

OSCAR WILDE'S POSE AND POETRY*

WHEN the iron jaws of the Marquis of Queensberry's "booby trap" snapped shut in May, 1895, upon the Irishman who had become a lord of the English language, the era of which Oscar Wilde was symbol, spokesman, and literary factotum came abruptly but effectually to an end. For Wilde and the nineteenth century alike, a few months over five years yet remained; neither was dead or sterile; both possessed resources of energy and artistic productivity. But the flute for piping careless ditties down the winds of time had lost its tune.

As early as November, 1893, Arthur Symons had bitten the hands that nourished him, in a since-famous article chiefly concerned with contemporaneous French writers, called "The Decadent Movement in Literature." *The Yellow Book*—that syndicate of brilliant upstarts which Oscar Wilde had always affected to scorn—even by the sacrifice of Aubrey Beardsley did not survive the term of Wilde's imprisonment. In the midst of Victoria's second Jubilee, the more serious, more regular tones of Edwardianism were heard sounding. Wilde himself, hopeful of poetic rehabilitation, produced no languid re-creation of pagan legend, but *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Literature was remarrying life; the age of Wells and Galsworthy was soon to be born. The contrasting careers of Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw measure the difference between the eras that hinged on the year 1895. Both writers were born in the Protestant-Irish "garrison" of Dublin during the middle 1850's; both seized upon epigram and paradox as effective mannerisms—and there similarity almost

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ended. Wilde, it is true, wrote for a season under the influence of the Fabians, probably of Shaw himself; however, he really was interested in the Soul of Man and only poorly comprehended Socialism, whereas Shaw really was interested in Socialism.

Possessed in private right of a sufficiency of high astounding names, Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde also rejoiced in an array of appellations, serious or satirical, suggested by the collective fancy of the late seventies, the eighties, and the first half of the nineties. To call him simply a Victorian would seem perverse or ironic, yet he was one of the very few British literary men of consequence whose lives fell entirely within the span of the queen's reign. Wilde was born on October 16, 1854, and died on November 30, 1900. One thinks also of Stevenson (1850-1894), Pater (1839-1894), and among the poets Hopkins (1844-1889) and Dowson (1867-1900), but of almost no one else. Such dates, obviously, are superficial and misleading; nevertheless, the designation of Wilde as a Victorian is something more than paradox. Who, in sober truth, were most typical of the period? What great men of letters stood four-square on that granite Victorianism which any schoolboy can describe in a few glib phrases? Certainly there was Macaulay, who, if he is to be considered a Victorian, was an early one (he died in 1859); there was the mature Tennyson; and—well, there *was* Tennyson. Assuredly, the rest is not silence, but mainly protest. One speaks, of course, of the Edwin Reardons rather than of the Jasper Milvains; not of mere purveyors to what Gissing sarcastically called "the market," but of those writers of artistic and social conscience who set the literary tone of their age. On that tone ran a gamut: a major scale from mildly

evolutionary to indignantly revolutionary, a minor from pessimistic skepticism to the reassertion of ancient faiths and philosophies.

The anti-Victorian tendency of much of the best Victorian literature is a thrice-told tale of criticism. Yet the *fin de siècle* often is thought of as an aberration; a foreign importation; a sudden, impulsive reaction against everything that had preceded it. Revulsion and French influence were both real elements; nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind the thread of continuity that bound it to the broad fabric of Victorian protest. With Oscar Wilde, even more than with others of the period, this recognition is needed lest his fantastic posturing, his evidently pathological narcissism, and his unblushing press-agentry obscure his significant leadership in a movement of much interest and some permanent value. Not only was Wilde gifted with vastly more than common talent; he was, after his fashion, sincere. Call him unsound to the core, but the core was firm: the core, that is to say, of Wilde the artist, unfortunately not of Wilde the man.

Although as poet Oscar Wilde is widely known for only a small part of his verse, including principally *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* together with "The Harlot's House," *The Sphinx*, and perhaps "Requiescat" and a few other short pieces, he became a professional writer of prose only by accident and force of circumstances. He always thought of himself, and it would appear that his friends customarily referred to him, as a poet. Originally he came before the literary world in verse. Then, after his first American adventure, he went to the left bank of the Seine bearing gift copies of one volume of poems and projecting other verse to follow. When he emerged from prison in 1897 he hoped to mitigate

the disgrace by recovering his position as a creative artist. If he rightly expected his extended letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, now known as *De Profundis*, in effect the longest and last of his "poems in prose," to plead his cause to posterity, it was through a return to meter and rhyme that he addressed his own time.

