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RECOLLECTIONS
OF
OSCAR WILDE

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RECOLLECTIONS
OF
OSCAR WILDE

BY
ERNEST LA JEUNESSE
ANDRÉ GIDE AND FRANZ BLEI

TRANSLATION AND INTRODUCTION

BY
PERCIVAL POLLARD

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INTRODUCTION
BY
PERCIVAL POLLARD



INTRODUCTION

STROLLING in the rare sunshine that visited Berlin in the spring of 1905, chance took me into a quaint little bookshop that faces what was once the workshop of venerable Joseph Joachim. There, among that litter of old and new, in all tongues, I found crystallised what much other observation had already hinted. Namely, that upon the continental literature concerning itself primarily with formal art no exotic influence was more noticeable than that of Oscar Wilde. Outside influence upon the German

theatre was on every hand. Farces from the French, dismal stuff from Scandinavia, and comedies by Bernard Shaw and J. M. Barrie, were taking their turn with Hauptmann, Sudermann, Max Halbe, Hartleben and Schnitzler in the repertoires of the leading German theatres. But the piece that was being played oftenest, on both sides of the Rhine, was Oscar Wilde's "Salome." When you went beyond the theatre, eyeing the windows of the booksellers, you saw Wilde's name everywhere, — his "De Profundis" was the most famous book of the season in Berlin; at any rate, the booksellers seemed to intimate so; they positively plastered their showcases and windows with Wilde literature.

Much of this Wilde literature was but repetition of what, despite the whilom

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aversion from this writer's work here and in England, is already fairly familiar to us. One curious little book I came upon, however, of such intimate, melancholy interest, that I determined some day to turn it into English. This I have now done.

In introducing the work of the three contributors to this little book, two Frenchmen and one German, I would premise that there must be many readers who have been astonished to find in the country of *Gartenlaube* literature and Rheinhold Begas statues such evident sympathy for a talent like Wilde's. The tremendous modernisation that has come over German art and letters has by no means been generally heralded. Only the barest facts may here be hinted.

The movement typified in England by

the *Yellow Book*, in America by the *Lark*, the *Chap-Book*, and similar attempts away from the academic, had a few years later its German echo. In art a whole school of successful men now testifies to this influence; in illustration there are *Jugend* and *Simplicissimus*, conveying to the public the work of the younger Munich men; in letters there are such men as Ernst Von Wolzogen, Frank Wedekind, Richard Dehmel, Otto Julius Bierbaum, and many others. Just as, through Beardsley, Wilde's influence upon our illustrative and decorative arts — in houses as well as in prints — may still be found, so upon a number of German writers, for print and playhouse, the Irishman's influence was undoubted. In the thought-mode of a number of successful writers of the lighter sort, some of

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whom were named just now, one could mark the flowing of an impetus sprung from the author of "Salome."

A year later, in the spring of this present year, one found the European vogue of Wilde still spreading. In Berlin, "An Ideal Husband" was on the boards of the Kleine Theatre; Vienna was issuing a Complete Edition; in Florence, Leonardo Azzarita was pointing out the Italian interest in "De Profundis," just as, in Madrid, Gomez Carillo had been giving fascinating glimpses of the author of "Salome." These glimpses I would well have liked to include as a chapter in this book, side by side with the glimpses of Messrs. Gide, La Jeunesse, and Blei. But the limits set for this brochure forbid, and I must content myself with the briefest of extracts from what Carillo gave his

Spanish readers. It is with "Salome" that these extracts deal; inasmuch as that sombre play has but in this summer of 1906 been for the first time offered to the London public — offered, and, if we may believe Mr. Max Beerbohm, refused as too serious! — these particulars can scarce fail of interest:

In those days, Carillo wrote, Wilde's thoughts were busied only with the lustful dance of Salome. "You are from Madrid?" And, after a long pause, "If for no other reason, I have always longed to go to Spain that I might see in the Prado Titian's Salome, of which Tintoretto once exclaimed: 'Here at last is a man who paints the very quivering flesh!' . . ." No day went by without his talking to me of Salome. Now it was a passing woman who started him dreaming of the

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Hebraic princess; again he stood for hours before the jewelers' windows building for himself the ideal combination of gems with which to festoon the body of his idol. One evening he asked me suddenly, in the midst of the street, "Don't you think she is better entirely naked?" He was thinking of Salome. "Yes," he went on, "absolutely naked. But strewn with jewels, all ringing and tinkling in her hair, on her ankles, her wrists, her throat, enclosing her hips and heightening with their myriad glittering reflections the unchastity of that unchaste amber flesh. For of an unknowing Salome, who is a mere tool, I refuse to hear a word; no, no, Salome knows. . . ." Another time his Salome was all chastity. I recall an evening when Wilde came from the Louvre, and began to speak to me of a gentle princess who danced before Herod as if by a call from Heaven, that she

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might finally be able to demand punishment on the lying enemy of Jehovah. "Her quivering body," he said, "is tall and pale as a lily; nothing sexual is in her beauty. Veils woven by angels conceal her slenderness, her blond hair flows like molten gold over her shoulders. . . ." Once we were at Jean Lorrain's. Before the picture of a beheaded woman, a very pale head, Wilde exclaimed, "Why, that is Salome!" And at once he imagined a princess who brings her lover the head of John, and then immediately sends her own head also, because she fancies herself despised by the young man. "It is exactly like that," he whispered. "A Nubian gospel discovered by Boissière tells of a young philosopher, to whom a Jewish princess makes a present of an apostle's head. The youth says to her smilingly, "What I had rather have is your own head, sweetheart." On that she

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goes away, pale, and that evening a slave brings the young philosopher on a golden plate the poor little head of his sweetheart. The scholar says, "Why all this blood?" and goes on reading Plato. "Don't you think that is Salome?" . . . "Write that!" said someone. Wilde actually began a story with the title "The Double Beheading." He soon tore the sheets up, and thought of a poem. That, too, he relinquished, and chose drama. . . . Only Gustave Moreau's portrait unveiled for him the soul of the dancing princess of his dreams. Many a time he simply repeated Huysman's words, "She is nearly naked. In the whirl of the dance the veils are unloosed, the shawls are fallen to the ground, and only jewels clothe her body. The tiniest of girdles spans her hips; between her breasts a jewel glitters like a star. . . ." Five years later, in prison, in hours of sleep-

RECOLLECTIONS OF OSCAR WILDE

lessness, of fever and hunger, he mechanically repeated to himself the words: "Between her breasts a jewel glitters like a star."

