Studying Oscar Wilde

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EARLIER we noted the discrepancy between academic interest in Wilde and his perennial popularity with the general reading public. In fact Wilde’s popular reputation today—as the author of four stylishly subversive comedies, a couple of touching short stories, and the macabre *Dorian Gray*—is not that different from the one which he enjoyed in the 1890s. Generally speaking, late-nineteenth- and twenty-first-century readers seem to make the same sorts of judgments about Wilde’s oeuvre: works which were relatively little read in Wilde’s time are still relatively little read today. His standing among academics, though, is different, and this state of affairs has come about because the grounds for the academic recuperation of Wilde’s reputation have little in common with the values of general readers who typically prize Wilde’s work for its capacity to entertain.

Concerned to establish Wilde’s place in a literary canon, one which encompasses contemporaries such as Henry James, Walter Pater, or Joseph Conrad, academics have often considered it important to establish his credentials as an original and “serious” thinker in tune with the intellectual currents associated with modernist thought and art. The occasional critic has even been tempted to see in Wilde’s wit a “profound philosophical seriousness” rather than just humour (Brown, xvi). As far back as the 1970s it was not unusual to identify Wilde as a key theorist of the *fin de siècle*, and to compare his influence with that of Friedrich Nietzsche (see, for example, Fletcher and Stokes, 114). Some years later this idea developed in such a way that Wilde’s writing—particularly his critique of nature and his interest in linguistic instability—was seen as an anticipation of the epistemological and moral relativism associated with late-twentieth-century postmodernism. Viewed from both positions, Wilde is avant-garde: he is outside or ahead of his time, and aligned with modes of writing or philosophical inquiry which fall well beyond the interests of most general readers.
A different avenue for understanding the intellectual fabric of Wilde’s work was explored by Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand in their 1989 edition of his *Oxford Notebooks* which, they claimed, revealed a hitherto unrealized depth and complexity in his undergraduate education. Jottings in the notebooks seemed to show that Wilde had read not only the main texts of Greek and Roman literature and philosophy expected from a nineteenth-century classics student, but also some contemporary German philosophy (particularly Friedrich Hegel), some French social theory (such as Auguste Comte), as well as works by recent British historians, scientists, and anthropologists (including Henry Buckle, Charles Darwin, and Edward Tylor). This description of what we might term Wilde’s intellectual development—derived from details of the curriculum he studied as an undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin and then at Magdalen College, Oxford—in turn enabled critics such as Linda Dowling to revalue Wilde’s engagement with Greek and Roman culture in such a way that it became central to his life. For her that engagement represented an intrinsic part of his understanding of his own sexual identity because it provided a discourse that permitted the articulation of, as well as an intellectual validation for, male-male desire. The originality of this argument was that it removed the issue of Wilde’s homosexuality from his biography (from an account of actual sexual practices and perhaps partners), and as a consequence allowed it to be reified: that is, it made homosexuality principally a matter of discourse. Dowling’s interest in the way classical references functioned to intellectualize male-male desire was thus an exclusively textual one. Although details of his sexual practices were obviously important in suggesting some reasons for the nature of Wilde’s concerns, her evaluation of his writing ultimately rests on its contribution to a particular area of cultural and intellectual debate, many of the details of which (once again) clearly lie outside the interests of the general reader (both in the nineteenth century and today).

The third and oldest way of recuperating Wilde’s reputation as a serious thinker began with the work of George Woodcock in the late 1940s. He attempted to see Wilde as an important political theorist. For Woodcock, Wilde’s most significant work was “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” which Woodcock read in the context of the history of anarchy, setting it alongside works by figures such as the contemporary exiled Russian anarchist Prince Peter Kropotkin and the mid-nineteenth-century French philosopher and social theorist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Later critics would extend this line of argument to address Wilde’s engagement with other strands of late-nineteenth-century political debate, such as socialism and individualism (both of which were contested concepts at the time Wilde was writing). Isobel Murray’s reading of what she called Wilde’s “prison writing” presented Wilde as both an original theorist of liberty, who synthesized such divergent sources as Ralph Waldo Emerson and the fourth-century BC Chinese mystic Chuang Tzû, as well as a political activist who cam-
 campaigned for prison reform (evidenced in the letters he wrote on this topic to the *Morning Chronicle* after his release from prison). More recently still—and in implicit opposition to Woodcock and Murray—critics interested in Wilde’s Irish nationality have claimed to find in some of his works a critique of British colonialism and an articulation of a form of republicanism, political positions that again enable him to be described as a literary innovator, either (in Declan Kiberd’s view) heading up the “Irish risorgimento” or (in Richard Pine’s argument) as an originator of a modernist tradition later and separately inherited by W.B.Yeats, Jorge Luis Borges, Jean Genet, and Roland Barthes. What is common to all these arguments about the political nature of Wilde’s writings is the (by now) familiar idea of him writing “against the grain”—that is, against the expectations and values of middle- and upper-class Victorian readers and theatregoers. Once again we are given an interpretation of Wilde’s writings that is in stark contrast to the way in which they were read by most of his contemporaries and continue to be read by the majority of readers today.

The most recent and ambitious attempt to cast Wilde as a serious intellectual is Julia Prewitt Brown’s *Cosmopolitan Criticism*, a work that incorporates elements of all three of the arguments we have outlined above. Placing Wilde in what she sees as a tradition of continental philosophy, originating with Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller, strengthened by Søren Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and culminating in the work of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, Brown sees Wilde articulating a cosmopolitan aesthetic, one which translates politically into an openness to other cultures, and which has elements in common with the cosmopolitanism advocated by some recent political thinkers in the United States. More significantly, perhaps, she charts Wilde’s working through of this idea as a “thirty-year” process, dating from his days as a schoolboy at Portora Royal School to the writing of *De Profundis*, and encompassing most of his oeuvre. It becomes, in effect, the defining purpose of his life and art, giving unity and coherence to what might otherwise seem an eclectic and uneven career. We might note in passing that no nineteenth-century reader could possibly have shared this perspective on Wilde, for none would have been in a position to view the oeuvre in this way; in point of fact there can only have been a small handful of readers who could claim to have known (or owned) much more than half of Wilde’s published writings, for they had been directed at such different sorts of audiences, and had sold in small numbers. The price Brown pays for intellectualizing Wilde, then, is to estrange him from his own time, as well as from many modern readers, few of whom will approach his individual works as elements to be understood in terms of some larger “philosophy of art.”

What is common to all these ways of recuperating Wilde as a serious thinker (rather than an entertaining writer) is that an appreciation of that intellectual or philosophical seriousness seems to require lengthy elucidation by academic
critics. Wilde, that is, is made out to be a difficult writer, one inaccessible to the common reader. It is also noticeable that many of the studies we have mentioned (including Brown’s) place considerable emphasis on parts of the œuvre least read by that common reader—particularly Wilde’s critical writings, a category that includes his graduate essay “The Rise of Historical Criticism” (never published in his lifetime), and the four essays which make up Intentions. Although many modern readers might be able to quote aphorisms from those critical essays, probably only a few could summarize accurately their arguments, and it was not until 2001 that his critical writings became available on their own in a modern paperback edition. Here, then, we seem to have a particularly striking example of that contrast between the writer of popular entertainments and the writer constructed by academics whom we mentioned in our introduction. Brown’s Wilde, grappling with the complexities of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, would be virtually unrecognizable to the general reader, aware of Wilde’s engagement with things German only through slighting references to that country’s language and music in the plays.

Our challenge in this chapter is not to inquire whether both these “Wildes” can coexist—of course they can, and obviously already do so; it is rather to investigate whether it is necessary for them to continue to inhabit such distinctly separate cultural worlds. In trying to come to terms with this question, there are a number of topics that we need to explore. First (and fundamental—

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**The Title of “The Rise of Historical Criticism”**  
Like the title De Profundis, which was given by Robert Ross to his abridged versions of Wilde’s prison manuscript, the title “The Rise of Historical Criticism” was also the invention of a later editor. Wilde’s own name for his essay (the manuscript of which, in three morocco-bound notebooks, is held in the Clark Library) was simply “Historical Criticism: Αλήθεια.” The Greek subtitle—which translates as “Truth”—was almost certainly an allusion to an anecdote in Aelian’s Varia Historia, 14. 34, which describes how ancient Egyptian priests were also judges, and in that capacity had to be “exceptionally honest and rigorous,” qualities which were symbolized by a statuette of lapis lazuli, worn around the neck, which was called “Truth” (ΑΛήθεια). The story of how Wilde’s essay lost its subtitle and gained a new, longer main title is an intriguing one, and it shows how often expediency, rather than accuracy, has played a significant role in the transmission of Wilde’s texts.

According to Stuart Mason, the manuscript of Wilde’s essay was one of many that disappeared (or were sold) following the sale of his effects at Tite Street on 24 April 1895. It first resurfaced in 1905 when part of it (the material in the first notebook) was privately printed under the title “The Rise of Historical Criticism” in New York in an edition of 225 numbered copies by the Sherwood Press. This first notebook was subsequently offered for sale in July 1905 (a description of it appeared in the sale catalogue of S. B. Luyster, Jun., of 35 John Street, New York).
ly) we will reexamine the grounds upon which Wilde has been understood as a serious writer. This in turn will lead us to reexamine the nature of his learning, and the ways in which he deploys it in his *oeuvre*, particularly in his critical writings. Then we will investigate whether providing for the general reader information about the full range of Wilde’s reading—as an editor does when he or she annotates his work—necessarily turns him into a difficult writer. The question we want to address is a straightforward one: what is that scholarly erudition for? We will argue that the presence of what (to the modern reader in particular) may appear to be esoteric references or allusions is not necessarily an indication of intellectual sophistication or philosophical complexity; it may just reflect the different educational backgrounds that separate the average late-nineteenth- from the average twenty-first-century reader. What matters more are the ends to which these references and allusions are put, and the manner in which they are signalled to the reader. At this point in our argument we will draw some comparisons with near-contemporary authors—Walter Pater and T. S. Eliot—who also conspicuously parade their learning, and who have also often been considered to be difficult for general readers. Finally we shall try to come to some conclusions about the nature of Wilde’s learning in relation to his place in literary history: that is, whether it operates in such a way to align him with, say, modernist writers or even with postmodernists. Before we begin, though, it will be useful to return briefly to the issue of Wilde’s popularity in his own

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**continued** Mason does not record who bought the first notebook. We know, however, that it was not purchased by Robert Ross, for when he published the first portion of Wilde’s essay in volume VII of his *Collected Edition* in 1908, he used the text and title of the 1905 Sherwood Press edition. In a note appended to the edition of that volume printed on Japanese vellum, Ross recorded his gratitude to a “Mr Charles Glidder Osborne, who has examined the original manuscript, now in America.” When Osborne (who may have been the purchaser of the first notebook when it was sold in July 1905) checked the manuscript for Ross he must have neglected to tell him that the Sherwood Press title was erroneous. Mason notes, somewhat cryptically, that some time after he had published the first part of Wilde’s essay Ross “found” the remainder of the piece “in two quarto exercise books” (Mason, 470). These were reproduced in volume XIV of the *Collected Edition*. When he consulted these last two notebooks Ross would have clearly seen for himself that Wilde’s choice of title was “Historical Criticism: Αλήθεια,” for it is repeated at the front of each notebook. Yet Ross did not make this correction: instead he retained the Sherwood Press title, which has been reproduced in every edition of the essay since. Editorial quibbling over titles may seem a trivial matter until we recall how significant they can be in determining the ways in which we approach a piece of writing as well as, in this particular case, how central the concept of truth would become in Wilde’s later writing.
time, as it turns out to have an important bearing on how academic critics have approached the whole topic of his intellectual seriousness.

