

[The Outlook]

OSCAR WILDE: A PORTRAIT OF THE 'NINETIES

BY E. T. RAYMOND

ONE evening in the early summer of 1895, the newsboys were shouting 'All the winners.' Yet one line on their placards gave the lie to that eternal cry which mocks the deaths of great men and the fall of great Empires. It referred to the sentence which, in due time, was to give birth to the one quite genuine thing Oscar Wilde wrote, the *Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Oscar Wilde was one of the losers; in the long list of men of genius who have paid just forfeit, it was not easy to think of a more tragic figure. Others had fallen from greater heights; none had gone more friendlessly to a lower perdition. For it was the very element of his tragedy that it could not be shared or alleviated; on the path he had henceforth to tread there could be no comrade; his offense was one at which charity itself stood embarrassed, and compassion felt the fear of compromise. On this very evening, two theatres were full of people chuckling over jests of almost wicked brilliance which he had turned and re-turned, polished and sharpened, with the laborious care of a lapidary, for he worked at trifles with tremendous earnestness, and the ease of the style was the reward of immense pains on the part of the writer. Two of his comedies were being played while the drama of his trial was proceeding on another stage. Business is business, and managers with money at stake did not care to withdraw immediately good money-drawing pieces. But they made a due *amende* to outraged decency. They played Wilde's plays, but they

struck his name out of the bill. The action might be mean. But it was understandable. There was no harm in the plays, but the name could hardly be pronounced without offense.

Even at this distance, when there can be pity without suspicion of condonation, it is not easy to discuss Wilde as we should any other author whose influence was considerable in his day and generation. Yet those who would pass by this ill-starred man of genius because of the event which interrupted his career as a writer would be acting almost as foolishly as the absurd people (mostly Germans) who on the same account yield him a perverse and irrational homage. Wilde was not only important in himself; he was still more important as the representative of a mood still to some extent with us, but extraordinarily prevalent in the latter years of the nineteenth century. Of this mood he was in letters the only able English representative. There were many men who thought his thoughts, and even attempted to write his style. But they are now forgotten except by the curious; Wilde alone survives. This mood was in certain aspects one of honesty, in others one of cowardice; it was never a mood of health. The honesty was negative; it took the form of protest against certain easy and conventional shams. The cowardice was positive; it took the form of fearing to stand in competition with great realities. People like Wilde had sense to detect, and virility to denounce, certain poor players of old

tricks; they had not the courage to be themselves quite genuine people; they contented themselves on the whole with doing newer tricks. There was no harm in this in itself. But they had also much conceit, and so, to impress the public with a due sense of their importance, they insisted that the tricks of which they were capable were really the only tricks worth doing. Their art was Art itself, and the only Art.

Now, it takes all sorts to make any kind of world, and there is no sense in expecting an artist whose gift is miniature painting to follow Paul Veronese. By all means let him sneer at any dull fool who does follow Paul Veronese. But we shall do well to take very little notice of him when he says that no picture should be painted on anything larger than six square inches of ivory. A Japanese *netsuke* is a pleasing object; so is Ely Cathedral. Let the *netsuke* carver have his due credit. But if he began to talk as if Ely Cathedral were a pretentious vulgarity, which he himself could easily have built if (in Johnson's phrase) he had 'abandoned his mind to it,' we should quickly tell him to mind his own business. But this was very much the pose of Wilde and his school. They were right in depreciating uninspired imitators of great men. They were wrong in depreciating all greatness which could not be measured by their own small tapes. They were especially wrong in declaring that 'popular art is bad art,' and setting up their own literary jade-work, often graceful and pleasant enough in its own way, as the only standard of taste. 'Only the great masters of style,' said Oscar Wilde once, 'ever succeeded in being obscure.'

If that were literally true, he himself, though self-called a 'lord of language,' would have to be denied the title of stylist, for though he sometimes showed

some confusion of thought, and very often said things so silly that one sometimes looks a second time to see whether they are really meant, he was, on the whole, quite extraordinarily lucid. But the words do mean something and reveal something. Every very great writer is obscure in the sense that he does somehow contrive to offer a choice to his reader; thus everybody has his own particular view of *Hamlet*, and of many individual passages in *Hamlet*, though the actual obscurities are very few. But Shakespeare never meant *Hamlet* to be a mystery to anybody; he meant it simply to be a good play, and one understandable to every soul in the theatre. Shakespeare was thinking of his audience as something that was doing him a compliment in coming to hear his play. Wilde thought of his audience as something to be complimented by his condescension in amusing it. Shakespeare, in short, represented popular and obvious art at its highest, and there is no higher art.