In the middle, successful years of his career, Wilde wrote but scant verse. The cause is easily understood. He was in his chosen world a poor man, with his living and presently that of a family to obtain. Robert Harborough Sherard, that most sensitive and through the years most steadfast of Wilde's friends, estimated that the net gain from the *Poems*—brought out, in the tradition of first collections of verse, at the author's expense—was "so small as to be negligible." Manifestly, for Oscar Wilde, dedicated as he was to literature, daily bread must be purchased in Gissing's "market" by journalism, by platform lecturing, by the essay, by the popular drama—in short, by prose. To a certain extent, the most kindly disposed critic must confess, Wilde made himself a tradesman of the New Grub Street; contrariwise, the most hostile is bound to admit the signet of originality and personality stamped upon every page of the collected works. Even when Wilde wrote in prose, the rhythmical and emotional effect was seldom prosaic. He himself stated this quality with characteristic gasconade:

Drama, novel, poem in prose, poem in rhyme, subtle or fantastic dialogue, whatever I touched, I made beautiful in a new mode of beauty . . . I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me. I summed up all systems in a phrase and all existence in an epigram.
(*De Profundis*)

For the most part, however, after the early eighties the genre poem-in-rhyme languished. Even if some of the later plays

were written with great speed, Oscar Wilde was no William Morris, capable of turning off an epic between tea and dinner; his genius, at least so far as poetry is concerned, was clearly of the sudatory order defined by Thomas Edison. Wilde's favorite among shorter forms of verse consisted of variations on the Italian sonnet, and his long poems are marked by the elaboration that does not conceal itself.

Oscar Wilde began occasional publication of verse while at Oxford, and in 1878 won the Newdigate Prize with a composition whose assigned topic was a city that, by luck, he happened to have recently visited. *Ravenna*, an elegiac poem of 332 lines in seven sections of unequal length (and merit), suffers from various faults of immaturity, including forced images, gusty rhetoric, and excess of epithets. Cast in the prescriptive iambic pentameter couplet of the competition, the work is metrically undistinguished. There are no rhythmical echoes of Pope; nevertheless, despite an admiration for Keats transmitted by the Pre-Raphaelite movement, Wilde lacked the full courage of Keats's rhythmic emancipation of the couplet. The inherent metrical flow in *Ravenna* is progressive, as in blank verse, but is continually halted by an imposed static pattern. Two lifelong characteristics of Wilde already appear to the full in this Newdigate poem: self-quotation from his earlier writings, without the blush of quotation marks (a tendency that was to make certain passages in his comedies, for example, sound like transcripts from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and from each other); and celebration of nature.

Wilde has been accused of both inaccuracy and insincerity in his lavish treatment of external nature, with some justification in the former charge and very likely also in the latter.

The unacquainted truth is that Oscar Wilde wrote, not for all time, but for an age; and to the age he addressed in the later seventies and early eighties, admiration and description of natural scenery were very near to being the hallmark of a poet. The objection that a poet need not obey the limitations of period, is of course entirely valid and may be used against Wilde. Still, to imagine that his love of nature was merely feigned would be an error. On the contrary, the taint of pose is rather to be found in that contempt of the natural iterated during his years as a London exquisite. When the portals of decent society were slammed against him, he instinctively turned again to the out-of-doors, to "the great simple primeval things" in his own phrase, even if weakness or unhappy destiny did ultimately lure him back to cities. Eagerly watching the trees outside the prison wall break into the green of spring, he elevated his *epistola: in carcere et vinculis* with a secular prose-psalm to Mother Nature:

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.

