Studying Wilde: Academic Scholarship and the “General Reader”

In the late 1980s and 1990s the future of literary studies as a discipline of knowledge within universities was being assiduously debated by academics on both sides of the Atlantic. The issues involved in that debate were complex, but one salient topic concerned the relationship of literary studies to cultural studies, and thus the relationship of literary judgments to political and ideological issues. This in turn brought to light a further set of questions about what came to be known as the role of value within the academic study of literature and whether or not it was the responsibility of academics to identify a hierarchy of values by reference to which some literary works could be judged to be better than others—however the concept of “better” was to be defined. And lastly—and for our present purposes most importantly—there was a discussion of the relationship between the specialist knowledge produced by the academic study of literature and the “uses” which such academic knowledge had for the “general reader”; or, in the jargon of the discipline, the relationship between academic specialization and social utility.

The paradox at the heart of English or literary studies concerns this claim to social relevance. Do academic literary studies address “big” questions in a way that most individuals can understand? Any claim that they do so constantly runs the risk of being undermined by the increasing specialization of research taking place within an academic discipline. The British intellectual historian, Stefan Collini, usefully isolated this dilemma when he characterized the formal study of literature as possessing an inevitable Janus-like quality. The study, he suggested, exists in a “tension between, on the one hand, being simply one specialized activity alongside other specialisms … and … still carrying the burden of being a kind of residual cultural space within which general existential and ethical questions can be addressed.” Recent academic research into Oscar Wilde might stand as a textbook illustration of this tension: Wilde’s literary works continue to live in the public imagination partly because they are so entertain-
ing and partly because they have become a focus for a widespread, lively, and easily accessible debate about gender, ethics, nationality, and politics. Yet at the same time those literary works have attracted an enormous body of specialist scholarship. In an ideal world, we could confidently anticipate a fruitful encounter between specialized academic knowledge and a writer’s popular reputation: one would naturally feed into the other. Yet it is a moot point whether academic enquiry has had any sustained effect on Wilde’s popular reputation, or on the ways in which his works are typically read, or—in the case of performances of his plays—seen.

Our own contribution to the debate about literary value and the status of the discipline was made in the early 1990s. It was to argue quite forcefully for the need for the discipline of literary studies to maintain its status: that is, not to allow itself to be collapsed into a minority concern of politics or sociology or philosophy, areas to which its function as Collini’s “cultural space” for “general existential and ethical questions” so often seemed to propel it. Our suggestion was that the way for literature departments to achieve this end was to concentrate on defining what is unique to literary knowledge. That is, to identify the particular character and value that political or philosophical questions achieve by being posed in or articulated via literary works. Since that time we have, individually and collaboratively, been involved in detailed studies of Wilde’s writing, using exactly the sorts of archival source materials—manuscripts, letters, book contracts, and so on—which are not easily available to the general reader. In so doing, however, we have become increasingly aware of a growing gap between the ways in which we, as academics, are attempting to understand Wilde and his reputation among general readers.

The size of this gap was demonstrated by the publication in 2003 of Neil McKenna’s sensationalizing The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde, a work which, in its use of evidence, in its methodology, and in its basic assumptions about the relationship between authorship and literary expressivity, flew in the face of most academic opinion, but which nevertheless enjoyed a high profile because of its appeal to an enduring public interest in Wilde’s sexual life. A dilemma which a decade earlier we had discussed in abstract terms had now taken on a painfully concrete form. The question which the reception of McKenna’s book forced upon academic critics was, to whom is their specialized knowledge addressed? More pointedly, to whose reading of Wilde will it make any difference? And more pointedly still, what is the relationship between specialized academic knowledge of Wilde and his works and his reputation among the general reading public? The present book is an attempt to confront these uncomfortable questions, and to investigate in a practical way whether and how the demands of the academic community can be made more relevant to the interests of the general reader.
The Popularity of Wilde

