II

Lives of Wilde: Facts and Fictions

The efforts of Wilde’s earliest biographers, writing in the first half of the twentieth century, have consistently been dismissed by their late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century counterparts. The reason for this state of affairs is simple: many of the players who had roles in Wilde’s life were still alive for several decades after his death, and consequently any story of Wilde’s life had to exhibit a sensitivity to their feelings, and more formally (and particularly in the case of anything written about Lord Alfred Douglas) to be alert to the swingeing penalties that British libel laws can exact. Early biographies have thus been treated cautiously, as representing only partial accounts of their subject’s life. Moreover, some of those biographers were only too well aware of the disadvantages of openly associating themselves with a figure who had endured constant public vilification in the early years of the twentieth century, and as a consequence were as much concerned with rewriting their own role in Wilde’s life as with their ostensible subject. This is also true of those biographies written by “friends” of Wilde, such as Robert Harborough Sherard and Frank Harris, who competed with each other for the honour of being remembered as Wilde’s rescuer or champion.

The charge of unreliability can also be easily proved in the several accounts of Wilde written by Alfred Douglas; those narratives were a series of attempts at self-justification and thus self-fashioning, particularly after his marriage in 1904 to Olive Custance when it was important for him to mark out some distance from his former, openly homosexual, self. In an obvious sense this partisanship, whether it exists in the form of an apologia or of condemnation, is a loss, for it undermines the reliability of the testimony of those who were the main witnesses to Wilde’s life. Moreover, such reservations are also applicable, though for slightly different reasons, to the life of Wilde written by his second son, Vyvyan Holland (in 1954, with a sequel published in 1966). As a family member (although he could not have known nor remembered his father particularly
Holland’s work could boast the privilege of inside information. He certainly had access to many documents (both letters and manuscripts) unknown to earlier writers, and for a time it was this quality of his accounts of his father that made them difficult to rebut or supersede, even though they were incomplete and one-sided.

The first significant milestone in Wilde’s biography, then, in the sense of establishing the foundations for a more secure critical appraisal of the life, and one moreover which could be contested by others, can be dated to Rupert Hart-Davis’s 1962 edition of Wilde’s letters. For the first time, scholars with no personal connection with Wilde had the opportunity to examine for themselves the evidence of the day-to-day minutiae of his passions and friendships; more importantly, they also had the means to assess the claims made by earlier biographers, since the Letters included copious correspondence between Wilde and figures such as Sherard, Harris, and Douglas. Given this wealth of information, it may seem surprising that so few new biographies were immediately forthcoming: with the exception of a small crop of studies in the mid-1970s—including H. Montgomery Hyde’s Oscar Wilde (1975), Louis Kronenberger’s Oscar Wilde (1976), and Sheridan Morley’s Oscar Wilde: An Illustrated Biography (1976), a volume which does not even cite the Letters—a full quarter of a century passed before the appearance of Richard Ellmann’s monumental and posthumous Oscar Wilde (1987).

This hiatus can, however, be explained (at least in part) by those critical fashions in literary studies that we mentioned in chapter one, and which had the cumulative effect of excluding Wilde from serious academic attention. More particularly, the dominance in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s of New Criticism and structuralism made the writing of biography a less respectable academic pursuit; certainly, it is significant that none of the biographies of Wilde published in Britain in the 1970s was written by an academic. Furthermore, the principal historicist alternatives to text-based criticism, influenced as they were by Marxist historiography, tended to understand Victorian literary history in terms of the ways in which literary works allegedly reproduced and normalized bourgeois ideologies. Such a view favoured a concentration on the realist novel as a form whose representational properties could be most readily and easily explained in terms of its political functions. As a consequence, Wilde’s interests in poetry, drama, and criticism (as well as in nonrealist fiction) tended to make him irrelevant to such a narrative.

By contrast, the influence of gay and gender studies in the late 1970s and 1980s, and in particular the emphasis in Anglo-American feminism (or gynocriticism) on the interrelationship between expressivity and sexuality, gave a new prominence to biography as a key critical tool, as well as to the biographies of those particular artists and writers whose sex or gender identity had
allegedly marginalized them from mainstream culture. It was against the background of this changed intellectual climate that a new biography of Wilde, by one of the foremost academic biographers of the century, may have seemed to be a worthwhile enterprise.

The length, detail, and narrative fluency of Ellmann’s biography immediately marked it out from all previous lives. Warmly received by most reviewers and by the general reading public, it remains almost two decades after its first publication the standard biography, the account of Wilde to which the majority of readers—scholars, students, and our common reader—will go first. This is not to ignore the fact that there have been many criticisms of Ellmann’s work, both on the grounds of its accuracy and in terms of the fundamental way in which he conceived of Wilde’s life—that is, of what he omitted from his account. There have also been several biographies since Ellmann’s, including those by Gary Schmidgall, Joseph Pearce, Melissa Knox, Barbara Belford, and Neil McKenna. However, although each of these works was motivated by an attempt to challenge particular aspects of Ellmann’s account—usually and significantly his treatment of Wilde’s sexuality—none has succeeded in replacing it, in the sense of offering a more complete or comprehensive account of the whole life. Certainly it is Ellmann’s Wilde that has had, and continues to have, the most significant influence on how readers understand Wilde’s literary works. Ellmann’s *Oscar Wilde*, then, remains the starting point for considering that biographical imperative we mentioned in the previous chapter.

The Evidence for the Life

Most assessments of biographies typically begin with attention to “facts”—to, that is, the evidence upon which a story of the life has been constructed. So—in the case of Wilde—what is the status of those facts and the evidence that they provide for us? Although it is obviously impossible to corroborate such a claim, we can be certain that after Wilde’s conviction in May 1895 the atmosphere of London became acrid with the smoke of destroyed incriminating evidence. Moreover, following Wilde’s bankruptcy even more material disappeared, whether accidentally, legally, or illegally. In Wilde’s correspondence and in that of his literary executor, Robert Ross, as well as in Stuart Mason’s *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde*, we find occasional mentions of Wilde having made gifts of manuscripts to friends, manuscripts that were subsequently sold on at public auction, presumably to private collectors. The periodic reappearance of such materials (a good example of which was the sale in March 2004 of a manuscript of “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” hitherto assumed to have been lost) suggests that many documents may still survive in private collections, and that unknown individuals are continuing, albeit possibly unwittingly, to exercise an unseen control over that image of Wilde we discussed above. In this way, the evidence for Wilde’s life is different from that of many other literary figures. So, for example,
we know that there are few surviving records that give details of Shakespeare’s life; but for Wilde, what we think we know about the nature and extent of the evidence is continually having to be revised.

An equally intractable problem has to do with the treatment of the evidence that is in the public domain. Here we need to acknowledge from the outset that it is almost certainly true that even the most scrupulous biographer cannot come objectively to Wilde’s life. So many of the events in it have elicited a moral response for so long a period of time that to sift through the evidence has always involved a degree of prejudging. Even the most sympathetic of scholars have tended to ignore those details which do not fit their particular preconceptions of his career. Moreover examples of such prejudice can be found in works that one would not, at first glance, expect to exhibit such bias, such as H. Montgomery Hyde’s *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1948). Though Hyde advertised his work as a reliable record of the trial proceedings, Merlin Holland’s more recent transcript in his *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess* (2003) reveals that, in his account of the first trial (the libel case brought by Wilde against Queensberry), Hyde judiciously edited various exchanges, perhaps in order to present Wilde’s performance in the witness box in the best possible light, polishing some of Wilde’s statements to make them seem wittier than they in fact were. Hyde also excluded those statements by other witnesses that pointed to a more sordid side to Wilde’s “loves” that dared not “speak” their name.

In a similar way, Holland’s recent revised and considerably expanded edition of the *Letters* indicates that in his earlier collection Rupert Hart-Davis had also silently excluded certain categories of correspondence, particularly those relating to the minute details of Wilde’s writing career. Hart-Davis’s 1962 Wilde is probably a more glamorous figure than Holland’s and Hart-Davis’s 2000 counterpart. However the biographer or critic, for whom such material is a crucial factual resource, was never in a position to see such editing (or, if we care to use a harsher term, such censorship). It is this invisibility that matters most, for it means that the materials with which the critic or biographer has to work have already been shaped into a preexisting narrative of some sort or other: not only do we not know the full extent of the evidence, we are never entirely clear about the ways in which the material which is in the public domain has been structured or informally edited.

Perhaps more regrettably, this shaping or troping of material is to be found even in the ways in which unpublished archive resources have been organized. A particularly striking example can be seen in the filing practices of the largest collection of Wildeiana, that held in the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, now part of the University of California in Los Angeles. Until a recent project to microfilm the collection (completed in 1999), that material had been ordered for the researcher into two main classes, those labelled “catalogued”
and “uncatalogued.” The fact that for many years this second body of documents was stored together in boxes meant that few scholars bothered to examine it in any detail. Those who did (like Peter Raby) were amazed to find crucial pieces of evidence, such as the original manuscript of Wilde’s letter to George Alexander containing the first known scenario of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, or the financial records of Wilde’s earnings in the West End theatre stored alongside other, far less important information. There are several possible reasons for such oversights, none of which should reflect adversely on the staff of that library. The first might be simply accidental; the second an understandable pressure on resources and time; and the third a failure to recognize the particular significance of a document. (There is, after all, no reason for a librarian to be constantly abreast of research of any or all parts of a library’s holdings.) The unfortunate upshot of all this, though, was that an inevitable prioritizing of evidence took place, and this process once again invisibly shaped conceptualizations of Wilde’s life and career.