**Wilde’s Popularity in His Time**

When we use the term “popularity” of a writer in the late nineteenth century we usually take as our measure the sales of particular works, or—in the case of a play—where it was performed, the length of its run, and its box office receipts. By any criterion, Wilde’s society comedies certainly were popular successes, although they had nothing like the popularity of the plays of some of his contemporaries—particularly Arthur Wing Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones. Judged in terms of sales they achieved during his life, Wilde’s prose works appear to have been much less popular. According to Mason’s figures, the sales of the book version of *Dorian Gray* and of the three volumes of short stories barely reached four figures apiece. *Intentions* sold in similar numbers, but the poetry sold only in hundreds. The only exception was *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*; this work went through seven editions in Wilde’s lifetime, but the total sale still ran only to thousands (Mason, 332, 360, 364, 355, 282, 407–23). These figures do seem poor compared to audiences for the plays, but they were about average for their time, particularly in the case of criticism and poetry, genres acknowledged by several publishers in the late nineteenth century to be difficult to sell. Of course there were authors who did very much better than Wilde; and there were “best sellers,” usually long novels, a genre which did not interest him, but which could sometimes sell in tens or occasionally hundreds of thousands. Wilde’s sales figures should not therefore be taken as evidence that some of his prose was too difficult or too learned for late-nineteenth-century general readers. In fact contemporary reviewers tended to note the opposite, frequently complaining about the facile nature of his learning. This judgment contrasts oddly with the views of some of those modern critics whose work we have just surveyed. Whose judgment should we trust, that of Wilde’s contemporaries, most of whom shared his education, or that of modern critics, many of whom have not?

**The Depth of Wilde’s Learning**

So what do we know about Wilde’s learning? The story which we are most usually told about it dwells, as we hinted above, on his success as an undergraduate at Trinity College, which in turn won him a classical demyship to Magdalen. The demyship (or scholarship at Magdalen) did represent real academic distinction, but we should remember that the award was a closed one (that is, one restricted to students at Trinity) and that Wilde was therefore competing against a relatively small group—those well-educated and able Irish Protestants who wanted to continue their studies in England. The Oxford double first was a considerable achievement as well; but once more we should bear in mind the fact the syllabus was not as extensive nor the examination system
nearly as rigorous as they later became. (It was for this reason that contempo-
rary commentators complained so often about the influence of private tutors
and cramming schools, which, it was claimed, could achieve in a few months
what was supposed to require several years of study at university.) Moreover,
Wilde’s achievements—although apparently, in Wilde’s own words, astonishing
“the dons”—did not earn him that fellowship at Oxford that he so desired.Wil-
de entered two prize competitions at Oxford: in 1878 the Newdigate Prize for
poetry and in 1879 the Chancellor’s English Essay prize. He won the Newdi-
gate, but the essay now known as “The Rise of Historical Criticism” failed to
win the Chancellor’s prize. In fact the prize was not awarded to anyone in 1879.
This was strange, for the same group of individuals judged both competitions,
and so it is difficult to believe that Wilde’s failure in the essay prize, the one in
which he so assiduously exhibited his learning and thus his credentials for an
Oxford fellowship, was due to prejudice. Awards of fellowships were based on
wider grounds than mere success in examinations, and it is quite possible that
Wilde’s learning, though impressive enough to earn him a double first, was per-
ceived to be too facile compared with the qualities expected of a potential fel-
low. Here it is perhaps worth noting that a decade or so earlier one of Wilde’s
mentors at Oxford, Walter Pater, was reported to have been given a fellowship at
Brasenose College because of his extracurricular knowledge of German philos-
ophy (moreover he had graduated with only a second-class honours degree).

It might be tempting to think that “The Rise of Historical Criticism”—that
critical work which is so central to Brown’s and to Smith and Helfand’s claims
about the development of Wilde’s intellectual concerns—articulated a thesis
of such startling originality or iconoclasm that it fell outside the boundaries
of what was then acceptable academic discourse. In this view, it would not be
shortcomings in Wilde’s learning which had excluded him from an academic
career, but rather the fact that his intellectual reach exceeded his grasp. Unfor-
unately, though, a close reading of the essay does not bear out this argument: by
far the largest part of it is translation or paraphrase of well-known texts from the
Oxford Greats curriculum. Moreover some of the textual examples singled out
by Wilde appeared in such standard contemporary textbooks as John Addington
Symonds’s Studies of the Greek Poets and John Grote’s ten-volume History of
Greece. In a similar vein, many of what appear to be the more esoteric references
in the essay—to, say, ancient Chinese annals, or the Indian King Chandragupta,
or the statue of Memnon, or the Minyan Treasure-House at Orchomenus—
almost certainly derived from a relatively small number of well-known second-
ary sources, in these cases from Hegel’s Lectures on the Philosophy of History (which
had been translated into English by J. Sibree in 1872).

Even what appear to be Wilde’s own judgments on certain aspects of Greek
and Roman history—on, for example, the Catiline conspiracy or the role of
the Roman pontifical colleges in fostering historical composition—can also often be traced back to standard undergraduate textbooks that we know he had studied—works as famous as Mommsen’s *History of Rome*. Occasionally Wilde is original: so his attempt to draw analogies between Greek historians (such as Polybius) and certain currents in modern thinking (notably the evolutionary view of society put forward by Herbert Spencer) may indeed have seemed novel to the essay’s first readers. At the same time, though, we ought to be aware of the fact that the nature of those comparisons tended to derive from scholarship that was quite dated by the time he was writing. For example, on several occasions in his essay Wilde alludes to Henry Buckle’s *History of Civilization in England* (1857–1861), a work which seems to have appealed to him because it argued that human behaviour, like the operation of the physical world generally, was governed by regular principles or laws, the existence of which permitted the writing of history to attain, or aspire to, the status of a science. This proposition, in its turn, had certain analogies—according to Wilde—with the concept of causation that could be found in the work of a number of ancient Greek historians, particularly Herodotus, Thucydides, and Polybius. What is relevant here is not so much the validity or otherwise of Wilde’s comparison, but the fact that by the time he was writing Buckle’s (originally controversial) history was nearly twenty years old, and its propositions concerning the scientific basis of history were already out of date. In other words, Wilde’s attempt in his essay to point out the modernity of Greek authors by comparing them with what he called the “most scientific of modern methods” was based on a concept of historiography that in the eyes of many contemporaries was not just dated, but was sim-

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**“The Rise of Historical Criticism” & Wilde’s Scholarship** The fact that Wilde’s graduate essay was written for an academic audience, and that its main purpose was to gain an academic post, gives us a useful insight into Wilde’s—and possibly also his contemporaries’—attitudes towards scholarship. If she were to glance at Wilde’s manuscript (as opposed to the “tidied up” version printed by Ross and subsequent editors) the modern graduate student would be struck by how careless Wilde seems in the way he registers his source materials. Citations are only rarely given for quoted material; quoted material itself is only rarely indented, and when it occurs within the main text, it is hardly ever properly marked off with quotation marks. When Wilde does mark the beginning of a quotation, he generally omits the closing quote marks, so it is difficult to tell where quotations end, a practice found later in many of his reviews for the *Pall Mall Gazette*. He also includes within his quotations material that would normally be excluded, such as “he said.” In addition the essay contains numerous spelling and grammatical errors as well as an idiosyncratic (and often confusing) method of punctuation. So, for example, em-dashes are used where the modern reader would normally expect a full stop, and sentences following full stops do not always begin with capital letters.
ply incorrect: not promising material for an aspiring fellow in what was then Britain’s most distinguished university. Far from being radical, by 1879 Wilde’s thesis, which stressed the role of the “speculative faculty” in historical research, may have struck his academic judges as old-fashioned.

To stress the lack of originality of Wilde’s thinking in “The Rise of Historical Criticism” and his use of familiar academic sources is not as pejorative as it seems. It is rather to recognize the essay for what it is: a conscientious exhibition of undergraduate learning, occasionally spiced with a dash of originality. Compared with the later published work, what is absent from the essay is that rhetorical élan, that confidence and ease in the handling of complex source materials which allowed for a nonchalantly relaxed and witty display of learning. “The Rise of Historical Criticism” is not an elegant piece of prose, nor one that makes for easy reading. But that difficulty is not because it is particularly erudite, its sources esoteric, nor its argument complex; rather the opposite: often the writing is merely laboured. Indeed one modern editor has quite fittingly described it as “longwinded” and something of a “dumpling” (Holland, ed., Works, 908). In some places in the manuscript paragraphs end mid-sentence and lines are skipped before the next paragraph begins, as if Wilde could not quite work out how to link his thoughts together. There are also places where gaps have been left with just a series of notes or jottings which presumably Wilde intended to amplify later. (Evidence of these shortcomings was erased when the essay was published by Robert Ross posthumously.) At its best “The Rise of Historical Criticism” has a journeyman quality to it, so that it reads more like an anticipation of the modestly successful anonymous journalism which occu-

continued When compiling his Bibliography of Oscar Wilde in the early decades of the twentieth century, Stuart Mason commissioned J. W. Mackail, Professor of Poetry at Oxford (from 1906–1911), to read Wilde’s essay in order to gain some insight into how it might have been received by its original intended audience. Mackail’s comments, as reported by Mason, are intriguing, for he does not make any reference to what—to modern eyes—looks like slipshod scholarship, noting simply: “The essay, young as it is, is quite up to the general level of that sort of thing and I do not know why the prize was not awarded” (Mason, 470).

It is not easy to interpret Mackail’s comments. It is possible, although unlikely, that scholarship was not particularly important in Oxford examinations at the time; it is also possible that Mackail did not read the essay closely, or was simply being polite. A third possibility is that modern concepts of scholarly rigour, those associated with larger developments in the social organization of knowledge, such as the twin processes of specialization and professionalization, became established only in a piecemeal fashion. Thus writing that looks “unscholarly” to modern eyes might have been quite acceptable in its own time.
pied Wilde for most of the mid-1880s than those flamboyant tours de force that make up Intentions.

The logic of these details is to suggest that there may be an alternative way of understanding the significance of Wilde’s undergraduate career and the importance of the knowledge he acquired during it for the writer he later became. Wilde was undoubtedly a clever and diligent student, with a particular facility for Greek translation, an excellent memory, and catholic reading habits; but he does not seem to have been intellectually precocious or scholarly, particularly in terms of his engagement with contemporary classical and historical knowledge. This observation might appear negative, but it is not necessarily the case that scholarship alone makes for either a good, or even an entertaining writer. Often the opposite: there were many erudite Victorian critics, such as John Churton Collins, who were tedious writers and whose criticism is virtually forgotten today.