As we have hinted, over a century after his death, the writings of Wilde are among the most popular of any British, Irish, or American author; this is certainly the case if we measure popularity in terms of recognition, quotability, and sales. All of Wilde’s main (that is, his completed) works are still in print and continue to sell well; his four society comedies are regularly staged and have been adapted several times for film and television. His aphorisms, correctly or incorrectly attributed, are so frequently quoted that many (such as “to fall in love with oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance” or “I have nothing to declare but my genius”) have become part of a common language. Those enthusiastic amateur reviews of Wilde’s works that Amazon.com frequently posts on its website touchingly, if perhaps naively, testify to his permanent appeal. Moreover, in crude terms, his financial stock, at least if it can be measured in terms of auction prices, has never been higher. For example, a work of negligible literary importance, a first edition of *Oscariana* (a collection of epigrams edited by Wilde’s wife Constance in 1895), was recently valued by Sotheby’s at £2,000–£3,000, while a single autograph sheet of six epigrams was valued between £6,000–£12,000. Even such ephemera as an (admittedly rare) copy of the sixteen-page Tite Street sale catalogue, a document of virtually no literary significance, was priced at £30,000–£40,000; and a faded print of Maurice Gilbert’s photograph of Wilde on his deathbed in Paris in 1900 was offered at £7,000–£10,000.\(^2\)

These prices certainly point to a continued public interest in Wilde, much of which centres on his personal life, even if an obsession with the life does not on its own account for the increasing regard for his literary output. One thing, however, is certain: members of the academic community—critics, editors, biographers, and bibliographers—have often claimed some agency in bringing about the change in Wilde’s reputation, at least in part. Commentators invariably point to the availability of new research tools—for example, to Rupert Hart-Davis’s 1962 edition of the *Letters*, to Richard Ellmann’s 1987 biography, and to scholarly editions of Wilde’s works (such as the New Mermaid editions of the society comedies produced in the early 1980s). It has been argued that, taken collectively, these provided the means to revalue Wilde’s literary and cultural significance, and thus to rehabilitate him with the general reading public. However, as we hinted earlier, it is questionable whether academic interest in Wilde has been setting a fashion, or merely and perhaps slavishly following it. The relationship between the Wilde of popular myth—the homosexual martyr who wasted his life through a reckless love affair—and the politicized subject of so many academic studies might suggest, to the cynical mind, that the contribution of scholarship to Wilde’s modern reputation is neither as original nor as influential as its advocates have claimed. By the same token, critical works which have diverged from these general academic trends by, say, documenting both a less
glamorous career and the derivative qualities of the literary works have gone relatively unread, their influence often restricted to graduate essays and academic conferences; and even there the unpopularity of the image of Wilde they tend to exhibit has led them to be overlooked.

Of course, and as we noted above, there is nothing novel about pointing to the gap between academic research and the sorts of material of interest to the general reading public: over the past decade or so the increasing irrelevance of academic criticism to what nineteenth-century commentators used to call the “home reader,” or to what Virginia Woolf rather later called the “common reader,” has been frequently observed. The pressures of specialization have led to much modern academic literary writing becoming so complex and arcane, or so freighted with esoteric information, that it can only be understood by a few. Moreover, as the sales of academic publications continue to decline, so a number of well-known critics seek more popular outlets for their work, preferring newspapers and magazines, radio and television, to the traditional academic medium of the refereed journal or the monograph. Such distinguished scholars and critics of nineteenth-century literary history as David Lodge and John Sutherland prefer to write for “serious” British national newspapers like the Independent, the Guardian, and the London Review of Books than for academic journals. Ironically enough, the beginnings of this fundamental division between the professional critic and the general reader had been observed even when Wilde was alive, and when academic literary criticism had barely been established. As the novelist and man of letters Grant Allen observed as early as 1882: “there are … critics—ay, and good ones, too. But they cannot stem the tide of public taste: they find themselves slowly stranded and isolated on their own little critical islets. Their authority is only recognised within a small sphere of picked intellects, and does not affect the general current of the popular mind.” The uncomfortable truth of that observation is neatly substantiated by a confident observation made in 1900 by one of those “picked intellects,” that “nothing that [Wilde] ever wrote had strength to endure”—a literary judgment which must count as one of the least accurate ever made.