(De Profundis)

During boyhood he had developed a flair for natural surroundings, afterward to be carried from Ireland to England, Italy, and Greece. Oscar Wilde's besetting vice was excess—one thinks of his quip: "Nothing succeeds like excess"—and in his typical verse the elaborated outdoor scenery, in particular his set flower pieces, are often a weariness of the patience. Nevertheless, they are a little more than the fabric

of conventional motifs that they sometimes appear to be. If the feeling is rung from the housetop, it very often rings true. The image of Ravenna finally awakening

. . . as wakes the rose
To crimson splendour from its grave of snows . . .

may repay us for such shopworn rhetorical merchandise from the same poem as

Adieu! Adieu! yon silent evening star,
The night's ambassador, doth gleam afar . . .

and other passages with equal lack of effect.

When Wilde's elegantly designed volume of *Poems* appeared in the early summer of 1881, the author obviously was determined to be in fact what, by the mockery of society, stage, and press, he was universally recognized as being: the avatar of Aestheticism. Presently, for his something less than triumphal progress through the six-shooter America of 1882, he developed several staple addresses, among which "The English Renaissance of Art" is a most valuable document for any inquiry into the literary aims of Oscar Wilde near the outset of his career. It should be read as a kind of epilogue to the *Poems*, for it lays down a considered aesthetic doctrine to which Wilde's verse, never mentioned in the lecture, was inferentially subscribed. Certain tenets are particularly revealing: ". . . this romantic movement of ours . . . is a reaction against the empty conventional workmanship, the lax execution of previous poetry and painting . . ." "The art which has fulfilled the conditions of beauty has fulfilled all conditions . . ." "Indeed, one should never talk of a moral or an immoral poem—poems are either well written or badly written, that is all."

The volume of verse is arranged in a pattern to which the

caption of the last group of poems appears to be the clue. Part of Oscar Wilde's pose was a strong feeling and high regard for music (of which, as a matter of fact, he probably had very little knowledge). In "The English Renaissance," for instance, he asserted—closely paraphrasing Walter Pater—that "music is the art in which form and matter are always one, the art whose subject cannot be separated from the method of its expression, the art which most completely realises the artistic ideal, and is the condition to which all the other arts are constantly aspiring." Although the context of this passage also expressed the view that "the true brotherhood of the arts consists not in their borrowing one another's method . . .," Wilde placed the phrase *The Fourth Movement* before the last composite section of his *Poems*, in the revised edition of 1882, as a half title. Thus he seemed to imply in the ordering an analogy to the sonata or symphonic form. The first two sections are half-titled, respectively, *Eleutheria* and *Rosa Mystica*; the third, with the freedom in form of the corresponding movement of a symphony, is a triple group of mutually related divisions respectively called *Wind Flowers*, *Flowers of Gold*, and *Impressions de Théâtre*. In addition to the shorter pieces falling under each of these various headings, five long poems—all written in the *Venus and Adonis* stanza, modified by lengthening the concluding line of each sestet to seven feet—are so spaced as to modulate between sections and subsections: "The Garden of Eros" after *Eleutheria*, "The Burden of Itys" after *Rosa Mystica*, "Charmides" after *Wind Flowers*, "Panthea" after *Impressions de Théâtre*, and "Humanitad" after *The Fourth Movement*. The sonnet "Hélas!" at the head of the collection strikes a dominant chord, the devastation inflicted upon the poet's soul and art by "the honey of romance," which at

the end is amplified, with variations, in "Flower of Love" (Γλυκύπικρος Ἔρωας) as a kind of coda.

The first two "movements" of the *Poems*, to a degree, offer violence to the pure spirit of *ars gratia artis* that was Oscar Wilde's avowed ideal. In particular, the themes of *Eleutheria* would appear countergrained to a theory enunciated more than once in the lecture on "The English Renaissance," that culture seeks "not rebellion but peace." Wilde, however, with his propensity to discipleship, or imitation, or plagiarism—the exact term to be selected at the discretion or charity of the critic—had hitched his poetic wain to many stars of different magnitudes: among them Byron, Shelley, and even more firmly Swinburne. Besides, it is only fair to point out that if his primary interest was as alien as it appeared to be "from any wild, political passion, or from the harsh voice of a rude people in revolt," he perceived that the renewals of modern art had been cradled in the French Revolution. And surely his own poems are sufficiently free of any wild political passion. The old personification and apostrophe of Liberty echoes down a laughing gallery of the *fin de siècle*—

These Christs that die upon the barricades,
God knows it I am with them, in some things.