What this Spaniard, Carillo, and the three other European continentals composing this little book have given us in glimpses of this man seemed to me of peculiar and personal interest. They must add to the general understanding.

If that general understanding comes slowly, it comes none the less surely. A month after Wilde's death, in January, 1901, I printed an essay attempting definition of his place as artist. Time has more than borne out all those forecasts of mine. There is no corner of the globe where something of his has not, by now, been read or played. Just as his writings are indisputably a part of the

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literature of the nineteenth century, so the impress made by the man himself belongs in any history of the manners of that century. One may conceive that in Wilde a perverse sense of loyalty to art kept him from ever displaying the real depth below his obvious insincerities; he had begun by being a public fool; he had succeeded in establishing folly as a reputation for himself; and the rumor of his paradoxical brilliance was too secure and too amusing for him to risk shattering it with glimpses of more serious depths. Yet who can read his sonnet, "Helas!" appearing in the 1881 edition of his *POEMS*, without feeling that under the glitter and the pose there was something else, something the gay world of London knew nothing of? Publicly, Wilde posed as a Soul only in the spirit in which that

word was then, in the 'Eighties, used in English society, as opposed to the Smart; he pretended nothing about him was genuine; he passed for a symbol of his own clever defence of liars; yet in "He-las!" the soul gave its cry.

What he hinted in that sonnet he was eventually to prove in his letters from prison to Mr. Ross, printed as a book under the title "De Profundis." Just as Pierre Loti once wrote a Book of Pity and of Death, so might "De Profundis" be called Wilde's Book of Pity and of Life. Just as that book hints the tragedy of his prison life, a tragedy more of soul than of body, so does this present little volume disclose some few facts from the man's life after leaving prison. The few had perforce to read "De Profundis" in the light of their knowledge that its

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author, after all the resolutions and conclusions in that document, reverted to his baser self, and died with his life fallen far below the altitude marked in the prison letters. That knowledge of the few is set forth in concrete, intimate manner in the following pages. It is true that on some points these documents are in conflict; as in the matter of the number following Wilde's body to the grave. But the glimpses of the man just before death, as Ernest La Jeunesse and André Gide give them in these pages, remain incontestably valuable. He died and was buried. Whether seven followed the coffin, or thirteen; whether he now lies in this cemetery or that; what matter? His work lives on.

—A word or two about the authors with whose pages I have taken the liberty of

very free translation. M. La Jeunesse is one of the wittiest of the younger Parisians. Much of his work has been on the impudent and amusing plane of a Max Beerbohm. His volume *The Nights, The Ennui, and The Souls of our Most Notorious Contemporaries*, criticised, chiefly by way of parody, all the biggest toads in the puddle of French letters; Zola, Bourget, Maeterlinck, and Anatole France all suffered his scalpel. His book of drawings in caricature of such men as Rostand, Pierre Louy, Jean Lorrain, Barrés and Jules Lemaitre, is diverting in the extreme.

Herr Franz Blei is one of the talented men connected with the German monthly, *Die Insel*, published in Leipzig three or four years ago, under the direction of Otto Julius Bierbaum. Bierbaum and

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Blei occasionally wrote for the stage together, and Blei has constantly been to the fore in translating for German readers the works of such men as Walter Pater, Ernest Dowson, and Arthur Symons.

About M. Gide I regret that I can tell you nothing; I prefer to invent nothing. The D— referred to in his pages is, of course, Lord Alfred Douglas, who married Olive Custance, and whose English version of "Salome" has lately been issued.

The hotel-keeper, mentioned on page 66, guards to this day the rooms in which Wilde died, as a shrine, not without pecuniary profit. Indeed, visitors have had amusing proof of the inexhaustible store of relics he commands.

PERCIVAL POLLARD.

RECOLLECTIONS
OF
OSCAR WILDE
BY
ANDRÉ GIDE



RECOLLECTIONS

THOSE who came to know Wilde only in the latter years of his life can scarcely, in view of that feeble and infirm existence, have had any conception of this wonderful personality. It was in 1891 that first I saw him. Wilde had at that time what Thackeray termed the most important of talents, success. His gestures, his look, were triumphant. So complete was his success that it seemed as if it had preceded him, and Wilde had nothing to do but follow it up. His books were talked about.

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Plays of his were on at several London theatres. He was rich; he was famous; he was beautiful. Happiness and honors were his. One likened him to an Asiatic Bacchus; or to a Roman Emperor, or even to Apollo himself — what is certain is that he was radiant.

When he came to Paris, his name traveled from lip to lip; one told the most absurd anecdotes about him: Wilde was pictured as everlastingly smoking gold-tipped cigarettes and strolling about with a sunflower in his hand. For Wilde had always the gift of playing up to those who nowadays fashion fame, and he made for himself an amusing mask that covered his actual countenance.

I heard him spoken of at Mallarmé's as of a brilliant causeur. A friend in-

vited Wilde to dinner. There were four of us, but Wilde was the only one who talked.

Wilde was not a *causeur*; he narrated. During the entire meal he hardly once ceased his narrating. He spoke slowly, gently, in a soft voice. He spoke admirable French, but as if he tapped a little for the words he was using. Hardly any accent at all, or just the faintest that he chose to adopt, giving the words often a quite novel and foreign air. . . . The stories he told us that evening were confused and not of his best. Wilde was not sure of us, and was testing us. Of his wisdom or his folly he gave only what he thought his listeners might like; to each he served a dish to suit the taste; those who expected nothing of him received nothing or the merest froth; and,

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since all this was just amusement for him, many, who think they know him, know him only as an entertainer.

As we left the restaurant on that occasion my friends went ahead, I followed with Wilde.

“You listen with your eyes,” he said to me rather abruptly, “that is why I tell you this story:

“When Narcissus died the pool of his pleasure changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, and the Oreads came weeping through the woodland that they might sing to the pool and give it comfort.

“And when they saw that the pool had changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, they loosened the green tresses of their hair, and cried to the pool, and said: ‘We do not won-

der that you should mourn in this manner for Narcissus, so beautiful was he.'

"'But was Narcissus beautiful?' said the pool.