We ought to note that recent academic responses to Wilde’s literary reputation have taken place in the context of a number of larger processes at work in academic culture in the twentieth century. The first was the propagandizing of the often difficult works of Anglo-American literary modernists, of grandees such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce. This occurred principally (and certainly initially) in higher education institutions and publishing houses within the United States. It was part of an attempt to mark out a role for professional criticism, particularly as a special kind of reading practice which, in the words of F. O. Matthiessen in a 1949 lecture entitled “The Responsibilities of the Critic,” “aimed to give the closest possible attention to the text at hand, to both the
structure and texture of the language.” In other words, there was a mutually reinforcing relationship between the celebration of technically or formally difficult texts and the promotion of a critical practice that required specialist reading techniques; the effect of that special relationship banished the “common reader.” In such a climate a writer like Wilde seemed just too easy or too straightforward to require professional explication: his language did not apparently possess the levels of complexity and ambiguity that would repay “close reading.” Nor did the repetitions, plagiarisms, and “loose” structure of many of his works answer to the definition of the literary text as “iconic” or “an example of … complexity and individuality.” As importantly, the extremely close identification of Wilde’s life with his work—then, as now, it was virtually impossible to “see” the text without first seeing the man standing in front of it—violated a basic modernist presumption of the autonomy of the text, of what T. S. Eliot had termed that quality of “depersonalisation” by which “art may be said to approach the condition of science,” a concern which was translated by New Critics into a focus on the text as a purely linguistic object.

A second process, which was in part a reaction against the perceived exclusivity of the first, was most strongly felt in the United Kingdom, particularly (and ironically, as far as the present writers are concerned) in the universities of the English midlands. It centred on the new discipline of cultural studies which had developed out of strong traditions of working-class English Marxist and socialist thinking, reinforced by the socially engaged criticism of writers such as George Orwell. This was combined with the personal experiences of cultural studies’ founding fathers, in particular Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart. Predicted on a reassessment and a legitimization of the various forms of popular culture, cultural studies as a discipline emerged as a dynamic alternative to traditionally defined literary studies, whether that practised by the New Critics or that to be seen in F. R. Leavis’s famous definition of literary value as a celebration of “life.” Its initial impact on nineteenth-century scholarship was to shift critical attention away from works that were marked off by their textual difficulty to more popular and entertaining writers and to popular art forms, such as (in the nineteenth century) the music hall, the sensation novel, and detective fiction. Moreover, judgments about the literary or aesthetic value of such works tended to be set aside in favour of an emphasis on what might be termed sociological questions, such as a work’s role in representing the values of hitherto marginalized or excluded communities (for example, the urban working classes or middle-class women). Ironically, although Wilde’s works were certainly held to be entertaining, and although many used popular literary forms, the concern that most had in representing the upper strata of British society, and Wilde’s frequently expressed disdain for “public opinion” and “lower-class” life, did not easily fit these political priorities. Put simply, the new discipline of cultural
studies had virtually nothing to say about Wilde, and Wilde the writer continued to be a relatively marginal figure among academics.

As cultural criticism developed some more sophisticated methods of analysis (in large part through the influence of French critical theory and its renewed focus on textuality), academic reassessments of popular culture took a slightly different direction. Noting that contemporary reviewers had often disparaged popular cultural forms for a lack of sophistication, modern critics began to hypothesize “subtextual” or “against-the-grain” readings which apparently revealed layers of complexity that were analogous in value to the erudition or formal experimentation and complexity of “higher” literary culture, or the elitist works associated with early modernism. Here finally, then, was a critical practice which seemed entirely adequate to the challenge of revaluing Wilde as a writer. As a consequence, any number of “new” issues were found in his oeuvre, and works once dismissed as trivial or dilettante were revalued as subversive, as attacks on bourgeois culture or as anticipations of postmodernist views about linguistic instability. So, to use an obvious and possibly tired example, critics “rediscovered” the value of The Importance of Being Earnest not because it was (and remains) one of the Wittiest plays in the language, but because careful analysis could reveal a complexly coded critique of late-Victorian sexual mores: or, as Christopher Craft put it, “in the revolving door of Wildean desire, the counters of comedic representation are disclosed as formal ciphers, the arbitrarily empowered terms whose distribution schedules and enforces heterosexual diegesis.”

