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Oscar Wilde the Poet

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Not included in Gonzales's *Modern Irish Writers*, because too little of his work concerns Ireland (xiv), and considered to be a poet whose "reputation as a dramatist and prose writer has overshadowed his poetry" (Quinn 57), Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854, to a Protestant Anglo-Irish family, and became the most popular but also the most hated and despised poet who dominated the literary world of Europe, particularly Britain and France, as well as the United States from the early 1880s to his arrest and conviction for sodomy in 1895. Five years after his death, Sir Max Beerbohm in *Vanity Fair*, March 2, 1905, stated that Oscar Wild was "primarily ... a poet, with a lifelong passion for beauty; and a philosopher, with a life-long passion for thought" (qtd. in Hyde 205). Oscar Wilde's career indeed began and ended with the publication of his poetry. He had published two books of poetry, *Ravenna* (1878) and *Poems* (1881), before he was twenty five (Frankel 25)¹. His poetic career was completed with the publication of his *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* in 1898, two years before his death. However, as Merlin Holland states,

¹ See Nicholas Frankle's chapter on Wilde as poet for Wilde's construction of his poetic identity as English and the critical neglect of his Irish poetry in *Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books*.

Wilde is very much a figure of dualities and paradoxes; he fascinates and confuses as he is

the Anglo-Irishman with Nationalist sympathies; the Protestant with life-long Catholic leanings; the married homosexual; the musician of words and painter of language who confessed to Andre Gide that writing bored him; the artist astride not two but three cultures, an Anglo-Francophile and a Celt at heart. And overlaid on it all is the question of which facets of the Wildean dichotomy were real and involuntary and which were artificial and contrived for effect. (3)

As Kohl explains, in his book *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*, Oscar Wilde displays a wide ranging variety and conflicting interests in his poetry. Wilde's

subject matter varies from political engagement to philosophical speculation, from religious longing to feelings of love, admiration and ennui testifies to a disposition that is without ties and is open to new impressions and influences... Corresponding to the multiple views of reality is an extraordinary multiplicity of forms and styles. (28)

Indeed, Wilde uses almost all of the poetic forms that the English poetic tradition affords through the poets he admired and imitated most. He uses, for instance, couplets in the "Ballad de Marguerite", *terza rima* with a rhyme scheme of aab in the "Harlot's House", Tennyson's "In Memoriam Stanza" form in Impressions: 2, f as well as sestets, sonnets, ballads and villanelle. Moreover, Oscar Wilde's predominantly conventional diction has recourse to a rich web of medieval and Biblical allusions, mythological references, detailed lists of flowers, alliteration, personification, synaesthesia and a particular preference for colour. It is important to note that, because Wilde did not believe that poets should speak of the real world, his poetry derives its material and inspiration from his literary predecessors and sources (Kohl 29). Wilde's poetry shows that his use of mythological figures, gods and nymphs and such as natural inhabitants of the poetic world he depicts are "part of an attempt to create an Arcadian dream world, as far away as possible from the real world (Kohl 29). In a sense Oscar Wilde needs no introduction to his art and poetry as he sums up his position in life and its relation to his art in *De Profundis* (1897) In this long letter of autobiography, Oscar Wilde reviews his life and art as a poet who served a two-year

sentence in prison. He states that he is “a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age” (*Collected Works 1071*). Oscar Wilde’s self-portrayal indicates that he is in many respects a privileged man of talent, a “genius, a distinguished name” who has a “high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring”. Oscar Wilde rightly states that he made “art a philosophy, and philosophy an art” and managed to change the minds of men and how they perceived the world. Most importantly, Wilde confirms his philosophy that “Art” is “the supreme reality, and life ... a mere mode of fiction” (*Collected Works 1071*). Oscar Wilde comes to modify his views about the source of his poetry but he is rather convinced that when art and life become confused, the result is destructive, since “action[s] of the common day” are important character builders and when one allows “pleasure to dominate” one ends “in horrible disgrace” (*Collected Works 1071*).