So terminates a "Sonnet to Liberty" with which the section is opened. At the end of the "movement," another sonnet, ostensibly a lament that

Our little island is forsaken quite:
.....
And from its hills that voice hath passed away
Which spake of Freedom . . . ,

proceeds to announce a private withdrawal from the workaday Victorian world, thus initiating a theme for "The Garden of Eros," the following link poem—

Come out of it, my Soul, thou art not fit
 For this vile traffic-house, where day by day
 Wisdom and reverence are sold at mart,
 And the rude people rage with ignorant cries
 Against an heritage of centuries.

It mars my calm: wherefore in dreams of Art
 And loftiest culture I would stand apart,
 Neither for God, nor for His enemies.

(“Theoretikos”)

Elsewhere in the first section he reproves “ignorant demagogues” and those

. . . whose hands profane
 Plant the red flag upon the piled-up street
 For no right cause . . . ;

(“Libertatis Sacra Fames”)

and, in imitations of Milton and Wordsworth, praises true-blue Cromwellian democracy and calls upon Christ to avenge the Turkish massacre of Bulgarian Christians. The longest of the eight poems constituting *Eleutheria*, one of the only two not sonnets, is a pre-Kipling contribution to the literature of imperialism. Despite a certain amount of fustian, including an evident interest in exotic place names for their own sake, the poem has some merit. The incapacity for unsophisticated enthusiasm that made Oscar Wilde really unfit to participate in the nineteenth-century libertarian tradition, saves “Ave Imperatrix” from jingoism. He watches without disapproval as

England with bare and bloody feet
 Climbs the steep road of wide empire . . . ,

but at the same time his sympathies are with

. . . the sad dove, that sits alone
 In England . . . ,

while

Down in some treacherous black ravine,
 Clutching his flag, the dead boy lies.

The final quatrains reveal his acceptance of the doctrine of manifest destiny—with a difference:

Peace, peace! we wrong the noble dead
 To vex their solemn slumber so;
 Though childless, and with thorn-crowned head,
 Up the steep road must England go,
 Yet when this fiery web is spun,
 Her watchmen shall descry from far
 The young Republic like a sun
 Rise from these crimson seas of war.

Rosa Mystica—the slow movement, as it were, of the symphony—is most open to the charge of insincerity, which is not quite warranted; or of cynicism, which is impossible to rebut. Cardinal Newman had broken a path from England to Rome that was trod, not only by certain pious young saints in the middle years of the century, but also by many impious young and not-so-young sinners of the Decadence, including Wilde (he was baptized on his deathbed). That Oscar Wilde was drawn by aught else than the pomp and ceremony of the Church is more than questionable; even out of the depths of spiritual agony he reported with self-analytic candor:

Religion does not help me. The faith that others give to what is unseen, I give to what one can touch, and look at. . . . When I think about religion at all, I feel as if I would like to found an order for those who *cannot* believe: the Confraternity of the Fatherless one might call it, where on an altar, on which no taper burned, a priest, in whose heart peace had no dwelling, might celebrate with unblessed bread and a chalice empty of wine. Everything to be true must become a religion. And agnosticism should have its ritual no less than faith.

(*De Profundis*)

At the same time he was seriously considering writing on "Christ as the precursor of the romantic movement in life." We are, therefore, hardly surprised to find that his youthful religious verse, although not oblivious of the irony that lurks

in ritual, is sensuous rather than devout. His deepest yearning is—

When, bright with purple and with gold,
Come priest and holy Cardinal,

—to behold

The only God-anointed King,
And hear the silver trumpets ring
A triumph as He passes by.

(“Rome Unvisited”)

This devotional section would be worse than mediocre were it not for the barely relevant “Requiescat” with which *Rosa Mystica* opens, and the cynically irrelevant pieces with which it closes. Commentators on the first generally have stressed its similarity in rhythm to Thomas Hood’s “Bridge of Sighs”; perhaps, however, the title is tacit acknowledgment of a deeper indebtedness, of spirit more than form, to Matthew Arnold’s “Requiescat.” The mourner tastelessly mars his lament by silly lines to the effect that the dead girl

. . . can hear
The daisies grow.