What other evidence do we have for the development of Wilde’s intellectual interests? As we have noted, there are a number of surviving notebooks, mostly dating from his undergraduate years, which appear to record some of his thoughts on the books he read, and which may have been used for some of his later writing (the clearest link between them and later work is the piece most contemporary with them, “The Rise of Historical Criticism”). There are two very early notebooks (in the Clark Library) which date from Wilde’s time at Trinity and which contain jottings on philosophy and particularly on Aristotle’s Ethics. There is another early notebook, now at Yale University, which contains extensive jottings on Theodor Mommsen’s History of Rome. There is a further such book (currently in a private collection, but described in the Prescott Catalogue at entry 441) which also contains notes on Greek and Roman history and philosophy. And finally there are the two notebooks (again held in the Clark Library) published by Smith and Helfand in their Oscar Wilde’s Oxford Notebooks.

Taken together these extant books have a complex story to tell us about Wilde’s early intellectual development beyond the dictates of the Oxford undergraduate curriculum; indeed, as we have noted, the record of his reading in them extends well beyond what would have been works set for examinations. The story they tell is also necessarily a fragmentary one, partly because of the way in which Wilde took notes. Many of his entries—particularly those in the two notebooks published by Smith and Helfand—have a shorthand quality to them; Wilde typically used these notebooks to copy out phrases or quotations that struck him as being particularly memorable and worthy of record. However, they do not, taken on their own, constitute evidence for a sustained encounter with any of the books he read. Nor can we know whether the evidence they provide for his reading is exhaustive or even representative; nor, indeed, wheth-
er a couple of sentences copied out from one chapter of a multivolume work are proof that he read all of it, read it thoroughly, or even admired it.² We should also bear in mind that Wilde’s notebooks were private documents, and we cannot be sure of their precise use. They may have been aide-memoires, revision tools, or some kind of reading diary. Moreover, the jottings in them that have not been traced to contemporary published sources may have derived from comments made in lectures to which Wilde listened, or they may have been records of observations made in tutorials or casually by some of his friends. All this is to suggest that they are not necessarily always original reflections.

To interpret those jottings, then, as evidence of Wilde developing some “serious” philosophical position—whether that “synthesis of Hegelian idealism and Spencerian evolutionary theory” posited by Smith and Helfand (Smith and Helfand, vii), or what Brown describes as the development of “the philosophical taxonomy by which [Wilde] would later come to treat the problem of art” (Brown, xv)—requires many gaps to be filled and often great leaps of faith. Certainly, such an interpretation places a weight on the evidence that in truth it cannot really bear. There is, moreover, a quite different way of interpreting the jottings in the notebooks. Instead of trying to fill in the gaps to produce a coherent narrative, we could equally well remark on the relative autonomy of each note, and see in them a quality remarkably similar to the aphorisms with which Wilde was reported to have peppered his conversation and which occur in his published works—that facility for summing up “all systems in a phrase and all existence in an epigram” which he recollected in De Profundis. In this argument the importance of the evidence contained in the notebooks is not to do with matters of intellectual development, with detecting the emergence of a philosophy, but rather with the development of a style, of a singular, and not necessarily scholarly, engagement with source material.

The point here is not whether one of these interpretations is more “correct” than the other, but simply that both are possible or plausible, because the evidence from the notebooks never speaks for itself. This in turn should alert us to the difficulties of using materials written at a very early stage in Wilde’s career to explain what happened later. Such analyses are always post hoc, in the sense that it is the later work (or rather, a particular interpretation of the later work, such as assumptions about its difficulty, seriousness, or erudition) which draws the critic back to the juvenilia. We can see the force of this observation if for a moment we reverse its terms: so, if the Oxford notebooks or “The Rise of Historical Criticism” were the only pieces of Wilde’s critical writings that we had in front of us, would any feature of them be striking enough to make us want to read more, to find out if there was any later criticism? Would those scattered jottings and that rambling essay announce themselves as evidence of an original creative mind at work? The answer is of course a resounding “No.”
There is another caveat to be applied to this use of Wilde’s early writing: most readers rarely try to understand a later work by making comparisons with something written years earlier (and for a very different purpose) or suspend judgments about a work written by a young man in anticipation that better works will emerge later. The unwritten assumption is that we cannot understand a single work until we understand the *oeuvre*, a dilemma that recalls a classic hermeneutic catch-22—we cannot understand the parts until we understand the whole, but we cannot understand the whole until we understand the parts. The logic of all this is that we should perhaps look more closely at Wilde’s learning in the particular contexts in which it is exhibited, and this means taking account of the concept of audience for which the critical essays in works like *Intentions* were directed. What observations can we make about Wilde’s learning as it appears in such pieces?

**The Character of Wilde’s Learning**

When we talk about how Wilde’s learning is exhibited in *Intentions* we obviously have a fairly secure notion of his intended audience, and therefore a firmer sense of what particular textual or intertextual effects he may have had in mind. Nonetheless there is an important if subtle distinction to be made between reading a work like *Intentions* for evidence of philosophical seriousness and examining the ways in which the volume displays its knowledge. In the first case, the work is being identified fairly closely with the author; but in the second there is a possible discrepancy between knowledge and the methods by which it is exhibited. This in turn opens up the space in which irony operates; it allows us to see that the ways in which knowledge is displayed—the particular use of, say, allusion and citation—can be as significant as that knowledge itself. The best way to understand these distinctions is probably by some examples, beginning with those passages that appear to be the most difficult because the learning in them—certainly upon a first reading—seems to be so dense.

With Wilde that learning frequently takes on the character of a kind of list. It occurs in most of the nondramatic works, but most particularly in *Intentions*. The following passage from “The Decay of Lying” is a good example:

It was not always thus. We need not say anything about the poets, for they, with the unfortunate exception of Mr. Wordsworth, have been really faithful to their high mission, and are universally recognized as being absolutely unreliable. But in the works of Herodotus, who, in spite of the shallow and ungenerous attempts of modern sciolists to verify his history, may justly be called the ‘Father of Lies’; in the published speeches of Cicero and the biographies of Suetonius; in Tacitus at his best; in Pliny’s *Natural History*; in Hanno’s *Periplus*; in all the early chronicles; in the Lives of the Saints; in Froissart and Sir Thomas Malory; in the travels of Marco Polo; in Olaus Magnus, and Aldrovandus, and Conrad Lycosthenes, with his magnificent *Prodigiorum et Ostentorum Chronicon*; in the autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini; in the memoirs of Casanuova; in Defoe’s *History of the Plague*; in Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*; in Napoleon’s despatches, and in the works
of our own Carlyle, whose *French Revolution* is one of the most fascinating historical novels ever written, facts are either kept in their proper subordinate position, or else entirely excluded on the general ground of dulness. (Ross, ed., *Intentions*, 27)

At this point in his argument Vivian is attempting to provide Cyril (and thus the reader) with a vivid illustration of his apparently counterintuitive argument that the most valuable and memorable kind of writing, paradoxically including history, is that which is “absolutely indifferent to fact.” And of course he is also in a sense showing off, trying to overwhelm Cyril’s rather halfhearted objections (“I think that view might be questioned”) with a flood of increasingly esoteric examples.

Most modern readers’ initial impressions of this “list” will probably centre on its length and eclecticism; most, too, will be familiar with only a few of the authors whom Wilde mentions. So Wordsworth needs little or no introduction (although a modern as well as a nineteenth-century reader might wonder why so many years after his death Wilde still calls him “Mr.”). But while Defoe’s, Boswell’s, Carlyle’s, and Malory’s writings will also probably be known (at least in part), Casanova, Napoleon, Cellini, and Marco Polo will principally be just names. The same is true of Wilde’s list of classical authors. Modern readers may at least have heard of Tacitus, Pliny, Herodotus, and Cicero, but unless they have enjoyed (or endured) a classical education are unlikely to be familiar with anything those Greek and Roman worthies actually wrote. And what about Olaus Magnus, Aldrovandus, and Conrad Lycothenes? These will almost certainly be completely unknown to our general reader. Would late-nineteenth-century readers have been less ignorant? Some would certainly have been better informed about the classical references, and some may also have been familiar with the writings of Casanova, Napoleon, Cellini, and Marco Polo. (For example, a new edition of Napoleon’s letters had been published in 1884, Marco Polo’s writings had appeared in a list of “books to read” in an 1886 review for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and Benvenuto Cellini’s autobiography had been translated into English in 1888.) But the Swedish historian Olaus Magnus (1490–1558), the Italian naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605), and Swiss philologist Conrad Lycothenes (1518–1561), would probably have been as remote for the reader then as now. The important question thus becomes whether these different levels of knowledge actually matter? Or, put another way, does a full acquaintance with all the references in Vivian’s list make any difference to how we interpret it, and thus to our acceptance of Vivian’s proposition about the role of facts in history? Are the specificities of the particular references significant?

The answer to this last question is both “yes” and “no” in the sense that the specificity of a particular reference seems to become less important the more esoteric it is. To put this another way: a reader will have “got the point”—not in fact a difficult one to get—after understanding only a few of the references,
because that point does not change as we move through the list. So the function of the increasing impenetrability of Wilde’s list is precisely to out-maneuivre the reader in a game of intellectual one-upmanship, to go beyond what he or she is able to verify. Precisely where and when this occurs will of course vary from reader to reader, but once again this variability does not really matter. For example, nearly all readers (then and now) will see that in referring to Wordsworth, Wilde/Vivian is not deriding Romantic poetry in general, but rather Wordsworth in particular, precisely because of his claims in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads about sincerity of poetic expression and the poet’s fidelity to nature. Similarly, the reference to Boswell’s biography works because he was known to have made up many of the details of his volume (a topic which received a great deal of publicity in the late nineteenth century following the revelations of Charles Rogers’s Boswelliana: The Commonplace Book of James Boswell, 1874).

