . . [It] is founded on constant laws common to all human nature; that it perceives, however darkly, things which are for all ages true;—that we can only understand it so far as we have some perception of the same truth;—and that its fulness is developed and manifested more and more by the reverberation of it from minds of the same mirror-temper, in succeeding ages" (QA, 310).

Ruskin's emphasis on the importance of vital, imaginative, and spiritual truth appears even in his choice of myth. According to Ruskin, in two of her three manifestations Athena represents the power of spirit: "[S]he is the Spirit of Life in material organism; not strength in the blood only, but formative energy in the clay: and, secondly, she is inspired and impulsive wisdom in human conduct and human art, giving the instinct of infallible decision, and of faultless invention" (QA, 346). Athena as spirit, he adds, is analogous to "the ministry of another Spirit whom we also, believing in as the universal power of life, are forbidden, at our worst peril, to quench or to grieve" (QA, 346).

Ruskin saw no contradiction between his spiritual and vitalist interpretation of life and the scientific explanations offered by Darwin, Huxley, and John Tyndall.[32] His description of section II of *The Queen of the Air*—"Athena Keramatis," as a "Study . . . of the supposed, and actual, relations of Athena to the vital force in material organism" (QA, 351)—allies him to one camp, the vitalists, in the ongoing debate within the scientific community concerning the origin and nature of life. Many scientists, like Ruskin, thought that "life really was something that acted through the medium of matter but was independent of it; before matter could assume the attributes of life it was necessary that a 'vital force' be added to it."[33] For Ruskin the spirit of life informed plants, all species of animals, and man alike, giving shape and form to matter. So, for example, he says, "The Spirit in the plant . . . [is] its power of gathering dead matter out of the wreck round it, and shaping it into its own chosen shape" (QA, 357). For humans this vital force, present in the powers of imagination, morality, and the aesthetic sense, recognizes and appreciates the workings of the spirit in both natural and human creations, and itself is capable of creativity.

Ruskin had a vitalist explanation, again adapting a current scientific theory of how spirit informs nonliving matter, and how it enables spirit in one living form to relate to spirit in another. Briefly, Ruskin thought that the spirit of life resided in the heat and motion which animated and informed matter and gave it life through vibrations, which moved through a medium called ether. These vibrations affected all living things and in humans were the physical means not only of perception but also of that aesthetic and moral capacity to see spirit in nature (QA, 292, 356, 378).

For Ruskin nature contained moral meanings, and humans, provided they had sufficient individual and racially inherited moral character and aesthetic sense, could recognize these meanings and re-create them in artworks. Ruskin's fundamental principle was that "art is the work of the whole spirit of man; and as that spirit is, so is the deed of it: and by whatever power of vice or virtue any art is produced, the same vice or virtue it reproduces or teaches" (QA, 391). Human abilities and conduct were a matter of free choice and were "the result of the moral character of generations. . . . Perseverance in rightness of human conduct, renders, after a certain number of generations, human art possible . . . " (QA, 393). Free will and inheritance, as causes of moral character and what Ruskin called the "inherited art-gift" (QA, 396), were fully compatible with and scien-

tifically justified by Darwin's and Herbert Spencer's racialist theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics.[34] Ruskin cited himself as an example: "This art-gift of mine could not have been won by any work, or by any conduct; it belongs to me by birthright, and came by Athena's will, from the air of English country villages, and Scottish hills" (QA, 396).[35]

In his College Notebook Wilde chose two examples from *The Queen of the Air* to illustrate his entry "use of the poetic faculty in science" (CN, 42–44). While he mentions several ways in which the poetic imagination apprehends scientific truths, he applies Ruskin specifically to the statement that the early Greeks "had mystic anticipations of nearly all great modern scientific truths" (CN, 43). Understood in their larger context, these notes indicate that Wilde accepted Ruskin's philological method for interpreting mythology, as well as some of the assumptions which inform that method. For instance, when he says, "So Ruskin shows the inherent truth in ancient symbolism" (CN, 42), Wilde reveals his idealist assumptions about the nature of truth (it exists in germ at the beginning of history) and its development in history (it is realized more and more self-consciously in time); more specifically, he reveals his idealist assumptions about mythology (there is truth in it not in its historic origins but in its imaginative foreshadowing, and an imaginative philological interpretation must be used to learn the truth).

