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Wild About Wilde

Newsletter

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Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde

WILD ABOUT WILDE

ISSN: 1 068-9737
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Dear Wild Wildeans,

The Oscar Wilde industry continues to churn out all sorts of interest in the great master and yet it remains remarkable how little of Wilde's writing is actually read or fully appreciated. Without a thorough reading of Wilde his contribution to art cannot be comprehended and yet time and time again many who profess to "love" Wilde for his flamboyance or his wit have, regrettably, hardly read a line of his or seen an authentic performance of his plays and do not grasp what his work and his aestheticism was all about. His aestheticism and his commitment to his muse, the Greek ideal, was so serious to him that he turned his entire life into a work of art and was not content to merely produce great works of beauty which he most certainly did. He told André Gide as much when Gide chided him for his lack of commitment to his work. Too often is Wilde taken over by special interest groups and his contribution to great literature often gets lost in the shuffle.

This brings me to Steven Berkoff and his production of *Salomé* which thrilled and delighted me when I first saw it back in 1988. I recently talked with Mr. Berkoff on the phone from London and the results are published in this issue on page seven. If only more directors, producers and theatre managers were as concerned to preserve the true quality of aestheticism and remain loyal to Wilde rather than trying to deliver a new message to the world, we would not have the deficiency in appreciation and the ignorance of Wilde's genius that is sometimes so obvious.

This is the centenary year of Wilde's imprisonment and much interest has been

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expressed in "doing something" to commemorate this event. Wilde himself would most likely say, as he did in a letter to Ernest Dowson after his prison term, that he wished that "the world would let me alone" and that his work is his legacy. By honouring his contribution to art we are truly honouring him. What other way could we possibly have to commemorate a great dramatist, poet, novelist and essayist than by reading his words, watching great performances of his plays and remembering always his life's work and what a contribution he made to literature and to beautifying the world.

All the best,

Carmel

Carmel

Plaque on the Wilde home in Merrion Square, Dublin. Now the American College. See P.10

[Photo Carmel McCaffrey]

Two Great Books

Horst Schroeder

One of the landmarks of recent research on Oscar Wilde is no doubt Philip E. Smith and Michael S. Helfand's edition of *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks*[1], as they give us - to quote the subtitle - A Portrait of Mind in the Makinq'.[2] The edition is the outcome of almost twenty years of research and is of a correspondingly high standard, in particular in its annotations. And yet, when this labour of love was at last presented to the public, the editors were well aware that, in spite of their painstaking efforts, they had 'not identified all of Wilde's sources', for which reason they invited their readers to help fill the remaining *lacunae.*[3] This suggestion I took up in two articles.[4]

This time I would like to add a note on the following entry in the Commonplace Book (1874-79):

> The splendour and grace of swift limbs, the grave beauty of girlish foreheads, the physical ecstasy of sensuous life [...]5

The entry derives from the first chapter of John Addington Symonds's *Renaissance in Italy: The Fine Arts (1877):*

> There was nothing finite here [in Christian art] or tangible, no gladness in the beauty of girlish foreheads or the swiftness of a young man's limbs, no Simple idealisation of natural deliqhttulness."

Seen in this context, the entry is another instance of the enormous impact Symonds had on Wilde.

*

Like Smith and Helfand's edition of Wilde's early notebooks, Patricia Clements's *Baudelaire* & *the English Tradition* is an impressive piece of recent research, for which the world of learning must be truly grateful. After two chapters on Swinburne and, respectively, Pater, Clements, in chapter III of her book, discusses in detail Wilde's complex attitude to the great French writer. Two references I found particularly noteworthy. The first one is on Wilde's critical discussion, in 'The Decay of Lying', of Zola and Balzac and on his quotation from Baudelaire's essay on Gautier:

> The difference between such a book as M. Zola's *L'Assommoir* and Balzac's *Illusions Perdues* is the difference between unimaginative realism and imaginative reality. 'All Balzac's characters,' said Baudelaire, 'are gifted with the same ardour of life that animated himself. All his fictions are as deeply coloured as dreams. Each mind is a weapon loaded to the muzzle with will. The very scullions have genius.'[7]

Clements comments as follows:

> The quotation, as Wilde says, is from Baudelaire.[8] But the translation and the critical comment, as Wilde does not say, are from Swinburne's *Study of Shakespeare.* 'Nothing,' Swinburne says of what Baudelaire had written, 'could more aptly and perfectly illustrate the distinction indicated in my text between unimaginative realism and imaginative reality.[9]

It's a brilliant discovery, and it needs to be added only that it gives renewed emphasis to Edmond de Goncourt's diary entry for 21 April 1883 after his meeting with Wilde:

> Le Poète anglais Wilde me disait, ce soir, que le seul Anglais qui avait lu Balzac à l'heure actuelle était Swinburne."

The other reference that struck me are Clements's remarks on Wilde's lecture *Impressions of America (1883):*

> In *Impressions of America,* Wilde 'civilises' the most chilling phrase of Baudelaire's 'Le Voyage' - 'une oasis d'horreur dans un desert d'ennui'[11] - to describe American girls as 'little oases of pretty unreasonableness in a vast desert of practical common-sense.'[12]

Here it is worthwhile adding that there is another instance where Wilde "civilizes" the most chilling phrase of Baudelaire's "Le Voyage"', viz. his letter of [?] 9--10 April 1883 to the French portrait-painter and writer Jacques-Emile Blanche:

> [...] J'aime tant voir votre atelier, avec sa porte bleue de paon, et la petite chambre verte et or, car c'est pour moi une fraiche oasis de beauté dans le désert de Louis seize que je trouve à Paris.[13]

Notes

1 New York, 1989.

2 The editors might have disclosed to their readers that the first part of the subtitle harks back to the collocation *animi figura* in Tacitus' *Agricola (46,* 3). Most probably it was suggested to them by John Addington Symonds's collection of poems of this name (1882), on which the author in his Preface commented as

follows: 'the title [is) borrowed from a famous passage in the *Agricola* of Tacitus [...] the book is meant to be what it calls itself, the Portrait of a Mind.' (vii)

3 Notebooks, 2.

4 'Wilde's Commonplace Book and Symonds's *Studies of the Greek Poets, Notes and Queries* 238 (1993), 53-54; 'Matthew Arnold and Oscar Wilde's Commonplace Book', *Notes and Queries* 239 (1994), 359-360.

5 *Notebooks,* 125 (Commonplace Book, 87).

6 (London, 1877), 13.

7 Oscar Wilde, ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford, 1989), 221 f.

8 'Théophile Gautier,' *Œuvres complètes de Charles Baudelaire,* ed. Claude Pichois (Paris, 1976), ii. 120. .

9 *Baudelaire* & *the English Tradition* (Princeton, 1985), 145. - See also ibid., 403 n.22 and Algernon Charles Swinburne, A *Study of Shakespeare* (London, ²1880), 137 f. n.1.