Taken together, these caveats amount to an acknowledgment that “facts” about Wilde’s life—the evidence from which biographies are constructed—are almost never neutral: so there are values involved in deciding whether certain factual details come into the public domain in the first instance, and in what forms; there are more values involved in assessing the status of particular facts;

**Wilde Archives**  Given the chaos that accompanied the bankruptcy proceedings brought against Wilde in 1895, in which the contents of his house were offered for sale, it is perhaps surprising that so many materials relating to his life and particularly to his writing career—letters, notebooks, manuscripts, typescripts, proofs, and so forth—have actually survived. Much credit in this respect must go to Robert Ross who was responsible for rescuing and later (in his role as Wilde’s literary executor preparing the first *Collected Edition* of Wilde’s works) for recovering many important documents. Although some of this material remains in private hands, a considerable amount of it can be readily accessed in the collections of public libraries in Great Britain and the United States. The most important of these Wilde archives include (in the U.S.) those located in the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library at the University of California, Los Angeles; the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin; the Berg, Arents Tobacco, and Frohman Collections in the New York Public Library; the Rosenbach Foundation in Philadelphia; the Pierpont Morgan Library; Princeton University Library; and the Beinecke Library at Yale. And in the U.K.: the British Library (including the recent bequest of Lady Eccles and the Lord Chamberlain’s collection of the licensing copies of plays); the Herbert Beerbohm Tree Archive in the Bristol Theatre Collection, University of Bristol; and the Ross Collection at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.
and there are still further values involved in interpreting their significance and relevance to Wilde’s life.

A useful example of the complexities that can ensue when such values are in competition with each other can be seen in the bitter arguments that have surrounded Wilde’s alleged cause of death. Ellmann, in common with some earlier biographers, asserted that “Wilde’s final illness was almost certainly syphilitic in origin” (Ellmann, 545). At the time when Ellmann was writing there was no single conclusive piece of evidence that pointed to this diagnosis; rather, it was an inference which he drew from a variety of pieces of what we might term circumstantial evidence. Recognizing the seriousness of his assertion—then (as now) the link between syphilis and sexual behaviour gives the disease a particular stigma—Ellmann somewhat unusually provided a long justificatory footnote:

My belief that Wilde had syphilis stems from statements made by Reginald Turner and Robert Ross, Wilde’s closest friends present at his death, from the certificate of the doctor in charge at that time … and from the fact that the 1912 edition of [Arthur] Ransome’s book on Wilde and Harris’s 1916 life (both of which Ross oversaw) give syphilis as the cause of his death. Opinion on the subject is however divided, and some authorities do not share my view of Wilde’s medical history. Admittedly the evidence is not decisive—it could scarcely be so, given the aura of disgrace, shame, and secrecy surrounding the disease in Wilde’s time and after—and might not stand up in a court of law. Nevertheless I am convinced that Wilde had syphilis, and the conviction is central to my conception of Wilde’s character and my interpretation of many things in his later life. (Ellmann, 88)

**Syphilis: The Nineteenth-Century Artist’s Disease** In the late nineteenth century, in the days before the discovery of penicillin, there was, of course, no proper cure for this devastating illness. It led in its tertiary stage to mental deterioration, particularly aphasia or what was then termed a “softening of the mind,” and eventually death. Moreover, its “appropriateness” as a judgment on the sexually licentious artist resided, at least in part, in the ways in which it ravaged both body and mind. Infamous and infamously defiant late-nineteenth-century syphilitics included the French writers Charles Baudelaire (who once commented that “the day a young writer corrects his first proofs, he’s as proud as a schoolboy who’s just caught the pox”) and, a little later, Alphonse Daudet. Both wrote about the consequences of living with the many and varied afflictions syphilis visits on the sufferer, as well as (the sometimes worse) discomforts of the proposed remedies, which including frequent purging, bizarre diets, and bathing in freezing cold water. Baudelaire’s close friend and publisher, Auguste Poulet-Malassis, who visited him a few months before his death, wrote poignantly of how the famous poet had “lost his memory of language and figurative signs.”
Few statements can be as revealing of a biographer’s method. As we see, the actual evidence for the diagnosis of syphilis comes from uncorroborated “statements” made by two of Wilde’s friends at the time of his death, men without medical qualifications who were almost certainly deeply distressed by the events to which they were witnesses. (That Ransome and Harris repeat Turner’s and Ross’s account lends it only notoriety, not authority.) Ironically, the doctor’s death certificate (which Ellmann later quotes) does not mention syphilis at all: the diagnosis is rather of “méninge encéphite” (encephalitic meningitis). It is a leap of interpretation to assume that the swelling of the lining of Wilde’s brain was a symptom of syphilis. We must presume that Ross, Turner, Ransome, Harris, and Ellmann (though apparently not the figure best qualified to know, the doctor himself) came to this conclusion because the diagnosis of syphilis fitted with a particular narrative of Wilde’s life—it represented an irresistibly tragic ending to a career destroyed by an overwhelming sexual appetite. As Ellmann admits, he is “convinced” it was syphilis, because it is that illness which is “central” to his conception of Wilde’s “character.”

The same might be said of Melissa Knox’s later *Oscar Wilde: A Long and Lovely Suicide*. Her psychoanalytic reading of Wilde’s life, which centred on his alleged sexual guilt, required a sexually contracted disease for him to feel guilty about—and naturally enough it is syphilis which best fits the bill. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Wilde’s grandson, Merlin Holland, made strenuous attempts to correct this “diagnosis” with the counterargument that “the medical and literary press” had run articles “supporting” his view that “the ‘death by syphilis’ theory” was “radically unsound.” However, this in its turn was countered by the allegation (from Knox’s advocates) that Holland had restricted access to Wilde’s estate,

*continued* He then went on to quote a contemporary medical book on aphasia which noted that “when you see an aphasic who appears to be in possession of his mental faculties, though he has lost the ability to express himself, how many times have you said of certain animals ‘if only they could speak’” (Pichois & Ziegler, 361). Daudet, in particular, produced a remarkably unsentimental and blackly humorous account of the physical pain his syphilitic neuropathy caused him. Physicians in Paris devoted to caring for syphilitic patients included Jean-Martin Charcot, Freud’s collaborator, working at his famous clinic, La Salpêtrière, and Georges Gilles de la Tourette, a pupil of Charcot. Part of the attraction of a diagnosis of syphilis in Wilde’s case is that it enlists him in this French Romantic tradition of transgressive writers, as well as explaining what some have perceived as a falling away in his creativity in the last years of his life following his release from prison in 1897.
and thus (it was implied) to precisely the sort of evidence that would eventually corroborate her views. It needs to be stressed here that no party in this dispute can be described as completely “disinterested”; likewise, the evidence, such as it survives, can be interpreted in a number of ways. Encephalitic meningitis can indeed be a symptom of tertiary syphilis; but it can also have several other causes. Thus the weight one gives to this “fact” about Wilde’s death is entirely dependent upon the other sorts of facts one aligns it with, and here Holland is certainly correct in observing that there are details about Wilde’s health in his final months which are not readily compatible with a diagnosis of syphilis. Moreover the selection of, or emphasis upon, those “other facts” in turn depends on what Ellmann, with admirable candour, terms one’s preexistent “conception of Wilde’s character.”

Sorting out the rival claims of Wilde biographies is not, then, just a matter of assessing the status of particular pieces of evidence. Equally important is the task of laying bare the values and assumptions which have shaped the narratives that interpret such evidence. Put more straightforwardly: understanding the biography is as much about finding out the purposes for which the narrative of the life is being used as it is about uncovering who Wilde really was (if indeed such an ambition could ever be fully realized). Moreover, we need to be clear about these matters when we attempt to clarify the relationship between biography and literary-critical judgments made about the work. And we need to acknowledge that it has rarely been the story of Wilde the writer that has interested his biographers; rather the principal source of interest has been the trajectory of Wilde’s sexual life. As a consequence, his literary works, as we have noted, have most often been viewed (both by the academic community and many thousands of “home” readers) as expressions or extensions of attitudes formed by Wilde’s own sense of his sexual identity. As Ellmann cogently puts it apropos of The Picture of Dorian Gray: “Wilde put into the book a negative version of what he had been brooding upon for fourteen years and, under a veil, what he had been doing sexually for four…. Through his hero Wilde was able to open a window into his own recent experience” (Ellmann, 297). Such a commonplace correlation between incidents in Wilde’s life and events which take place in his fiction, though, tends to leave unanswered some important questions concerning the precise nature of the relationship between Wilde’s sexuality and creativity. These can usefully be brought into focus by means of a simple thought experiment.

Wilde’s Sexuality

How would we read Wilde’s literary works if it were suddenly discovered that they had been written by a straight writer, a woman, or even a closet gay writer, one never tried, let alone imprisoned for his sexual life (a figure, for example, such as Wilde’s exact contemporary, the poet A. E. Housman)? Put another way,
can we imagine *The Importance of Being Earnest* having been written by Arthur Wing Pinero, Henry Arthur Jones, or even Elizabeth Robins? Or *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Joseph Conrad? Such questions do not somehow seem comparable to inquiring whether some of Shakespeare’s works might have been written by Bacon (as some literary historians have done at intervals in the last two centuries). The attribution to Bacon, although almost certainly incorrect, is at least reasonable; but assigning *The Importance of Being Earnest* or *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to one of Wilde’s contemporaries seems inherently implausible (although, interestingly, it is possible to imagine different authors for some of Wilde’s fairy tales, such as “The Happy Prince” or “The Selfish Giant”—works which, as we argue later, have been read by children without the obscuring lens of Wilde’s biography). Such a reaction is an indication of how deeply engrained our retrospective reading of Wilde’s creativity is, one always coloured by knowledge of the man revealed during the trials. But it also raises questions about the identity of that figure of Wilde to whom the novel or the plays seem so indissolubly tied. Here it is perhaps worth reiterating that of several personas which Wilde himself actively cultivated—the aesthete, dandy, socialite, or man of the theatre—one was explicitly or openly homosexual, and it is to be doubted (as Alan Sinfield has argued) whether many of Wilde’s contemporary readers actually knew prior to the trials that the married man with two children was himself leading a “double life.”3 These are questions to which we will return. First, though, we need to disentangle the meanings of the terms “the gay Wilde” or “Wilde the homosexual” to try to ascertain the nature of that sexual identification through which the works are so persistently read.