"'Who should know that better than you?' answered the Oreads. 'Us did he ever pass by, but you he sought for, and would lie on your banks and look down at you, and in the mirror of your waters he would mirror his own beauty.'

"'And the pool answered: 'But I loved Narcissus because, as he lay on my banks and looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw my own beauty mirrored.'"

As I said: before others Wilde wore a mask, to deceive, to amuse, sometimes to anger. He never listened, and bothered little about any thought that was not his own. If he could not shine

quite alone, he withdrew into the shadow. One found him there only when one was alone with him.

But so, alone, he began:

“What have you done since yesterday?”

And as my life had then a very ordinary routine, what I told about it could hardly interest him at all. I rehearsed this very ordinary matter, and Wilde’s frown showed.

“Really only that?”

“Really nothing new.”

“Then why tell it? You must see yourself that all that is very uninteresting. There are just two worlds; the one exists without one ever speaking of it; that is called the real world, for one does not need to speak of it to perceive its existence. The other is the world of

art: one must talk of that, for without such talk it would not exist.

“There was once a man who was beloved in his village for the tales he told. Every morning he left the village, and when he returned, at evening, the villagers, who had tired themselves in labor all day long, assembled before him and said, — Tell us, now, what you saw to-day! He told them: I saw a faun in the wood piping a dance to little wood-gods. — What else? Tell us! said the people. — As I came to the sea I saw on the waves three sirens combing their green locks with a golden comb. — And the people loved him because he told them stories.

“One morning he left the village as usual — but as he reached the sea he saw three sirens, three sirens on the

waves, combing with golden combs their green tresses. And as he fared on, he saw in the wood a faun, piping before dancing wood nymphs. . . . When he reached his village that evening and one asked him as of old: Tell us! What have you seen? he answered: I have seen nothing."

Wilde paused a little; let the story work into me; then:

"I do not like your lips; they are the lips of one who has never lied. I shall teach you to lie, that your lips may grow beautiful and curved as those of an antique mask.

"Do you know what is art and what is nature? And the difference between them? For after all a flower is as beautiful as any work of art, so the difference between them is not merely beauty. Do you know the difference? The work

of art is always unique. Nature, that creates nothing permanent, forever repeats itself, so that nothing of what she has created may be lost. There are many narcisses, so each can live but one day. And every time that Nature invents a new form, she repeats it. A sea-monster in one sea knows that its image exists in some other sea. When God made a Nero, a Borgia, a Napoleon, he was only replacing their likes; we do not know those others, but what matter? What is important is that one succeeded! For God achieves man, and man achieves the work of art."

That Wilde was convinced of his æsthetic mission was made clear to me more than once.

The Gospel disquieted the pagan Wilde. He did not forgive its miracles. Pagan

miracles, those were works of art; Christianity robbed him of those.

“When Jesus returned to Nazareth,” he said, “Nazareth was so changed that he did not know the place. The Nazareth of his day had been full of misery and tears; this town laughed and sang. And as the Lord descended into the town he saw flower-laden slaves hastening up the white steps of a marble house. He went into the house and saw in a jasper hall reclining upon a marble couch one in whose hair were twined red roses and whose lips were red with wine. And the Lord stepped behind him, touched his shoulder and spoke to him: ‘Why do you spend your life like this?’ The man turned around, knew him, and said: ‘I was a leper once, and you healed me — how else should I live?’”

“And the Lord left the house and returned upon the street. And after a little while he saw one whose face and garments were painted, and whose feet were shod with pearls. And after her followed a youth, softly, slowly, like a hunter, and his coat was of two colors and lust was in his eyes. But the face of the woman was as the lovely face of a goddess. And the Lord touched the youth’s hand, and said: ‘Why look you so upon this woman?’ And the youth turned around, knew him, and said: ‘I was blind, and you restored my sight. Upon what else shall I look?’

“And the Lord approached the woman: ‘The way you go is the way of sin; why do you go that way?’ And the woman knew him, and said: ‘The way I go is a joyful way, and you forgave me my sins.’

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“Then the Lord’s heart filled with sorrow, and he wished to depart from the town. And as he came to the gates, a youth was sitting by the roadside, weeping. The Lord approached him, touched his hair, and said to him: ‘Why do you weep?’

“And the youth looked up, knew him, and said: ‘I was dead, and you waked me from the dead. What else should I do but weep?’”

“Shall I tell you a secret?” Wilde began, another time — it was at Herédia’s; he had taken me aside in the middle of the crowded salon, and was confiding this to me: “Do you know why Christ did not love his mother?” — He spoke quite softly into my ear, as if in shame. Then he made a slight pause, took me by the arm, and, suddenly

breaking into a loud laughter: "Because she was a virgin!"

One morning Wilde bade me read a review in which a somewhat unskilful critic had congratulated him upon the fact that he "gave form and vesture to his ideas by way of daintily invented stories."

"They imagine," Wilde began, "that all ideas come naked into the world. They do not understand that I can think in no other way save in stories. The sculptor does not translate his thought into marble; he thinks in marble."

Wilde believed in a sort of fate in art, and that ideas were stronger than men. "There are," he said, "two sorts of artists: these offer us answers; those offer questions. One must know to which of these sorts one belongs; for he

who asks is never he who answers. There are works of art that stand waiting, that one does not understand for a long time, for the reason that they offer answers to questions that one has not yet put; for often the question comes dreadfully long after the answer."

And he said, also:

"The soul comes old into the body, which must age to give her youth. Plato was the youth of Socrates."

Then I did not see Wilde again for three years.

A stubborn rumor that grew with his success as playwright ascribed extraordinary habits to Wilde, about which some people voiced their irritation smilingly, others not at all; it was added that Wilde made no secret of it, and spoke of it without embarrassment — some said

he spoke with bravado, some with cynicism, some with affectation. I was very much astonished; nothing in the time I had known Wilde had led me to suspect this. But already his old friends were cautiously leaving him. Not yet did one quite disown him. But one no longer spoke of having known him.

An unusual accident brought us together again. It was in January, 1895. A fit of the blues had driven me to travel, seeking solitude rather than change. I hurried through Algiers to Blidah; left Blidah for Biskra. Leaving the hotel, my eyes fall, in weary curiosity, upon the black tablet that bears the names of the hotel-guests. And next to my own I see Wilde's name. I was hungry for solitude, and I took the sponge and wiped my name out.