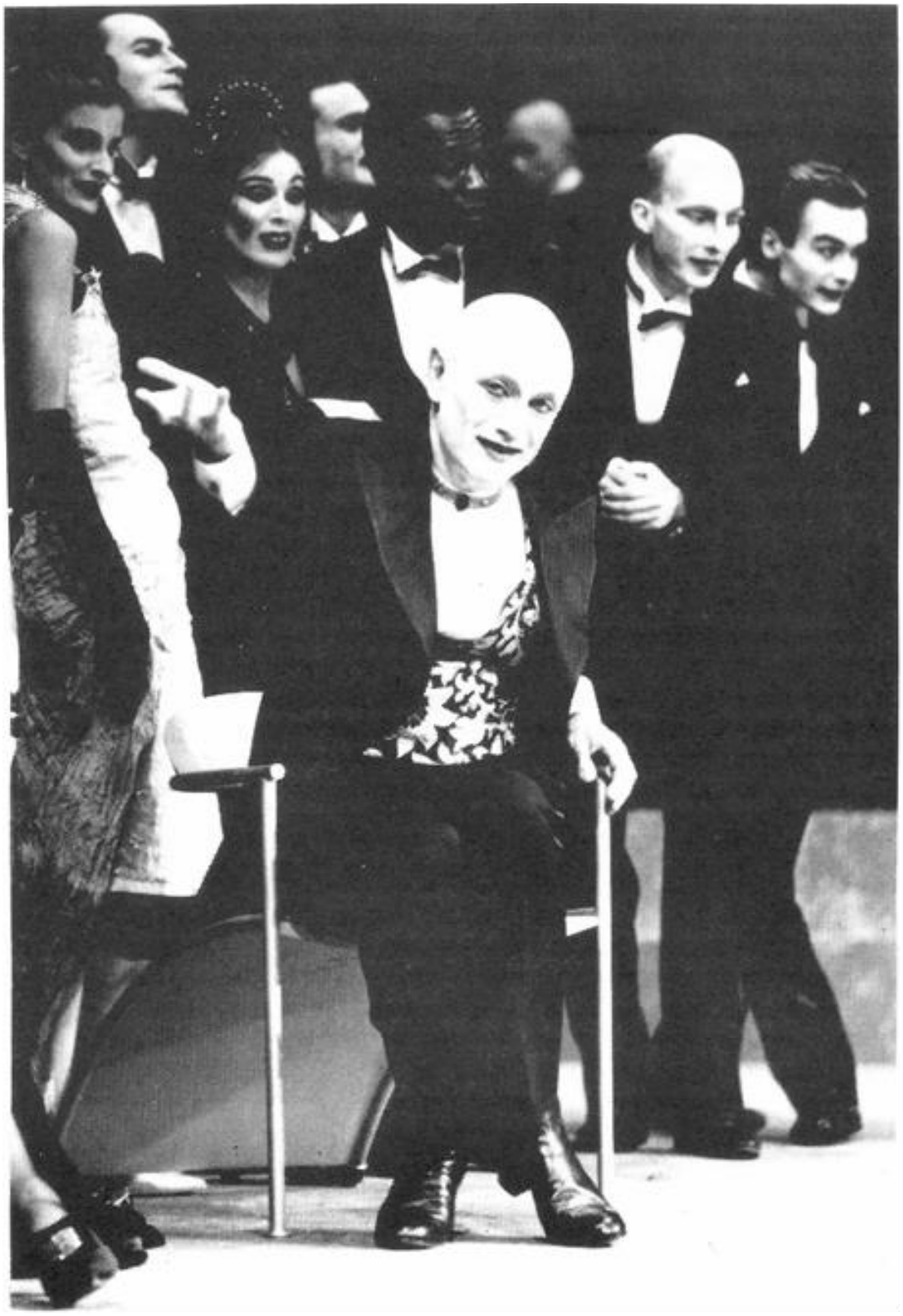
10 The Letters of Oscar Wilde, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London, 1962), 303 n.4. - Translation: 'The English poet Wilde told me this evening that the only Englishman to date who has read Balzac is Swinburne.'

11 Translation: 'an oasis of horror in a desert of boredom'.

12 Baudelaire & *the English Tradition,* 142. - 'The most chilling phrase' is to be found in I. 112 of Baudelaire's poem. - For *Impressions of America,* see the editions by Stuart Mason (Sunderland, 1906, 34), H. Montgomery Hyde *(The Annotated Oscar Wilde* [London, 1982). 382) and, respectively, Merlin Holland *(Oscar Wilde. Letters and Essays* [London, 1993), 509).

13 Letters, 145. - Translation: 'I would so much love to see your studio, with its peacock-blue door, and the small green and golden room, for this is to me a refreshing oasis of beauty in the desert of Louis XVI which I find at Paris.'

Dr. Horst Schroeder is a *senior lecturer for English literature at the Technische Universität Braunsweig, Germany and has published much on the subject of Oscar Wilde.*



Steven Berkoff in the role of Herod in Salomé. He also directs the play.

