Oscar Wilde Revalued

Small, Ian

Published by ELT Press

Small, Ian.
Oscar Wilde Revalued: An Essay on New Materials and Methods of Research.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/15595.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15595
WILDE’S treatment at the hands of literary critics maps very precisely on to the changes in literary history which the previous section, Literary Histories, documented. Broadly speaking, up to the Second World War critical studies of Wilde did nothing to redefine his place in literary history. The bibliographical or critical certainties of a Leavis or a Bateson, defining as they did with an unerring confidence what was to count as the literary, effectively marginalized Wilde in the canon of English literature. Oddly enough in all his voluminous writing, Leavis has nothing of significance to say about Wilde; and in Bateson’s *Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* (1940) he is dismissed as a figure of minor importance. However, as a general rule, Wilde has been treated more seriously as the century has progressed, and as a consequence the number of studies devoted to him has steadily increased.

The most noticeable feature of this change is a decreasing interest in moralizing Wilde’s life. Up to the 1950s literary critics were rarely content to offer accounts of the work; rather they felt it incumbent upon themselves to judge Wilde the man, and his works were used as evidence in those judgments. Unsurprisingly, the emphasis was always upon Wilde’s “immorality.” As a consequence the history of Wilde criticism, certainly up to 1960, is of little interest to the modern reader. With one or two possible exceptions, Wilde has no equivalent of an A. C. Bradley or an L. C. Knights.

Good accounts of Wilde’s early critical reputation are given in Karl Beckson’s *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (1970), in Fletcher and Stokes (1976), and in Mikhail (1978). Some representative contempo-
Dramatic reactions are also printed in Tydeman's 1982 *Casebook* volume on the comedies. The most important of these early studies—in particular Arthur Ransome's *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (1912) and Arthur Symons's *A Study of Oscar Wilde* (1930)—are interesting in the manner of most of the early biographical material, in that they are written by individuals involved in some of the events which they describe, and hence are clearly partial in their judgments. In this respect, Ransome's study is far less well-known for its critical insights into Wilde's work than for the unsuccessful libel action which Lord Alfred Douglas subsequently brought against Ransome on account of his book.

The two works on Wilde by "Leonard Cresswell Ingleby" (Cyril Arthur Gull), *Oscar Wilde* (1907) and *Oscar Wilde: Some Reminiscences* (1912), Thurston Hopkins's *Oscar Wilde: A Study of the Man and his Work* (1913), and Stuart Mason's *Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Movement* (1920) also tell the reader more about the disposition of their respective authors than about their subject.

Studies such as these are most profitably treated as documents in the history of the relationship between literary culture and morality in the first part of the present century; what might be called their silent testimony is of more permanent interest than any insights which they offer into Wilde's work.

The best single discussion of an aspect of Wilde's oeuvre (interestingly, his poetry) up to the Second World War is by Douglas Bush in *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry* (1937). Bush writes sensitive literary criticism which is nevertheless coloured by what at the time was a familiar moral disapproval. The same is broadly true of works of the 1940s and 1950s. Although they attempted to address Wilde more seriously, they are unable to reconcile literary approbation with the (at times indignant) moral disapproval attaching to certain aspects of the life. So Edouard Roditi in *Oscar Wilde* (1947) discusses Wilde as a dandy, and thus employs, albeit programatically and sketchily, a literary-historical methodology absent from most early works; he attempts, that is, to locate Wilde's persona within contemporary cultural debates. St. John Ervine in *Oscar Wilde: A Present Time Appraisal* (1951) also tries to locate Wilde within a context—in this case the dramatic conventions and traditions of his time. However he does so only to find him
wanting in comparison with his contemporaries, particularly George Bernard Shaw. Indeed Ervine’s attempts to assess Wilde’s literary [rather than moral] qualities stand out against the general trend in the 1940s and 1950s, but even when Wilde is judged in literary rather than moral terms, he is still found wanting. James Agate (1947), for example, finds Wilde devoid of any artistic conscience or taste, and Louis Kronenberger (1952) attempts to explain the singularity of Wilde’s comedies are only partly successful.