RECOLLECTIONS OF OSCAR WILDE

Even before I reached the station I was in doubt as to whether I had not acted as a coward, and I had my trunk brought back, and re-wrote my name on the tablet.

In the three years since last I had seen him — I do not count a very hasty encounter in Florence — Wilde had changed visibly. One felt less softness in his look, and there was something coarse in his laughter, something forced in his gaiety. At the same time he seemed more certain of pleasing, and less anxious to succeed; he was bolder, greater, more sure of himself. And curiously enough he spoke no longer in parables; not one single story did I hear from him the whole time.

At first I voiced my wonder at finding him in Algiers. "I am running away

from art," he replied, "I want to worship only the sun. . . . Have you never noticed how the sun despises all thought? He always discourages thought; it flies to the shadows. Thought once dwelt in Egypt; the sun conquered Egypt. Long it lived in Greece; the sun conquered Greece, then Italy, then France. To-day all thought is crowded out, driven into Norway, and Russia, where the sun never comes. The sun is jealous of art."

To worship the sun, that was to worship life. Wilde's lyric worship grew fierce and dreadful. A destiny determined him; he could not and would not escape it. He seemed to apply all his care, all his courage to the task of exaggerating his fate, and making it worse for himself. He went about his pleasure

as one goes about one's duty. "It is my duty," he said, "to amuse myself frightfully."

Nietzsche did not surprise me so much, later, because I had heard Wilde say: — "Not happiness! Anything but happiness! But pleasure, yes; pleasure, joy! One must always want what is most tragic."

As he walked through the streets of Algiers, he was the centre of a most strange crew; he chatted with each of these fellows; they delighted him, and he threw his money at their heads.

"I hope," he said, "that I have thoroughly demoralised this town." I thought of Flaubert's reply, when he had been asked what glory he held most worthy — "*La gloire de demoralisateur.*"

All this filled me with astonishment,

wonder, and dread. I was aware of his shattered condition, of the attacks and enmities aimed at him, and what dark disquiet he concealed under his abandonment of gaiety. One evening he appeared to have made up his mind to say absolutely nothing serious or sincere. His paradoxes irritated me, and I told him his plays, his books, were far from being as good as his talk. Why did he not write as well as he talked? "Yes," said Wilde, "the plays are not great; I think nothing of them; . . . but if you only knew how amusing they are! . . . Incidentally, most of them are the results of bets. So is 'Dorian Grey.' I wrote that in a few days, because one of my friends asserted I would never write a novel." He leaned towards me and added: "Do you wish to know the great

drama of my life? I have given my genius to my life, to my work only my talent."

Wilde spoke of returning to London; the Marquis of Q—— was abusing him, and accusing him of flight. "But," I asked, "if you go to London, do you know what you are risking?"

"That is something one should never know. My friends are funny; they advise caution. Caution! How can I have that? That would mean my immediate return. I must go as far away as possible. And now I can go no further. Something must happen — something different."

The next morning Wilde was on his way to London.

The rest is well known. That "something different" was hard labor in prison.

From prison Wilde came to France. In B——, a remote little village near Dieppe, there settled a Sebastian Melmoth; that was he. Of his French friends I had been the last to see him; I wished to be the first to see him again. I arrived about midday, without having announced myself in advance. Melmoth, whom friendship with T—— brought often to Dieppe, was not expected back that evening. He did not arrive until midnight.

It was still nearly winter, cold and bitter. All day long I mooned about the deserted strand, bored and moody. How could Wilde have chosen this B—— to live in? This boded no good.

Night came, and I went into the hotel, the only one in the place, where Mel-

moth, too, lodged. It was eleven, and I had begun to despair of my waiting, when I heard wheels. M. Melmoth had returned.

He was numb with cold. On the way home he had lost his overcoat. A peacock's feather that his servant had brought him the day before may have given him a foreboding of ill luck; he expresses himself as fortunate to have got off with only the loss of his overcoat. He shakes with the cold, and the whole hotel is astir to make him a hot grog. He scarcely has a greeting for me. He does not wish to show his emotion before the others. And my own excited expectation quiets down as I find in Sebastian Melmoth so completely the Oscar Wilde, — not the hard, strained, forceful Wilde of Algiers, but the soft, pliable

Wilde of before the crisis; I feel myself set back not two years, but four or five; the same arresting look, the same winning smile, the same voice.

He lodged in two rooms, the best in the house, and had furnished them tastefully. Many books on the table, among which he showed me my "Nourritures Terrestres," then but just out. On a high pedestal, in the shadow, a Gothic Madonna.

We sat at table by lamplight, and Wilde sipped his grog. Now, in the better light, I note how the skin of his face has roughened and coarsened, and his hands still more, those hands with their fingers still covered by the same rings, even the lapis lazuli in its pendant setting, to which he was so much attached. His teeth are horribly decayed.

We chat. I speak of our last meeting in Algiers, and if he recalls my then foretelling his catastrophe. "You must have foreseen the danger into which you were plunging?"

"Of course! I knew a catastrophe would come — this one or that one. I expected it. It had to end like that. Think! Going on was impossible. An end had to be. Prison has utterly changed me. And I have counted on that. D—— is terrible; he will not understand my not taking up my old life; he accuses the others of having changed me. . . . But one can never take up the same life. . . . My life is like a work of art; an artist never begins the same thing twice. My life, before I was in prison, was a success. Now it is quite ended."

Wilde lit a cigarette.

“The public is dreadful; it judges only by what one has done last. If I returned to Paris it would see only the condemned man. I shall not appear again until I have written a play.” — And then, abruptly: “Was I not quite right to come here? My friends wanted to order me South, for rest, for at first I was quite unstrung. But I begged them to find me a quiet little village somewhere in Northern France, where I would see nobody, where there is some cold and hardly any sunshine. I have all that, here.

“Everyone is very nice to me here, especially the clergyman. His little church is a great pleasure to me. Think: it is called the Church of Our Lady of Joy — Isn't that delightful? — And now

I am quite sure I shall never be able to leave B——, for this very morning the clergyman has offered me a pew!

“And the customs officers! How bored such people are! I asked them if they had nothing to read, and now I am getting for them all the novels of the elder Dumas. I must stay here, eh?”