Even if we allow for the fact that historically separate groups of readers will have different kinds of education, the ways in which Wilde’s rhetoric operates remain virtually unchanged. As we have said, many nineteenth-century readers would certainly have appreciated the specificity of the classical references—the fact that in his Histories Herodotus scathingly dismissed sources which claimed

**Parading Knowledge in “Pen, Pencil, and Poison”** “Pen, Pencil, and Poison” may strike many modern readers as the most “learned” of Wilde’s pieces in Intentions, not in the sense of it being necessarily the most abstruse or wide-ranging in its references or allusions, but rather in the way it appears to draw on a very detailed body of research about the life and works of a figure who will be largely unfamiliar to them, that of the Victorian poisoner Thomas Griffiths Wainewright. Knowledge about Wainewright comes to the reader in two forms. First, there are the details of his biography, about which Wilde appears to be impressively well-informed: so we are given precise descriptions of Wainewright’s parents (including an account of the epitaph printed in the Gentleman’s Magazine following the death of his mother), his upbringing in his uncle’s “fine Georgian mansion” with its “lovely gardens and well-timbered park,” his education at “Charles Burney’s academy at Hammersmith,” and so forth (Ross, ed., Intentions, 63). Second, there are the very lengthy lists of paintings, engravings, books, jewellery, and furniture which Wilde uses in order to convey to the reader the breadth and refinement of Wainewright’s taste. Thus, for example, we are told that in his library Wainewright has “an engraving of the ‘Delphic Sibyl’ of Michael Angelo,” “the ‘Pastoral’ of Giorgione,” as well as some “Florentine majolica,” “a rude lamp from some old Roman tomb,” “a book of Hours,” some of “Tassie’s gems,” a “tiny Louis-Quatorze bonbonnière with a miniature by Petitot,” a “fine collection of Marc Antonios,” “Turner’s ‘Liber Studiorum,’” “the head of Alexander on an onyx of two strata,” and a “superb altissimo relievo on cornelian” of “Jupiter Ægiochus” (Ross, ed., Intentions, 69).
that people such as the “Neuri” turned into wolves, or that those inhabiting the mountains north of Scythia had “goat’s feet.” They would also have known that—these caveats notwithstanding—Herodotus could also confidently attribute the deaths of two Spartan envoys at the hands of the Athenians to “the venting of the rage of Talthybius” (a mythical figure worshipped as a hero at Sparta and Argos) and as a “sure sign of heaven’s handiwork.” Some of those self-same readers would also have known that Cicero’s versions of his own speeches in the senate (on, for example, the Catiline conspiracy) appeared quite differently in reports of them made by writers such as Sallust in his Bellum Catilinae. A few might conceivably have known too that one of the most famous speeches reported by Tacitus (in his Annals)—that by the emperor Claudius when he gave freedom to the Gauls—was later proved to have been significantly rewritten, rearranged, and reordered when fragments of Claudius’s actual speech, inscribed on bronze tablets, were discovered at Fourière near the modern city of Lyons in 1524. But the fact that modern readers (and of course many nineteenth-century readers) do not know these particular details does not really matter—they will still have understood the general thrust of Vivian’s argument much earlier. Moreover, as we said, the main point of that long list is that some of it should not be understood: its ultimate incomprehensibility is an intrinsic part of the joke.

continued  However, this apparent “research” becomes much less striking when we realize that nearly all of it was taken from a single book, W. Carew Hazlitt’s Essays and Criticisms by Thomas Griffiths Wainewright (1880). That volume brought together a collection of Wainewright’s critical writings (mainly from the London Magazine), and prefaced them with a long introductory essay that attempted to separate fact from fiction in Wainewright’s extraordinary life. Wilde’s grudging acknowledgment of Hazlitt’s volume towards the end of “Pen, Pencil, and Poison”—he refers to it condescendingly as “quite invaluable in its way” (Ross, ed., Intentions, 92)—seems designed to disguise the fact that his whole piece was constructed more or less of paraphrases and quotations from the essays that Hazlitt had anthologized, together with many borrowings from Hazlitt’s own introduction (Wilde even repeats Hazlitt’s mistakes). So what exactly was Wilde’s game here? Did he assume that most readers would be unfamiliar with Hazlitt’s volume and therefore would not realize the extent of his indebtedness? And what of those who did? In “The Critic as Artist” Wilde seems to have had the perfect answer: when discussing the topic of originality, Gilbert claims that “treatment is the test” (Ross, ed., Intentions, 143)—that is, the source or originator of an idea is less important than what the critic is able to do with it. In such a view the acknowledgment of source materials—the whole paraphernalia of modern scholarship—is conveniently rendered redundant.
It follows from this that a modern reader should not be dismayed or overwhelmed by a parade of recondite knowledge—this is precisely Wilde’s point. Moreover research into the individual references, although perhaps of some interest in itself, will not significantly alter their understanding of what Wilde/Vivian is trying to do. A second observation to make is that Wilde’s references are not functioning in the way that scholarly allusion normally does—that is, when full knowledge of an allusion is a precondition of a reader’s full understanding of a work’s argument. At one level, then, Wilde seems to be poking fun at varieties of useless scholarly knowledge, while at the same time fully exploiting an opportunity to display the width of his own catholic reading. And this in turn explains exactly why some contemporary reviewers could acknowledge what they saw as a certain cleverness in Wilde’s argument but also disapprove of its apparent lack of serious purpose.

Not all Wilde’s allusions in *Intentions* are as densely packed as those in the passage that we quoted above; nevertheless the listing effect—the quick succession of name after name—does reappear surprisingly often, and generally works in a similar way, in the sense that the absence of specific knowledge about a name being mentioned barely detracts from an understanding of the point being made. Take, for example, the following passage from “The Critic as Artist” which begins (again) with the relatively familiar but then proceeds to the recondite:

> Who, as Mr. Pater suggests somewhere, would exchange the curve of a single rose-leaf for that formless intangible Being which Plato rates so high? What to us is the Illumination of Philo, the Abyss of Eckhart, the Vision of Böhme, the monstrous Heaven itself that was revealed to Swedenborg’s blinded eyes? Such things are less than the yellow trumpet of one daffodil of the field, far less than the meanest of the visible arts; for, just as Nature is matter struggling into mind, so Art is mind expressing itself under the conditions of matter, and thus, even in the lowliest of her manifestations, she speaks to both sense and soul alike. (Ross, ed., *Intentions*, 177–78)

Nineteenth-century readers (and some modern ones) would certainly have heard of the first two names, and be alert to the fact that the first was a near-contemporary of Wilde. However, relatively few readers (either then or now) would necessarily have known—or have been able to recall immediately—the exact work by Pater to which Wilde was alluding. It was in fact a line in an essay entitled “Coleridge” which was first published in the *Westminster Review* in 1865 and then reprinted in 1889 in Pater’s essay collection *Appreciations*: “Who would change the colour or curve of a rose-leaf for that οὐσία ἀχρώµαος, ἀσχηµάτιστος, ἀναφής—that colourless, formless, intangible, being—Plato put so high?” (Pater, *Appreciations*, 68). Once more the main questions are: how important is this piece of information; does the reader need to know Pater’s exact words, and where they come from, in order to appreciate Wilde’s (or Gilbert’s) point?
We can encounter the rather casual formula Wilde uses—“as Mr. Pater suggests somewhere”—fairly often in nineteenth-century prose; it serves to indicate that a detailed familiarity with a source is not an absolute requirement for comprehension. We are told the words are from Pater, that Pater is referring to a comment from Plato, and we can easily understand (even without having read any Plato) that a contrast is being made between the tangible beauty of a rose leaf, present to our senses in the here and now, and some kind of rarefied, abstract, spiritual ideal that inhabits only Plato’s world of ideas. To be informed that Pater originally made this observation in the context of a discussion of Coleridge, or that he had reinforced his argument by using the example of “the Hindoo mystic” (rather than Wilde’s Philo, Eckhart, and the rest) does not fundamentally change our understanding of the point in question; nor indeed does it make that much difference if we have the Greek words in front of us, or know where exactly they occur in Plato’s works. And this is because Gilbert is not inviting a scholarly engagement with either Plato’s or Pater’s texts: he is simply and casually invoking their names as authorities, or mentioning them as “serious” representatives of alternative ways of understanding beauty.

Of course for the reader who was (and is) familiar with the writings of these two figures, then there are other layers of meaning to be unravelled. For example, that Wilde should single out Pater’s comments on a rose leaf might call to mind the waspish parody of Paterian aestheticism in the satirical novel *The New Republic* (first published in 1876–1877, when Wilde was at Oxford) by the young conservative writer W. H. Mallock. There Pater appears under the name of “Mr. Rose,” a character whose devotion to sensual beauty includes an excited interest in young page boys and erotica. That association in turn might also call to mind, for the same reader, the controversies that had surrounded Pater’s earlier exposition of his ideas about beauty in his first book, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). The conclusion of that work had been withdrawn from the second edition (which appeared in 1877) because of accusations, fuelled by rumours about Pater’s homosexuality, that it advertised an amoral hedonism. The reader in possession of all this knowledge might thus infer that in endorsing Paterian sensuality, as opposed to Platonic intangibles, Wilde/Gilbert is slyly advocating a precise kind of sensual pleasure; and that the “us” he so casually invokes is actually a coded reference to a particular interest group.

It is exactly these chains of association that academic critics (and editors) will typically feel obliged to lay before modern readers—that, after all, is their job; and in so doing they bring into the open a range of meanings that permit one to construe a subversive sexual politics underlying Wilde’s criticism. This in turn can allow such works to become grist to the mill of writers like Neil McKenna, who claim that everything Wilde wrote was in the service of “his commitment to ‘the Cause.’” What we need to remember, though, is that this level of
allusion—whether or not actively intended by Wilde—would only have been available to a very small group of readers, to those who had been contemporaries of Wilde and Pater at Oxford in the mid-1870s (that is, nearly fifteen years before “The Critic as Artist” was first published), and who had been close enough to events there to have known about the homosexual scandal in which Pater had been involved. It is worth reminding ourselves that the rumours about Pater’s homosexuality, although occasionally hinted at in the national press, circulated principally in the closed world of Oxford colleges. Moreover, although Mallock’s *The New Republic* was obviously exploiting this rumour mill, it is an open question whether or not his portrait of “Mr. Rose” was sufficiently pointed, or indeed sufficiently accessible, to do Pater any real damage in the eyes of those readers living outside Oxford.

More importantly, perhaps, we also need to realize that recognition of this sort of joke depended primarily upon what we might term private, as opposed to public and scholarly, knowledge: that is, the potential connotations conjured up by the term “rose leaf” do not require of the reader any complex intellectual engagement with Wilde’s text. The joke—if appreciated—is not fundamentally a literary one and does not depend on any form of textual difficulty. Further-

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**Wilde, Pater, & the Pleasure of the “in-joke”** A number of modern critics have detected in Wilde’s account of the Victorian art critic and poisoner Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, in his essay “Pen, Pencil, and Poison,” a series of coded allusions to Walter Pater. Some of these are reasonably obvious: for example, several of the literary and art works that Wilde dwells upon in order to trope Wainewright’s taste might just as easily stand in for Pater’s connoisseurship. So Wainewright’s love of “La Gioconda, and early French poets and the Italian Renaissance” reads suspiciously like part of the contents list of the essays in Pater’s *The Renaissance*; his “grand dish with the marriage of Cupid and Psyche” is reminiscent of chapter five of *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) where Pater gives a shortened and, at the time, much admired translation of Apuleius’s second-century account in Latin of the Cupid and Psyche myth in his *Metamorphoses*. Other links between Pater and Wainewright, however, seem more private and also more cruel. Thus Wainewright’s “tall copy of the *Hypnerotomachia*”—an account of the erotic adventures of the protagonist, Poliphili, in the pursuit of his beloved, Poilia—would have called to mind for some readers W. H. Mallock’s satirical portrait of Pater in the guise of the fictional Mr. Rose, in which the tastes of the Pater/Rose figure include pornographic books. Likewise Wainewright’s “fondness,” like Baudelaire’s, for “cats” associated Pater, who was also reputed to have been very fond of those animals, with the most controversial of French Decadent writers. Finally, there is Wainewright’s “love of green” which would remind those readers who knew Pater intimately of his rooms at Brasenose College which were panelled in what some of his contemporaries later described as “a pale green tint” which gave off a peculiar “greenish light.”
more we might also notice that Wilde’s use of Plato (as an authority to be set in opposition to Pater) is entirely orthodox. The appropriation of Platonic views of male-male love in order to legitimate a homosexual identity—that intellectual activity which Dowling sees as so central to Wilde’s interest in Greek philosophy—is not at issue here. Rather, that set of associations cannot logically be brought into play for those readers wishing to see sexual connotations in the allusion to rose leaves, because if they are, then the distinction between Platonic and Paterian ideas of beauty collapses, and Gilbert’s argument falls apart. Another way to put this might be to say that the literary effect of the allusion—Gilbert’s use of two eminent writers (one contemporary and one ancient) to trope two different views of beauty (one concrete and immediate, one spiritual and abstract)—actually requires “personal” knowledge to be set aside.