The idea that life experiences are important in Wilde’s poetry is confirmed by Wilde, too. He states, “The two turning points in my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison” (*Collected Works 1074*). Indeed, while his education at Oxford turned him into a leading aesthete poet to claim a position for art that contests art’s relation to life and its responsibility as a medium of moral instruction, the unfortunate prison experience he had to go through because of his sexual preferences brought an end not only to his aestheticism but also to his poetry. At Oxford, as Ellmann suggests, “Oscar Wilde made himself” (98). It is at Oxford that he changed his name from Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde into Oscar Wilde. It is at Oxford that he met John Ruskin in his first year and Walter Pater in his third year and developed his interest in aestheticism (Chapin 28). Wilde’s *Poems* published in 1881 shows the influence of Pater, aestheticism and Hellenism. Despite the fact that the first collection that Oscar Wilde published to introduce himself as a poet of aesthetic norms led to the denial of the title poet to him, before his imprisonment for homosexuality, Oscar Wilde was a champion of poetry as the supreme art in his day as the leader of the movement Art For Art’s Sake (Roditi 6). A copy of the *Poems* Wilde sent to Oxford Center was rejected on account that

It is not that these poems are thin - and they are thin:
it is not that they are immoral - and they are
immoral... it is that they are for the most part not by
their putative father at all, but by a number of better-
known and more deservedly reputed authors. They are
in fact by William Shakespeare, by Philip Sidney, by
John Donne, by Lord Byron, by William Morris, by

Algernon Swinburne, and by sixty more... The Union Library already contains better and fuller editions of these poets: the volume which we are offered is theirs, not Mr Wilde's. (Beckson and Fong 63; Ellmann 140)

An equally drastic review of his poetry appeared in *Punch*, which, referring to Wilde's prominence as an aesthete, stated "There is a certain amount of originality about the binding but that is more than can be said about the inside of the volume. Mr Wilde may be aesthetic but he is not original" (Kohl 16). Wilde's first collection was criticized not only for plagiarism but also for inconsistencies and contradictions. When in 1881 he rather confidently sent his collected poems with some new ones to a publisher with a letter that claimed "Possibly my name requires no introduction" and although the publication became as popular as to go to five editions in one year, it was stated of him that he was a poet with "no genuine lyrical feeling", "no distinct message" and had a language which was "inflated and insincere" and his poems had "profuse and careless imagery" (Kohl 15). Significantly, such criticism never discouraged Wilde. Wilde owns inconsistencies and contradictions as integral elements of self-recognition as a poet. He replied in "The Critic as Artist" to charges of inconsistency that "We are never more true to ourselves than when we are inconsistent" (Chapin 32). According to Wilde, borrowing from other poets is part of the poetics of aestheticism. Indeed, studying "a fine poet without stealing from him" is almost impossible for a good poet, as a poet "is able to draw new music" from the reeds through which he blows, despite the fact that they "have been touched by other lips" (Mendelssohn 146). Oscar Wilde thus was pioneering the Art for Art's Sake movement in poetry. As Michelle Mendelssohn states

Aestheticism ...[is] the literary and artistic movement that flourished in Britain and America between 1870 and 1900 and that advanced art for art's sake in opposition to the utilitarian doctrine of moral or practical usefulness... Aestheticism was an argument about art and culture. According to Wilde, its chief characteristics were to increase appreciation for 'beautiful workmanship' (RW 197), to recognise 'the primary importance of the sensuous element in art', and to liberate art from ethical considerations by embracing 'art for art's sake'. (5)