Also, the image of

. . . her bright golden hair
Tarnished with rust . . .

is distinctly decadent. Nevertheless, this “Requiescat” by Wilde is a fine elegy; it does not gush, yet being less intellectual, less ironic than Arnold’s is partly for that reason more pathetic. Admitting as expert evidence Poe’s testimony that the death of a beautiful woman is of all subjects the most poetical, we may perhaps include a lovely young girl, like Oscar Wilde’s sister, who

. . . hardly knew
She was a woman . . .

The last three poems of *Rosa Mystica* sound an abrupt prelude to a *laus paganorum* entitled "The Burden of Itys" that stands next in the collection. "Vita Nuova" adapts a Christian theme to intimate a return to paganism; the other two celebrate the lady whom for a season Wilde had served as love-puppy-in-ordinary. Whereas the sonnet "Madonna Mia" is restrained, "The New Helen," composed in a decade of ten-line stanzas with a variable rhyme scheme, is extravagantly declamatory.

Arthur Symons analyzed the Decadent movement into two distinguishable but complementary phases: the Impressionist and the Symbolist. The pieces brought together in Wilde's *Poems*, having been written in the five or more years down to 1881, were too early for any direct influence of French *Symbolisme* of the eighties. At this period, in fact, Oscar Wilde was critically suspicious of the symbol in literature; and in "The English Renaissance," where his poetic theory was less Symbolistic than Parnassian, he bluntly called symbolism (with a small *s*) alien to the artist. Impressionism, on the other hand, is the tonic note of the tripartite third "movement." The first two subdivisions, *Wind Flowers* and *Flowers of Gold*, are similar to each other, although neither is internally homogeneous. Some of the best pieces contrive to engender an imagist technique for verse out of Whistler's pictorial art. The decadent mood is not wanting, as can be seen in the ending of "Impression du Matin," whose introductory stanza has drawn a "Thames nocturne of blue and gold" changing to a "Harmony in grey":

But one pale woman all alone,
The daylight kissing her wan hair,
Loitered beneath the gas lamp's flare,
With lips of flame and heart of stone.

Manifestly, the imagination that will produce "The Harlot's House" is already aroused.

The sequence of five indifferent sonnets collected as *Impressions de Théâtre* need not detain our attention; let us hope they pleased the three theatrical stars to whom they were addressed. Irving (in an exceptionally good line) is called:

Thou trumpet set for Shakespeare's lips to blow!

Sarah Bernhardt is ridiculously idealized as a reincarnated Greek, weary of

The heavy fields of scentless asphodel,
The loveless lips with which men kiss in Hell.

Ellen Terry, who appears to have rivaled Lily Langtry in Wilde's transient devotion, is beneficiary of a trio of sonnets of considerable warmth but meager power.

The Fourth Movement is a short section somewhat incongruously introduced by "Le Réveillon," which not merely in stanzaic form and impressionistic style, but in demonstrable history of composition, belongs with a sketch called "La Fuite de la Lune" in *Flowers of Gold*. Otherwise, this last "movement" consists of a sheaf of seven love lyrics, generally either resigned or wearily determined rather than joyous or impassioned in tone. The best, by far, is "Her Voice," a woman's monologue at parting reminiscent of sources as widely separated as Michael Drayton and Robert Browning. More interesting, however, as speaking in the poet's own behalf, is "Apologia," though a certain juvenility of tone suggests—rightly—that it might have been written by a youth still in knee breeches. The poem is almost insufferable in its exaggeration of attitude, but it does, at least, express

an attitude sincerely held by its author: the worship of beauty. As in the first and second "movements," the final entry of this section sets a pitch for the directly subsequent long poem: here "Taedium Vitae" prepares the reader to expect Wilde's desertion of Aphrodite for Athene in "Humanitad."

The five long poems, whose position and function in the scheme of the book already have been mentioned, came very close to justifying the sniff, "Swinburne and Water," that headed some critical observations of *Punch* on the typography, paper, and binding and on Wilde's alleged unintelligibility. Swinburne down to about 1878, the year of the second *Poems and Ballads* shortly prior to his retirement from society, bore much the same relation to the Decadence in England as Baudelaire to *le Symbolisme* in France—except, of course, that Swinburne did not die until 1909, at the age of seventy-two. Among the hard, gemlike disciples he outlived, Oscar Wilde certainly had aspired to be the Verlaine. In subjects, in philosophy, in frank sensuality, in alliteration and phrasing, to some extent in cadence and stanza forms—in short, in every possible way—the younger poet sedulously aped the singer who, in "The Garden of Eros," is praised as

. . . that fiery heart, that morning star
Of re-arisen England . . . ;

the inheritor of Keats and Shelley; a being for whom

. . . Venus laughs to know one knee will bow before her still . . . ;

a destroyer of the cross, in whose writings the pagan gods

Have found their last, most ardent worshipper . . .