And what of the “list” that follows the mention of Pater and Plato: the “Illumination of Philo, the Abyss of Eckhart, the Vision of Böhme, the monstrous Heaven itself that was revealed to Swedenborg’s blinded eyes”? It is hard to know how many of these references would have been known to the average late-nineteenth-century reader, but probably only a few. Philo Judaeus, an important scholar of Hellenic Judaism born around 25BC, and the German mystic

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continued  Green, of course, was not a neutral colour in English culture of the 1880s and 1890s: in his English Poems (1892), the poet and critic Richard Le Gallienne (1866–1947) commented on the “popular vogue which green has enjoyed for the last ten or fifteen years,” observing that in its “more complex forms,” the colour implied something “not quite good, something almost sinister” (Beckson, 122–23)—an association which Wilde later exploited in Salome when he used “a little green flower” as a symbol of Salome’s perverse desire. It recalls, too, how on the opening night of Lady Windermere’s Fan Wilde and (it is alleged) all the gay members of the audience wore green carnations in their buttonholes. The association between the colour green and a Decadent sexuality was fixed in the popular imagination by the publication in 1894 of Robert Hichens’s first novel, The Green Carnation, a witty satire on Decadence in general and Wilde in particular, which contained distinct homoerotic suggestions. We need to remember here that at the moment when “Pen, Pencil, and Poison” was first published in the Fortnightly Review in January 1889, Pater’s reputation was on a firmly upward trajectory, following the successes of Marius (1885), Imaginary Portraits (1887), and the third edition of The Renaissance (1888). Seen in this light Wilde’s use of Wainewright to recall, to those “in the know,” the sexual scandal that had threatened to blight Pater’s career in the 1870s looks rather vindictive—an attempt, perhaps, to disparage a figure who was always a rival to Wilde’s own claims to critical preeminence (Pater’s essay “Style,” in which he applied his aesthetic criticism to works of literature, had been published just a month earlier in December 1888 in the same periodical, the Fortnightly Review).
Jacob Boehme (1572–1624), would probably have been little more than names recalled but vaguely; the Swedish scientist, philosopher, and theologian Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) and the German Dominican Johannes (Meister) Eckhart (c. 1260–1327) might possibly have been slightly better known, since new editions of their work had appeared in the 1870s and 1880s respectively. It is still unlikely that many of Wilde’s readers would have had a detailed knowledge of them. But, as with the references to Olaus Magnus, Aldrovandus, and Conrad Lycosthenes in the passage quoted earlier, this does not matter much: we still get the point, because Gilbert (who, like Ernest and Wilde, enjoys parading his knowledge) gives us quite enough clues. “Illumination,” “Abyss,” “Vision,” “Heaven”—these terms are sufficient to indicate that with these authorities (as with Plato) we are again in the realm of abstraction, rather than that of tangible, physical beauty. Moreover, there is little sense that looking up the details of any of these authors’ works—reading, say, Swedenborg’s description of his encounter with the spiritual world in his De Coelo et ejus minabilibus (or A Treatise Concerning Heaven and Hell, Containing A Relation of Many Wonderful Things Therein)—will be time well spent: rather the opposite. The whole pleasure of reading this passage—encapsulated by Gilbert’s elegantly casual phrase “What to us...?”—lies in the realization that the learning being exhibited (which of course most of us don’t share, as Gilbert well knows) is as redundant as it is impressive. The reader does not need to be a scholar to understand a joke about scholarship.

Much the same sort of effect can be seen in the following passage, also from “The Critic as artist”:

But I see that the moon is hiding behind a sulphur-coloured cloud. Out of a tawny mane of drift she gleams like a lion’s eye. She is afraid that I will talk to you of Lucian and Longinus, of Quinctilian and Dionysus, of Pliny and Fronto and Pausanias, of all those who in the antique world wrote or lectured upon art-matters. She need not be afraid. I am tired of my expedition into the dim, dull abyss of facts. There is nothing left for me now but the divine μονόχρονος ἡδονή of another cigarette. Cigarettes have at least the charm of leaving one unsatisfied. (Ross, ed., Intentions, 124)

Here, again, the reader does not need to know the precise details of who these classical authors were or what they wrote: all that matters—and this we can pick up from Gilbert’s bored tone—is that they were authorities, and there were many of them. The significance of the list thus resides as much as anything in the way that it is structured: those three pairings followed by “and Pausanius” are designed rhetorically to give the impression of that prized Decadent quality, ennui or utter weariness. The reader does not have to have studied Greats at Oxford to get the joke (though it might have been all the more pointed had he done so). And what of the Greek phrase? Do we need to know that “μονόχρονος ἡδονή” (“momentary pleasure”) had been quoted by Pater in chapter nine of his novel Marius the Epicurean, where it was attributed to
the Greek philosopher Aristippus (born c. 435 BC), who founded the Cyrenaic school which argued that the sovereign good consisted in pleasure, a precept which anticipated Epicureanism? Undoubtedly there would have been some nineteenth-century readers who would have understood this allusion, and who would no doubt have appreciated a joke against Paterian seriousness. (As we explain below, Pater invoked this phrase in the service of a complex scholarly exploration of the philosophical differences between spiritual pleasure and simple hedonism.) And those selfsame readers may also have been alert to the connotations underlying Wilde’s allusion to Pater’s comments on the beauty of a rose leaf which we noted above.

What needs stressing, though, is that these personal asides at Pater’s reputation, directed, as we said, to only a select few, are once again not relevant to Gilbert’s intellectual argument. On the contrary: recognizing the personal politics underlying these allusions tends to undermine Gilbert’s invocation of Pater as an authority on sensual pleasure to be set against idealists such as Plato. In other words, in order to get Gilbert’s joke—what we might term the rhetorical effect of his comments—we should not investigate the origins of the Greek allusion too closely. The most the reader needs is the ability to translate the phrase, and perhaps identify it with Aristippus, and thus with a philosophical justification of pleasure; but even if he or she can do none of these things, there is still a joke to be seen, that something as apparently banal as smoking a cigarette can be dignified by a Greek epithet. Learning, once again, is being exhibited for the reader’s admiration at the same time as it is being trivialized.

“For mine own part, it was all Greek to me” (Julius Caesar)

It is worth interrupting our larger argument to consider in more detail Wilde’s use of Greek in Intentions. For a writer who, as we noted above, was so at ease with ancient Greek texts, and who so liberally scatters his critical prose with the names of Greek authors (particularly Plato, Aristotle, Aeschylus, and Euripides), it is perhaps surprising to learn that there are only four occasions in the whole of Intentions where he actually quotes directly in Greek, and even then the quotations are brief, just a word or phrase. In addition to the example given above, the others are: “we find the delicate fictile vase of the Greek, with its exquisitely painted figures and the faint \( \text{ΚΑΛΟΣ} \) [beauty] finely traced upon its side” (from “Pen, Pencil, and Poison”); “To-night it may fill one with that \( \text{ΕΡΩΣ ΤΩΝ Α∆ΥΝΑΤΩΝ} \) [love of the impossible], that Amour de l’Impossible, which falls like a madness on many who think they live securely and out of reach of harm, so that they sicken suddenly with the poison of unlimited desire, and, in the infinite pursuit of what they may not obtain, grow faint and swoon or stumble”; and “To us, at any rate, the \( \text{ΒΙΟΣ ΘΕΩΡΗΤΙΚΟΣ} \) [contemplative life] is the true ideal. From the high tower of Thought we can look out at the
world. Calm, and self-centred, and complete, the aesthetic critic contemplates life” (both from “The Critic as Artist”) (Ross, ed., Intentions, 69, 149, 182–83).

For nineteenth-century readers these would not have been difficult terms or phrases to translate (schoolboy Greek would have been, and is still, adequate); and even for the reader who knows no Greek at all, the general sense of what is being said is made clear enough from the context of the rest of the sentence. Some readers might have recognized in the second example an allusion to a line in Euripides’s *Heracles* where Amphitryon, the father of Hercules, is pleading for the lives of his grandchildren who have been sentenced to death: “ἄλλως δ’ ἀδυνάτων ἐοικ’ ἐρὰν” (“Yet it seems I am foolishly in love with the impossible”). But once again, even for those unable to identify this source, Wilde’s paraphrase supplies enough information to allow them to understand the nature of the love which is described.

The lightness of Wilde’s touch here and the lack of any real demand being made of the reader are significant: the chief function of these Greek quotations is (again) rhetorical, to show that the speaker (Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist”) or the narrator (in “Pen, Pencil, and Poison”) has enjoyed a certain sort of education—that Greek phrases come to him as naturally and fluently as English ones (or indeed French ones). The modern reader does not, then, need to dwell too long on the precise significance of these Greek terms or their sources (recognizing the allusion to *Heracles* does not lead us into thinking more deeply about the Greek quotation or its relevance to Wilde’s argument). That this tactic was by no means the only (or even, perhaps, the most usual) way of alluding to classical works in late-nineteenth-century criticism can be seen, as we will explain below, by comparing Wilde’s prose to that of Pater. But Wilde’s use of Greek sources in some of his other works—such as “The Rise of Historical Criticism”

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**Wilde and the Art of Smoking**  Smoking, in Wilde’s oeuvre, is almost always associated with the dandy for whom it signals refinement, sophistication, and of course leisure: a cigarette is one of the dandy’s key cultural accessories. “The Decay of Lying” opens with Cyril associating relaxation with “smoking cigarettes” and it is made clear by his request midway through the dialogue for “Another cigarette, please,” that smoking and talking go hand in hand (Ross, ed., Intentions, 31). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Lord Henry opines to Dorian through the “thin blue wreaths of smoke that curled up in such fanciful whorls from his heavy opium-tainted cigarette” (*Complete Works*, III: 4). In Act I of *A Woman of No Importance*, Lady Stutfield admires Lord Alfred’s “very charming … gold-tipped cigarettes” which, as Lord Alfred airily explains, “are awfully expensive” (Ross, ed., *A Woman of No Importance*, 30). The most famous use of this Wildean prop is of course to be found in *The Importance of Being Earnest* where a cigarette case left in the smoking-room is crucial to the plot.
and De Profundis, both of which were written for different occasions and audiences compared to those of Intentions—also stands as a useful contrast.

Take, for example, the following passage in “The Rise of Historical Criticism,” one which to the reader unfamiliar with ancient Greek would make almost no sense:

The various manifestations of this law, as shown in the normal, regular, revolutions and evolutions of the different forms of government … are expounded with great clearness by Polybius, who claiming for his theory in the Thucydidean spirit, that it is a κτήμα ἐς ἀεὶ, not a mere ἀγώνισµα ἐς τὸ παραχρήµα, and that a knowledge of it will enable the impartial observer … to discover at any time to what period of its constitutional evolution any particular state has already reached and into what form it will be next differentiated: though possibly the exact time of the changes may be more or less uncertain. (Ross, ed., Miscellanies, 193)

Here we need to know both the precise translation of these Greek terms and the exact context in which they occur. Otherwise we cannot appreciate how Polybius’s “theory” (about which we also need quite detailed knowledge) can be “Thucydidean in spirit.”