Wilde would also have been exposed to Ruskin's idealist theories of history, perception, art, and science when he attended the lectures on "The Aesthetic and Mathematical Schools of Art in Florence" during Michaelmas Term (10 November to 14 December 1874).[36] Ruskin interpreted the historical development and decay of Florentine art from the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries by using an idealist assumption of the unity of moral and aesthetic faculties and a racialist explanation for their origins. He identified five stages of Florentine art: "(1) Savage; (2) AEsthetic; (3) Mathematic; (4) Attempt to regain the AEsthetic, which may be called Romantic, combining faith and imagination against (5) Sensual and Infidel" (AM, 186n). Ruskin's idealist theory of art and perception may be found in his distinction between two "tempers" or states of mind, aesthesis and mathesis (AM, 211). When aesthesis dominates, artists see spiritually and create works which embody spiritual truth; when mathesis dominates, artists neglect spiritual truth and strive for measured or mathematical perfection of form.

In the history of Florentine art the "Aesthetic" school of 1300 produced the greatest art because it saw spiritually: "To the school of Perception—that which depends on its instinctive sight and sense—belongs necessarily the foundational discovery of the existence and true nature of things; while to the demonstrative, instructive, or mathematical school [of 1400] belongs the comparison, discipline, arrangement, and correction of impressions received by the senses" (AM, 249). According to Ruskin, the secondary artistic achievement of the mathematical school was caused by a diminution of faith, a consequent loss of imagination, and a greater interest in "material objects" and "abstract theorems" (AM, 185–86, 212, 214).

Ruskin explained that the faith, imagination, and moral power of the Aesthetic school developed because of the union of northern and southern races in Florence.

He extends his racialist explanation when he says of Cimabue and Giotto, "My own belief is that these men are both absolutely of Graeco-Etruscan race, as opposed to the Norman; that they represent the new budding of an underground stem which has its root partly in Greece proper, partly in Egypt. . . . They are at once Greek of the Greeks, and Christian of the Christians—the flower and purest force of both" (AM, 200). This racialist theory is no metaphor. Ruskin believed that the inheritance of acquired characteristics explained the physical differentiation of the races and, in this case, the development of an instinctive aesthetic sense.[37] He alludes to this process, near the end of these lectures, when he begins to suggest the implications for modern society of his historical and aesthetic analysis. Ruskin admits that even if some modern scientists and physicians deny it, there is a science of religious and spiritual life. He reconciles his idealist theory of art with his acceptance of contemporary science through his use of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Qualities of mind and character are passed on biologically, he says, and they are accompanied by physiological changes:

> For the characters and passions of men descend and proceed from each other as trees do from graft or seed; there is a botany, a science, of the growth of the mind which lets you see either intellect or conscience unfolding, first the blade, then the ear, after that, the full corn in the ear. Parallel with these mental changes there are changes in our body and in the nervous substance of the brain; so that an Etruscan brain would differ from a Gothic one, and Quercia's from Ghiberti's, in entirely physical particulars. (AM, 263; see CB, 83)

Ruskin assumes that materialist science denies the reality of spirit and that this assumption blinds those who hold it to manifestations of spirit in life. This blindness, in turn, can lead, through custom and practice, to a biological inability of an entire race and culture to see aesthetically and morally (i.e., idealistically)—especially in England: "And yet people speak in this working age, when they speak from their hearts, as if houses and lands, and food and raiment were alone useful, and as if Sight, Thought, and Admiration were all profitless, so that men insolently call themselves Utilitarians, who would turn, if they had their way, themselves and their race into vegetables . . ." (MP II, *Works* IV, 29).

On the other hand, through education and practice an idealist instinct for beauty and good conduct could be strengthened and could help an entire racial group to see better, as Ruskin's famous remark in *Modern Painters* suggests: "[T]he greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to *see* something, and tell what it *saw* in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion,—all in one" (MP III, *Works* V, 333). Wilde knew *Modern Painters*;[38] in fact, Ruskin gave a series of lectures at Oxford in 1877 which included readings from the second volume that outlined his idealist theory of true and false artistic creation and aesthetic perception. We argue that some of Ruskin's critical interests and assumptions decisively influenced Wilde's development. He shared with Ruskin an idealist perspective and consequently an antimaterialist and antiutilitarian position in culture and politics. He also shared an interest in how the imagination functioned to create and interpret art and to improve culture.