A Conversation with Steven Berkoff about his production of *Salomé*

Interview by Carmel McCaffrey

Back in 1988 the Gate Theatre in Dublin, Ireland staged a production of Wilde's *Salomé* directed by Steven Berkoff. The word on the streets of Dublin was that it was "strange." Filled with the promise, and the dread, of seeing a "strange" production of one of Wilde's plays I went to the theatre. I was not prepared for what I saw. So many directors take over Wilde's works and give us a version of their own interpretation and some of them are very strange indeed. I have seen Lady Bracknell played à la Margaret Thatcher and Gwendolen as Princess Di. I have painfully watched Dorian Gray played as a Californian brat complete with a 'surfin' U.S.A.' accent and a yacht in the San Francisco Bay. I have suffered through Ken Russell's crude version of *Salomé* where Wilde was stuck into his own play as a campy spectator and a dis-interested father. I am holding my breath because somewhere down the line I know I am going to grieve through a blue-jeaned and tennis-shoed Algernon Moncrieff. Can you doubt it? So many directors and players do not understand Wilde and feel the constant need to 'improve' or 'update' his work without any idea or interest in what the original is about.

During that performance in Dublin, Steven Berkoff brought me to the real Oscar Wilde, the aesthetic enchanter. I sat transfixed in my seat as the *frisson,* the sensation, rolled over me while on stage white-faced figures costumed in stunning evening dress moved in a dream-like motion slowly and sensuously to the melody of Wilde's words. I left the theatre seeing flowers growing from the Dublin streets and heard music flowing from the damp pavements. I wanted to go again and keep experiencing Wilde, the weaver of magic and mystic delights of sheer sensation ho conjured up worlds where "mean things put on beauty like a dress."*

I returned a few days later with a friend who had not been to a theatre for many years and who knew absolutely nothing about Oscar Wilde and the *fin de siede.* I was curious to see her reaction to what Berkoff had done on that Dublin stage. The play was an enormous success but would the audience agree? She said nothing at all during the play and I kept wondering what she thought of this slow-motion, pierrot-like experience. When the play came to an end the audience clapped its warm appreciation and we made our exit from our seats. Suddenly, as we made

*Lord Alfred Douglas "The Dead Poet".

our way out to the aisle, she turned to me and said spontaneously "That was beautiful; it was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." Yes, exactly! Precisely the reaction Wilde had intended and Steven Berkoff had done it.

It was truthfully one of the best productions of a Wilde play that I had ever seen in that it was faithful to Wilde and the aesthetic moment or impression that he had intended to create. Berkoff's production is devoid of any crudity or vulgarity and as such is absolutely true to the spirit of Wilde. I had not known what became of this production until recently I earned that it was to be staged in New York and I was determined to seek out Mr. Berkoff and talk with him.

The Brooklyn Academy of Music is staging Mr. Berkoff's rendering of Oscar Wilde's S*alomé* on the 17th through the 21 st October 1995, and I talked with Steven Berkoff on the telephone from London in early October regarding his presentation of this play. When I asked him what attracted him to *Salomé* he immediately mentioned the "unusual exotic language" and the fact that the play is what he described as being an "anti-bourgeois" play. In this sense he sees *Salomé* as being very different from Wilde's other plays although I think this label can be applied to all of the plays, some in more subtle form than *Salomé* . *"Salomé ,"* Mr. Berkoff said, "is a full-blooded, red blooded, hot blooded, powerful drama. A drama of power and obsession and as such Oscar earns his laurels."

We talked about the aestheticism of the play and the language incorporating the perennial search of the aesthete for a new sensation. I told him how I had experienced his production as giving me an aesthetic sensation of pure, uplifting beauty and Mr. Berkoff then said "Yes, and it is also in a way a religious experience and I wanted people to experience it this way. That to me is what drama and theatre is, a religious experience, in that you have to be motivated by divine inspiration and not just go to the theatre to Simply digest your dinner which is what so much theatre is today." He also added that he did this play "as a gesture to Wilde of my deep, abiding respect and deep affection for the vibrancy of his work and in mourning and respect for his suffering."

He also lamented the fact that few theatre managers and owners are willing to stage a production which is in any way different or unconventional because it offends what he termed "their crude sensibilities." Back in 1895 things were not very much different when this beautiful play was originally banned in England. According to Steven Berkoff "the same conditions prevail" against a performance like this as did a hundred years ago and I must confess that I was surprised and alarmed to hear him say this. What a shame if something so beautiful could offend anyone's "sensibilities".