Of course nothing could be further from how most Amazon.com correspondents experience Wilde’s work, and it is hard to think of very many readers (modern or late-nineteenth-century) who would be fully attuned to the allegedly “seven” gay meanings that Craft gives to the name Bunbury. It is thus somewhat ironic that the price of universities’ belated embrace of Wilde’s literary talents was to estrange the figure whom they wished to celebrate almost completely from the common reader.

As we have already observed, this tension over what might loosely be termed “scholarly” and “general” opinions of Wilde has never been properly resolved. In fact it has become only more stark with the continuing brilliance of Wilde’s reputation outside universities, testimony to which can be found in the proliferation of nonacademic critical writing on him. It can be quite plausibly argued that works by figures such as Peter Ackroyd, Neil McKenna, Neil Bartlett, Colm Tóibín, or by Wilde’s grandson, Merlin Holland, have exercised more influence over the general reader than anything written in an academic monograph. Matters are not helped by the fact that the terms in which academics typically debate Wilde’s literary reputation are hardly designed to attract the nonspecialist. They tend to centre on a dull pedantry over whether Wilde did or did not plagiarize the work of some long-forgotten late-nineteenth-century dramatist, or on the
obfuscations of overdetermined theories of sexuality and textuality. Persuading the general reader, as well as the average student reader, that scholarship has something positive to contribute to their experience of a group of works which, on the surface, are not very obviously “difficult” or complex—compared to, say, those of contemporaries such as Walter Pater, Henry James, or Joseph Conrad—is an important task. It forms the central ambition of this book.

Our second and related ambition is to establish a clearer distinction between the enduring “personality” of Wilde through which, as we mentioned above, most readers encounter his works, and the literary merits of those works themselves. The theoretical insistence by New Criticism, and then by structuralism and deconstruction, on viewing texts simply as linguistic artifacts has almost no relevance to how the average reader experiences a work—certainly a work by Wilde which invariably comes to them already labelled and contextualized by a particular knowledge of his life. Who today can read The Picture of Dorian Gray without calling to mind the iconic photographs of Wilde and his own “dear boy,” Lord Alfred Douglas, an identification which Wilde himself rather confusingly pointed to in De Profundis (even though he had almost certainly not begun his relationship with Douglas when he wrote that novel)? Often it is the notoriety of Wilde’s life that attracts readers to the works in the first place. A first step, then, in bringing academic and popular opinion together has to be an acknowledgment of the existence and irresistibility of this biography which (oddly enough) turns out to hang ominously even over the critic concerned only with purely textual matters.

When he shaped his own career, as he tried assiduously to do throughout his life, Wilde actively promoted an identification of himself—or, more accurately, of an image he projected of himself—with his work. At first these images included the languid aesthete and then the dandy, both of whom could neglect or affront the niceties of British social mores. They were followed within months with an image of the sophisticated man of letters, of what in De Profundis once again Wilde called the “supreme arbiter of taste,” and then that of the urbane socialite and man of the theatre, the toast, for two or three years at least, of London’s fashionable West End. Although this self-promotion was initially a highly successful strategy, one which earned Wilde considerable publicity, its limitations were dramatically exposed during his trials in 1895 and his subsequent conviction for gross indecency. Wilde’s literary works continued to be interpreted biographically, but via an image over which he had now completely lost control. Post-prison works, such as The Ballad of Reading Gaol and De Profundis, can be seen as his (or both his and Robert Ross’s) attempts to recover some agency in that process of fashioning, to re-present his criminal personality as that of a tragic victim, whether of a vindictive British establishment or of an all-consuming passion for his apparently undeserving lover, Alfred Doug-
las. And it is the enduring quality of these latter images that has probably been the single most important factor in shaping Wilde’s reputation through the late decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. With the exception of Neil McKenna’s recent work, which we have already mentioned and to which we shall return in later chapters, modern biographies have done relatively little to challenge these images: indeed popular films like Brian Gilbert’s *Wilde* only reinforced them.