It may come as a surprise to some to learn that there is no single nor reliable story of Wilde’s sexual life. Ellmann’s biography can rightly lay claim to be the first academic study to present that sexuality in a positive light—that is, to see it as being inextricably linked to Wilde’s creativity. In Ellmann’s view, Wilde’s sexual orientation was not an unfortunate and rather troublesome aberration, as it had been for a tradition of apologists from Sherard to Montgomery Hyde. Rather for Ellmann it was the defining core of Wilde’s personality. Given this claim, it is surprising to find that Ellmann’s conception of what that sexual life actually amounted to is rather empty, perhaps to the point of naivety. We are told of Wilde’s male “friendships,” of his engaging personality, and of his emotional attachments to a series of attractive young men, as well as about his generosity in love (even to his wife). As Ellmann confided to one of the present authors, in his view the secret of Wilde’s life was simple: it was one of love.4 And its tragedy was that the main object of that love—Alfred Douglas—was an unworthy recipient of it. Such a powerfully romantic reading of Wilde’s sexuality, in which many of the rather obvious distinctions between love and sexual appetite tend to be elided, is conspicuous for what it fails to disclose, or for terms which it does not use. When we read Ellmann’s biography, we find that it
is strangely difficult to get much sense of Wilde as an actual sexual being, of the numbers and frequency of his sexual partners and liaisons, or of his own sexual pleasures, or indeed of the differences that might have existed between his homosexual and heterosexual relationships. There is an ironically Victorian coyness in Ellmann’s descriptions of Wilde’s actual sexual life, for if we are to judge by Ellmann’s account, not much sex seems to have happened.

Early critics of Ellmann, though, did not generally pick up on this limitation, possibly because the sympathy with which he portrayed a homosexual lifestyle was so novel, and possibly because the tragic trajectory of his biography fitted so well with what we have termed the Wilde “myth.” Those reviewers who did raise objections to the biography tended to focus upon small factual errors (such as confusions of names or dates) or upon Ellmann’s overdependence on unreliable source materials (such as those “witness” accounts of his deathbed scene which we mentioned earlier). To be sure, among the reviewers there was the occasional voice who complained about the lack of attention given to Wilde’s writing life, or rather the lack of a fit between Ellmann’s account of Wilde’s sexuality and his actual methods of composition. On the whole, though, the main impact of Ellmann’s work was to spur scholars into politicizing the myth that his biography had so successfully consolidated—that is, into viewing Wilde’s homosexual identity as formed less by the particularities or details of his actual sexual practices (about which, as we have said, Ellmann was remarkably reticent) than by those contemporary homophobic ideologies which marginalized and criminalized him. Thus, for example, some historians followed up hints in Ellmann’s life about possible connections between Wilde’s trial and the homosexuality of Lord Rosebery (later to become Prime Minister), seeing the activities of the prosecution (for example, their decision not to call Douglas as a witness) as an attempt to cover up a potential homosexual scandal at the very highest echelons of British political life. Other scholars, notably Ed Cohen, took up this idea of Wilde as a political “scapegoat,” arguing that in 1895 it was

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**The Power of Wilde’s Name & “Dirty” Books** Wilde’s name has had such potency that it has—not surprisingly—led many to identify him with anonymous or forged works, several of them sexually explicit. The most famous of these was the apparent discovery of a whole cache of Wilde manuscripts by Fabian Lloyd, Constance’s brother and so Wilde’s brother-in-law. They are now held in the Clark Library and were quickly revealed to be forgeries written by Lloyd himself in an attempt to cash in on Wilde’s name. A similar kind of fraud was that practised by the publisher Charles Carrington, who tried to pass off a translation of the *Satyricon* of Petronius Arbiter as a work by Wilde. (The *Satyricon* had a kind of totemic if scurrilous reputation in late-nineteenth-century culture and came to be associated with numerous writers; Charles Baudelaire, for example, was reputed to have agreed to work on a translation of it.)
homosexuality itself, rather than Wilde, which was on trial. In this view, once again, the particularity of Wilde’s own sexual behaviour was of less concern than the opportunities his case allegedly offered for a specific “construction” of the homosexual by a homophobic media. Pursuing this line of argument, Alan Sinfield has also argued that Wilde’s trial marked the moment when “the image of the queer emerged.”

It is worth emphasizing at this point that these extensions to, or elaborations of, Ellmann’s biography had very little to say about Wilde’s literary career, or what for brevity we can call the literary (as opposed to the political) value of his writings. Rather they concentrated on documenting Wilde’s centrality to a history of gay rights. Moreover, what has mattered most in that history has been Wilde’s iconic status: as a highly visible “sign” he allowed other kinds of attitudes—particularly homophobic ones, or class prejudices, or even discrimination based on ethnicity—to come into view. As a consequence Wilde’s writings have tended to be of interest principally insofar as they can be subsumed into this larger political narrative: put crudely, insofar as they can be interpreted as interrogating or subverting the values and attitudes of the culture which criminalized him. And in this process, as we have said, precise details about Wilde’s actual sexual behaviour, and thus information allowing Ellmann’s romanticized reading of the life to be controverted, have generally been neglected. In fact, until Neil McKenna’s *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* was published in 2003, there were few biographies that directly took issue with the details of Ellmann’s depiction of Wilde’s sex life.

The “Franker” Biographies

Gary Schmidgall’s *The Stranger Wilde* (1994) was explicitly motivated by a dissatisfaction with what he termed the “discreet” dispensation of an earlier generation of biographers (a group in which he included Ellmann). By contrast, Schmidgall promised to give the reader a more “inconvenient” portrait

continued The most enduring attribution of authorship concerns Wilde’s supposed contribution to the nineteenth-century pornographic novel *Teleny*, which continues to be reprinted with his name on the cover. In other words it is Wilde’s name that continues to sell the work rather than any intrinsic merit it might possess. The legend of *Teleny*’s composition was that the manuscript was circulated among a group of friends which included Wilde. Each added chapters or episodes and passed the work on. Scholarly opinion over its authenticity remains divided. Not only is there no consensus about which parts Wilde may (or may not) have written, there is no concrete evidence that he ever wrote material of this kind.
of a (now) famous icon, one which gave fuller attention to the “ramifications” of Wilde’s homosexual identity—to, that is, his lack of sympathy with “closeted” gay contemporaries, such as Walter Pater or Henry James. Such claims, though, were not based on any new evidence about Wilde’s actual sexual practices, but rather on what was at heart a programmatically autobiographical reading of the literary works and a problematic equating of late-nineteenth- and late-twentieth-century homosexual experiences. These culminated in Schmidgall imagining Wilde as a habitué of late-night “talk-shows.” Schmidgall, then, told us no more about Wilde’s actual sexual behaviour than Ellmann had done, and in this respect his account of Wilde’s sexual psychology—Wilde’s allegedly greater willingness to be “out”—lacked both novelty and depth. The same point can be made of Melissa Knox’s A Long and Lovely Suicide, to which we have already alluded. Like Schmidgall’s book, Knox’s controversial account of Wilde’s sexual identity was not based on new evidence; rather it depended (once again) on a rereading of his literary works, only this time from the viewpoint of the psychoanalyst in her chair interrogating Wilde on the couch. So although Knox could certainly claim to offer the most radically new view of Wilde’s sexuality since Ellmann, for many scholars (and certainly for non-Freudians) the authority of her account was compromised, and perhaps vitiated, by a number of flaws in her methodology—that is, by her simplistic assumptions about literary creativity (which paid no attention to the artifactual and institutional nature of literary works) as well as her assumptions about a straightforwardly expressive relationship between emotion and language.

Why Was Alfred Douglas Never Prosecuted for Gross Indecency? Numerous readers have wondered why Wilde’s relationship with Douglas did not form part of Wilde’s indictment for gross indecency, and why, in the light of their very public relationship, Douglas was never prosecuted following Wilde’s conviction in 1895. According to H. Montgomery Hyde, the issue was brought up by the foreman of the jury in Wilde’s third trial, when he noted, “if we adduce any guilt … it applies as much to Lord Alfred Douglas as to the defendant.” The judge, Mr. Justice Wills, agreed, but pointed out that the observation was irrelevant to Wilde’s case. Further light is shed on this matter by letters published by Merlin Holland in Irish Peacock & Scarlet Marquess between the Hon. Hamilton Cuffe (then Director of Public Prosecutions) and Charles Gill (who acted as junior counsel for the Marquess of Queensberry in the libel case brought by Wilde). Gill had written to Cuffe about whether a “prosecution ought to be instituted against Lord Alfred Douglas on account of his connection with the case of Oscar Wilde and Alfred Taylor” (Taylor ran a male brothel, but refused to give evidence against Wilde, and was tried and convicted for gross indecency along with him.) In Gill’s view a prosecution against Douglas would not succeed because the evidence against him could not be corroborated.
Advertised as “the greatest contribution to Wilde scholarship” since Ellmann’s “magisterial biography,” Neil McKenna’s startlingly graphic *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (2003) was (like Knox’s and Schmidgall’s studies) explicitly conceived as a corrective to Ellmann’s idealized view of Wilde’s sexual self. That said, once again McKenna does not challenge the basic premise of Ellmann’s book in that he too sees Wilde’s personality and creativity defined by his sexuality. He understands Wilde’s uninhibited pursuit of his desire in quasi-heroic terms, as that of a “brave champion” who exhibited a “courageous” commitment to “the Cause,” one of gay rights. For McKenna, Wilde was a member of a “modern day Theban Band [of] warriors and lovers willing and prepared to embrace death rather than surrender” (McKenna, 396). McKenna also shares the propensity of Ellmann (and once more of Knox and of Schmidgall) to interpret the literary works in straightforwardly biographical terms, to the extent that the chief value of what McKenna terms Wilde’s “highly autobiographical” writings lies in what they reveal about his “secret life” (McKenna, xiv). The principal distinctions of McKenna’s account, then, are to be found in his very different conception of what Wilde’s sexual life actually amounted to, and the quality of the new evidence which he provides to substantiate it.

