Oscar Wilde Revalued

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The Myth of Wilde

Since 1900 Oscar Wilde has been the subject of some 13,000 articles or books of one kind or another. Or at least so E. H. Mikhail estimated in his 1978 bibliography. Clearly few writers have achieved the distinction of having had so much ink spilled on their behalf. By the same token, however, virtually no major writer in English has been so badly treated for so long by the academic and non-academic critical industries alike. This apparent paradox is easily explained. Mikhail's total, although it sounds impressive, is in fact made up of a great deal of trivia or ephemera, and such material has done little to enhance Wilde's intellectual or literary reputation. At best it has simply been irrelevant to such judgements.

In recent years Wilde has lost none of his fascination, and the number of essays and books about him has continued to grow inexorably. But there has been one significant development since Mikhail compiled his bibliography; in the last fifteen years the nature of writing about Wilde has changed almost beyond recognition. Hence the reason for any new review of research is not so much a need to update earlier bibliographies (although much updating needs to be done), but rather a perception that a whole new "Wilde" needs to be recorded.

Until very recently there were none of the basic tools for a proper study of Wilde: no standard—nor even adequate—edition of the collected works, no satisfactory biography, no full census or description of the manuscripts and manuscript resources. In Anglo-Irish Writing: A Review of Research (1976)—along with Mikhail's bibliography, one of the few attempts to put Wilde scholarship on a proper
footing—Ian Fletcher and John Stokes noted that “in all their dealings with Wilde, the English have been wrong about practically everything.” The English may indeed have been in error in their judgement, but their interest in Wilde never waned. For fifty years after his death, Wilde certainly did have a reputation, but it was that of an infamous homosexual rather than a figure worthy of intellectual or academic attention.

Perhaps such notoriety was inevitable, given the public nature of his career, and especially of his trials and imprisonment. However, the consequence of this prurient interest in the life was that although an immense amount of biographical documentation was collected from the 1880s onwards, it amounted to little more than speculation, anecdote, and sometimes malicious misinformation. Moreover such a situation was compounded by the fact that most “critical” accounts (at least until the 1970s) had recourse, in one way or another, to that early body of partial information. In this respect the early biographies are the most biased; by drawing upon, or by being uncritical of, anecdote and speculation, they were instrumental in creating and then popularizing the “myth” of Wilde.

All of this would be unimportant were it not for the fact that vestiges of the myth remain today even in relatively recent accounts. So revaluations of Wilde as well-known and as thorough as those by Richard Ellmann and Richard Pine continue to read Wilde’s life as a “tragedy,” his scandals and trials a “fall” occasioned by the hubris of the too-successful socialite. Although these accounts certainly do provide us with new and more reliable information about Wilde (and, in Ellmann’s case, an abundance of such information), they still tend to interpret it along traditional lines.

A central aim, then, of this new review of research is to make explicit the changes in direction which have occurred in some Wilde research in the last fifteen years and which will perhaps finally allow the myth of Wilde to be laid to rest. Such a process is needed because the emergence of what may be termed a “de-mythologized” Wilde has taken place piecemeal; the “new” Wilde appears in innovative but scattered research undertaken by a variety of individuals working in isolation or in “marginal” areas such as gender studies, women’s studies, textual scholarship, or theatre history. Taken individually, the findings of these critics may not appear to promise much, but
taken collectively, they present us with a figure whose career is very different from that of the tragedy described by Ellmann and Pine.

The "new" Wilde is occupied less by the brilliant salon life of the 1890s and much more by hard and sometimes rather prosaic work. Wilde becomes the epitome of the new type of professional writer at the turn of the century, concerned with the unglamorous business of self-promotion, negotiating with publishers, cultivating potential reviewers, and constantly polishing his work. Moreover his interests are now seen to be much more wide-ranging than those associated with the literary and art worlds of the time. The "new" Wilde is preoccupied with issues such as authority, gender, identity, and prison reform; he is seen as thoroughly and seriously engaged with some of the most contentious intellectual issues of his day.

It is not surprising that this changed perception of Wilde has coincided with the emergence of relatively new areas of study within English. Generally speaking, most of the changes which have occurred in Wilde criticism over the past fifteen years have their origins in larger changes which have taken place in the various practices of the discipline. One of the most significant of these changes concerns literary history. For the first seventy years of this century, literary history assumed, but never made explicit, a set of values which marginalized or excluded writers such as Wilde. One of the anomalies of that history is that major but controversial figures of the late nineteenth century, although written about at great length, have rarely been marked out as worthy of serious intellectual attention; they never appeared as central figures in the canon which literary history enshrined. So although Wilde may have been acknowledged as a theoretician of culture, or as a propagandist for art, or as a figure to be accommodated uncomfortably within the history of English bourgeois sexual ethics, he was never accorded the status of "sage" to stand alongside Victorian worthies such as Matthew Arnold or John Stuart Mill. Consistently accused of superficiality and slightness, he was invariably credited only with a kind of clever *haute vulgarisation*—Wilde the "disciple," to use the accepted euphemism, of Pater, of Ruskin, of Godwin.