The phrases that Wilde quotes may be translated as a “possession of all time” and “a prize to be heard for the moment,” and the passage in full (which is an explanation of Thucydides’s historical method) reads in translation as follows: “And it may well be that the absence of the fabulous from my narrative will seem less pleasing to the ear; but whoever shall wish to have a clear view both of the events which have happened and of those which will some day, in all human probability, happen again in the same or a similar manner—for these to adjudge my history profitable will be enough for me. And, indeed, it has been composed, not as a prize-essay to be heard for the moment, but as a possession for all time.”

The passage in Polybius’s work to which these comments (according to historical criticism) refer reads in translation as follows: “and it may well be that the absence of the fabulous from my narrative will seem less pleasing to the ear; but whoever shall wish to have a clear view both of the events which have happened and of those which will some day, in all human probability, happen again in the same or a similar manner—for these to adjudge my history profitable will be enough for me. And, indeed, it has been composed, not as a prize-essay to be heard for the moment, but as a possession for all time.”

In that play, however, Wilde typically subverts the association between smoking and bohemianism when Lady Bracknell responds to Jack’s admission that he smokes: “I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind” (Ross, ed., The Importance of Being Earnest, 40). Wilde himself also seems to have been a heavy smoker. When he stepped out to address the audience on the first night of Lady Windermere’s Fan he was described by the Sunday Times reporter as having a cigarette in his hand. A cartoon from 1895, entitled Biter Bit: the arrest of Oscar, draws him lounging nonchalantly in an easy chair with a lighted cigarette, as detectives burst in to arrest him. In many photographs, too, including the famous poses with Douglas and the post-prison pictures of a portly Wilde posing at Naples, he has a lighted cigarette dangling from the fingers of his right hand.
ing to Wilde) apply occurs in his account of revolutions in the *Histories* (VI. 9. 10 ff.). More particularly, Wilde seems to have in mind some lines (in VI. 9. 14), which he quotes in Greek in the margins of the manuscript version of his essay, in which Polybius describes how a state that “has been formed and has grown naturally … will undergo a natural decline and change into its contrary.”4 We can see that here Wilde is attempting to engage his reader in an area of scholarly debate, one that assumes a specialist knowledge of Greek literature (which of course the essay’s intended readers—distinguished Oxford academics—possessed, and who were probably, as we noted earlier, far better educated than Wilde). By contrast, the allusions to Greek literature in *Intentions* do not require anything approaching this level of intellectual work. In that volume, learning is an altogether more casual and witty affair.

Before moving on to compare Wilde with writers whose scholarship is used for markedly different purposes, there is one final example from *Intentions*—from one of Gilbert’s speeches in “The Critic as Artist”—that is worth examining:

> But we who are born at the close of this wonderful age, are at once too cultured and too critical, too intellectually subtle and too curious of exquisite pleasures, to accept any speculations about life in exchange for life itself. To us the *città divina* is colourless, and the *fruitio Dei* without meaning. Metaphysics do not satisfy our temperaments, and religious ecstasy is out of date. The world through which the Academic philosopher becomes “the spectator of all time and of all existence” is not really an ideal world, but simply a world of abstract ideas. (Ross, ed., *Intentions*, 177)

At first glance, the use of allusion in this passage appears rather different from the other examples we have examined: so there are no lists and no translations of the terms in foreign languages; and rather than a named individual, the quotation is attributed simply to “the Academic philosopher.” How difficult, then, is this passage to decipher? What level of knowledge does it require of the reader? The first clue is provided by the mention (in the final sentence) of a world of “abstract ideas.” This passage occurs just before Gilbert’s contrast between Pater’s and Plato’s notions of beauty which have been discussed above. So the reader who is unsure of the identity of the Academic philosopher would find out soon enough (although we need to acknowledge that the phrase “Academic philosopher” would have been familiar to Wilde’s contemporaries, most of whom would have known enough about Plato to know also of his famous Academy).6 But what of those first two phrases that translate (as most can easily guess) as “the divine city” and “enjoyment of God”?  

Here is it perhaps relevant to note that Wilde had used the phrase “*città divina*” at least twice before, and on both occasions when he was addressing a popular audience. So in his 1882 lecture “The English Renaissance of Art”—written for his American lecture tour—he referred to “that *città divina* [with the correct accent], as the old Italian heresy called it, the divine city where one can
stand, though only for a brief moment, apart from the division and terror of the world and the choice of the world too” (Ross, ed., Miscellanies, 271); and then some years later he also used it in a review for the Pall Mall Gazette in June 1889, commenting that “Mr Austin’s vision of the città divina of the future is not very inspiring” (Ross, ed., Reviews, 514). These examples suggest that the allusion probably operated, and was intended so to operate, at a fairly general level, referring to any imagined ideal city or life—or as Gilbert helpfully explains, any form of “metaphysics”—as opposed to a particular literary one (such as, for example, the one imagined in the heretical poem La Città di Vita [1455–1464] by the Florentine writer Matteo Palmieri, and to which Pater alluded in The Renaissance). “Fruitio Dei” works in a similar way. Wilde himself may possibly have derived the phrase from a line in Benjamin Jowett’s introduction to Plato’s Symposium (in the second volume of his Dialogues of Plato) which he had copied into his Commonplace Book: “ερως [love] … is like the fruitio Dei of the mediaeval saint, or Dante’s love for Beatrice, or the hunger and thirst after righteousness” (Smith and Helfand, 149). It seems highly unlikely, though, that Wilde required the reader of Intentions to make exactly this connection. Knowing that Jowett had used the phrase when discussing the topic of abstract love makes, perhaps, for a witty joke against his scholarship and his particular use of Plato. Significantly, though, it does not materially add to the reader’s understanding of Gilbert’s argument. In order to grasp his main point we only need to know that—as he himself explains—he is referring to the valorization of any form of religious or spiritual ecstasy.

We see in this passage, then, that Wilde’s allusions can operate with varying levels of knowledge, and that a detailed acquaintance with some of his sources can provide some readers (those in the know, as it were) with an extra joke. However, such jokes tend to be personal in the sense that they are directed against contemporary figures whose authority Wilde had private reasons to challenge. For example, it has been suggested by some critics that Wilde’s personal hostility towards Pater may have had something to do with a feeling of resentment, or even contempt, at the way in which Pater had dealt with his own sexuality—by withdrawal and conformity—when threatened with scandal and public exposure. Another way to put this might be to say that this level of reference directs us towards thinking more about writers and personalities than about the specificities of their texts. More importantly, perhaps, the general reader (whether today, or in the late nineteenth century) who misses such references does not as a consequence misunderstand the logic of Wilde’s argument, nor, indeed, the general target of his satire. So we can appreciate Gilbert’s witty dismissal of spiritual and idealized love, as it is celebrated by Greek authors such as Plato, without necessarily having to know the details of a late-nineteenth-century scholarly debate about Hellenism and homosexuality, nor indeed about the power of Benjamin Jowett in deciding careers both in Oxford and in the
real world beyond it. When modern academics point these sorts of details out to us, it may add an extra layer of meaning and allow us to see aspects of *Intentions* as more politically charged than we might hitherto have thought. But it is unclear whether such information contributes very much to our enjoyment of the volume’s rhetorical strategies, as opposed to illuminating some of the personal circumstances of Wilde’s own life. On the contrary: it could be argued that the continued relevance of Wilde’s critical writings is precisely because they work, and were in fact designed to work, without such specialist or personal knowledge.

We also need to be aware of the fact that there are often inconsistencies in the learning that Wilde places on display. A striking example can be seen in his allusions in *Intentions* to French Impressionism. In both “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist” the superior aesthetic sensibilities of Vivian and Gilbert (in contrast to those of their respective interlocutors, Cyril and Ernest) are troped by reference to their tastes in pictorial art. So in the view of Vivian, Monet, and Pissarro (both of whom had recently exhibited works in London) represent the height of artistic sophistication and modernity, exemplifying, so Vivian claims, one of his (and Wilde’s) central critical precepts—that it is life which imitates art, rather than (as the realists proposed) art imitating life:

And so, let us be humane, and invite Art to turn her wonderful eyes elsewhere. She has done so already, indeed. The white quivering sunlight that one sees now in France, with its strange blotches of mauve, and its restless violet shadows, is her latest fancy; and, on the whole, Nature reproduces it quite admirably. Where she used to give us Corots and Daubignys, she gives us now exquisite Monets and entrancing Pissaros. (Ross, ed., *Intentions*, 42–43)

In “The Critic as Artist” Gilbert also comments on the use of colour by French Impressionists, although he is rather more condemning than Vivian of their treatment of nature:

But even the Impressionists, earnest and industrious as they are, will not do. I like them. Their white keynote, with its variations in lilac, was an era in colour…. Yet they will insist on treating painting as if it were a mode of autobiography invented for the use of the illiterate, and are always prating to us on their coarse gritty canvases of their unnecessary selves and their unnecessary opinions, and spoiling by a vulgar over-emphasis that fine contempt of nature which is the best and only modest thing about them. One tires, at the end, of the work of individuals whose individuality is always noisy, and generally uninteresting. There is far more to be said in favour of that newer school at Paris, the Archaiestes, as they call themselves, who, refusing to leave the artist entirely at the mercy of the weather, do not find the ideal of art in mere atmospheric effect, but seek rather for the imaginative beauty of design and the loveliness of fair colour, and rejecting the tedious realism of those who merely paint what they see, try to see something worth seeing, and to see it not merely with actual and physical vision, but with that nobler vision of the soul which is as far wider in spiritual scope as it is far more splendid in artistic purpose. They … have sufficient aesthetic instinct to regret those sordid and stu-
pid limitations of absolute modernity of form which have proved the ruin of so many of the Impressionists. (Ross, ed., *Intentions*, 204–206)

In Gilbert’s view, Impressionism, far from being “the latest” fancy, is somewhat *passé*, having been superseded by a different artistic movement, that of the Archaicistes. In fact, the careers of the so-called Archaicistes (that is, artists such as Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon, and Rodolphe Bresdin) more or less overlapped with those of the Impressionists (Moreau died five years earlier than Pissarro, and was one year his junior). Moreover the most celebrated appraisal of their exotic and intense style had appeared in a work that predated Wilde’s *Intentions* by several years, Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *A Rebours* (1884)—it may indeed have been Wilde’s source for the observation. There Huysmans’s protagonist Des Esseintes gives a voluptuous description of these “disconcerting,” “fantastic,” and “frenzied” works which leave the viewer “amazed and pensive.”

To claim that the Archaicistes were the “newer” school in Paris was thus debatable, but for an English reader (both in the late nineteenth century and today), they were certainly the lesser-known movement. A preference for the Archaicistes over the Impressionists might thus be taken as an indication of Gilbert’s more refined (and possibly more Decadent) connoisseurship.