McKenna’s biography is self-consciously concerned with what he terms Wilde’s sexual “behaviour”—that is, with the pleasure Wilde took in sexual activity once he had “surrendered” to the “overwhelming” nature of his attraction to young men, and the ways in which he then sought to satisfy his compulsive appetites. McKenna sees sex as a practice: he wants to trace what exactly Wil-
de did, with whom, and where. So he unapologetically lays before the reader details about Wilde’s alleged fondness for oral sex, the “disgusting” stains on the bed-sheets of his room at the Savoy Hotel, his “hunting” and sharing with Douglas (and occasionally with Ross) of young male prostitutes or “pick-ups,” and his taking advantage of his wife’s (and children’s) absence to make assignations with young men at their Tite Street home. In charting such behaviour, McKenna exposes a sexual life that for some readers will seem to be little more than a studied, exploitative, and sometimes sordid promiscuity. McKenna’s own emphasis, though, is on the tensions between what he terms this “generalised” lust, an “addiction to sex … frequent sex, with as many people as possible,” and the “ideal and idealised love,” defined by personal qualities such as fidelity, loyalty, and devotion, which are precisely the terms by which Wilde typically troped his relationship with Douglas (McKenna, 188).

A good example of the differences between Ellmann’s and McKenna’s treatments of Wilde’s sexual behaviour can be seen in their respective accounts of Wilde’s and Douglas’s visit to Algiers in early 1895 during the rehearsals of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. To the best of our knowledge, only one short letter by Wilde written during this trip has survived. Addressed to Robert Ross, it describes in mock pastoral terms the “beauty” of the surroundings, the “lovely” Kabyle boys, and “an excursion into the mountains of Kabylia” where “shepherds fluted on reeds” and where Wilde and Douglas were “followed by lovely brown things from forest to forest” (*Complete Letters*, 629). The principal source of evidence for Wilde’s and Douglas’s activities are the writings of André Gide, particularly his autobiographical volume *Si le grain ne meurt* (1924), in which Gide describes meeting Wilde and Douglas in the walled city of Blidah, and their taking him on a tour of the town’s nightlife, one which ended in a bar-room brawl. A few days later Gide met up with Douglas and Wilde again, this time back in Algiers; Gide recounts how Wilde procured for him a young flute-playing Tunisian, “Bosie’s boy,” Mohammed, with whom he later spent the night in a room opposite to that occupied by Wilde and another “boy” (Douglas meantime had returned to Blidah in pursuit of yet another Arab boy, one “Ali”). Ellmann retells these events using both Gide’s and Wilde’s words, but in such a way that Gide’s sexual behaviour is the centre of the narrative and that of Wilde reduced to something of an amused bystander. So Wilde is described merely as having “made the arrangements” for Gide’s rendezvous with Mohammed (who is just “an Arab boy with a flute”), while the “arrangements” themselves are left unspecified, and observations about Wilde’s own nocturnal adventures are simply omitted. Moreover, Ellmann’s dominant image of Wilde’s Algerian perambulations is an oddly nonsexual one; he is pictured as going “through the streets” followed by a “band of petty thieves” whom he “observed … with joy” and to whom he “scattered money” (Ellmann, 405). The blatancy of what we would now call sex tourism is conveniently overlooked by Ellmann.
Not so McKenna: his account of the Algerian excursion is much more detailed and it stresses from the outset its sexual purpose. He points out for the uninformed reader that Algiers was well known in French gay circles as an ideal location for gay sex tourism: “Algiers was no different to London, other than that the supply of boys seemed unending and that, for Bosie in particular, boys—some as young as thirteen or fourteen—were readily available” (McKenna, 324). This emphasis upon the youth of the male prostitutes is another detail carefully omitted by Ellmann. So too is the sharing of sexual partners, which McKenna sees as an intrinsic part of the sexual dynamic—establishing an “erotic bond of sorts”—linking Wilde, Bosie, and in this case, Gide. McKenna gives Wilde considerably more agency than Ellmann does, casting him in the role of an experienced and determined sexual predator. Wilde, then, is a “habitué” of the café where the initially “puzzled” André is introduced to Mohammed, and he enjoys a “night of passion” with his own “darbouka player” (McKenna, 327). McKenna also reads Wilde’s report of his activities to Ross in explicitly sexual terms, glossing Wilde’s reference to “lovely brown things” as referring to “beautiful boys wherever they turned, seemingly all of them smiling sexual invitation.” Indeed the reference to fluting shepherds loses all its overtones of bucolic innocence and becomes instead “probably an oblique reference to oral sex” (McKenna, 324).

An initial comparison between these two accounts might lead one to conclude that Ellmann, whether through tact or possibly distaste, is guilty of romanticizing practices that might otherwise be labelled as child prostitution or pedophilia, and that his biography is therefore profoundly misleading if not irresponsible. By contrast, McKenna is much more aware of the nature of the activities he is describing. As he baldly puts it: “Neither Oscar nor Bosie had any sense that their pursuit of boys was wrong, or that paying them for sex might be exploitative. They were used to paying renters for sex in London” (McKenna, 324). Such a judgment, though, tends to overlook the uncomfortable fact that neither Ellmann nor McKenna has concrete evidence to substantiate his particular version of events in north Africa. As we noted above, both rely heavily on Gide’s memoirs, but given Gide’s complex reactions to his own sexuality, these cannot unquestioningly be taken to be accurate. Several modern Gide scholars—including those explicitly sympathetic to their subject—have acknowledged that his writings are considered by some to be “so far-fetched” that they ought to be viewed as the product of an “over-fertile imagination.” McKenna, too, will admit to the possibility of unreliable memoir evidence, although he tends to dismiss the problem. For example, while noting that another of his sources (the unpublished autobiography of Trelawny Backhouse) is “not always accurate or, indeed, true,” he justifies using it on the grounds that it has “the ring of authenticity” to it (McKenna, 153). A further difficulty is that this “ring” derives
largely from its similarities with other equally untrustworthy sources, such as the memoirs of Douglas or John Addington Symonds.\footnote{\protect\citename{\protect\etal}28}

In the light of these problems it could be argued that Ellmann’s consciously elliptical account of the Algiers visit is merely an acknowledgment of the uncertain status of the evidence he is relying upon: as with any good judge, he omits what he considers unsubstantiated hearsay. Likewise, McKenna, for all his apparent candour, is sometimes guilty of his own tendency to romanticize. For example, he describes how Wilde’s encounter with another Arab boy narrowly avoided disaster when the latter’s plans to “trap [Wilde] for robbery and possible murder” were thwarted by Wilde’s sexual experience and expertise: “after Oscar had sex with him, he was, apparently, ‘ready to lay down his life for him’” (McKenna, 328). Most readers will perhaps be a little suspicious of this rather hackneyed idea that the power relations involved in prostitution can somehow be dissolved both through the pleasure of sex and by the consummate sexual mastery of an older man. Moreover, those who carefully examine McKenna’s endnotes will observe with dismay that the source for the anecdote turns out to be a letter from Laurence Housman to George Ives which dates from 1933: this “apparent” fact, then, derives its authority from a memory recalled four decades after the event, and from a man who could not possibly have been a witness to what he describes.

Unfortunately there is no reliable way to adjudicate between Ellmann’s and McKenna’s stories: we do not know with certainty what transpired among Wilde, Douglas, Gide, and their various Arab “boys” during that trip to Algiers. It is certainly possible to speculate about their sexual behaviour, based on the knowledge that Algiers was indeed a well-recognized destination for European sex tourists. But the plausibility of such speculation will depend as much upon the authority of the narrative which interprets the evidence (that is, to use Ellmann’s phrase once again, upon the biographer’s “conception of Wilde’s character”) as it does on the status of the evidence itself. In this respect, it is worth noting in passing that McKenna’s acceptance of Gide’s account, and thus his confident assertions about Wilde’s and Douglas’s sexual promiscuity, derive from his attempt to construct what he terms a “psychologically” coherent and convincing account of a homosexual lifestyle; that lifestyle in turn (from the evidence given in the trials) appeared to involve extremely frequent casual sex—what McKenna terms a “two-year binge of intense and unremitting sexual activity with dozens of boys and young men; an endless cycle of pursuit and capture, of desire and satiation” (McKenna, 217), exemplified by Wilde and Douglas “hunting singly, or as a pair” to bring boys back to the Savoy Hotel in London in order have sex “either à trois, or sequentially” (McKenna, 222–23). “Addiction” is the term McKenna most frequently invokes to explain such appetites, and in so doing he gives Wilde’s behaviour a recognizably modern pathology and thus,
we might infer, a fashionable and perhaps not wholly appropriate relevance to twenty-first-century sexual anxieties.