Wilde's undisguised emulation of Swinburne is especially evident in the linking poems—or at any rate in four of the five: "The Garden of Eros," "The Burden of Itys," "Panthea,"

and "Humanitad." The one partial exception is "Charmides," an erotic Grecian narrative standing between *Wind Flowers* and *Flowers of Gold*, for which various influences in English poetry including Keats and Landor, besides classical sources, have been cited with greater or less probability. In spirit and general character, if less in detail, "Charmides" certainly does not escape the pervasive Swinburneism of the other four. It is at once the best, longest, most widely known, and most questionable morally of the links.

Taken as a group, these five long poems, none of which had been published before 1881, reflect industry more than inspiration. Yet they do not really misrepresent either Wilde or his poetic interests and talents. One word very nearly summarizes their character: sensuousness. The verse is not generally remarkable for its musical quality—although Oscar Wilde did know how to compose delightful verbal music when he made a serious effort, as in the "Serenade" (from *Wind Flowers*), sung by Paris, beginning—

The western wind is blowing fair
Across the dark Aegean sea . . .

Nor is it exactly "picture poetry" that he writes. Wilde is most characteristic when he is weaving and emblazoning a heavy pattern of imagery that appeals simultaneously to all the senses. Most of all, he delights in color. His typical line is, not bathed, but splashed with all the shades and blends that he could wring from his pen. The result frequently is the effect of a Keats gone mad; even when Wilde succeeds, we feel very near to surfeit. He can scarcely express his love of nature without bedecking her like a jeweled courtesan. Consider, for illustration:

Each tiny dewdrop dripping from the bluebell's brimming cell.

There (quoted from "The Burden of Itys") is a genuinely beautiful line, yet the conscious panting after Swinburne and Arnold offends our taste. Nor are we inclined—nowadays, at least, howsoever it might have been at the century's end—to indulge a poet who pedantically obtrudes classical figures and themes, some of them calculatingly obscure, on any and every occasion. Finally, we have heard it all before. Today, little more than archaeological interest attaches to the hedonistic, Italianate-republican, and pantheistic faiths that Wilde in his middle twenties dutifully reflected from and at his era.

Oscar Wilde's nondramatic poetry was completed by two separate publications, *The Sphinx* (1894) and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898); plus some two dozen occasional pieces, including a few early ones contributed to periodicals but not reprinted in the *Poems*, a number of later date than that book, and one or two left in manuscript. Much of the verse composed after 1881, which is of generally high quality, evidences the continuing domination of Impressionism over Wilde in the first half of the eighties. One of a pair of three-stanza compositions in this manner, grouped under the title "Impressions," is incidentally interesting as referring to Wilde's first voyage to America, with his one poetic appreciation of machinery—

And in the throbbing engine room
Leap the long rods of polished steel.

By common consent, the best of the short poems (its only possible rivals being "Requiescat" and a sonnet deploring the sale of Keats's love letters) is "The Harlot's House," which constitutes a transition between Oscar Wilde's Impressionistic phase and his excursion into Symbolism in *The Sphinx*.

It consists of thirty-six lines arranged in tercets with linked rhyme, and tells of the desertion of the poet by his love, who "passed into the house of lust."

Then suddenly the tune went false,
The dancers wearied of the waltz,
The shadows ceased to wheel and whirl.

And down the long and silent street,
The dawn, with silver-sandalled feet,
Crept like a frightened girl.

It is known that Wilde withheld this poem from the press for two years. He finally caused it to be printed, evidently not fully revised, during his quarrel with Whistler in 1885—probably as a demonstration of the argument, advanced in his review of "Ten o'Clock," that "the poet is the supreme artist, for he is the master of colour and form, and the real musician besides, and is lord over all life and all arts . . ."