Even where the critic is obviously more sympathetic to Wilde’s enterprises, as with Graham Hough’s The Last Romantics [1949], Wilde is still a minor figure, sandwiched between Pater and Morris on the one hand and Yeats on the other; or he is depicted as a propagandizer of the fin de siècle, flawed by his lack of seriousness and the “unsureness of his taste.” (It is only fair to add, however, that Hough’s later anthology of Wilde in 1960 goes some way towards redressing the balance, and is in itself an interesting example of the change in Wilde’s critical fortunes.) Aatos Ojalo’s Aestheticism and Oscar Wilde [1954–1955] is more lenient in its judgments; however the definition of Aestheticism which it proposes [a series of tropes and styles] gives the movement only a limited significance as a literary movement and ignores its importance in a larger cultural history. James Laver (1954) offers a brief and at times superficial survey of Wilde’s oeuvre.

Much more importantly, George Woodcock (1949) propagandizes Wilde as an anarchist—the first critic to see in Wilde those political, particularly anti-bourgeois, concerns which modern critics have been so eager to identify. But it is important to emphasize that Woodcock is not interested in reassessing Wilde’s literary significance; hence, he is only interested in a part of the oeuvre—some of the critical essays—and that interest is a purely political one. Indeed, Woodcock’s argument was taken up in his later work, Anarchism (1962), where Wilde is seen explicitly as a follower of William Godwin; the same topic is discussed also by Masalino D’Amico (1967); and much more recently by Michael Helfand and Philip E. Smith II (1978).

As I have indicated, it is possible to date the beginning of serious study of Wilde from the early 1960s. This change came about in two distinct phases. In the first place there was a sudden increase in the availability of scholarly materials on Wilde—principally Hart-
Davis's edition of the letters. This in turn helped provide the beginnings of serious biographical study. These developments were not surprising in the context of the general empiricist bias then dominant in British and American literary historiography which held that literary works could be best understood via their historical and cultural contexts. Thereafter in the 1960s and 1970s a series of critical monographs, devoted to tracing sympathetically the connexions between the man, the writer and his time, began to be published. Paradoxically, the second and more interesting phase in Wilde criticism occurred precisely because of a general dissatisfaction with the basis of that empiricist historiography—it coincided, that is, with the wholesale questioning of the methods and assumptions of empiricist literary history which have been described above.

Ironically, then, before students of Wilde had a chance to be provisioned with adequate empirical tools—with an accurate biography and scholarly editions, for example—their usefulness for critical judgments was being increasingly called into question. The recent assimilation of literary theory into critical practice has led to an entirely new set of priorities for critics interested in Wilde. He is now seen as a writer against whom notions of authority may be measured, and this has involved a redefinition of what is meant by an "historical context." An interest in biography or in the "background" of his work has been joined by a concern with Wilde's relationship to various nineteenth-century discourses. In other words, the first revolution of the 1960s was to overturn the dismissive judgments of a previous generation.

So the great virtue of Jacques Barzun's "Introduction: The Permanence of Wilde" (in Oscar Wilde's De Profundis [1964]) lies in precisely his attempt to engage Wilde as a serious writer. The same seriousness informs Charles Ryskamp's important collection of essays, Wilde and the Nineties (1966). A year later Epifanio San Juan, in The Art of Oscar Wilde (1967), reinforced these claims that Wilde's work possessed a seriousness of purpose, a view much more likely to find acceptance now than when his book was written. Kevin Sullivan (1972) and Michael Hardwick (1973) both offer less judicious, and, at times, inaccurate accounts of their subject.
Christopher Nassaar's *Into The Demon Universe* (1974) was one of the first attempts to construct a coherent critical reading by exploiting, rather than merely rehearsing, the facts of biography. Nassaar's thesis is that Wilde, from 1886 onwards, entered a world of evil, guilt, sin and atonement; and that this theme informs all his work. A companion piece, but arguing a different point of view, is Philip K. Cohen's *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde* (1978). Cohen's subject is that of Wilde the moralist, and his work is particularly good on some aspects of the drama. Rodney Shewan's *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (1977) is still one of the most balanced critical monographs on Wilde and his œuvre. Shewan makes use of unexamined manuscript material, explores in an original manner Wilde's relationship with the intellectual currents of his time, and sees his career as an exploration of the notion of individualism. However, for a reassessment of the political consequences of individualism, see the later studies, already mentioned, by Ed Cohen (1987), Dollimore (1987), and Cagnier (1986).