Whether or not McKenna’s description and diagnosis of Wilde’s sexual behaviour is more correct, or more plausible, than that given by Ellmann is not in itself a literary question, though it certainly has had considerable relevance for how Wilde’s literary works are to be interpreted. As we noted earlier, both Ellmann and McKenna read a work of fiction such as The Picture of Dorian Gray as a disguised autobiography, and so both agree that the novel is about homosexuality. In Ellmann’s view it is “one of the first attempts,” though “appropriately covert,” to “bring homosexuality into the English novel” (Ellmann, 300); for McKenna, it is “a celebration of the nature of sexual desire and sexual pleasure between men,” “designed, ‘intended’ and ‘understood’ by its readers to be a book about sodomy and those men who practised sodomy” (McKenna, 127).

The questions which are begged here are numerous. To what extent is biography—in this case a certain preconceived view of Wilde’s character—driving the interpretation of the novel, rather than, as Ellmann and McKenna would have us believe, the novel providing evidence for the life? Second, there is the issue of the extent to which the novel is therefore deriving its value from its connection with the biography. And third, there is the question of whether and how that value changes as the biography—in this case, the sexual life—is revised. We will return to these questions in later chapters. For now, though, it will be sufficient to give some further illustrations of the complexities involved in them.

**Sexuality, Creativity, & the Trials**

Both Ellmann’s and McKenna’s accounts of Wilde’s sexuality draw extensively upon contemporary correspondence, mainly that of Wilde and Douglas, but also from some of the other men with whom they were involved, such as Robert Ross, John Gray, André Raffalovich, and Adrian Hope. However, the language of such letters, particularly those which McKenna and Ellmann see as “love tokens,” can present the biographer with some difficult problems. Wilde, in common with many of his male correspondents, tended to describe his encounters with young men, and his feelings for and about them, in elaborately affected, quasi-classical, and often rather flippant terms, all of which make it difficult to ascertain whether or not, or to what extent, he is writing seriously. Given the climate of the time, it is of course to be expected that expressions of male-male desire would necessarily be coded, even in private correspondence. Much scholarship has been devoted to deciphering the classical allusions by means of which such relationships were typically articulated, at least among classically educated men such as Wilde. For the same reasons, though, such disguise, if disguise it is, makes it virtually impossible to distinguish between real sentiment and what may be mere pose or exaggeration, fantasy, or a shared joke. An example will perhaps make the dimensions of this problem clearer.
McKenna’s understanding of Wilde’s sexual development involves a transition from what he terms early “love affairs” with “young poets”—specifically Rennell Rodd, Richard Le Gallienne, and André Raffalovich—to a later, more promiscuous and predatory involvement with male prostitutes. McKenna’s evidence for Wilde’s relationship with one of those poets, Le Gallienne, whom he claims Wilde “loved” after his marriage, derives from some surviving correspondence which was apparently initiated by Le Gallienne in September 1887 when he sent Wilde his first book of poetry. Le Gallienne subsequently took up an invitation to meet Wilde, and later stayed at Tite Street in June 1888 and March 1889; in the period between these dates the two men exchanged further books, verses, and letters. The exchanges included a volume by Le Gallienne inscribed with a poem commemorating their very first encounter. It begins: “With Oscar Wilde, a summer-day | Passed like a yearning kiss away, | The kiss wherewith so long ago | The little maid who loved me so | Called me her Lancelot” (Complete Letters, 367).

The language of Wilde’s and Le Gallienne’s letters is certainly effusive, increasingly so as their acquaintance develops. So Wilde talks of Le Gallienne as the “young poet who came here so wonderfully and so strangely,” and of their meeting to “make music,” and later of his hopes that Le Gallienne’s “laurels are not too thick across your brows for me to kiss your eye-lids” (Complete Letters, 367, 397, 457). Le Gallienne himself is equally fulsome, writing to Wilde that the “thought that you sometimes recall me is sweet as a kiss & it is blessed to know that but a little while & I shall be with you once more…. I have news to tell you in which I think you will rejoice with your true-lover” (Oscar Wilde Revalued, 77–78). And to John Lane he joked: “suffice it | I have never yet more fascinating fellow [i.e., Wilde] met, | and O! how sweet he was to me | is only known to R. le G” (Beckson, 193). But is such “talk” evidence of a sexual relationship? McKenna believes that it does constitute evidence of a sexual relationship, unequivocally asserting, apropos of Le Gallienne’s poem, that

The yearning kiss in question was literal as well as literary. Something more corporeal had happened that summer afternoon between Oscar and the twenty-two year old Le Gallienne…. There can be no doubt that Oscar seduced Richard Le Gallienne that summer afternoon; and no doubt that Le Gallienne was ready and willing to be seduced…. The same month that he met and had sex with Oscar, Le Gallienne was also found staying with the journalist and poet Gleeson White and his wife in Christchurch, Hampshire, a town which was later to house a small but important colony of Uranian poets and writers (McKenna, 89).

In point of fact, and pace McKenna, there is plenty of room for doubt, and other scholars have been much more cautious in their speculations about the nature
of Wilde’s and Le Gallienne’s relationship. For example, Karl Beckson focuses exclusively on their shared literary interests, with Le Gallienne cast not as Wilde’s lover but merely his “log-roller” (Beckson, 194). Ellmann is also rather more circumspect, barely even hinting at a sexual intimacy. Citing some of the same evidence as McKenna, he includes an additional—and in his view, rather telling—comment made by Le Gallienne to a friend in 1888: that Wilde’s language was “very rich” (Ellmann, 267; his source is Louise Jopling). That language was also of course self-consciously literary, as were Le Gallienne’s own responses: both men wrote to each other using the exaggerated “purple prose” that would later be found in works such as The Picture of Dorian Gray and The Sphinx. So in the same letter where Wilde talks of kissing Le Gallienne’s eyelids, he also describes his friend’s poetry as “rich and Dionysiac and red-veined” with “that true ultimate simplicity that comes, like the dawn, out of a complex night of many wandering worlds” (Complete Letters, 457).

It is precisely these sorts of stylistic similarities that seem to have led McKenna to conclude that the language shared by The Picture of Dorian Gray and his letters is compelling evidence that Wilde’s fiction is deeply autobiographical. Yet it needs to be acknowledged that the same observation could lead one to the very opposite conclusion: namely that Wilde’s and Le Gallienne’s letters, far from disclosing “real” feelings, and thus being authentic windows into their subjects’ private lives, are merely a lighthearted literary game played by two self-consciously poetical writers. In this respect, rather than the novel being autobiographical, we might just as convincingly conclude that the letters are a form of fiction, and that they are certainly elaborate linguistic constructions. Moreover, other questions need to be asked about such material. What value accrues to it by virtue of being a “coded” reference to homosexuality? Would we be more or less interested in Le Gallienne’s poetry, or Le Gallienne as a poet, if we knew for certain that his relationship with Wilde was a sexual one and not a mere “literary” friendship?

McKenna’s and Ellmann’s reading of a work such as The Picture of Dorian Gray as a novel fundamentally “about” homosexuality is obviously of importance to historians such as Ed Cohen who wish, as we have noted, to see Wilde’s life and work as key “events” in a history of gay rights. But what relevance does (or could) such a reading have for those who wish to read the novel primarily for its literary value—for, say, its stylistic qualities, its intertextuality, or its narrative strategies? Here we ought to distinguish between, on the one hand, the role played by Wilde’s writing in accounts of his sexual behaviour and sexual psychology and, on the other, the bearing of his (disputed) sexuality on judgments about the merits of his writing as writing. Too often the distinctions between these questions are elided, so that Wilde’s literary works are read as an expression of (and thus in turn become evidence for) his sexuality, and that sexuality
in turn becomes the main key to unlocking the meaning of his literary works. In such viciously circular reasoning an important question is often overlooked: that is, how far could a work such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* lay claim to critical attention for other reasons than exhibiting sexual desires and sexual practices which were at the time illegal (an issue to which we return in chapter six)?

On the novel’s first publication in Britain there were a number of reviewers who insinuated a connection between rumours about Wilde’s sexuality and the themes of the story. And those opinions typically came from figures—particularly W. E. Henley—who had known Wilde personally for some time. In this sense, they were not reviewing the novel, but—in the manner of many contemporary critics—reading the man via a review of the novel. However, there is surprisingly little concrete evidence to suggest that Henley’s views were representative and that Wilde’s writings had been widely viewed—that is, by readers who did not know him personally—in terms of their homoeroticism. Of course had they been so interpreted, and had Wilde therefore been given a reputation as a dangerous and morally subversive writer, instead of simply posing as one, he could hardly have achieved his popular successes on the relentlessly commercial West End Stage, a cultural arena which always fought shy of public controversy. Such an observation does not constitute evidence that Wilde’s works were not “about” homosexuality, nor about *his* homosexuality (we suggested in chapter one that it is virtually impossible to adduce such a negative proof). It does nonetheless alert us to the existence of a range of interpretations available from the novel which are not overtly sexual or even biographical, and this in turn suggests that there were (and are) grounds for evaluating Wilde’s works (and more particularly *The Picture of Dorian Gray*) other than those of self-disclosure. But this observation leads us to ask why these other grounds have been so routinely set aside in favour of autobiographical readings.