But what is the reader of *Intentions* in its entirety to think? Can we reconcile the differing evaluations of Impressionism which these allusions seem to gesture towards? Can Monet’s mauves and lilacs be both “exquisite” and “earnest” (a loaded term if ever there was one in Wilde’s vocabulary)? Can Impressionism be both the “latest fancy” and yet less novel than the “newest school”? Can it both be an exemplification of the superiority of art over life while at the same time tending to spoil “by a vulgar over-emphasis that fine contempt of nature”? What, according to *Intentions*, constitutes true modernity in art? Is it the symbolic and archaic subjects chosen by the Archaicistes, or is it the Impressionists’ radical revisioning of landscape? If we try to press Wilde for answers to these questions we only involve ourselves in further imponderables, such as, for example, the problems of ascertaining the relationship between the expertise of Vivian and that of Gilbert, and of how both of their knowledge of contemporary art relates to Wilde’s own.

Vivian’s extolling of the modernity of Monet is perfectly understandable as an illustration of his comments about the way art sets visual patterns which nature then copies: thus, he claims, we now see the world in terms of Monet’s mauves as opposed to what Wilde had elsewhere termed “the grey mists” of Corot and “opal mornings” of Daubigny, artists who belonged to the earlier, Barbizon school (*Complete Letters*, 211). In a similar way, Gilbert’s weariness of Impressionism’s effects, of what he sees as its slavish adherence to “absolute modernity of form,” is comprehensible in terms of his attempt to persuade Ernest of the value of the “decorative arts” in which artistic inspiration always comes “from
form, and from form purely,” not from being left at the “mercy of the weather” or painting en plein air. Difficulties arise only if we try to put these comments together and extrapolate from them a canon of artworks which can illustrate a consistent aesthetic. The problem is not that Vivian and Gilbert are working with different criteria of aesthetic value (both, for example, deplore realism); it is rather that their appreciation of the works they choose to illustrate their aesthetic principles is subordinate to their larger argument. So for Vivian, Impressionism can be usefully invoked as testimony to the creativity of art in its rejection of mere imitation; for Gilbert, however, the same movement’s mode of seeing can be used to illustrate a lack of inventiveness, not because it is in any way indebted to realism, but because seeing with “actual and physical vision” is inferior to “that nobler vision of the soul.” Although these statements do not contradict each other—clearly there can be more than one kind of nonmimetic art—they produce different evaluations of Impressionism, and this in turn makes it difficult to derive from *Intentions* a reliable “map” of Wilde’s own artistic taste.

The question of the ultimate value of Impressionism in Wilde’s oeuvre remains elusive. Moreover, providing the reader—as scholars will inevitably be tempted to do—with ever more detailed “background” information about French Impressionists, useful and interesting though it might be, does not resolve the issue. It will not magically bring into line those contradictory or errant judgments (although it might explain why and how they could coexist within a culture). And this is because making sense of *Intentions* does not require the reader to join up, as it were, all the intellectual dots. Rather the opposite: searching too hard for coherence in that work, trying to trace a pattern in the range of allusions and reference, and to derive from it an intellectual or artistic canon, will lead only to frustration. As Wilde himself warned at the end of the final piece in that volume: “Not that I agree with everything that I have said…. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything” (Ross, ed., *Intentions*, 269). To this we might add that the appropriate attitude to adopt when reading aesthetic criticism, at least that practised by Wilde, is to remain, as we said, on the surface of things.

**Wilde & Intertextual Authority**

As we might expect, however, many of Wilde’s contemporaries were not content with what Henry James called mere surfaces. If we compare the use of sources and references in a range of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century works, we will be in a position to have a clearer understanding of what is involved when we label a work as intellectually difficult rather than (as in *Intentions*) simply using knowledge which seems intended principally to perplex readers. Good examples of these writers are, as we have said, Pater—Wil-
Pater is a writer whose works are mainly known today in academic circles or to a small group of aficionados. It may come as something of a surprise, then, to learn that in his own lifetime Pater’s critical writings and fiction consistently outsold those of Wilde. Moreover, with the possible exception of his first book, *The Renaissance* (1873), they were also consistently better received by critics and academics. This in turn might explain why Pater is so often a personal target for Wilde. Part of Pater’s reputation in the late nineteenth century might have had to do with the fact that he possessed a more astute sense of his readership, and as a consequence of the kind of writer he wished to be, than Wilde ever did. Pater demands that the reader follow him on an intellectual odyssey through the byways of classical culture, and his contemporary readers (there were many well educated enough to embark on that journey) realized that if they were prepared to take up his challenge they would not be disappointed. In other words, Pater announces the “literariness,” the high culture, and the scholarly basis of his work from the outset.

We can see this exemplified in the very title of his only novel, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, published in 1885, two or three years before Wilde began work on his criticism. Before they even turn to the first chapter of Pater’s novel, readers have quite a lot of information to make sense of: to know what Epicureanism is; to understand nineteenth-century critiques of it as mere hedonism (as opposed to a serious philosophy); to realize the Latin significance of the name “Marius”; and—a little later—to recognize, read, and identify the epigraph on the title page, given only in Greek. All this announces the novel’s “difference.” And the reader who, despite all this, expected the usual Victorian plot, characterization, and entertainment would certainly have been disappointed. Unlike in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, learning is not sweetened by the melodramatic thrill of thwarted love, murder, and revenge. Pater, from the beginning, takes no hostages. For him and his readers, scholarship, learning, and knowledge were an entirely serious business. This is not to say that there are no jokes in the novel, but they are not at the expense of scholarship, as with Wilde; rather they work almost as a celebration of it. Moreover they require of the reader a level of knowledge at least equal to Pater’s own.

The novel contains numerous quotations, some submerged, from a variety of classical sources. Several of these are the same as those often invoked by Wilde: Virgil, Ovid, Plato, Livy, the letters of Pliny and of the Stoic philosopher Cornelius Fronto. However, the function of all these works in Pater’s story goes well beyond providing a simple historical texture or background for a novel (which is set in second-century Rome); nor—as with Wilde—are they cited just as authorities to endorse or complicate a particular line of argument.
They are rather used as part of a complex intertextual game, understanding the rules of which requires a precise recall of the specific pieces of text to which Pater alludes. Moreover, the narrative itself often gives little clue to the uninformed about the nature of the game being played, or indeed whether there is a game at all. For example, on several occasions Pater quotes from (or translates) the correspondence between Cornelius Fronto and the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, the existence of which was discovered in 1815. Thus we find passages such as:

And at least his success was unmistakable as to the precise literary effect he had intended, including a certain tincture of “neology” in expression—*nonnihil interdum elocutione novella parum signatum*—in the language of Cornelius Fronto, the contemporary prince of rhetoricians. (Pater, *Marius*, I: 61)

Or:

Like the modern visitor to the Capitoline and some other museums, Fronto had been struck, pleasantly struck, by the family likeness among the Antonines; and it was part of his friendship to make much of it, in the case of the children of Faustina. “Well! I have seen the little ones,” he writes to Aurelius, then, apparently absent from them: “I have seen the little ones—the pleasantest sight of my life; for they are as like yourself as could possibly be…. Ah! I heard too their pretty voices, so sweet that in the childish prattle of one and the other I seemed somehow to be listening—yes! In the chirping of your pretty chickens—to the limpid and harmonious notes of your own oratory.” (Pater, *Marius*, I: 245)

Or:

And here Cornelius Fronto was to pronounce a discourse on the *Nature of Morals*.…. And he did this earnestly, with an outlay of all his science of mind, and that eloquence of which he was a master…. Certainly there was rhetoric enough: a wealth of imagery: illustrations from painting, music, mythology, the experiences of love: a management, by which subtle, unexpected meaning was brought out of familiar terms, like flies from morsels under amber, to use Fronto’s own figure. (Pater, *Marius*, II: 3–4)

In these instances we have three different ways of representing Fronto’s words to the reader: in the first passage we are only given the Latin (which translates as “some parts here and there were not marked with sufficient novelty of expression”). In the second (and apparently most straightforward) example Pater translates the Latin for us, though in a manner which in its colloquial charm and immediacy changes the tone of the original. In the third, he appears to be giving a sort of précis of a speech by Fronto (although in this instance, and unlike the letters to Marcus Aurelius, neither the document itself, nor any mention of it in other authors, has survived, and so there was nothing for Pater to quote from, to translate, or to paraphrase). These choices—of a Latin quote, then an English translation rendered into direct speech, and then a paraphrase of a speech which has been “imagined” or “ventriloquized” by Pater—suggest that
he may be indulging in some form of textual play, for they explicitly call to the reader’s attention a variety of interpretative and hermeneutic questions to do with the nature and status of his Latin source material.

Do Fronto’s and Marcus Aurelius’s letters rehearse or reveal the personal thoughts of each man (as their presence in a novel might demand)? Can we reconstruct from them a sense of their characters? Were those letters, as the narrative voice confidently asserts, “certainly sincere,” despite the apparently formal and often formulaic way in which they conducted their literary conversation? Or, are those letters merely a species of intellectual display, an arena in which each man could exercise his rhetorical skills, particularly as at the time one of the correspondents was absolute ruler of the European world? And if they are display, how far is Pater’s “fictionalization” of an oration by Fronto legitimate, insofar as it is employed in the service of an intellectual goal—better to weigh up the merits of Stoic philosophy? It is worth noting that Pater also significantly reorders and rewrites, through his translations, many of his other Latin and Greek sources, most significantly Aurelius’s Meditations. Again the effect is to allow him to present Stoicism in a particular light, to draw attention to its nobility while at the same time emphasizing some of its shortcomings, such as its inability to come to terms with the rich variety of human experience, and especially human suffering.

To engage with these issues obviously requires an intimate acquaintance with the documents Pater was using and a knowledge of which ones he invented. To put matters another way, the reader must work hard to make sense of Pater’s strategies. An inability to appreciate the differences between those Latin sources which have been faithfully quoted and those which have been slightly reordered and reinterpreted, as well as the differences between both these and those “sources” which have been “made up,” excludes the reader from fully understanding (or entering into) the novel’s complex debates about Roman ethics. And this is because those debates are conducted via a subtle interrogation of the source materials of Roman history and historiography, an interrogation that asks some penetrating questions about the authority, reliability, and status of texts. Pater’s textual “games”—if that is the right term for them—are thus not a kind of “added extra,” designed to engage the attention of the well-educated reader: they are the substance from which the novel is crafted, its rationale, as it were. In “The Critic as Artist,” as we saw, Fronto was just another name in a long list of classical bores; but in Marius the Epicurean, Fronto is, essentially, a textual construct, and the invoking of his name draws us inexorably into textual debates and the niceties of late-nineteenth-century classical scholarship. This in turn may explain why even the best of editorial apparatuses is unlikely to transform Marius into a modern best seller. Because the novel has only a rudimenta-
ry narrative, little characterization, and no dramatic events, there is nothing else to engage the reader’s attention beyond this intellectual game.