As an aesthete, Oscar Wilde strongly defended the position, in his Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that “The artist is the creator of beautiful things...There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well-written or badly-written. That is all...All art is quite useless” (*Collected Works* 4). Hence, “Wilde became a convenient and controversial symbol of what aesthetic culture entailed” (Mendelssohn 1). In the mid-and late-nineteenth century when Oscar Wilde wrote as an aesthete, the aesthetes subscribed to Pater’s idea of “Art for Art’s Sake” and to the freedom of art from social responsibility. The aesthete thus demonstrated a taste for medievalism, Pre-Raphaelite art, Japonism and Swinburne’s poetry. Accordingly, it is of importance that Wilde’s aesthetic poetry gives expression to the two most important figures of influence on his life and poetry. He subscribes to Keats’s idea that a life of sensations is better than a life of thoughts and Pater’s statement that one should “be forever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions” in several of *Poems* (Kohl 30). “Helas!”, the poem that prefaces the collection *Poems* seems to be the expression in poetry of what Wilde promised to himself as a student at Oxford. Recognised by Wilde later as his most representative poem, “Helas!”, begins with an anti-Victorian attitude towards any moral purpose in life and replaces it with passion: “To drift with every passion till my soul / Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play ...” and advocates a life of sensations at the cost of loss of “ancient wisdom and austere control” (*Collected Works* 769). Perhaps, as Ellmann suggests, Wilde’s “self-indulgence,... was never without remorse” as the concluding lines of “Helas!”, when Wilde quotes the Biblical passage quoted by Pater to present his position, read: “. . . lo! with a little rod / I did but touch the honey of romance - / And must I lose a soul's inheritance?” (*Collected Works* 769).

Expressing a strong awareness that the contemporary world is not pro-art in its materialistic preoccupations and scientific worldview, the “Garden of Eros,” presents beauty as the ultimate remedy:

Spirit of Beauty! Tarry with us still,
It is not quenched the torch of poesy,
...
Although the cheating merchants of the mart
With iron roads profane our lovely isle
And break on whirling heels the limbs of Art.
(*Collected Works* 780,781)

The speaker suggests that Pre-Raphealite poetry is “a better mirror of” the age and consequently disowns the present in favour of the new art he attempts to introduce: “Methinks that was not my inheritance/For I was nurtured otherwise, my soul /Passes from higher heights of life to a more supreme goal” (*Collected Works* 783). Hence, the poem redefines art as beauty which he suggests will live on in the works of the poets:

They are not dead, thine ancient votaries
Some few there are to whom thy radiant smile
Is better than a thousand victories,
...there are a few
Who for thy sake would give their manlihood
And consecrate their being, I at least
Have done so, my thy lips my daily food
And in thy temples found a godlier feast
Than this starved age can give me, spite of all
Its new-found creeds so sceptical and so dogmatical.
(*Collected Works* 779)

In such poems of beauty and pleasure Wilde seeks a break from the dreariness of his age which appears to be growing in tastelessness and dogmatic violence. Similarly, in “Theoretikos”, the speaker describes the present world as one of increasing corruption and loss, a “vile traffic house where day by day/Wisdom and reverence are sold at mart” (*Collected Works* 776). It appears that flight from such a world is necessary for the soul of the poet and his individual stance: “It mars my calm: wherefore in dreams of Art/And loftiest culture I would stand apart” (*Collected Works* 776). Wilde’s philosophical poem “Humanidad”, similarly, engages in a contrast between the purity and energy of nature and mood in its criticism of the corruption of his age, the anarchy, ignorance and greed. It laments that Beauty, “That Spirit hath passed away” (*Collected Works* 861).

Like his role models, the Pre-Raphealites, Wilde also employs some medieval themes and stories in “Ballade de Marguerite” and “The Dole of the King’s Daughter” and “Ravenna”. Accordingly, his poetry gives an equal emphasis to the medievalism that formed an important part of the poetics of the Pre-Raphealites Swinburne, Rossetti and William Morris. In the courtly love convention represented in “La Bella Donna Della Mia Mente” (The Beautiful Lady of My Memory) (*Collected Works* 810-11), the knight suffers because of his secret love for a noble lady. A similar theme is employed in

“The Dole of The King’s Daughter” (*Collected Works* 834-5), in which the knights face death for their love for the king’s daughter.