“And the children here worship me. On the Queen’s birthday I gave a feast to forty school-children — the whole school was there, with the teacher! For the Queen’s Day! Isn’t that delightful? . . . You know, I am very fond of the Queen. I always have her picture by me.” And he showed me Nicholson’s portrait of the Queen pinned to the wall. I arise to examine it; a small bookcase is underneath it; I look at the books. I wished to induce Wilde to talk more

seriously. I sit down again, and ask him, somewhat timidly, if he has read the "Recollections in a Morgue." He does not reply directly.

"These Russian writers are extraordinary; what makes their books so great is the pity they put into them. Formerly I adored 'Madame Bovary'; but Flaubert would have no pity in his books, and the air in them is close; pity is the open door through which a book can shine eternally. . . . Do you know, it was pity that kept me from suicide. For the first six months I was so dreadfully unhappy that I longed to kill myself — but I saw the others. I saw their unhappiness; it was my pity for them that saved me. Oh, the wonder of pity! And once I did not know pity." He said this quite softly and without any

exaltation. "Do you know how wonderful pity is? I thanked God every night, yes, on my knees I thanked Him, that He had made me acquainted with pity. For I entered prison with a heart of stone, and thought only of my own pleasure; but now my heart is quite broken; pity has entered in; I know now that pity is the greatest and loveliest thing in the world. . . . And that is why I can have nothing against those who condemned me, for without them I would not have experienced all this. D— writes me horrible letters; he writes that he does not understand me, does not understand my not taking arms against the whole world; since all have been abominable to me. . . . No; he does not understand, cannot understand me. In every letter I tell him that our

ways lie apart; his is the way of pleasure — mine is not. His is that of Alcibiades; mine that of St. Francis of Assisi. . . . Do you know St. Francis? Will you do me a very great pleasure? Send me the best life of our Saviour!”

I promised; and he went on:

“Yes — towards the last we had a splendid warden, a charming man! But for the first six months I was utterly, completely unhappy. The warden, then, was a horrible creature, a cruel Jew, without any imagination.” I had to laugh at the absurdity of this rapidly uttered comment, and Wilde laughed too.

“Yes, he did not know what to invent for our torturing. . . . You shall see how void of imagination the man was. You must know that in prison one has but an hour in the sunshine, that is, one

marches around the yard in a circle, one after the other, and is forbidden to say a word. One is watched, and there are dreadful punishments if one is caught talking. The novices, who are in prison for the first time, can be distinguished by their inability to speak without moving their lips. For ten weeks I had been there, and had not spoken a word to a soul. One evening, just as we are making our round, one behind the other, I suddenly hear my name spoken behind me. It was the prisoner behind me, who was saying: 'Oscar Wilde, I pity you, for you are suffering more than me.' I made the greatest efforts not to be observed, and said, without turning around: 'No, my friend; we all suffer alike.' And on that day I did not think of suicide.

“In this way we often talked together. I knew his name and what he was in for. He was called P——, and was a fine fellow! But I had not yet the trick of speaking with motionless lips, and one evening ‘C. 33!’ (— that was I —) ‘C. 33 and C. 48 fall out!’ We left the rank, and the turnkey said: ‘You are to go before the warden!’ And as pity was already in my heart I had fear only for him; I was even happy that I must suffer on his account. — Well, the warden was simply a monster. He called P—— first; he wished to hear us separately — since the punishment for the one who has spoken first is twice as heavy as for the other; usually the former gets a fortnight in the dark cell, the latter only a week; so the warden wanted to know which of us two had been the first. And

of course P—— said he was. And when the warden interrogated me presently, of course I, too, said it had been I. That enraged the man so that his face went scarlet, for he could not understand such a thing. ‘But P—— declares also that he began! I don’t understand. . . .’

“What do you say to that, *mon cher*? He could not understand! He was very much embarrassed. ‘But I have already given him fourteen days. . . .’ and then: ‘Very well! If this is the case, you simply both get fourteen days.’ Splendid, that, eh? The man simply had not an atom of imagination.” Wilde was greatly amused; he laughed, and went on talking gaily:

“Naturally, after the fourteen days, our desire to talk was all the keener. You know how sweet is the sensation of

suffering for others. Gradually — one did not always parade in just the same sequence — gradually I managed to talk with all of them! I knew the name of every single one, his story, and when he would be leaving prison. And to each I said: The first thing you are to do when you come out is to go to the post-office; there will be a letter there for you with money. . . . There were some splendid fellows among them. Will you believe me if I tell you that already some three of my fellow prisoners have visited me here? Is that not wonderful?

“The unimaginative warden was succeeded by a very nice one. Now I could ask to read whatever I wished. I thought of the Greeks, and that they would please me. I asked for Sophocles, but he was not to my taste. Then I

thought of the writers on religion; those, too, failed to hold me. And suddenly I thought of Dante. . . . oh, Dante! I read Dante every day in the Italian, every page of him; but neither the Purgatory nor the Paradise was intended for me. But the Inferno! What else was I to do but adore it? Hell — were we not dwelling in it? Hell, that was the prison.”

The same night he spoke to me of his dramatic scheme of a Pharaoh, and of a spirited story on Judas.

The following morning Wilde took me to a charming little house, not far from the hotel, that he had rented, and was beginning to furnish. Here he meant to write his plays: first, the Pharaoh, then an “Achab and Isabella,” the story of which he told marvellously.

The carriage that is to drive me off is ready. Wilde gets in with me to accompany me a little distance. He speaks of my book, praises it cautiously. The carriage stops. Wilde gets out and says goodbye; then abruptly: "Look here, *mon cher*, you must promise me something. The 'Nourritures Terrestres' is good . . . very good. But, *mon cher*, promise me never to write 'I' again. In art there is no first person."

Back in Paris again, I told D—— my news. He declared:

"All that is quite ridiculous. Wilde is incapable of suffering boredom. I know him very well; he writes to me every day. I dare say he may finish his play first, but then he will come back to me. He never did anything great in solitude, he needs distractions. He wrote

his best while with me. — Look at his last letter. . . .” D—— read it out to me. In it Wilde implored D—— to let him finish his Pharaoh in peace; that then he would return, return to him. The letter closed with this glorious sentence — “And then I shall be King of Life once more!”