It would be foolhardy for the writers of any study to claim to be able to present the “real” man behind the myth of Wilde; but such a concession does not prevent one from drawing attention to the kind of biographical information that disturbs or problematizes that myth, and then showing how it can generate rather different readings of his literary output. To put this simply: the present book does not attempt to offer a new biography of Wilde; nor—as some critics might phrase it—does it aim to “re-try” him, or to deconstruct Wilde the cultural icon. Our initial focus is narrower and more modest: we are interested in exposing the extent to which myths about Wilde, particularly about his life, have shaped literary judgments, and then in establishing some grounds upon which biographically informed criticism might proceed. And those grounds, in turn, involve getting certain “facts” right and being rigorous about criteria of “relevance”—that is, about determining which sorts of facts about the life can be used to explain which sorts of literary qualities, and also how those facts can be used in the service of literary and aesthetic judgments. Contrary to expectations, we shall argue that those works that seem at face value most amenable to biographical readings, because they seem closest to the details of Wilde’s life, often turn out to be most resistant to them, in the sense that the personal allusions which can be detected in them do not generate coherent or consistent interpretations of the works as a whole. Seeing Wilde’s *oeuvre* as partly autobiographical, as a working out of some private preoccupation with his sexual identity, does not, we will suggest, do him any great service as a writer—nor, oddly, does it bring us much closer to understanding his complex personality.

**Studying Oscar Wilde**

In the next chapter we show how biographically motivated readings of Wilde’s works have produced a body of assumptions about his literary talents which are so widespread that they have now virtually fossilized into “facts” about him. We then investigate the status of some of these “facts” by examining critically the accounts of Wilde’s life that underpin them. Again our aim here will not be to provide an alternative biography of Wilde; instead we will be concerned with establishing the limits of biographical interpretation *per se*, by drawing attention to the insecurity of much of our knowledge of Wilde’s life (particularly his sexual life) and to the general methodological difficulties involved in using the work as evidence for the “real” man. In subsequent chapters, we look
more closely at how particular Wildean myths have evolved and the impact which they have had on our understanding of specific works. In chapter three we concentrate on that text which seems the most authentically autobiographical, which has consequently had the greatest impact on how Wilde’s life and career have been conceived, and which also represents the most insistent blurring of the boundary between biography and criticism—namely, *De Profundis*. That document is surrounded by intriguing stories and legends and is known more by repute than in detail. Our exploration of its role in authorizing the most potent of modern biographical myths, that of the “tragic” Wilde, will thus centre on bringing to the reader’s attention what might seem to be some rather complex and esoteric information about the way in which it was composed. We shall then try to show how those dry-as-dust scholarly facts can change our sense of the document’s identity, and we shall explain the implications of that transformation for the ways we interpret and value it, and thus for its “use” in understanding Wilde’s life. The chapter will close by setting out new grounds for a literary (as opposed to a biographical) appreciation of *De Profundis*, one which pays full attention to its artifactual nature, and which attempts to come to terms with qualities that have often been overlooked, such as its repetitions, inconsistencies in its argument, its uneven tone, and its loose, rambling structure.

Chapter four contests different elements of myths about Wilde: the idea of him as a “genius,” an effortlessly engaging and erudite thinker, whose philosophizing places him (according to some modern critics) in a (basically German) tradition stretching from Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller to Friedrich Nietzsche, and then to Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. Unlike the popular “tragic Wilde,” Wilde “the intellectual,” as we might call him, is very much a creation of modern academics, one which derives mainly (though not exclusively) from that area of his life and that part of his *oeuvre* which are least well known to the general reader—that is, his undergraduate education in classics at Trinity College, Dublin and at Magdalen College, Oxford and his subsequent use of that education in his critical writing, particularly in the essays published in *Intentions*. Wilde’s contemporaries, though acknowledging a certain showy cleverness in that volume, nevertheless tended to dismiss it as superficial or derivative. Such a judgment is clearly at odds with the originality and complexity that some modern scholars allege they find there. How do we explain this discrepancy? Is it inevitable that academic revaluations of Wilde’s criticism, which typically draw attention to the depth and sophistication of his learning, will make it inaccessible to most general readers?