As a general rule, this situation improved as the century progressed, but serious study of Wilde as a writer (rather than homosexual martyr, socialite, or conversationalist) only really began in the
1970s. As I have suggested, most critical accounts up to this time drew heavily upon biographies (however unreliable they might have been): relatively few emphasized the work rather than the life. So as late as 1973, even a critic as sympathetic as Bernard Bergonzi could assert in *The Turn of the Century* that Wilde was "a tragic celebrity with relatively slender talents" whose work possesses a "largely derivative quality."

However this situation changed dramatically with the advent of the sustained, if sometimes unfocused, critique of the values and assumptions underlying "traditional" literary historiography which occurred in the mid-1970s and 1980s. The details of these processes are very familiar and need no elaboration here. Their specific consequences for the study of Wilde, though, are much less well-known.

In general terms, as the manner in which literary history defined its object of study became problematized, so the relationships between issues such as power, authority, and discourse came to be seen by some as the central concerns of literary history. And this process in turn led to the situation where the categories of the social and the literary, hitherto seen as mutually exclusive, were now no longer held to be so simple or so distinct. This revision of the bases of literary history significantly altered traditional perceptions of Wilde: it allowed the life and the work to read against each other in new and complex ways. Wilde continues to be of general interest to students of gay culture and to social historians, but today such an interest is not at the expense of ignoring his literary work. On the contrary: critics' concern with the replication of ideologies (especially those of sex and gender) in literary works has enabled Wilde's oeuvre to be viewed as an exemplary locus of late nineteenth-century politics. For example, a number of writers have perceived in Wilde's critical essays a sustained attempt to resist and subvert the dominant bourgeois and heterosexual ideologies of his time. (It is worth noting in passing that old suspicions concerning the political contexts of Wilde's trials and their relation to possible homosexual scandals in British public life have recently re-emerged.)

As a consequence of such revaluations it has become possible to reintegrate those two figures which, for half a century, were almost distinct "cases" in British and Irish history: Wilde the writer and Wilde the flamboyant homosexual iconoclast no longer exclude each
other. The analysis of the relationships between authority, power, and ideology, and of their representations in discourse, has also led to a general interest in what is sometimes termed the "manipulation of meanings" (and hence of categories of thought). Cultural historians since the late 1950s have alerted us to the fact that this phenomenon became increasingly complex with the advent of a mass consumer culture in industrialized societies in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Indeed, literary and theatre historians have long been aware of Wilde's ambivalent relationship with the power of the popular press and the West End theatre in London—the power, that is, of the media techniques of the time—to create "personalities." The work of some recent critics has allowed us to see much more clearly these processes at work, with the result that the premises of past major critical studies of Wilde have been transformed. (Of course, Lloyd Lewis and Henry Justin Smith's *Oscar Wilde Discovers America* [1936] discussed such matters, but with less sophistication and with a different set of emphases.)

The general thesis which up to the 1960s characterized the discussion of many Victorian writers was that of the Victorian "sage" engaging and addressing a range of social issues. Such a thesis tended to exclude Wilde, simply because no simple "position" or "attitude" to the dominant social issues of the late nineteenth century could ever be distilled from his work. However, in the case of Wilde, the notion of the "sage" has now given way to that of the prototypical media "personality" created by, and for, an emerging consumerist culture. Perhaps the relative paucity of serious or informed critical writing on Wilde up to the late 1960s (compared with other Victorian figures, such as Matthew Arnold, or with early modernists, such as E. M. Forster) might have had something to do with a glimpsed or partial perception that such a traditional treatment would have always proved to be inadequate in his case.

The new interest in the relationship between power, authority, and sexuality, *considered as social phenomena*, has also had important consequences for the biographer of Wilde and for the critic who draws upon biography. Wilde's dandyism, his interest in the Decadence, and his homosexuality were topics once addressed only as salacious or entertaining aspects of the life, and thus somehow divorced, except in an incidental manner, from the work. Indeed, Wilde's homosexuality, endlessly discussed from the trials onwards, attracted very little
serious analysis: even in the early 1970s, Wendell Harris, in his account of Wilde in the Modern Language Association’s Victorian Prose: A Guide to Research, could unequivocally assert that “the relationship between Wilde’s homosexuality, creative writing and aesthetic theorizing has been wearisomely but largely profitlessly discussed.”

Accounts of the transgressive nature of Wilde’s “condition” along the lines suggested by W. H. Auden’s nasty phrase, the “Homintern Martyr,” slowly gave way to an account of its pathology, but even then it was one which was couched in reductive Freudian terms: Wilde the “pariah” became Wilde the “case.” However, the discussion of the relationship between gender and power over the past ten years, and the broad interest in uncovering the nature of the relationship between sexual practices and sexual ideology, have gone a long way towards rectifying some of these biases (and perhaps establishing new ones). A particularly significant work in this respect is Peter Gay’s encyclopedic and ambitious discussion of Victorian sexuality, The Bourgeois Experience (1984–1986). In his second volume, Gay insists that the trials of Wilde momentarily made explicit “the stretches between [Victorian] erotic probity and sinfulness” which were “left vague” in Victorian sexual ethics; and he documents how the press coverage of the trials tended to dwell upon this very issue.