Soon afterward Wilde returned to Paris. The play was, and remained, unwritten. When Society wishes to destroy a man, she knows what is needed, and she has methods more subtle than death. . . . Wilde had for two years suffered too much and too passively; his will was broken. For the first few months he was still able to set up illusions for himself; but soon he gave up even those. It was an abdication. Nothing was left of his crushed life but the

sorrowful memory of what he had once been; some wit still was there; occasionally he tested it, as if to try whether he still was capable of thought; but it was a crackling, unnatural, tortured wit. I only saw Wilde twice again.

One evening on the Boulevards, as I was walking with G——, I heard myself called by name. I turn around, it was Wilde! How changed he was! "If I should reappear before I have written my play, the world will see in me only the convict," he had said. He had returned without his play, and when some doors closed against him he sought entry nowhere else; he turned vagabond. Friends often tried to save him; one tried to think what was to be done for him; one took him to Italy. Wilde soon escaped, slipped back. Of those who

had remained longest faithful to him, some had several times told me that Wilde had disappeared. Hence I was, I admit, a trifle embarrassed to see him again like that, in that place. Wilde was sitting on the terrace of a café. He ordered two cocktails for myself and G——. I sat down facing him, so that my back was to those passing. Wilde noticed that and ascribed it to an absurd shame on my part, and not altogether, I regret to say, with injustice.

“Oh,” he said, “sit down here, next to me,” and pointed to a chair by his side, “I am so utterly alone now!”

Wilde was still quite well dressed; but his hat no longer was brilliant, his collar was still of the old cut, but not quite so immaculate, and the sleeves of his coat showed faint fringes.

“When once I met Verlaine,” he began, with a touch of pride, “I did not blush at him. I was rich, joyous, famous, but I felt that it was an honor for me to be seen with Verlaine, even though he was drunk.” Perhaps because he feared to bore G——, he suddenly changed his tone, attempted to be witty, to jest; his talk became mere stumbling. As we arose Wilde insisted upon paying. When I was bidding him farewell he took me aside and said, in a low and confused tone, “Listen: you must pay . . . I am quite without means. . . .”

A few days later I saw him again for the last time. Let me mention but one thing of those we talked of: he bewailed his inability to undertake his art once more. I reminded him of his promise, that he had made to himself, not to re-

turn to Paris without a completed play.

He interrupted me, laid his hand on mine, and looked at me quite sadly:

“One must ask nothing of one who has failed.”

Oscar Wilde died in a miserable little hotel in the Rue des Beaux-Arts. Seven persons followed to his funeral, and not all of these accompanied him to his last resting-place. Flowers and wreaths lay on the coffin. Only one piece bore an inscription; it was from his landlord; and on it one read these words: “*À mon locataire.*”

RECOLLECTIONS
OF
OSCAR WILDE
BY
ERNEST LA JEUNESSE



RECOLLECTIONS

IF, without looking more closely, one happened to notice this slowly moving and very solemn gentleman as he strolled our boulevards in his expansive corpulence, one jumped at once to the conclusion that to himself and in himself he appeared as a mourning processional.

Never was there a more utter victim of the misunderstanding between the mob and the poet. The public longs to be fooled. It has a right to deception, as it has a right to bread, or to its

dreams — and the real dreams of the night-time are so rare and so difficult! It wants to dream, of an evening, in the theatre, so that in the daytime it may have matter for astonishment and for wonder; it wants to be excited, at break of day, before work comes, by the murders and crimes in the newspapers.

When once a thaumaturg — and I choose the word purposely, one that Wilde respected highly — undertakes to fool the public, he has the right to choose his material where he finds it; one does not expect of him moral and social lessons, but inventions, tricks, words, a touch of heaven and a touch of hell, and what not else; he must be Proteus and Prometheus, must be able to transform all things, and himself; he must reveal the secret of this or that life

for the readers of his paper or the patrons of his theatre; he must be confessor, prophet, and magician; he must dissect the world with the exactness of a doctrinarian and recreate it anew the moment after, by the light of his poetic fancy; he must produce formulas and paradoxes, and even barbaric puns with nothing save their antiquity to save them.

For this price — a well paid one — he can find distraction after the manner of the gods or the fallen angels, and seek for himself excitements and deceptions, since he has advanced, and eventually crossed the borders of ordinary human emotions and sensations. Wilde had paid the price. Now, with the coin of his artistic triumphs, he longed, among a thousand nobler and more interesting things, to play the young man.

He played badly.

Now it was the public that was duped in duping him. For the only fortune, good or bad, permitted to the poet is of the sort that an octogenarian biographer delights to present after the poet's death.

Wilde in exile remained always English: I mean to say that he had pity with all victims without hatred for the judges. He approved completely of the sentence and execution of that Louise Masset who was hanged for the killing of her child. He followed closely the course of events in the Transvaal, and was all enthusiasm for Kitchener and Roberts, a touching trait in an exile. Irishman by birth, an Italian in his inclinations, Greek in culture and Parisian in his passion for paradox and *blague*, he never could forget London — London, in whose fogs he had

found all his triumphs; London, into which he had brought all exotic civilisations; London, that in his vanity he had transformed into a monstrous garden of flowers and palaces, of subtlest suggestion and discreetest charm. His impertinences toward the English had been those of a benevolent monarch. When he came late into a salon, without greeting to anyone, accosted the hostess and asked, quite audibly: "Do I know anybody here?" that was nothing but his singular gallantry; he had by no means the intention of slighting this one or that one, but wished merely to avoid the appearance of knowing all the world, inasmuch as the hostess herself probably knew only a small number of her guests. He has been accused of a green carnation and a cigarette; it was for that, perhaps,

that for twenty-four months he was deprived of all tobacco and all flowers. He has been reproached of having spent twice the 150,000 francs his plays brought him in; he was declared bankrupt. His name was erased from the hoardings and from the memories of men; his children were taken away from him; all this because the public wished to amaze him with its cruelty.

Still this was not the end. From the moment that he set foot on our soil we were witnesses to a terrible tragedy: his effort to pick up the thread of his life. This giant, whom lack of sleep, of nourishment, of peace and of books, had been unable to destroy and scarcely to weaken, asked of the sea, of Paris and of Naples, that they harbor the dawn of a new era in his art.

He failed.

At forty, confident in the future, he failed. He could but reach out with impotent arms into the past, lose himself in bitter memories. American managers clamored for a new play of his; all he could do was to give Leonard Smithers "An Ideal Husband," 1899, to print, a play several years old.