One of the reasons why such prominence has been given to the conjunction of Wilde’s sexual and literary careers can be traced back to his trials, and in particular to the use made by Edward Carson, Queensberry’s defence counsel, of some of Wilde’s letters to Douglas (one of which included a sonnet), of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and of some of the maxims Wilde had recently published in the *Chameleon*. It is worth reminding ourselves that unlike the case successfully brought in 1888 against Emile Zola’s British publisher, Henry Vizetelly, the Queensberry libel trial was not about an obscene publication, nor was it a case of literary libel. The trial was provoked by a card that Queensberry had left for Wilde in the Albemarle Club which identified him as “posing” as a “somdomite [sic].” Moreover, the introduction by Queensberry’s counsel of “evidence” to be found in literary works may have come as something of a surprise to Wilde; certainly he could not have guessed that it would form a part of Queensberry’s
defence until he learned of the latter’s Plea of Justification only a couple of days before the actual trial was due to start.

Most of that plea is concerned with listing instances and acts of “indecency and immorality” committed with named individuals. Only at the very end (almost as an afterthought) do we find the two elements of the plea that relate to Wilde’s writings. Specifically they claimed that Wilde “did write and publish and cause and procure to be printed and published with his name on the title page thereof a certain immoral and obscene book [that is, The Picture of Dorian Gray] … which said work was designed and intended … and was understood by the readers thereof to describe the relations intimacies and passions of certain persons of sodomitical and unnatural habits tastes and practices.” The plea further claimed that Wilde “joined in procuring the publication of the said last mentioned obscene work [the Chameleon] … published his name on the contents sheet … as its first and main contributor and published in said magazine certain immoral maxims as an introduction to the same under the title “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young”” (Holland, 290). Both these works, according to Queensberry’s plea, “were calculated to subvert morality and to encourage unnatural vice.” They may have been added to the plea to justify the claim in Queensberry’s card that Wilde was “posing” as a sodomite, should the evidence of his “unnatural habits” prove inconclusive.

The first point we should be alert to here is the restricted number of literary works which Queensberry’s counsel named. The Picture of Dorian Gray and “Phrases and Philosophies” amount to only a small fraction of Wilde’s oeuvre: the poems, all the plays, the short fiction, and the journalism were passed over. Moreover, the case was not that The Picture of Dorian Gray and “Phrases and

**The Victorians & the Importance of Literary Biography**  It was not unusual for Victorian reviewers to connect literary works and the lives of their authors, and literary biography was a popular genre. Famous examples include Elizabeth Gaskell’s Life of Charlotte Brontë (1857), John Forster’s Life of Charles Dickens (1872–1874), and John Cross’s George Eliot’s Life (1885). Writers’ autobiographies—such as John Ruskin’s Praeterita (1885–1889)—were equally popular. This interest in biography culminated in Sir Leslie Stephens’s monumental Dictionary of National Biography (1882–present; after 1890 its editorship was taken over by Sir Sydney Lee) in which one of the longest entries is devoted to Shakespeare, a figure for whom there is relatively little secure biographical information. This inevitably led to a situation in which the writer’s life was constructed from the work, and the work reinforced opinions about the life. In the Queensberry libel trial Carson’s dissolving of the distinction between life and art would not then have seemed unreasonable. Indeed hostile reviews of works of literature often took the form of thinly veiled attacks on the personal lives of their authors. Algernon Swinburne, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Walter Pater had all suffered in this way.
Philosophies” were in any sense representative of Wilde’s general intentions as a writer; rather, they were cited as specific and special cases. The singling out of The Picture of Dorian Gray may have been prompted by some of those isolated reviews (which we mentioned earlier) that had greeted its first publication in Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine. Although not explicitly accusing Wilde of proselytizing homosexuality, comments had been made about the novel’s “disgusting sins and abominable crimes” and its suitability only for “outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph boys.” This was an allusion to the Cleveland Street scandal of 1889 in which a house in Westminster had been raided by the police, and in which telegraph boys from the General Post Office situated nearby had been found to have been offering sexual services to aristocratic customers. Such comments made the referent of the reviewers’ objections clear and Wilde, unsurprisingly, had written numerous replies in defence of his story. That said, it needs to be stressed again that not all reviews had taken this line; American readers in particular seemed much more inclined to view the novel as a straightforward (and valuable) morality tale. It seems utterly implausible that American reviewers were collectively more naive than their British counterparts; it is just that they were not in possession of that inside information of some of Wilde’s English reviewers, and as a consequence could more easily separate, in D. H. Lawrence’s phrase, the teller from the tale. The evidence of “Phrases and Philosophies” was somewhat less secure, in that in this instance it was much more difficult to establish a direct connection between Wilde’s aphorisms and specific sexual offences; here it was more the case that Carson was hoping to establish guilt by association—that Wilde’s agreement to have his work published in the Chameleon aligned him with the allegedly immoral attitudes of that publication’s other contributions, particularly the story entitled “The Prince and the Acolyte” by the magazine’s editor, John Francis Bloxam.

In his opening remarks for the prosecution, Wilde’s (that is, the prosecuting) counsel Sir Charles Clark spent a good deal of time on what he termed the “very curious allegations” regarding Wilde’s literary works, probably because he thought that they were the most easy to rebut. And the case that he presented was straightforward: he aimed to demonstrate that the works in question did not necessarily lend themselves to the “inferences” listed by the defence, arguing that The Picture of Dorian Gray had been “five years … upon the bookstalls and at bookshops and in libraries” and the epigrams in “Phrases and Philosophies” were no different in kind to those “which many of us have enjoyed when being interchanged in dialogue by the characters in such a play as A Woman of No Importance” (Holland, 40–41). Clark also took pains to establish the longevity and distinction of Wilde’s reputation as a man of letters. Since the publication in the early 1880s of his first volume of poetry, Wilde, according to Clark, had become “a very public person indeed, laughed at by some, appreciated by many but at all events representing a special and particular aspect of artistic literature,
which commended itself greatly to many of those of the foremost minds and most cultivated people of our time” (Holland, 28–29). In his cross-examination of Wilde, Queensberry’s counsel, Edward Carson, tried to undermine Clark’s case by contesting what he termed the “natural meaning” of the disputed works, by which he meant the meaning most readily available to the majority of readers (whom he called “ordinary” individuals): that they were about, or were inciting, illegal acts such as sodomy. And he also tried to force Wilde to concede that his writing was deeply autobiographical, that he was depicting incidents “in his own life.” Carson’s tactic was to try to convince the jury that only a man of what he called a “sodomitical” nature could have written such material.

Like some modern critics and readers, then, Carson was proposing a straightforwardly expressive relationship between an author and his work, one which Wilde, in his turn, tried to counter by distinguishing between the function of a literary persona (a mask adopted by the literary artist) and the life and feelings of the real author. So Wilde consistently contested Carson’s suggestions by insisting on a distinction between “novels and life,” and emphatically reminded the court that he had written “a work of fiction.” Likewise, Wilde absolved himself on artistic grounds of any responsibility for the “misinterpretations” that might be placed on his work by individual readers and which told far more against them and their values than against himself, the author. With particular regard to The Picture of Dorian Gray, he stressed that the reader did not discover meanings “in” the text, but rather—in a manner that would, in abstract terms at least, find sympathy with some other modern critics—projected onto it what he or she wished to find there. His argument was that “each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray. What Dorian Gray’s sins are, no one knows. He who finds them has brought them.” “Only brutes and the illiterate,” Wilde suggested, could possibly have read his novel in the manner suggested by Carson (Holland, 78, 81). In this way Wilde tried to deflect the allegation of “sodomite” away from himself—as an artist—and onto his readers, a group for whose beliefs he could not possibly be held responsible.

It is hard to judge who came out best from these courtroom exchanges. We should remember that by far the largest part of Carson’s cross-examination centred on the more serious and damning aspects of Queensberry’s Plea of Justification, those numerous counts of gross indecency which Wilde had committed with young men. It was the evidence relating to these activities, overwhelming and irrefutable as it turned out to be, rather than Wilde’s literary work, which brought about the collapse in the prosecution’s case. This point needs to be stressed: it is commonly suggested that Wilde’s literary art—in fact, art in general—was on trial as much as the man. But this is just not true. Wilde was not tried and convicted because of anything he had written (the famous cross-examination over The Picture of Dorian Gray belongs only to the libel trial, where Wilde
was prosecuting and had not yet been, in strictly legal terms, accused of anything). Mr. Justice Clark’s summing up (at the close of Wilde’s first trial for gross indecency) gave the jury only four questions to consider, none of which mentioned his literary works. Carson’s cross-examination of Wilde about his writing in the case against Queensbury was more than anything else part of a rhetorical strategy made by an extremely clever advocate who had known Wilde at Trinity College in Dublin, and knew better than most the weaknesses in the way he argued. The fact that it was seen as such by Wilde’s counsel (and apparently by some members of the first jury in the case brought against Wilde by the Crown) should act as a reminder of the problems we encounter with “autobiographical” modes of interpretation: however tempting they might be, they can never be substantiated. Moreover, they also suffer from being always post hoc—as Wilde’s counsel, Clark cogently put it, The Picture of Dorian Gray, that allegedly “sodomitical” book, had been available “upon the bookstalls and at bookshops and in libraries” for five years prior to the trial. As we noted earlier, no one during that time had seen fit to bring a case against it under the obscenity laws in the way in which the Crown had prosecuted Vizetelly. If The Picture of Dorian Gray was as manifestly about sodomy as Carson (and, later, McKenna) alleged, then there certainly would have been grounds for some kind of prosecution of both Wilde and his publisher, Ward, Lock.