In the “Duchess of Padua” and “To Milton” and such sonnets, Wilde employs the Renaissance art forms. In fact, as stated above, Wilde is aware of writing in a well established tradition, a tradition established by the Pre-Raphaelites and the Romantics before them and duly acknowledges his debt to them in the “Garden of Eros” where he identifies with the “Spirit of Beauty”, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Burne-Jones, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and “Morris our sweet Chaucer’s child/Dear heritor of Spenser’s doleful reed”, (*Collected Works* 780) as his masters. Wilde argued that these borrowings from the Pre-Raphaelites and their pictorial style and ornament was a necessity of the aesthetic poetics. In “Pen, Pencil and Poison”, Wilde states: “To those who are preoccupied with the beauty of form nothing else seems of much importance (*Collected Works* 947). According to Wilde “the very key note of aesthetic eclecticism...[is] the true harmony of all really beautiful things irrespective of age or place, of school or manner” (*Collected Works* 950). Accordingly, “In a very ugly and sensible age, the arts borrow, not from life, but from each other” (*Collected Works* 954). Borrowing and imitating thus become “the privilege of the appreciative man” (Wilde qtd in Saint-Amour 92). In this context, Wilde’s first published poem “Ravenna” seems to set his standard for poetic production. As a poem celebrating Ravenna as a city of art and ancient civilisation Ravenna provides a compendium of the city’s literary history with references to English romantics, although the poem is argued to be, “virtually plagiaristic, including allusions and quotations from Wordsworth’s ‘Daffodils’, Browning’s ‘Home Thoughts From Abroad’, and ‘Love Among the Ruins’, Tennyson’s ‘Mariana’, Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’ and ‘Ode to the West Wind’ as well as wholesale borrowings from the tone and imagery of Keats” (Robbins 23).

Wilde’s paint poetry can be considered in this category, too. In accordance with his poetic principle that poetry should be divorced from life and its instruction, Wilde states in “The Decay of Lying,” that realism is the most dangerous for the future of art; it should be acknowledged for perfect art that “life imitates art far more than art imitates life” (*Collected Works* 933). Wilde contends in “The Critic as Artist” that “When man acts he is a puppet. When he describes he is a poet” (*Collected Works* 980). Hence, his poems “Impression du Matin”, “In the Gold Room: A Harmony”, “A Symphony in Yellow” and other poems entitled “Impression” illustrate this view. In “Impression du Matin”, a descriptive poem of early morning Thames, we observe and enjoy a painting in words:

The Thames nocturne of blue and gold
Changed to a Harmony in Gray
A barge with ochre-coloured hay
Dropt from the wharf: and chill and cold
The yellow fog came creeping down
The bridges, till the houses' walls
Seemed changed to shadows, and St Paul's
Loomed like a bubble o'er the town (*Collected Works* 805)

An equally impressionistic poem is "Magdalen Walks" which describes the poet's favourite walks of Magdalen College in Oxford:

The little white clouds are racing over the sky,
And the fields are strewn with the gold of the flower of
March
The daffodil breaks under foot, and the tasseled larch
Sways and swings as the trush goes hurrying by.
(*Collected Works* 805)

Similarly, in "Les Silhouettes" the focus is on the description of the beauty of the scene observed:

The sea is flecked with bars of Gray
The dull dead wind is out of tune
And like a withered leaf the moon
Is blown across the stormy bay...
And overhead the curlews cry,
Where through the dusky upland grass
The young brown-throated reapers pass
Like silhouettes against the sky. (*Collected Works* 830)

With its emphasis shifted to the supremacy of desire and the victory of love "Panthea" is a poem challenging the dominant view of art as morally instructive and guiding in its statements:

Nay let us walk from fire unto fire,
From passionate pain to deadlier delight,-
I am too young to live without desire,
Too young art thou to waste this summer night
Asking those idle questions which of old
Man sought of seer and oracle, and no reply was told.
(*Collected Works* 841)

The poem clearly privileges feelings in its philosophical attempt to understand and convey the true meaning of life:

For sweet, to feel is better than to know,
And wisdom is a childless heritage,
One pulse of passion-youth's first fiery glow,-
Are worth the hoarded proverbs of the sage:
Vex not thy soul with dead philosophy,
Have we not lips to kiss with, hearts to love and eyes to see
(*Collected Works* 841)