His heavy lids drooped upon cherished dreams: his successes; he walked slowly, in short paces, so as not to disturb his memories; he loved the solitude one gave him, since it left him alone with what he had once been. Yet still the evil habit was on him of haunting, with some companion, the obscurest streets, dreaming of similar adventures in London. . . . always London!

He had to have that oblivion which

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alcohol denied him. For even in the bars it was London he sought. There was left for him nothing but the American bars, which were not to his liking. One evening at Chatham's he had been told his presence was unwelcome. There on the terrace he had tried to distract his incurious eyes, but the passers-by gazed at him too curiously; he gave up even that.

All his face was furrowed by tears. His eyes seemed caverns hollowed out by pale tears; his heavy lips seemed compact of sobs and oozing blood; and everywhere was that horrible bloating of the skin that signals human fear and heartache corroding the body. An unwieldy ghost, an enormous caricature, he cowered over a cocktail, always improvising for the curious, for the known,

and for the unknown — for anyone — his tired and tainted paradoxes. But mostly it was for himself he improvised; he must assure himself he still could, still would, still knew.

He knew everything.

Everything. The commentaries on Dante; the sources of Dante Gabriel Rossetti; the events and the battles of history — of all he could talk as a strip-ling talks, smiling sometimes his smile that was of purgatory, and laughing — laughing at nothing, shaking his paunch, his jowls, and the gold in his poor teeth.

Slowly, word for word, he would invent in his feverish, stumbling agony of art, curious, fleeting parables: the story of the man who, having received a worthless coin, voyages forth to meet in combat the ruler whose doubly counterfeit

presentment he has found. . . . But he lacked, for the setting down of these tales, the golden tablet of Seneca.

He wasted himself in words; perhaps he tried to lose himself in them. He sought scholars that he might find in them an excuse for finding himself again, for living anew, for being born again, and to keep him from overmuch thinking about ungrateful plagiarists.

Wilde once told a tale of a king and a beggar, and said at close: "I have been king; now I will be a beggar." Yet he remained to the very last day the perfect, well-groomed Englishman—and did not beg.

That would indeed have been a new life, this life that fate denied him.

Words fail to paint properly the chaos of hope, of words and laughter, the mad

sequence of half-concluded sentences, into which this poet plunged, proving to himself his still inextinguished fancy, his battling against surrender, his smiling at fate; or to suggest the grim dark into which he always must turn, daily fearing death, in the narrow chamber of a sordid inn.

He had been in the country, in Italy, and he longed for Spain, for the Mediterranean; there was nothing for him save Paris — a Paris gradually closing against him, a deaf Paris, bloodless, heartless, a city without eternity and without legend.

Each day brought him sorrows; he had neither followers nor friends; the direst neurasthenia tortured him. Want clutched at him; the pittance of ten francs a day allowed him by his family was no longer increased by any advances

from his publishers; he must needs work, write plays that he had already contracted to undertake, — and he was physically unable to arise from his bed before three in the afternoon!

He did not sour under all this; he simply let himself run down. One day he takes to his bed, and pretends that he has been poisoned by a dish of mussels in a restaurant; he gets up again, but wearily, and with thoughts of death.

He attempts his stories all over again. It is like nothing save the bitter, blinding brilliance of a superhuman firework. All who saw him at the close of his career, still spraying forth the splendor of his wit and his invention, whittling out the golden, jeweled fragments of his genius, with which he was to fashion and embroider the plays and poems he still

meant to do — who saw him proudly lifting his face to the stars the while he coughed his last words, his last laughter, — will never forget the tremendous, tragic spectacle as of one calmly damned yet proudly refusing utterly to bend the neck.

Nature, at last kind to him who had denied her, gathered all her glories together for him in the Exposition. He died of its passing, as he died of everything. He had loved it, had drunk it in large measures, greedily, as one drinks blood on the battlefield. In every palace of it he built again his own palace of fame, riches, and immortality.

For this dying man it was a long and lovely dream. One day he passed out through the *Porte de l'Alma* to look at Rodin's work. He was almost the only

wayfarer thither. That, too, is tragedy; and the master showed him, quite near by, the Porte de l'Enfer.

But enough of details; on to the end.

Thirteen persons, in a bedroom out by the city limits, remove their hats before a coffin marked with a No. 13; a shaky hearse with shabby metal ornaments; two landaus instead of a funeral coach; a wreath of laurel; faded flowers; a church that is not draped for death, that tolls no death-note, and opens only a narrow side-entrance for the procession; a dumb and empty mass without music; an absolution intoned in English, the liturgic Latin turned to a non-conformist jumble; the glittering salute of a captain of the guard on the Place Saint Germain-des-Prés; three reporters counting the participants with cold-blooded precision

— that is the farewell that the world takes from one of its children, from one who had wished to illuminate and spread far the splendor of its dream; — that is the knell of a life of phantasms and of dreams of impossible beauty; — that is the forgiveness and the recompense; — that, on a false dawn, is the first rosy light of immortality.

Wilde, who was a Catholic, received but two sacraments: the first while in a coma, the last in his last sleep. The priest who looked after him was bearded and English; seemed himself a convert. In all justice I would assert here that Wilde was sincerely enough a Catholic not to have need of the last rites; that he devoutly loved all the Romish pomp and ceremony, even to the color-effects of the stained windows and the notes of the

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organ; and that some of all this might rightly have been his due, rather than this stolid farce, this hasty burying, this oppressive absolution, in which the vicar seemed to be washing his hands clean of this taint of unrighteousness.

It was in our hearts, in us, that the true religion was.

I cannot judge, cannot praise, Oscar Wilde here. Properly to seize and set forth his curious genius were a greater task. One will not find that genius in his writings. Witty and sublime it is, there; but, for him, too piecemeal. His work is the shadow of his thoughts, the shadow of his illuminating speech.

One must conceive him as one who knew everything and said everything in the best way. A Brummel, who was a Brummel even in his genial moments.

And one who would have fulfilled that part while tasting of shame and of unhappiness.

None believed in Art more than Wilde.

I will close this oration by an illusion to his simplicity. Wilde, who suffered so much, suffered under his reputation of being affected. One evening Wilde, who was not usually fond of publicly deploring his lost treasures, lamented his paternity. After he had told me of his son Vivian's conversion to the Catholic faith, the boy having quite simply declared to his guardian "I am a Catholic," Wilde said with a smile, "And Vivian, twelve years old, lies down on a couch, and when they wish him to get up, says; 'Leave me — I am thinking!' with a gesture, mind you, of my own — a gesture that people have jeered at and of

which they have always declared it was affected!" That was the beginning of a rehabilitation among the mob.