Wilde, on the other hand, represented art that was above all things undemocratic. Its assumption was that whatever is popular must be vulgar, that whatever is unusual has at least a presumption of being fine. In such an attitude, whether to life or to art, there is an obvious spiritual danger, and it is not without reason that most people look for corruption where there is excessive refinement. After all, all the most important things men do must be either conventional or monstrous, and he who consciously strives to be much above the common herd in things mattering not very much is fatally prone to be dreadfully below it in things that really do matter. The country or age which can show great art with a simple and obvious motive is generally healthy. The country or age which attaches immense importance to the elaboration of trifles for

esoteric appreciation is generally unhealthy. In these matters, wherever there is mystery there is evil.

'The two great turning-points of my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison.' So says Wilde in *De Profundis*. His father was an oculist in Dublin, a clever, ill-balanced man of imperious passions and extravagant habits, who firmly believed that alcohol had pulled him through a severe illness, and drank freely on principle. Lady Wilde, poetess and Nationalist pamphleteer, was disappointed with Oscar in much the same way that Betsy Trotwood was disappointed with David Copperfield; she wanted a daughter, and, since nature had denied her, she sought consolation by dressing, treating, and talking to the boy as if he had been a girl. It was one of the innumerable oddities of this lady to pretend descent from great people — she believed herself to come from a stem of the same tree which yielded Dante the poet — and the boy was named Oscar because his mother imagined herself to have some sort of connection with the Royal Family of Sweden.

It was an unwholesome, if brilliant, atmosphere in which Oscar Wilde grew up, and the boy early contracted those habits of extravagance which led him, when in London, to spend hundreds a year in the matter of cabs alone. Neither at school nor at Oxford did he take any interest in sport, but he was devoted to his blue and white china, his antiques, and his wall papers. This æstheticism earned him the resentment of some robust fellow-undergraduates, and he was once tied up in a rope and dragged to the top of a hill; when released he merely flicked the dust off his clothes and remarked 'Yes, the view is really very charming.' Perhaps the most important event of his Oxford life was the win-

ning of the Newdigate prize. His success decided him to take up literature as a profession. And in order to make a short cut into literature, he placed himself at the head of the æsthetes, clean-shaven and long-haired, in 'a velvet coat, knee-breeches, a loose shirt with a turn-down collar, and a floating tie of some unusual shade fastened in a Lavalliere knot,' carrying in his hand 'a lily or a sunflower which he used to contemplate with an expression of the greatest admiration.'

The notoriety naturally following on this masquerade had its advantages in the way of dinner invitations, lecture engagements, and, to some extent, the smiles of publishers. But Wilde earned little and had to spend a good deal in maintaining his position; and, despite a lecturing venture in America, it was not until his marriage with Miss Constance Lloyd in 1884, that he settled down to anything like satisfactory employment. For such a man, the post of editor of the *Woman's World* could hardly be amusing, and Wilde retained the bitterest recollections of his connection with journalism.

'In centuries before ours,' he once wrote, 'the public nailed the ears of journalists to the pump. That was quite hideous. In this century journalists have nailed their own ears to the key-hole. That is much worse.' It was not, in fact, until the 'nineties had well opened that Wilde began to make good and to relieve the strain on his wife's little fortune which his extravagant habits caused. *Dorian Gray*, published in 1891, was a doubtful artistic success and a quite undoubtful commercial failure. But at the beginning of the next year *Lady Windermere's Fan* at once took the fancy of London. Wilde had made several attempts to conquer the stage, but partly inexperience and partly obstinacy had so far stood in his way. 'I hold,' he said, 'that the stage

is to a play no more than a picture frame is to a painting.' But a frame can generally be made to accommodate any picture, and no stage could properly accommodate some plays.

Wilde once argued for the performance of plays by puppets. 'They have many advantages. They never argue. They have no crude views about art. They have no private lives. We are never bored by accounts of their virtues, or bored by recitals of their vices; and when they are out of an engagement they never do good in public or save people from drowning. . . . They recognize the presiding intellect of the dramatist, and have never been known to ask for their parts to be written up.' A man holding such views — which perhaps are only a mad extension of a sane position — was likely to remain for long unacted. But when he left behind him the intricacies of five-act tragedy, and found his true *metier* in comedy, his success was instantaneous.