Chapter three tries to show the consequences of a lack of scholarship—that is, how errors or lacunae in readers’ understanding of the composition of *De Profundis* can lead them to misidentify it. Chapter four, by contrast, draws attention to problems associated with what might be termed an excess of scholarly inves-
tigation. It examines the way in which an overzealous interpretation of Wilde’s sources—an attempt to synthesize his diverse references into a coherent “philosophy”—can make him into an overly “difficult” writer. Our own analysis, by contrast, aims to restore to the general reader some feeling for the light-hearted wittiness of Wilde’s critical prose by showing that his knowledge is not nearly as deep as has often been assumed, and that the ways in which it is displayed—in particular his use of citation, quotation, and allusion—are designed to prevent us from taking any of it too seriously. In short we shall try to demonstrate how scholarship, when appropriately deployed, can reveal Wilde’s qualities as an entertainer, and can explain, too, why it was that his contemporaries were so much less impressed by his erudition than modern commentators tend to be.

Chapter five concentrates on what are Wilde’s most popular and enduring works—the society comedies. These are also the works that seem to require the least elucidation by the academic community. Yet they have probably generated more scholarship than the rest of the oeuvre put together: in a sense, one might detect here a struggle for ownership, as academics vie with each other (and with the general reader) to find ever more esoteric layers of meaning in what are very accessible works. In this chapter, then, we begin by differentiating three distinct sorts of reference (or specialist knowledge) to which scholars have drawn attention in their attempts to explain the plays: the literary (that is, the specific literary traditions, such as the French “well-made play,” upon which Wilde’s dramas draw); the biographical (those “subtextual” allusions to Wilde’s own sexual life); and the social or topical (that is, the plays’ dependence on the intricate values and mores of late-Victorian etiquette). We then give some concrete examples of how such knowledge can be deployed to interpret the plays, and we pay particular attention to the ways in which these different layers of reference interact with each other. We will argue that what may seem to be the most relevant sort of knowledge to the general reader—the biographical—turns out to be the least useful, insofar as the occasional allusions to Wilde’s personal life cannot be used for a coherent or consistent reading of any play as a whole. Moreover, and somewhat surprisingly, pursuing the plays’ “gay” subtexts can actually make them seem more (rather than less) conventional to the extent that they can be seen as exhibiting elements of Victorian homophobia.

The same chapter—chapter five—also pays attention to a group of works often overlooked in studies of Wilde’s career as a dramatist—his unfinished plays and scenarios, particularly La Sainte Courtisane, The Cardinal of Avignon, and A Florentine Tragedy (all of which are printed in the appendix). Like Salome, these three works have historical or biblical settings, and contain no topical references. They thus seem very far removed from the details of Wilde’s own life. Yet we argue that it is these works, rather than the society comedies, which most reward biographically inflected readings, for it is in them that we see Wilde at his most
“raw” and personal, using the drama to explore emotions that are closest to his own experiences. We suggest that the conflicts dramatized in *La Sainte Courtesane*, *The Cardinal of Avignon*, and *A Florentine Tragedy* make most sense in terms of Wilde playing out the anxieties which were produced by his own relationship with Douglas, a detail which in turn may explain why none was ever finished.

In chapter six we turn to Wilde’s fiction and attempt to explain the reasons behind the popularity of *Dorian Gray*, particularly the conundrum of how the selfsame work could be viewed both as a straightforward morality tale and—as Edward Carson bluntly put it in the first (Queensberry’s libel) trial—a “book putting forth sodomitical views.” Today, with the hindsight of the trials, we are so habituated to reading Wilde’s novel biographically that we can easily overlook its complexity and subtlety—that is, the nature of those stylistic clues that take us back to the biography in the first instance. We argue that *Dorian Gray* derives its suggestive power not from its expressive transparency, as writers such as Neil McKenna have tended to assume, but rather the opposite, from a highly contrived literary style which works by ellipsis and allusion, and which demands of its readers a fairly sophisticated literary education in order that they recognize and follow the chains of association which those allusions gesture towards. We shall then try to explain the mechanisms of this style by examining *Dorian Gray*, not as most critics and readers do, in relation to Wilde’s other triumphs in the 1890s, such as the society comedies, but rather in relation to an earlier and often overlooked group of works, those short stories (mainly fairy tales) which he wrote in the late 1880s. We show how, in what may seem rather simple and straightforward tales such as “The Happy Prince” and “The Young King,” Wilde developed the techniques which he would later use with such success in his novel.

Notes


2. These figures are the guide prices taken from the catalogue of Sotheby’s auction of Wilde material that took place in London on 29 October 2004; see 88, 89, 92–93, 108.


**Works Cited & Consulted**