And now the grandson of this Mathurin, who admired Balzac, from whom this unfortunate borrowed his fatal pseudonym of Sebastian Melmoth, sleeps; he sleeps, this son of a noble and learned father and mother, at whose christening stood a King of Sweden; sleeps, and sleeps badly, in a churchyard that is far enough away to choke the courage and the prayers of whoso might wish to venture there. Hardly will the echo of borrowed fables wake or lull him. Hardly will the occasional utterance of his name in scandal reach him, bringing its burden of insult.

He will, I hope, pardon me these words, uttered only for history, for sin-

ERNEST LA JEUNESSE

cerity and for justice, and to be witnesses for one who was his friend in evil days, who is neither æsthetic nor cynic, and who in all humility sends greeting to him in his silence and his peace.

RECOLLECTIONS
OF
OSCAR WILDE
BY
FRANZ BLEI



RECOLLECTIONS

“**L**IFE is frightfully devoid of form. Its catastrophes occur in the wrong places and to the wrong people. Grotesque horror plays round about its comedies, and its tragedies wind up in farce. It wounds you when you would approach it; it lasts too long or too briefly.”

If one seek an example to these sentiments, one would find none better than the life of him who uttered them. For every word of Oscar Wilde's came true in his own case, up to that one which

declared that Art, and Art alone, could safeguard us against the soiling dangers of life. His passion for discovering the ways that fare between Truth and Beauty led him into discredited paths that spelt anathema to the conventional; he believed he could tread those ways safely, since he carried before him the illumining torch of Beauty. But Life always wounds those who approach it from dreams. And Wilde, like his own *Dorian*, had moments in which he saw evil only as a means towards realising his conception of the beautiful, and so one saw him consorting with evil. He recognised sin as the only thing that in our time has kept color and life, and that we cannot hark back to holiness and can learn far more from the sinner. As *Dorian* was, so was he a type that our

times desires strongly and yet fears, that we picture to ourselves in secret fancies and worshippings and yet crucify when it comes to life. For not yet is there one law over both thought and deed, and we must be grateful to this divorce for our scheme of life, without which our world would be the richer only for one animal without sin.

Wilde's literary residue would be important enough to secure his name to posterity. But his life encountered a fate that took precedence, with its grotesque tragedy, over his work, and overshadowed it scurrilously with a blackness that, in England, was as a night of pestilence. One may almost admire the stupid power for cruelty in such a people that — peer and butcher-boy acting as one man — dealt out to its one-time

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darling a two years' torture, and, not satisfied with that, wished to stamp out even the memory of him as of one infamous. One must needs explain this cruelty as a mob outbreak of Sadism, not to be found altogether extraordinary there, where flagellation marks the highest plane of erotic culture.

English society is always ruled by a dandy, and not only since the days of Brummel and Selwyn. The greater the dandy, the more absolute his rule. Wilde was the acknowledged master and tyrant; he lashed that society and spared not, and it cringed before him, since he was dandy by the grace of God. Magic words he had, that paradoxically subjugated the truths of to-morrow. Yet somewhere a lover hides always in his scabbard of senseless love a dagger of

hate that some day is bared and kills the beloved. Wilde was both a dandy and a genius; democracy can suffer neither in the long run.

“Dandyism is simply a manner of being, and is not to be made in any way tangibly visible.” One notes from this sentence that Barbey d’Aurevilly does not insist upon the importance of the dandy’s more specific arts — of body and vesture — as compared to the beautifully shaded art that may be achieved by mere living. This is wrong. One may live one’s life in the most delicate shadings, may dress and act as a dandy, and yet remain, like Whistler, merely a painter. It is the visible, material elements that compose the importance of the whole. The dandy is, before all else, a decorative artist, whose material is his

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own body. That seems but a slight matter. But, if all the world went naked, one would have a higher and better valuation of the one exception that went clothed. The dandy is an artist. He is egoistic as an artist, delights, like him, to deal with the world, and feels, like the artist, most in his element when conspicuously alone. Only one distinction I would draw between them, and that is upon a point of art: that of the dandy is unselfish, since he offers it to all who wish to see. One error should be scouted: clerks and dignitaries who happen to dress exaggeratedly are by no means dandies. Not all who versify are poets. The clerks and the dignitaries may compose their toilettes as finely as they will; they are still primarily clerks and dignitaries.

Dandyism, too, like every other art, has its dilettanti. But here is the case: the whole being of the dandy must be full of his art; all that he does, says, and thinks, must emanate from his dandyism. And, unlike other artists, he may never be less than his work; on this or that point his personality must always loom as the greater — greater than all the sum of all his powers that only come singly to utterance. A dandy will say that a really well arranged bouquet for the buttonhole is the only thing that joins art and nature, for he has seen it as life's first duty to be as artistic as possible, and knows that the second duty has not yet been discovered.

No dandy has more conscientiously fulfilled this duty than Wilde; later days proved that in this fulfilment he had

spent his genius. He wrote occasionally, when he had no audience; for as a dandy he was of the type that spends its life declaiming. No poet ever set art above nature more nobly than Wilde, for his ambition was not to be a poet, but more than that: a dandy. He dreamed of an abstract beauty that might never run into the danger of losing itself in life, since it never arose out of life, — of a beauty that would prove nothing, that would not even have any intrinsic purpose. For even this conscious purpose in beauty seemed to him only, at best, a moral pose in disguise.

It is not in his writings that one will find this strange man's genius; only a shadow of it is there. One who, like Wilde, does not centre his artistic temperament upon a single expression, upon

the art and craft of a single book or a single poem, but utters it rather in his whole living and being, will achieve in his books and poems only the fragmentary that even to himself must seem slight, and that must always be subject for his own irony. "All bad writing is the result of sincere feeling" — Wilde asserted that when he was at the height of his fame, when he ranked the poet and poetry far beneath dandyism, and gladly deserted poetry in favor of success as dandy. Only when he was neglected and despised and ill and miserable, sincere feeling bred in him his one great poem: *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. He could assert his paradox only as a dandy; as poet he went counter to it. Then he had fashioned art into his life; now life fashioned him to his art.

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