On the other hand, though, Carson did win from Wilde the concession that certain passages in The Picture of Dorian Gray could be misconstrued so as to “convey the impression that the sin of Dorian Gray was sodomy” (Holland, 78–79). Of course the mere possibility of such an interpretation in no way proved (or proves) that the novel was written with the clear intention that it should be so read; nor does it go any way towards proving that such a reading accurately reflected the disposition or desires of the author. As Clark had curtly pointed out in his opening for the prosecution, “there is always a difficulty, of course, when upon a plea of this kind a statement is made referring to a particular book, because it puts one into the difficulty of considering what that book is” (Holland, 41). Yet Carson’s proposition was a powerfully suggestive one, and his method of cross-examination—his rapid movement between statements about how readers interpreted the novel to questions about the details of Wilde’s own life—was designed to consolidate it as a “fact” in the minds of the jury. If Carson could repeatedly suggest that Wilde himself was a homosexual, or that he moved within homosexual circles—if he could fix this image in the jury’s minds, as he later successfully did—then what he claimed to be the so-called “natural meaning” of The Picture of Dorian Gray would begin to seem much more persuasive, more self-evident than it was. And in that process the distinction, which Wilde had insisted on, between who a writer is and what he writes about, would become irrevocably blurred.
Can We Imagine Robert Louis Stevenson Writing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*? If Not, Why Not?

We can see the latent power of such suggestions by briefly comparing critical reactions to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with those to Robert Louis Stevenson’s near-contemporaneous *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. It has now become a critical commonplace to reiterate Wilde’s own contention about his novel, that nothing in the story is made explicit, and that Dorian’s “sins” are never named. Likewise, and by extension, the precise nature of the relationships among the three main male characters, Lord Henry Wotton, Basil Hallward, and Dorian himself, is always deliberately withheld from the reader. At a time when male and female lives were much more clearly demarcated, and men habitually socialized in each other’s company, often in the absence of women, a Victorian readership would not necessarily find anything remarkable when they encountered such a strictly gendered fictional world. At the same time, though, the relationships among the three men often appears claustrophobic and competitive; moreover it seems to centre on secrets, blackmail, and a celebration of the male body. The language in which the men describe their attachment to and interest in each other can be seen as ambivalent in that it appears to borrow terms more usually associated with the representation of male-female relationships. Similarly many of the settings in which Wilde places his male characters remove them from more usual Victorian male middle-class or aristocratic environments, those of professional work, or politics, or the public domain in general. By contrast, Basil, Dorian, and Lord Henry are most frequently found in the home, or in what can be loosely described as domestic settings, even if that domesticity is entirely male and more to do with exquisite tastes and rare objects than hearth, homeliness, and the raising of children. There is also a relative absence of narrative interest in female characters: many critics have pointed out how the role of Sybil Vane was “written up” for the 1891 book version of the novel. In addition the style of the novel has often been remarked upon. The overdetermined descriptive language, with its excessive use of adjectives and intensifying adverbs to do with the senses, has been taken to be suggestive of an aesthetic or a Decadent sensibility; historically (since the early 1870s, at least) those two labels had been used to connote or code sexual aberrance or excess.

For a century of readers, including Carson, Ellmann, and McKenna, it is precisely these sorts of elements that combine to form what they see as a homoerotic dynamic to the novel, one in which the tensions among the three main characters can only be fully understood in terms of male-male desire. Is it the case, though, that these features are necessarily homoerotic? As we shall detail later, some critics have seen this depiction of male aristocratic society as a critique of class and of a male bourgeois work ethic, rather than as a sexual ethic. Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* also concentrates almost
exclusively on a male world, one which is again characterized by hidden desires and impulses, by secrets and blackmail, by differences between outside appearances and inner moral realities, and by a lack of interest in female characters. And there have been a number of modern critics who have insisted that Stevenson’s novel, too, works by means of a submerged homoerotic dynamic which connects and explains the unusual tensions in the relationships among the main male characters and their failure, when threatened, to call upon the usual social mechanisms of policing and control, or to invoke the possibility of redress in law. At the same time, though, a homoerotic reading of Stevenson’s novel will strike most readers as being much more provocative, and certainly more surprising, than a similar reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. We have no evidence that Victorian reviewers interpreted *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in such a way; nor is it an interpretation which comes readily to most modern readers when they encounter the novel for the first time. Those academic studies that claim to find a homoerotic subtext have had virtually no influence on the general reader and such a subtext has rarely, if ever, figured in the work’s numerous dramatic and film adaptations. And one obvious reason for the relative resistance of *Jekyll and Hyde* to a homoerotic interpretation lies in the way Stevenson made an appeal to the Victorian reader via his romanticized, heterosexual authorial persona—one which, we might add, was as much a construction, as much a product of media hype, as Wilde’s more effete Decadent self-image. The dominant public perception of Stevenson, first as a dashing and glamorous adventurer, and then as an ill and tragically weakened married man who removed himself to a South Sea island, hardly lent itself to support personal sexual iconoclasm, let alone gay subtexts in his work.

Our aim in replaying Carson’s and Wilde’s exchanges, and then in comparing *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, has been to remind ourselves of the kinds of assumptions that have to be in place if the expressive value of literary works—their “authenticity”—is to be defined in terms of their connections to the author’s sexual life, or to assumptions about his or her sexual identity. It is important to remember that the accusation that Wilde “did write and publish and cause and procure to be printed and published with his name on the title page thereof a certain immoral and obscene book” did not require Carson to prove that Wilde was guilty of immoral and obscene activities in his own life. Likewise, then, we should also recognize that our evaluation of what exactly works such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* have to say about homosexuality does not have to depend on establishing the work’s closeness to Wilde’s own sexual practices. In forming a critical judgment about the novel we should try to separate two issues which Carson, and many literary critics since, have deliberately blurred. The first is: what (if anything) does *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (or any other work in Wilde’s œuvre) have to say about (homo)sexuality? And the second is: do those depictions of sexuality have any
interest or value in and of themselves apart from their alleged relationship to Wilde's own life, knowledge of which, as we have noted above, is still relatively insecure?

There is a more telling point to be made against seeing Wilde's literary works as crudely expressive of his sexuality, and this is also to be glimpsed in the libel trial. As we noted, only a fraction of Wilde's writing was mentioned in the court proceedings: so even if the case for seeing autobiographical elements in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be sustained, it still leaves the major part of the *oeuvre* unaccounted for. A theory of expressivity cannot be established on the basis of a few passages taken in isolation from one novel. It is worth reminding ourselves how resistant some of Wilde's other writing has been to readings of this sort. And it is also worth pointing out that when other works (notably *A Woman of No Importance* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*) have been read for their gay subtexts, those readings (as we argue in chapter five) are difficult to square with their overall dramatic structures, with their initial receptions, and with their enduring popularity among basically conservative British theatrical audiences.

There is also the issue of what we do with the evidence—mainly from contemporary reviews—about how Wilde's works were actually read at the time of their publication (rather than with the hindsight of the evidence that came to light during the trials). As we have said, it is certainly the case that some readers saw *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in terms of a scandalous portrayal of male-male desire but, as we have also said, many others did not. Moreover the worst of the British reviews came from individuals who seem to have known in advance what they were “looking for” in the book. In the terms in which Wilde put it, they found exactly what they “brought with them.” Much the same can be said of “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.,” another work often read nowadays for its homoerotic subtexts. However, as Horst Schroeder pointed out many years ago, hostile responses to Wilde’s essay/story were the exception rather than the rule. He claims that the vast majority of reviewers saw “no harm in the story and discussed it not from the point of view of morality, or rather immorality, but in the first place from the point of view of Shakespearean criticism.”12 Significantly, the most barbed review of “Mr. W.H.” came from the same source as the most vituperative comments about *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—from the *Scots Observer*, edited by that former colleague and later bitter rival of Wilde, the arch-conservative W. E. Henley, Stevenson’s model for the pirate Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*.

**Wilde's Place in a History of Sexuality**

Fittingly, such a perception of the discrepancy between modern readings of Wilde’s works and the evidence of how the majority of contemporary readers responded to them has led some historians to reexamine the whole issue of the kind of sexuality which the works express. Here some of the most searching
criticism of anachronistic readings of Wilde’s writings have been made by Alan Sinfield and a little later by Joseph Bristow. Both critics have suggested that such readings have been driven by modern concerns about homosexuality—that it is these concerns which in turn inform the identification and the interpretation of the works’ alleged homosexual codes. Broadly speaking, Sinfield and Bristow argue that the modern reader tends to equate the “effeminacy” associated with the behaviour of Wilde’s dandies with homosexuality even though, from the point of view of the cultural historian, there is little actual evidence for making such a connection in the years leading up to Wilde’s trials. As a consequence what the modern reader takes to be markers of gender politics might have appeared to original readers in the first instance as class markers, in the sense that representations of the excesses of the dandy were invariably understood to be comments on aristocratic privilege rather than on sexual identity. Such a reading has the advantage of preserving elements of the transgressive nature of Wilde’s heroes, but it gives to them a very different politics. It has the added merit of accounting for some contemporary objections to his work.