The cast at the Brooklyn Academy is different from the original cast which performed at the Gate in Dublin and Steven Berkoff plays the role f Herod. His performance has been described as "electrifying." I asked if perhaps it would be at all possible to have this production put onto video and apparently that is a possibility in the future. It would be excellent for classroom use as well as pure entertainment.

After New York they will travel to Glasgow, Scotland and then on to Edinburgh, Scotland in November. Watch out for this production. It travels the world. It really is an aesthetic experience which will take you back to Oscar Wilde and the enchantment of the 1890s.

The Toilette of Salomé by Aubrey Beardsley

OF WILDE IMPORTANCE!

Watch out soon for the publication of *The Oscar Wilde Encyclopedia* compiled by Karl Beckson. It is due for publication by AMS Press in early 1996. European distribution is through Eurospan. It will contain every work of Wilde including all of his reviews. It will also feature biographical entries of the figures of importance in Wilde's life. In addition, there will be a section on literary and cultural concepts such as dandyism, decadence etc.. Sounds like a must for every library and Wilde scholar. More information as soon as it is published.
Karl Beckson has recently published *London in the 1890s:* A *Cultural History* and has been a scholar of Wilde and his era for many years.

THE YELLOW BOOK (reproduction of the complete set) is also available from AMS Press. Paperback, 13 volumes, with all the original illustrations. For information. on price please call AMS press at Tel: 1 212 777 4700 or FAX 1 2129955413.

NEWS FROM MERRION SQUARE, DUBLIN:

This month on the 16th October a statue of Oscar Wilde is being unveiled in Merrion Square gardens, Dublin, opposite the house that Oscar grew up in. The statue, which is a reclining figure on a rock, is being sponsored by the Guinness Brewery which makes that magical black liquid.

Oscar Wilde, who was born in Westland Row, Dublin, moved to number 1 Merrion Square when he was two years old. A plaque has now been put on the house to commemorate Wilde's years there and a stained glass window depicting The Happy Prince has been placed in one of the side windows. The house is now owned by the American College and the people there are taking great care to preserve the memory of its illustrious former inhabitant. A special lunch in honour of Wilde was held on 16th October, the poet's birthday, in the Merrion house.

Eric Bentley and the New York Times

The May 21, 1995, edition of *The New York Times Magazine* featured a two page article, rather luridly illustrated, by Professor Wayne Koestenbaum of Yale University. Its title tells the story: Obscenity, A Celebration. It was not just *The Times* and Professor Koestenbaum who were celebrating but, strangely enough, Wilde himself, jailed for "gross indecency" just 100 years ago that month. Eric Bentley wrote the following response but *The Times* declined to print it. It is here published in full.

To *The New York Times*

Dear Sirs (sic),

The New York Times and Professor Koestenbaum can celebrate obscenity all they want, but Oscar Wilde did not. He disowned it. He distanced himself from it- in which cause, at the trials, he was willing to tell the court some whopping lies - asserting for example that he did not have sex even with boys he was found in bed with and also that the kind of same-sex love he believed in was actually sexless.

Anyhow, much of Professor Koestenbaum's account is provably untrue. An example? "He [Wilde] said next to nothing about homosexuality." Perforce, he has to say a great deal about homosexuality in the trials. In jail (yes, gaol), he continued to do so, not only in the famous *De Profundis* letter (long enough to constitute a whole book) but also in an *infamous* letter to the Home Secretary in which he said worse things about homosexuality than today are said even by Cardinal O'Connor of New York].

Professor Koestenbaum asks if Wilde, alive today, would "come out" and is not sure he could. But this is to forget that, not in court and not in jail but afterwards, in exile, he did come out and wrote that one must work toward the repeal of the law under which he had been jailed: "I have no doubt that we shall win, but the road is long, and red with monstrous martyrdoms. Nothing but the repeal of the Criminal aw Amendment Act would do any good. That is the essential. It is not so much public opinion as public officials that need educating." I could go on ...

Sincerely yours,

Eric Bentley

The writer is author of the book *Monstrous Martyrdoms* which contains his play *Lord Alfred's Lover*.