There is a clear identification of love and poetry, of the lover and the poet, as admirers of beauty, too: "Me thinks no leaf would ever bud in spring,/But for the lovers' lips that kiss, the poets' lips that sing" (*Collected Works* 845). Love seems to compensate for all losses and unhappiness. The wounded spirit that the poet tries to save from the wreck caused by society finds comfort and consolation in love. Similarly, in "Apologia", regretting the fact that now he must become a man of sorrow for unreturned love, the speaker contends that at least he has followed his heart in loving and experiencing his heart's desire:

Perchance it may be better so- at least
I have not made my heart a heart of stone,
Nor starved my boyhood of its goodly feast,
Nor walked where Beauty is a thing unknown.
(*Collected Works* 847)

It is clearly stated that doing otherwise would never have been an option for someone whose life depends on the love of beauty:

But surely it is something to have been
The best beloved for a little while
To have walked hand in hand with Love, and seen
His purple wings flit once across thy smile
....
...yet have I burst the bars
Stood face to face with beauty, known indeed
The Love which moves the Sun and all the stars!
(*Collected Works* 848)

However, Wilde's representation of love, of beauty and desire as the supreme goals in life never went without challenge and controversy. In "Charmides", the only narrative poem in his volume

Poems, Wilde portrays Charmides, an ancient Greek sailor, who, hiding in the temple of the Greek goddess Athena at night, makes love to her effigy. Ruth Robbins argues that “Charmides” represents all the features that Oscar Wilde’s poetry represented to his critics and set the critical context in which his poetry was to be evaluated (30). Charmides is clearly transgressive of the sexual norms of the Victorians as it demonstrates “the emphasis on Wilde’s sensuality, his pushing limits in proper subject matter, his ‘unmanliness’, his resistance to generic and other norms and rules, and his lack of originality” (Robbins 42).

Such poems are also instructive of the relationship between life and art that Oscar Wilde tries to redefine in his poetry. Although Wilde claims that the best art is not about life, it is clear that he is well aware of the inevitable correspondence between the two. Indeed, Wilde’s early poetry suggests that life claims a larger than necessary place in art and that the confusion of the two is rather dangerous for art. Oscar Wilde tried all his life to keep life away from his art but it is life that finally reestablished the connection between art and life at the expense of the poet and his poetry. Oscar Wilde defines his imprisonment in Reading Gaol as “the second turning point” in his life as stated above. As a man who upheld and promoted beauty and refinement as the ultimate target of his life and his art, Wilde seems to have suffered most because of his fellow creatures and their social norms. His imprisonment for homosexuality brought him full circle and forced him to abandon the amoral stance that he always claimed to belong to art. Consequently, what he defended as an artist, Wilde had to modify as a convict, however ironic and paradoxical this appears to be. Wilde wrote no poetry while in prison but a long letter later was published under the title *De Profundis* in which he records his transfer from Wadsworth Prison to Reading as a traumatic experience. He reports that he stood at

Clapham Junction in convict dress, and handcuffed, for the world to look at...When people saw me they laughed...As soon as they were informed (of who I was) they laughed still more. For half an hour I stood there in the Gray November rain surrounded by a jeering mob.
(*Collected Works* 1094)

It was not only the people who mocked him but also the prison system destroyed him. Wilde wrote in his letter to the *Daily Chronicle on the Prison Hill*, March 24, 1898 when he came out of prison that

The present prison system seems almost to have for its aim the wrecking and destruction of mental faculties. The production of insanity is, if not its object, certainly its result... Deprived of books, of all human intercourse, isolated from every humane and humanising influence, condemned to eternal silence, robbed of all intercourse with the external world, treated like an unintelligent animal, brutalised below the level of any of the brute creation, the wretched man who is confined in an English prison can hardly escape becoming insane. (qtd. in Hyde 3)