And what about *The Waste Land*, a poem that can seem at first glance to many readers (especially students) to be as impenetrable, as intimidating in its use of sources, as *Marius the Epicurean*, but which, unlike that novel, has had a significant afterlife beyond scholarship? We have observed that in *Marius the Epicurean* textual difficulty occurs only in part because its references are recondite; much more alienating for the modern reader is the fact that the textual issues which they point the reader towards are themselves complex (and not to everyone’s taste). In Wilde’s prose writing, as we have argued, although some of his textual references are equally recondite, the appreciation of the points of his argument does not require a full or detailed knowledge of them. *The Waste Land* uses references often as esoteric as those to be found in Pater, and—again as with Pater—the reader does need to know their origins, and to be able to make sense of them, in order to appreciate the poem. But with Eliot, the purposes and ends of erudition are quite different: we are not led outside the text into debates about scholarship, textual authority, and epistemology. Rather the allusions beyond the text push us back towards it. Pater’s intertextuality is centrifugal; Eliot’s, by contrast, is centripetal. Wilde’s moves us neither to or from his text. These distinctions are again made clearer if we examine some examples.

Early drafts of *The Waste Land* reveal its original epigraph to have been some lines from Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness*, a work published recently enough to have been in the minds of many of Eliot’s original readers. That epigraph read as follows:

> Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision,—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath—

> “The horror! The horror!” (*The Waste Land*, 3)

Valerie Eliot’s edition of the drafts and manuscripts of the poem reveals a handwritten addition to the typed quotation identifying its source as “Conrad.” The notes to her edition also register the reservations of Ezra Pound, Eliot’s first “editor,” about the use of the epigraph, that Conrad was not “weighty” enough. By the time the Boni and Liveright first edition of the poem appeared in New York in 1922, Conrad had been displaced by the altogether more heavy Petronius and a quotation from the *Satyricon*:

> Nam Sybillam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerunt: Ἐιβωλλα τι θέλεις; respondebat illa: ἀποθανεῖν θέλω.
[For indeed I myself saw the Sybil of Cumae with my own eyes suspended in a basket, and when the boys said to her: “What do you want,” she replied “I want to die.”] (The Waste Land, 133)

As with the epigraph to Marius the Epicurean, these lines stand unidentified and untranslated. (Even the notes that Eliot added to his poem do not identify or translate them.) Like Pater, then, Eliot and/or Pound is assuming a reader with a fairly detailed classical education. Of course Petronius’s Latin and Greek are not nearly as accessible for the general reader—neither in the early twentieth century nor today—as the passage from Conrad is or would have been. That inaccessibility, however, is not simply to do with one’s facility in translating Greek or Latin (actually the lines are not particularly difficult linguistically) but because they come from a source which, as Rod Boroughs pointed out some years ago, was slightly risqué and esoteric. The Satyricon would not have been part of the typical or “official” Latin curriculum either at school or university. It was considered to be disreputable, not a work for polite reading, a reputation which Wilde had exploited earlier in Dorian Gray.

To understand the significance of Eliot’s or Pound’s use of this allusion, and its relation to the poem as a whole, requires a quite detailed knowledge of both sources and their cultural currency. We need to know, for example, that in classical mythology the Cumaean Sybil possessed the ability to read the future and that her prophecies were often misinterpreted. We also need to know that she had asked from Apollo the gift of eternal life, a boon which the god had granted. But she failed to ask for the accompanying gift of eternal youth, and so in the Satyricon she is a figure shrivelled by an eternity of old age: she becomes, like Eliot’s Tiresias, a spectator of the absurdity of human life. At first sight we may seem now to be in Paterian country, deep among the intricacies of classical knowledge and how it is to be interpreted. However, this is not really the case, for Eliot is not asking us to consider the variety and status of classical figurings of the Sybil, nor recent scholarly debates about her significance in Roman culture, nor the textual issues involved in reading Petronius’s Satyricon. He is not, like Pater, pointing us towards the different translations of classical literature, nor contemporary controversies about the forged fragments of the Satyricon; rather the classical reference serves principally as a striking image to propel the reader into some of the central themes of the poem itself—its sense of the sordidness of human sexuality, and the relationship between knowledge and age.

The same can be said of some of the allusions within the poem. In “The Fire Sermon” section the following quotations are juxtaposed with no textual signposts whatever—titles, authors, or quotation marks, and so on:

By the water of Leman I sat down and wept …
Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,
Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.
But at my back in a cold blast I hear
The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear. (lines 182–186)

Eliot’s notes to “The Fire Sermon” gloss two of these references (although not specifically in relation to these lines) as an allusion to Edmund Spenser’s Prothalamion and Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress.” What is omitted from those notes is a reminder that line 182 is taken, with significant changes, from Psalm 137.1 (in the Authorized Version: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion”). Nor is the reader informed that the quotation from Spenser has been slightly modified, and that lines 185–186 contain only echoes of Marvell’s famous final stanza. This is why, as many critics have noted and many readers have discovered, the notes which Eliot included at the end of the poem are of such limited use. They tell us only of an origin; they don’t even attempt to gloss an allusion’s significance. And this may not have been because Eliot was being in some way obtuse or elitist, as John Carey has maintained. Rather it is as if Eliot wants the reader to keep her mind on the poem and not on the erudition that went into its making. Eliot is not merely exhibiting cultural knowledge: he is requiring the reader to engage in some form of cocreative activity, and it is this feature of The Waste Land, rather than the simple number and range of allusions, which makes it difficult, even for those readers who share Eliot’s cultural background. The difficulties arise from reading the poem as a poem, from seeing the place of the poem’s allusions in the structure of the work as a whole.

How Difficult Is Wilde’s Critical Writing?

The term “difficulty” is relative; it is one which philosophers might label a double predicate—difficult in what ways, and difficult for what sort of reader with what sorts of expectations, we might want to ask? In this chapter we have

The Satyricon of Petronius  The Satyricon of Petronius was a common reference point for numerous fin-de-siècle writers on both sides of the English Channel. It forms part of Dorian’s reading habits in The Picture of Dorian Gray, and there are also borrowings from and allusions to it in works by the French writers Marcel Schwob and Pierre Louÿs (both of whom were friends of Wilde), as well as Anatole France, Jean Lorrain, and Joris-Karl Huysmans. The protagonist of Huysmans’s A Rebours memorably describes the Satyricon as a novel with “no plot or action … simply relating the erotic adventures of certain sons of Sodom” (Huysmans, 43). The Satyricon was also an important source for a number of late-nineteenth-century studies of sexuality, including Richard Burton’s account of pederasty in the essay appended to his 1885–1888 translation of the Arabian Nights, Marc-André Raffalovich’s Uranisme et Unisexualité (1896), and the various writings on homosexuality in the 1860s by the German scholar Karl Heinrich Ulrichs.
tried to draw a distinction between the difficulties which arise when readers do not share the same kinds of cultural knowledge as the author, and therefore fail to recognize textual references and allusions; and the difficulties which are a consequence of the complexity of the issues which certain kinds of allusions point the reader towards. It is only in the latter case that allusions, once identified, continue to create interpretative problems for the reader. Wilde’s critical prose, we have argued, is generally free from this second sort of difficulty. Despite the range of erudition which he displays, his arguments, though provocative and striking, are not particularly hard to understand, and he does not require from his reader very much intellectual effort. In fact too much effort can actually spoil the effect, either by revealing a debt (for example in his use of Hazlitt in “Pen, Pencil, and Poison”) which detracts from Wilde’s originality, or by compromising an essay’s coherence. And this may be one reason why contemporary reviewers of *Intentions* were perplexed and disappointed by it: the “cleverness” which they observed did not lead them in the directions they expected to go.

What is most striking about Wilde’s criticism, compared to that of a number of his contemporaries, is how lightly and irreverently he wears his learning; even for readers who are not familiar with his range of source materials there is invariably a good joke to be had, often at the expense of scholarship. Paradoxically, then, encouraging modern readers to stay—as Wilde put it—on “the surface of things” may be the best way to keep his critical prose alive and relevant. This is not to deny that a serious point may be being made via irreverence—a point, perhaps, about the standards of the scholarly community from which Wilde himself may have felt excluded when he failed to gain an Oxford fellowship. There may also be a vein of seriousness— nastiness might be a better term—behind some of the personal allusions. The jibes at the reputations of Pater and Jowett in particular look like a continuation of some form of Oxford in-fight-

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**continued**

Little wonder, then, that the *Satyricon* gained a reputation, as Rod Boroughs puts it, as “a particularly unwholesome piece of literature.” It survives only in an incomplete and fragmentary form, and has consequently been the subject of a number of forgeries as various hoaxers have claimed to have found other missing fragments. (In the mid-seventeenth century, however, a genuine manuscript of one of the work’s central episodes was discovered in Dalmatia.) By the end of the nineteenth century the most readily available translation was that by Walter K. Kelly; the titles given to the English and American editions of his work give a sense of how the text was typically being marketed: *Erotica: The Elegies of Propertius, The Satyricon of Petronius Arbiter, and the Kisses of Johannes Secundus* (1854); and *The Satyricon; or, Trebly Voluptuous. By Petronius Arbiter, Minister of Pleasure to the Emperor Nero* (1866). The names of both Oscar Wilde and Algernon Swinburne were also linked with translations, neither of which materialized.
ing. Moreover by looking at these aspects of Wilde’s criticism it is possible to politicize his writing, to affiliate him to, say, postmodernist critiques of textual authority, or to see in his anti-institutionalism an impertinence cherished by an exiled Irish nationalist. Yet these are not the only ways to read Wilde; nor, perhaps, are they the most rewarding or entertaining. In the next chapter we will continue this discussion of Wilde’s “seriousness,” but by concentrating on what, at first glance, seem to be his least serious works: the society comedies.

Notes

1. Such an all-inclusive approach to Wilde’s oeuvre has other pitfalls, and these can be glimpsed in a startling error in Brown’s first sentence, when she describes Portora Royal School as being located “in Dublin” when it was in fact in Enniskillen (in what is now Northern Ireland); given the centrality of geography in defining Irish identities and politics, this is an odd slip to make, but perhaps a convenient one for an argument in favour of a cosmopolitanism that overrides national boundaries.

2. Here we might make a comparison with what is probably the most ambitious attempt to establish the intellectual foundations of a nineteenth-century writer’s work—Billie Andrew Inman’s exhaustive reconstruction of Walter Pater’s reading from records of his library borrowings at Oxford. The list of books she compiled is indeed extensive, but it in no way can be assumed to represent the contents of Pater’s mind, nor the extent of his reading, nor how he reacted to what he read. See Inman, *Pater and His Reading, 1874–1877, with a Bibliography of His Literary Borrowings, 1878–94* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990).

3. For those who are interested in such matters, Wilde is referring to a passage in Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War*, I. 22. 4.


9. It might be tempting to explain these inconsistencies in the representation of French Impressionism in terms of the fact that “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist” were initially composed separately for publication in different issues of the *Nineteenth Century*. However, neither of the passages on Impressionist art actually appeared in the periodical versions of the two essays, although manuscript evidence suggests that they had been present in early drafts of both pieces.

10. Boroughs comments: “the *Satyricon* had long been regarded as one of the naughtier classics because of its sexual, most especially its homosexual, subject-matter”; see Boroughs, “Oscar Wilde’s Translation of Petronius: The Story of a Literary Hoax,” *English Literature in Transition*, 38.1 (1995), 17–18.
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