The main emphasis of J. E. Chamberlin's *Ripe Was the Drowsy Hour* (1977) is to place Wilde within his intellectual, artistic, and cultural milieu; in particular his study makes interesting connexions between Wilde and contemporary scientific developments. John Stokes's informed and informative essay (1978) in the *British Council's Writers and Their Work* series is an excellent introduction to Wilde, and contains a useful, although now necessarily dated bibliography. Donald H. Ericksen's *Oscar Wilde* (1977) is a conventional introductory account which sees Wilde's artistic career finding its culmination in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Alan Bird's *The Plays of Oscar Wilde* (1977) was the first book to be devoted to Wilde as a dramatic author. It too is basically an introductory account, analyzing the plays (and the fragments of plays) in the order in which they were written; but the book's main emphasis is upon criticism of the plays, rather than on theatrical history. James Agate's "Oscar Wilde and the Theatre" had addressed the subject in 1947. Hesketh Pearson in *The Last Actor-Managers* (1950), *Beerbohm Tree: His Life and Laughter* (1956), and *Gilbert: His Life and Strife* (1957), all describe aspects of contemporary theatres and the staging of Wilde's plays.

However, until very recently, the most comprehensive account of the plays available was that by Katharine Worth (1983) in Macmillan's series on Modern Dramatists. Hers was the first full discussion of the plays since the study by Bird and in it Wilde becomes an existentialist playwright, quintessentially modern in his concerns and—like, in Worth's view, other Anglo-Irish writers of the time—cosmopolitan in the ways he assimilated European influences (but see also Clements [1985] and Guy [1991] for an account of the complexity of influence itself). Worth stresses Wilde's commerce with Symbolism, particularly with Maeterlinck's drama. In Worth's essay it is possible to detect the emergence of new ways of seeing Wilde as a dramatic author, for the context of his writing for the stage until this time had never been adequately described—indeed all discussions of the plays up to the 1970s have severe limitations in this respect.

As I have suggested, details such as a systematic account of the practices of dramatic authorship in the final years of the nineteenth century have been largely overlooked by critics, but they are essential tools for any proper assessment of the nature of Wilde's achievement as a commercial dramatist. A useful start in remedying this situation is Russell Jackson's comprehensive and excellently annotated anthology, Victorian Theatre [1989]. Jackson brings together documents of what he calls the "social life of the Victorian theatre—descriptions of the audiences, the working conditions of Victorian actors and authors, the theory and practice of management, and the techniques of a theatre of elaborate scenic illusion" (1).

George Rowell (1989) provides an informed introduction to the drama of the late nineteenth century and Wilde's place in it, on this
topic, see also Susan Laity (1988). Elsewhere, Walter Nelson (1989) discusses the reviews of the social dramas and, in From Ravenna to Salomé, the reception of the other works. Nonetheless we still need to know how the specificities of Wilde's career fits with these general concerns—about, for instance, the collaborative nature of his work.

Up to the 1980s, issues such as these tended to be ignored by critics purporting to deal with Wilde's dramatic output. In this sense, the most lucid and comprehensive study of Wilde as a Victorian playwright is Kerry Powell's recent book, Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s (1990). The emerging picture is now that of a radical Wilde (in both Worth's and Powell's view, for example, he is a devoted adherent of Ibsen) willing therefore to engage with, at least in the early plays, contemporary political subjects. Also concerned with the dramatic as the "unifying factor" in all of Wilde's work is Peter Raby's Oscar Wilde (1988), an intelligent and lucid, if introductory, account of its subject. Norbert Kohl's (1989) account of Wilde is systematic and scholarly, although of necessity it ignores some recent American research.