The Ballad of Reading Gaol is the product of these inhuman circumstances and it truly reflects the prisoner's world and feelings. In that sense *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is unlike anything that Wilde wrote before. The poem tells the story of an inmate sentenced to death for killing his wife. Wilde stated that the ballad form he adopted for this poem and its publisher *Reynold's Magazine* are suitable for the poem, "because it circulates widely among the criminal classes – to which I now belong – for once I will be read by my peers – a new experience for me" (qtd in Hyde 184). Moreover, as the work of a poet in violation of the social norms, *The Ballad* had to be published anonymously, by Leonard Smithers in 1898 under the name C.3.3., which stood for cell block C, landing 3, cell 3. Thus, Wilde's name did not appear on the poem's front cover. Only after its seventh edition in June 1899, it became public that C.3.3. was actually Wilde. The poem proved to be a commercial success, and brought Wilde a little money which he desperately needed. A passage from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was chosen as the epitaph on Wilde's tomb;

And alien tears will fill for him,
Pity's long-broken urn,
For his mourners will be outcast men,
And outcasts always mourn.

The author of these lines admits, in several letters written to his publisher, during the publication of the *The Ballad* "I am so lonely and poor" (Hyde 174). Wilde never seems to own the poem as his work; he, in fact, had rather ambivalent feelings about it. He stated, "I am not sure I like it myself. But catastrophies in life bring about catastrophies in art" (qtd. in Hyde 157) and described *The Ballad* as a poem that "suffers under the difficulty of a divided aim in style. Some is realistic, some is romantic: some poetry, some propaganda" (qtd. in Hyde 164).

On the other hand, the poem is considered to be the most, if not the only, autobiographical poem by Wilde because of its verses such as the following:

Yet each man kills the thing he loves
By each let this be heard.
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word.
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword! (*Collected Works* 892)

The Ballad also establishes a comradeship between the speaker and the convict of the poem and makes the convict's experience a common one shared by the speaker:

A Prison wall was round us both
Two outcast men we were
The world had thrust us from its heart
And God from out His care
And the iron gin that waits for Sin
Had caught us in its snare. (*Collected Works* 895)

The pun on "wild" in the following stanza, too, suggests that Wilde's *Ballad* is as much about himself as it is about a fellow prisoner:

And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats,
None knew so well as I:
For he who lives more lives than one
More deaths than one must die. (*Collected Works* 902)

Arthur Symons, a fellow aesthete poet, wrote in his review of *The Ballad* that in it "We see a great spectacular intellect, to which, at last, pity and terror have come in their own person, and no longer as puppets in a play" (Beckson 248). Evidently, experience finally makes its way into poetry in Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* but with the difference that it sums up Wilde's relationship with society and his lifelong conflict with the world he inhabited to a catastrophic end. A poem of earlier date had already given expression to the conflictual and destructive relationship between art and life. The poem is "Tedium Vitae" and it reads thus:

To stab my youth with desperate knives, to wear
This paltry age's gaudy livery,
To let each base hand filch my treasury,

To mesh my soul within a woman's hair,
And be mere Fortune's lackeyed groom,--I swear
I love it not! these things are less to me
Than the thin foam that frets upon the sea,
Less than the thistledown of summer air
Which hath no seed: better to stand aloof
Far from these slanderous fools who mock my life
Knowing me not, better the lowliest roof
Fit for the meanest hind to sojourn in,
Than to go back to that hoarse cave of strife
Where my white soul first kissed the mouth of sin.
(*Collected Works* 851)

Evidently, Wilde's poetry is never entirely divorced from life and his poem "Sweet I blame You not for Mine the Fault was" ends with the confident statement that "I have made my choice, have lived my poems, and, though youth is gone in wasted days, /I have found the lover's crown of myrtle better than the poet's crown of bays" (*Collected Works* 866). The only thing that is wrong here is that Oscar Wilde actually has the "poet's crown of bays", too, a privilege he disdained and disclaimed if it was to be given by a society he so passionately tried to make evolve into something it was not.²

² See Regenia Gagnier, "Wilde and the Victorians" in *Companion to Oscar Wilde* Ed. Peter Raby. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997, 18-33.

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