Such a general context provides a useful corrective to traditional views of Wilde’s sexuality, in that homosexuality is seen to possess a much greater social significance than was usually allowed. For some critics this leads to a reassessment of Wilde’s career in which the “tragedy” of his downfall lies not in his public exposure at his trials, but in his ill-treatment by contemporary society. Hence, Wilde and his works become positive elements in the history of gay rights rather than negative or faintly embarrassing moments in the history of bourgeois literary culture. Important markers in this reassessment of Wilde are represented by the work of British, American, and Canadian critics such as Jonathan Dollimore, Ed Cohen, and Richard Del-lamora. Dollimore in particular has examined the relationship between sexual identity and categories of bourgeois thought, arguing that in his critical writing Wilde sees the “notion of individualism [as] . . . inseparable from transgressive desire and a transgressive aesthetic,” and that this leads to a “relinquishing” of the notion of an “essential self.”
The relocation of Wilde in literary history is not the product of gender studies alone. Other challenges to the assumptions of "traditional" literary history, such as those associated with formalism and structuralism, have also led to a revaluation of his work; Wilde the proto-formalist, and thus the "herald" of modernist iconoclasm, is now a commonplace. So the arguments of Wilde's critical essays are seen by some commentators to rehearse concepts familiar in early twentieth-century modernism; and his complex uses of textual devices in the plays and in *Dorian Gray* are understood as an anticipation of the uses of intertextuality more usually associated with modernists such as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce.

Moreover, further insights into Wilde have even been generated by some of the methods associated with "traditional" literary history. In the area of theatre history, Wilde's plays are now more usually seen in the social and theatrical (rather than simply literary) contexts in which they were produced. As a consequence, the topic of Wilde the practising playwright, as well as Wilde the dramatist, is now being examined. To take his status as a playwright first: it is now generally assumed that the notion of "texts" and of textual history has to include the history of productions. In these cases, simple information concerning the particularities of performances and of audience reaction is as important as general theoretical speculation on the nature of texts and of audiences. So, for example, knowledge of the textual history of *Lady Windermere's Fan* has been enhanced by evidence that Wilde changed elements of the play in direct response to the reactions of his audiences. In addition, theatre historians interested in Wilde as a dramatist have begun to locate him in relation to contemporary dramatic traditions: he is seen as both working within them and reacting to them.

This context has allowed the drama, particularly the society comedies, to be seen as much more radical than was previously thought. So theatre historians such as Russell Jackson, Kerry Powell, Katharine Worth, and Joseph Donohue have shown that Wilde uses contemporary dramatic conventions, but simultaneously subverts their accepted significance. Thus a traditional element of Victorian comedy, that of the matriarch, is in Wilde's hands transformed into an immoral parody of herself—into a Lady Bracknell or into a Duchess of Berwick. Nonetheless, much more still needs to be done in the way
of dramatic criticism which pays due attention to issues such as stage-history and theatrical values.

A systematic account of the practices of dramatic authorship in the final years of the nineteenth century is an essential tool for any proper assessment of the nature of Wilde's achievement as a commercial dramatist. Little is known, for example, of the collaborative nature of Wilde's work, although there is abundant evidence that he must have collaborated in large measure with George Alexander and Herbert Beerbohm Tree. Issues such as these have been ignored by previous critics who purport to deal with Wilde's dramatic output; but they are essential if the present-day reader is to see Wilde's dramatic and theatrical originality. Nevertheless it has been possible to glimpse Wilde's role as a professional writer engaged with all aspects of the marketing and production of his plays. Moreover, this interest confirms the findings of recent research into the topic of Wilde's journalism. Although hampered at present by a simple lack of appropriate materials, investigations have already revealed the professionalism with which Wilde undertook this particular aspect of his career. The full extent of what Wilde wrote for some periodicals—particularly for the Pall Mall Gazette—is not known, and the conditions under which he worked as a journalist have never been examined except in the most general terms. However, suggestions as to how this situation may be remedied are beginning to be proposed by critics such as John Stokes.

A second and large area where the methods of "traditional" literary history have led to new discoveries about Wilde concerns his manuscripts. Recent re-examination of the manuscripts and typescripts of his work held in libraries in Britain and the United States has offered a much clearer overall view of his development as a writer. In particular it has allowed some traditional adverse judgements of Wilde—such as those concerning his plagiarism—to be re-assessed. Wilde's habits of re-using his own work and adapting that of others can be seen as systematic and careful strategy rather than simple laziness or deceit: they are rather to be explained in terms of a confrontation with intellectual and academic orthodoxies. The manuscripts also reveal some aspects of Wilde's intellectual development. In this respect an important recent edition of Wilde's Notebooks by Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand describes early influences in his Oxford years and their significance for his later
work. Finally, preliminary research for the Oxford English Texts Complete Works has brought to light a number of hitherto unknown or forgotten, but nonetheless important, works and documents by him.

It is probably true to say that there is more interest, certainly more serious interest, in Wilde now than at any time in the century. The significance of the present review lies therefore not simply in its updating of Mikhail's bibliography but in its documenting of a whole new critical vocabulary and methodology.