With a fine stroke of litotes, R. H. Sherard characterized *The Sphinx* as "a masterpiece of the poetry which is not spontaneous." We have to keep in mind that Oscar Wilde was no Englishman; for him, England was at the fork of roads leading to Rome and Paris. Three of his major works, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Sphinx*, and *Salomé* (the last even in language) belong to Anglo-French literature. *The Sphinx*, written in English but of mainly foreign spirit, has been shown to be a potpourri of motifs, images, and vocabulary from Gautier, Baudelaire, and above all Flaubert of *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*. Influence of Poe, the accepted forerunner of contemporary French literature, also was active.

The meter, on the other hand, is an adaptation of the native *In Memoriam* stanza, which fascinated Wilde from his earliest days of verse writing, standing second only to the

sonnet in his favor. At the start, he used it principally for religious sentiment, sometimes (as in "The True Knowledge") directly borrowed, along with the meter, from the poet laureate—

Thou knowest all—I cannot see.
 I trust I shall not live in vain,
 I know that we shall meet again,
 In some divine eternity.

Presently he discovered its peculiar utility for impressionistic sketching, for which he repeatedly employed it. When Wilde finally published *The Sphinx* his familiar spirit, the Imp of the Perverse, caused him to draw out the quatrains to long-line couplets—the "firm, lava-like verse" appreciatively described by Arthur Ransome—in order to give a factitious appearance of subtle internal rhyming. An early manuscript clearly shows that this bizarre printed form was an after-thought.

The poem may conceal an allusion to a malady, antecedent to the more notorious deviation, that could be as important as the latter for explaining Wilde's warped personality and physical decay. There are excellent grounds for assuming that he had begun *The Sphinx* while he was an Oxford undergraduate. In one of the religious poems of his university period, also in the *In Memoriam* stanza, he cries out to Mary:

O crowned by God with love and flame!
 O crowned by Christ the Holy One!
 O listen ere the searching sun
 Show to the world my sin and shame.
 ("San Miniato")

Here is an early occurrence of a word that will require many entries if ever a concordance to the works of Oscar Wilde is compiled: *sin*. His whole imagination seems to have been

fired by sin; the word and the concept are scarlet threads shot through his writings of all periods. Wilde was precisely the type of young disciple Walter Pater dreaded when he temporarily suppressed and later altered the "Conclusion" to his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. In *De Profundis* Wilde speaks of reading, during his first term at Oxford, what necessarily would have been the original edition of 1873, calling it "that book which has had such strange influence over my life . . ." Where Pater offered a balanced moral and artistic freedom, Oscar Wilde found the hagridden pleasures of a sybarite, and he brought himself to settle a terrible reckoning. Probably there is more than fantasy in the poet's morbid questioning of the sphinx that haunts him:

What snake-tressed fury, fresh from Hell, with uncouth gestures and unclean,
Stole from the poppy-drowsy queen and led you to a student's cell?

What songless, tongueless ghost of sin crept through the curtains of the night
And saw my taper burning bright, and knocked and bade you enter in?

Are there not others more accursed, whiter with leprosies than I,
Are Abana and Pharphar dry, that you come here to slake your thirst?

Of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* little could be said that has not many times been remarked; the poem and its qualities are known to every reader. At last the battered poseur had found the once-despised jewel of seriousness—in a sty. But we shall misread the ballad unless we reject the fallacy that Wilde came out of prison repentant. He wanted, as he declared in *De Profundis*, "to live long enough and to produce work of such a character that I shall be able at the end of my days to say, 'Yes! this is just where the artistic life leads a

man!" At the same time, more than hinted in that proud, ironic flinging back of a bitter phrase, was the trapped beast's instinct to turn upon his captors. The two desires made requisite a very delicate poise between, on the one side, a futile return to aestheticism, and, on the other, an inarticulate snarl of rage. *Reading Gaol*, a restrained protest in terms of prison life against what man has made of man, successfully achieves and holds that balance. Possibly it is the last word on its subject, as once in an age the final utterance may be spoken on some great theme. Oscar Wilde's artistic life closed, as was befitting to the man, in paradox: the apostle of beauty, the disciple of Keats and Pater and Swinburne, rested his surest poetic fame upon a ballad of ugliness.

J. D. THOMAS