Arguments like those of Sinfield and Bristow, which attempt to distinguish between what was interpreted as effeminate behaviour on the one hand, and homosexual (or in Carson’s terms, “sodomitical”) behaviour on the other, in their turn have encouraged a wider-ranging debate about the historiography of gay culture in the late nineteenth century and the nature of Wilde’s precise role in it. The idea that Wilde’s trial marked the emergence of the homosexual as a distinct “type,” an observation which can be traced back to, and which has in turn received its authority from, the work of Michel Foucault, and which (as we noted) was developed by Sinfield, is now itself coming under scrutiny. So, too, is the assumption that the 1890s marked a particularly high moment of homophobia—a moment in what has been seen as a general homosexual panic. For example, through a meticulous examination of numerous legal cases, H. G. Cocks has argued that “sodomy” was named “openly, publicly, and repeatedly” from 1780 onwards, and that there is no evidence to see the 1890s as a uniquely homophobic decade. As a consequence, Cocks argues that there is no compelling evidence for Wilde’s trial being seen as a hugely significant defining moment which materially changed attitudes towards the sexual behaviour of homosexuals. Cocks even contests one of the fundamental received truths of queer theory, that the Labouchere amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, under which Wilde was convicted, was pivotal in the policing of sexuality. That act, in his view, did not substantially change the law; it merely codified what had been happening on a piecemeal basis in common law for a long period. In keeping with this revisionary tendency, Matt Cook has recently claimed that amendments to the 1898 Vagrancy Law (which passed into law well after Wilde’s trials, and which criminalized public soliciting or importuning) did much more to change the policing of homosexuality than Labouch-
ere's famous amendment. Cook also draws attention to the roles played by less prominent homosexual activists, such as George Ives, in bringing about real changes in the public perception of male-male desire. All of this runs counter to the views of a generation of earlier critics, such as Elaine Showalter, who argued that the 1890s was a singular decade, one marked off by its acute anxieties about gender and sex roles.

These debates are not of course about literary issues, nor are they much concerned with the role of literary works in the history of gay culture. However they do have important implications for the critic of Wilde’s literary works. We have argued that the interest in reading Wilde’s work autobiographically, stemming as it did from the trials, was part of a larger project of rehabilitating his reputation by giving him a central role in the history of gay rights. However, if that history is now being questioned, then the _raison d'être_ for such a reading is also weakened, if not undermined. If the argument for a generalized homosexual panic—that is, for a heightened anxiety about homosexual activity in the years leading up to Wilde’s trials—is flawed, then one of the central justifications of expressive autobiographical readings of his works is lost. We might put all this another way round and say that if arguments about a homosexual panic are exaggerated, then Wilde’s reasons for wishing to use his works to proselytize for what McKenna calls the “Cause” are by the same token undermined.

Raising questions about Wilde’s motives for writing leads to what is perhaps the most substantial objection to a straightforward identification between his literary works and his sexuality. Other details of Wilde’s biography—that is, his letters to his publishers, to his literary friends, his self-advertised desire for fame, his constant need for money—all these point to a range of quite separate motives for writing, some of which manifestly conflict with a desire to explore, in however coded a manner, his sexual identity. To treat Wilde’s works as expressing aspects of his life involves a profoundly impoverished view of both his personality and of literary creativity in general, one which separates the composition of individual works from much of what philosophers have for some years identified as the institutional qualities of art. Such a treatment also elides real distinctions to be made about different sorts of works, written in different genres, on different occasions, and for different audiences, different purposes, and for different publishers. It does not even acknowledge, let alone attempt to explain, what sociologists of texts are now calling the bibliographic codes of literary works. That is, it says little about a work’s reception and almost nothing about its sales, because it fails to notice the social, and so the produced, nature of any text—that decisions about pricing, format, print run, and so on, invariably have a commercial (and therefore a social) rather than simply expressive origin. Equally importantly, autobiographical, and particularly psychosexual, views of creativity have nothing to say about collaboration, particularly in those genres, such as
the drama, which depend upon a host of co-creative agents, principally actors, managers, and directors. (It is worth reminding ourselves also that Wilde worked most successfully in a wholly commercial theatrical environment, and none of the theatre managers with whom he collaborated would have any interest in staging a work which ran even the smallest risk of offending an audience, let alone of incurring the wrath of the state censor, the Lord Chamberlain’s Chief Examiner of Plays.) This is a qualification particularly important in Wilde’s case, because there is strong and consistent evidence that at every stage in his career as a writer both of fiction and of drama he solicited advice from more experienced colleagues and frequently acted on that advice.

And so …

Where have all these qualifications led us? Initially they suggest that the question of whether Wilde’s literary works are “about” his homosexuality cannot be satisfactorily answered by a recourse to details of his own sexual life. We can be confident about this claim for several reasons. First, many details of Wilde’s sexual life are still unknown, and some of the most important questions about it will probably never be answered. Even McKenna’s book relies on testimony from the trials, much of which is not necessarily reliable, and certainly not capable of being generalized to explain the whole of Wilde’s sexual experiences. Second, and as we have already suggested, there is a considerable dispute among cultural historians about whether there could have been a readership (beyond Wilde’s own intimate circle) for the coded references to homosexuality which his works allegedly contain. After all, reduced to their bare bones, arguments about subtexts in a literary work are invariably tautologous: we cannot prove the existence of hidden meanings. If we could do so, they wouldn’t be hidden, or have to be hidden, in the first place. All we can do is try to identify a body of readers for whom those readings would have been relevant, and try to find a persuasive reason for an author to address them. In the case of Wilde, neither of these avenues has been satisfactorily explored. And this reservation in turn leads to a third caveat. There is a great deal more to Wilde’s life (or to anybody else’s, for that matter) than sexual behaviour, and many more possible ways of explaining literary creativity. So even if we were disposed to accept the premise that Wilde’s personality was formed and then driven by his sexuality, we are not as a consequence justified in ignoring or neglecting those many other details which affected how his works were written, and which cannot be understood in terms of sexual orientation. To give a graphic example of this point: Wilde’s disputes with his publisher Leonard Smithers over the pricing and print runs of The Ballad of Reading Gaol (generally Wilde’s complaints were entirely related to the amount of money he would earn from the poem) probably had as much to do with his overall artistic conception of that work as his years in prison for gross indecency did.
Here perhaps we should confess to a vested interest in this debate about the limits to the amount of work which an autobiographically expressive aesthetic will do for us. Our example of Wilde’s disputes with Leonard Smithers is taken from an earlier attempt to discuss Wilde’s creativity in terms which deliberately resisted giving priority to his sexuality and which focused instead on the materialist preconditions for professional authorship in the late nineteenth century. In that study we argued that the mundane and the unglamorous aspects of authorship can be seen as inevitably possessing a powerful formative agency. The point of marshalling such information was not to offer it as an alternative to, say, Ellmann’s or McKenna’s version of creativity; nor indeed as an alternative to autobiographical interpretation per se. It was merely to point out that this kind of information has an equal claim to our attention when we try to understand what motivated Wilde, not least because it often leads to a concept of authorial intention which conflicts with one understood primarily in terms of his sexual identity. To put this simply, and perhaps in somewhat reductive terms: it is difficult to reconcile our knowledge that, for Wilde, writing was often and necessarily a commercial activity with the idea that he wished to use his literary works to subvert bourgeois sexual morality. At the same time, though, we also need to acknowledge that the majority of modern readers are likely to be attracted to Wilde precisely because of his sexual notoriety, and it is thus his sexuality—rather than those more mundane aspects of his life—which will continue to be seen as the driving force of his personality, and so the most important element in his creativity. Carson’s legacy, if not wholly welcome, has certainly been enduring.

Such an acknowledgment obviously places the academic critic in a distinctly odd position vis-à-vis that “general reader” to whom, as we noted in chapter one, he or she has—or should have—certain responsibilities. How can scholarship about Wilde—whether it is to disavow notions of authorial intention altogether, or whether it is to present a less glamorous and more commercially motivated intending author—be made relevant to these general readers’ experience when it seems to fly in the face of what they most want to know? Or rather, when it seems simply to disable or contradict the kind of reading to which many are so strongly attracted? As we have suggested, one can contest on scholarly grounds many of the details (as well as the overall argument) of McKenna’s biography: that his autobiographical reading of the literary works is simplistic and tautological, and that his sensationalized account of Wilde’s sexual promiscuity is based on what is often clearly unreliable evidence and an anachronistic conception of sexual identity. Yet McKenna’s biography—like the evidence from Wilde’s trials—gives the modern reader a powerfully dramatic portrait, one which it is difficult to modify, let alone supplant. The main challenge of the remainder of this book, then, is to try to show the positive elements of what will often seem like a negative activity—that of undermining or disabling some of the most cher-
ished popular myths about Wilde and his works, including the idea that his writing is—as McKenna puts it—“highly autobiographical.” We begin, in the next chapter, by looking at the notion of his life as a “tragedy,” and we shall concentrate on De Profundis, that work which seems on the face of things to be the most authentically autobiographical because it was not published in his lifetime and was therefore apparently free from the taint of those commercial interests which we have mentioned.

Notes

1. It is worth reminding American readers that British law does not define freedom of speech in the same way as American law, and that laws of slander, defamation, and libel are different in the two countries.


4. A comment made during a private conversation between Ian Small and Richard Ellmann in the early 1980s.

5. The most important of these was Joseph Donohue’s observation that Wilde’s creativity continued well after his release from prison: Wilde wrote and saw through press The Ballad of Reading Gaol (1898) and carefully and systematically revised The Importance of Being Earnest and An Ideal Husband for publication in 1899. See Joseph Donohue, “Recent Studies of Oscar Wilde,” Nineteenth-Century Theatre, 16.2 (1988), 123–36.


8. So are we really to believe, as McKenna seems to do, Douglas’s assertion, made in his Autobiography, that “‘at least ninety per cent’ of his contemporaries [at Winchester] had sex with other boys” and that the “remaining ten per cent were doomed to celibacy by circumstance rather than by choice” (McKenna, 153)?


10. There is the added complication that Le Gallienne’s handwriting, especially in those letters which McKenna quotes, is often very difficult to read.


**Works Cited & Consulted**