SOTHEBY'S OF LONDON SALE RESULTS JULY 1995

The following items were offered for auction on 24th July 1995 at Sotheby's of London with the following results:

Lot 133 Wilde (Oscar). Important autograph manuscript of his unpublished poem "Hearts' Yearnings", signed in full at the end "Oscar O'F. Wills Wilde Magdalen College Oxford", written in black ink with a few corrections and revisions and one line recast in pencil, comprising forty lines arranged in eight five-line stanzas beginning,

Surely to me the world is all too drear,
To shape my sorrow to a tuneful strain,
It is enough for wearied ears to hear
The Passion-Music of a fevered brain,
or low complainings of a heart's pain ...

and ending,

...I only hear the sighing of the breeze
that makes complaint in a sweet undertune,
I only see the blossom-laden trees
Splintering the arrows of the golden moon,
That turn black night into the burnished noon.

2 pages, ruled folio, written while at Magdalen College, Oxford, undated but probably composed between October 1874 *and December 1876*

Wilde signed himself in full, as in this manuscript, only until about December 1876, and he went up to Oxford in October 1874 and graduated in November 1877. The date on this manuscript is therefore probably between 1874 and 1876. His first published work, a poem, was "Chorus of Cloud Maidens" which appeared in the *Dublin University Magazine* in November 1875.

Estimated value: £8,000 - £10,000. Unsold at £5,500.

Lot 134 Wilde (Oscar). Autograph inscription signed, written on his American tour, his celebrated self-quotation on aestheticism "The secret of life is in art" signed and dated from Brooklyn, February 1882, *on an octavo album leaf, the reverse bearing another's inscription in Brooklyn dated* 18 *March* 1882, *framed and glazed, 1882.*

In the midst of his lecture tour in America Wilde visited Brooklyn on 3 February 1882, where he spoke at the Academy of Music.

Estimated value: £400 - £500. Sold for £1,300.

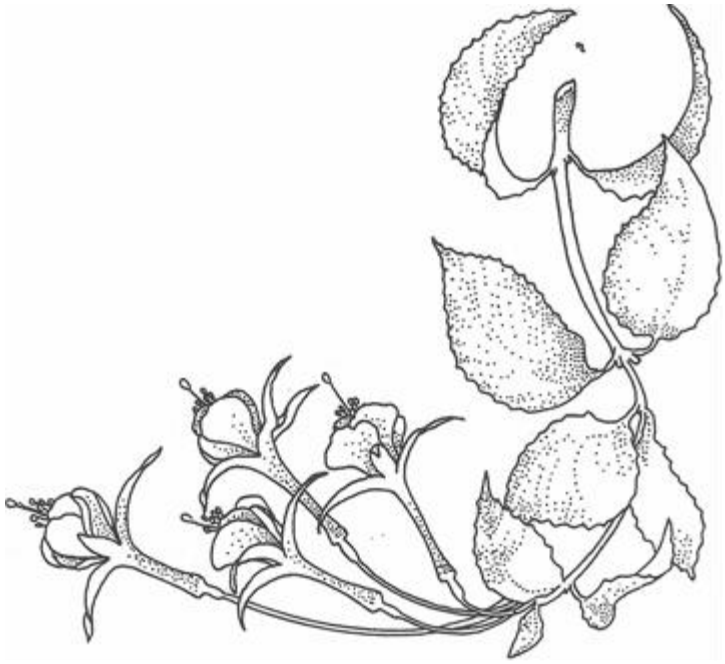
Lot 135 Wilde (Oscar) Autograph letter signed ("Oscar"), to Arthur Clifton at the Albemarle Club, arranging to call for him at 8 o'clock tomorrow at the National Liberal Club (" ... would it be a bother for you to dress? I am promised forth to supper. If it is, don't mind ... ") 2 *pages, 8vo, integral blank, autograph envelope stamped,* 16 *Tite Street, Chelsea, postmarked 13 February 1889*

Arthur Bellamy Clifton (1862 - 1932) was a solicitor who gradually became an art dealer. One of the partners in his art gallery in Ryder Street in 1900 was Robert Ross. Clifton supported Wilde during his later tribulations and visited him in prison.

This letter is apparently unpublished (not in *The Letters* and *More Letters,* ed. Rupert Hart-Davis).

Estimated value: £1,000 - £1,500. Sold for £1,000.