And it was well deserved. The Wilde comedies 'date' a good deal. They are rather monotonous in their brilliancy. There is too much of a particular trick; one is always expecting the unexpected. The characters sit round to exchange epigrams rather too much like the Moore and Burgess Minstrels used to sit round to exchange conundrums, with a 'Mr. Johnson' at one corner and a 'Mr. Somebody-else' at the other. The epigrams themselves are often forced and sometimes merely foolish. There is little characterization; all Wilde's men are wits, or the butts of wits, and his women, broadly speaking, are unimportant. But when all deductions are made, his comedies are among the best in the language. *Lady Windmere's Fan* was followed a year later by *A Woman of No Importance*, and in 1895 by *An Ideal Husband* and — the best of the series — *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

From circumstances of considerable embarrassment, Wilde suddenly mounted to high prosperity. But the change was all for the worse. With his tendencies to physical self-indulgence, a plentiful supply of ready money tempted him to fatal excess in eating and drinking, and he was a man to whom exercise of any kind was repellent. On his unsound mental constitution the brilliance of his position and prospects had an equally unfortunate effect. He grew fat and bloated in person, and absurdly inflated in conceit. His features, once handsome with the comeliness of some face on a classic coin, were now puffed and of impure outline, and the richness of dress which he affected degenerated into a greasy luxuriousness. He had only three years of prosperity, but those were enough to show that he had neither the mind nor the physical constitution to bear success. Even before the tragedy which cut short his working life, his friends had begun to fall away, and it was pretty clear that his career as a creative artist was likely to be limited.

Of the last chapters of his unhappy history, nothing can usefully be said. The expiation was no less horrible than the sin; his last piteous work may suggest that there was final penitence and rest. But there was so much of the artificial in Wilde that it was never quite safe to infer when he was genuine and when histrionic. Almost his whole life had been spent in posing. Yet his mind was naturally precise and logical; with proper discipline, it would have been of quite masculine strength. 'There is something tragic,' he once said, 'about the enormous number of young men there are in England at the present moment who start life with perfect profiles, and end by adopting some useful profession.' He would have been better with a useful profession.

To adapt his own words, there is something tragic about the enormous number of young men there are in England at the present moment who start life with some Greek and Latin, a knack of good form and social dexterity, a more than competent physique, enough money to enable them to spend a few of their best years in rather laborious idleness, and no notion of giving the world a full equivalent of what they propose to take out of it. The number of young women in much the same case is scarcely less disquieting. The real moral of Wilde's tragedy is not the obvious one. It is rather that even highly gifted people should have some honest trade to begin with, and leave 'art' and 'literature' (apart from such branches as are really trades and handicrafts) until, mayhap, they find themselves positively impelled thereto. If that were the rule, the world would be poorer by some millions of bad pictures and unpleasant novels, but indefinitely richer in human cleanliness and honesty.

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IN THE AIR

BY ARCHDALL REID

'COME along,' said the youthful Major who was also a very famous airman.

I followed as to slaughter, and presently stretched elderly legs up the high sides of the Avro. The mechanic in front and the Major in the pilot's seat exchanged incantations. 'Contact,' barked the one. 'Contact,' responded the other. Thereupon the devil that dwelt in the machine awoke, roaring. The mechanic slipped aside. We rushed forward, and up, and away. I had been told by all who loved and trembled for me to keep my mind and my eyes concentrated on my boots on

pain of being catastrophically sick. As well tell a boy to keep his tongue from the hole whence a tooth has been extracted. I looked over instantly. Nothing happened, not even a sense of giddiness or danger. One sat up to the neck in a well and gazed, as it were, from a high-window. Whoever can do that with comfort may fly with happiness. The platform, not the vehicle, seemed to move. The ground fell away. For a moment I had an intimate view of the tops of trees and the roofs of sheds. A moment later, and they were remote and toylike.

On the left, with hills and woods beyond, was the great sea inlet, reflecting cloud and sky, and dotted with ships to which their triangular wakes gave an appearance of enormous speed. On the right was England, vividly green, financially neat, miraculously beautiful, cut into irrationally small fields no bigger seemingly than backyards, and utterly empty of life. The narrow, twisting roads stretched vacant, for one looked on the heads of men and from that height inexperienced eyes saw them not. It was a day of thick but broken clouds. Those above flung lakes of traveling shadow. Those below, of thinner texture, white as sunlight snow, but fleecy and transparent, crept, so it seemed, among the very hedgerows.

We had no speaking tube. The pilot turned his grave young face in scrutiny. Had he the impudence to suppose that I, a rational being, in charge of a man who had been described as 'one of the three or four finest fliers in the world' was afraid? I waved ecstatically. Instantly, he plunged into a cloud and banked steeply. Up, in the semi-obscurity, rose one wing, down sank the other; and one stared through drifting mist at dim fields directly below. For a moment terror gripped one. Then came recollection of the fame of