WAW Editor's note:
At the time of printing the exchange rate is £1 *sterling = $1.60 U.S. dollars.*



The Gospel According to Walt Whitman

(extract of a review by Oscar Wilde from the *Pall Mall Gazette,* January 25, 1889.)

"No one will get to my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance ... or as aiming mainly towards art and aestheticism. *Leaves of Grass* has mainly been the outcropping of my own emotional and other personal nature - an attempt, from first to last, to put A *Person,* a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth century in America,) freely, fully and truly on record. I could not find any similar personal record in current literature that satisfied me." In these words Walt Whitman gives us the true attitude we should adopt towards his work, having, indeed, a much saner view of the value and meaning of that work than either his eloquent admirers or noisy detractors can boast of possessing. His last book, *November Boughs,* as he calls it, published in the winter of the old man's life, reveals to us, not indeed a soul's tragedy, for its last note is one of joy and hope, and noble and unshaken faith in all that is fine and worthy of such faith, but certainly the drama of a human soul, and puts on record with a simplicity that has in it both sweetness and strength the record of his spiritual development, and of the aim and motive both of the manner and the matter of his work.

His strange mode of expression is shown in these pages to have been the result of deliberate and self-conscious choice. The "barbaric yawp" which he sent over "the roofs of the world" so many years ago, and which wrung from Mr.

Swinburne's lips such lofty panegyric in song and such loud clamorous censure in prose, appears here in what will be to many an entirely new light. For in his very rejection of art Walt Whitman is an artist. He tried to produce a certain effect by certain means and he succeeded. There is much method in what many have termed his madness, too much method, indeed, some may be tempted to fancy.

In the story of his life, as he tells it to us, we find him at the age of sixteen beginning a definite and philosophical study of literature:

Summers and Falls, I used to go off, sometimes for a *week at* a *stretch, down in the country, or to Long Island's seashores - there, in the presence of outdoor influences, I went over thoroughly the Old and New Testaments, and absorbed (probably to better advantage for me than In any library or indoor room - it makes such difference where you read) Shakespeare, Ossian and the best translated versions I could get of Homer, Eschylus, Sophocles, the old German Nibelungen, the ancient Hindoo poems, and one of two other masterpieces, Dante's among them. As it happened, I read the latter mostly in an old wood. The Iliad ... 1 read first thoroughly on the peninsula of Orient, northeast end of Long Island, in* a *sheltered hollow of rock and sand, with the sea on each side. (I have wondered since why I was not overwhelmed by those mighty masters. Likely because I read them,* as *described, in the full presence of Nature, under the sun, with the far-spreading landscapes and vista, or the sea rolling in.)*

Edgar Allan Poe's amusing bit of dogmatism that, for our occasions and our day, "there can be so such thing as a long poem," fascinated him. "The same thought has been haunting my mind before," he said, "But Poe's argument...work'd the sum out, and proved it to me," and the English translation of the Bible seems to have suggested to him the possibility of a poetic form which, while retaining the spirit of poetry, would still be free from the trammels of rhyme and of a definite metrical system.

Having thus, to a certain degree, settled upon what one might call the "technique" of Whitmanism, he began to brood upon the nature of that spirit which was to give life to the strange form. The central point of the poetry of the future seemed to him to be necessarily "an identical body and soul, a personality," in fact, which personality, he tells us frankly, "after many considerations and ponderings I deliberately settled should be myself" ...

From: ***The Picture of Dorian Grey***

Oscar Wilde

... It was the creation of such worlds as *these that seemed to Dorian Gray to be the true object, or among the true objects, of life; and in his search for sensations that would be at once new and delightful, and possess that element of strangeness that is* so *essential to romance, he would often adopt certain modes of thought that he knew to be really alien to his nature, abandon himself to their subtle influences, and then, having,* as *it were, caught their colour and satisfied his intellectual curiosity, leave them with that curious indifference that is not incompatible with* a *real ardour of temperament, and that indeed, according to certain modern psychologists, is often* a *condition of it.*

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https://carmelmccaffrey.com/

Wild About Wilde Newsletter is listed in the *Modern Language Association [MLA] International Bibliography* and the *MLA Directory of Periodicals* under the acronym WAWN.