Oscar Wilde Revalued
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WILLIAM Tydeman (1982) anthologizes some contemporary reviews of the plays and some of the major critical essays written since in Macmillan’s Casebook series. The contemporary accounts include reviews by William Archer, the critical accounts range from essays by Max Beerbohm and St John Hankin in the first decade of this century to a selection of major modern critical writing including Ian Gregor’s essay on comedy in Wilde, and extracts from Christopher Nassaar, Shewan and Ganz. Also recently reprinted is Richard Ellmann’s 1969 collection of critical essays in the Twentieth Century Views series. Ellmann anthologizes from the available material in broadly the same manner as Tydeman. The critics here include Yeats, Lionel Johnson, Gide, Douglas, Joyce, Shaw and Auden—but fortunately the collections complement rather than compete with each other. In so doing they provide a convenient overview of critical trends during the past ninety years.

Meanwhile in his massive Chelsea House series, Harold Bloom (1985) provides another anthology of critical work, his emphasis being upon Wilde as a literary rather than a theatrical figure. Bloom’s volume includes material by Yeats, Eric Bentley, G. Wilson Knight as well as by contemporary critics such as Ellmann, Epifanio San Juan and Nassaar, hence his selection lacks that historical perspective which characterizes Tydeman’s and Ellmann’s choices. More recently, Regenia Gagnier anthologizes another group of essays including those by Ed Cohen, Christopher Craft, Jonathan Dollimore,
Gerhard Joseph, Zhang Longxi, Camille A. Paglia, Philip E. Smith II and an extract from Kerry Powell’s *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, all discussed elsewhere.

**Individual Studies**

**The Criticism**

In general, Wilde’s criticism has been regarded in one of two ways. The first has been to set it against a tradition of nineteenth-century criticism, such as that of Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin or Walter Pater, which Wilde either exploits or rejects, depending upon the thesis of the critic. In this view of Wilde’s criticism, early essays by Paul Elmer More (1910), Alice Wood (1915), and particularly, Ernst Bendz, in *The Influence of Pater and Matthew Arnold in the Prose Writings of Oscar Wilde* (1914), are clear indications of a pattern of criticism that has persisted for fifty years; a pattern which includes, for example, Leonard Brown’s essay (1934) on the relationship between Wilde and Arnold, and David DeLaura (1962) or Michael S. Helfand and Philip E. Smith II (1978). Recently Bruce Bashford, in “Arnold and Wilde: Criticism as Humanistic” (1985), has picked up the threads of this familiar account of Wilde by analyzing Arnold’s and Wilde’s critical practices and seeing in them a fundamental humanism which he contrasts favourably with the tendencies of modern deconstructionist criticism, a proposition contested by Zhang Longxi in an essay discussed below. Edward A. Watson (1984) examines Wilde’s commerce with other famous nineteenth-century statements about the function of criticism by means of a (by now) fairly familiar opposition between aesthetics and ethics. In particular, Wilde’s essay “The Critic as Artist” “attempts, through knowledge, scholarship, and personality, to analyse some aspects of the theoretical foundations of literary criticism in Plato’s ‘Ion’ and *The Republic*, Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Pope’s *An Essay On Criticism*, and Arnold’s ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’ “[225]. In Watson’s view, Wilde ultimately becomes an “iconoclast . . . a role he enjoys implicitly by taking on such legislators as Plato, Pope, and Arnold.” Fuller accounts of the amount of classical reading to which Wilde would
have been exposed as an Oxford undergraduate are given in Ellmann's life and in a learned and thoroughly documented essay by William Shuter (1988). Shuter examines what Pater would have been teaching to undergraduates at Oxford in the 1870s—the syllabus and texts which Wilde would have been required to follow systematically. His essay may be read as a useful complement to Ellmann's account of Wilde at Oxford simply because it provides an interesting examination of the day-to-day teaching when Wilde was an undergraduate there.

The pervasive presence of Pater, rather than of Arnold, in Wilde's critical thinking was detected somewhat later. So, for example, John Pick (1948), Ruth Temple (1960) and Wendell Harris (1971) all see, although for different reasons, Pater as the dominant influence; and hence his writing becomes the origin of the basic concepts in Wilde's criticism. Rather earlier, Ellmann, in "Overtures to Salomé" (1968), suggested the presence of both Ruskin and Pater. Other connections have also been identified. So Michael North's discussion (1985) of the themes of sculpture and poetry in Winckelmann, Pater and Yeats refers also to Wilde. He argues that in "The Critic as Artist" Wilde's celebration of Greek sculpture and his setting up of a "golden age" of Greek art is part of a strategy which emphasizes the contemporary writer's difference from society at large. More securely based, and using evidence from his and Michael Helfand's edition of the Oxford Notebooks (discussed above), is Philip E. Smith II's account (1988) of the influence of contemporary science, and especially evolutionary theory, upon Wilde's critical writing. Elsewhere, George Stavros (1978) writes on the influence of the Romantics on Wilde. Locating the writing of the late nineteenth century in relation to Romantic ideology and Romantic mythology is, of course, a long-standing feature of literary history, characteristically exemplified in works such as Graham Hough's The Last Romantics, Frank Kermode's Romantic Image, Mario Praz's The Romantic Agony, or Ian Fletcher's collection of essays, Romantic Mythologies. Speculation about other influences, particularly that of French writers such as Renan and Gautier, or German sources, such as Heinrich Heine, is documented in Fletcher and Stokes (1976, 114); although here again, as I have suggested in my discussion of literary history, detecting the presence of French influences and French paradigms in the work of late
nineteenth-century British writers has been commonplace for some time.

The second way of discussing Wilde's criticism is in terms of the way it anticipates the concerns of early modernism. This line of argument can certainly be traced to Ellmann's seminal essay "The Critic as Artist as Wilde" (1967), or to the work of Jan B. Gordon (1970); there Intentions becomes a rejection of Victorian traditions of criticism. Such a case reinforces recent views of Wilde's exploitation of the media in late nineteenth-century consumerist culture. Hence R.J. Green (1973) notes the early modernism of Intentions and Hilda Schiff (1965) sees in those essays a proto-modernist programme for the autonomy of art, a topic since pursued by Herbert Sussman (1973) and Edward Said (1983). Also relevant here is Russell M. Goldfarb's essay (1962) on Victorian decadence. Related to this general interest in Wilde's arguments about the autonomy of art is an attempt to find in his varied utterances an internally coherent aesthetic. For A. E. Dyson (1965) such a synthesis is indeed possible, but for René Wellek in volume IV of A History of Modern Criticism (1965) Wilde's work presents only contradiction, not coherence.

Two different but related approaches to the criticism are those by J. D. Thomas (1969) and Bruce Bashford (1985). Thomas discusses intentionality in the dialogues—quintessentially a modernist concern. And more recently, Bruce Bashford looks at a more subtle aspect of this idea: he attempts to isolate in De Profundis a "theory of self-realization." His essay refers back to his two earlier and closely related studies of Wilde as a critic (see Bashford 1977 and 1978), for he sees the assumptions that underlie De Profundis to be in total opposition to the arguments which Wilde adopted in the critical dialogues. For Bashford, Wilde's concern in De Profundis is to outline a concept of individual development. In his essay Bashford also teases out some of the contradictions in Wilde's critical positions. In this respect his work can perhaps be profitably read as a contrast to Dollimore's essay (1987) on the same topic.

In a series of essays published in a number of periodicals, William E. Buckler discusses many of the issues rehearsed in the criticism. In "The Agnostic's Apology (1989)," he describes the formal contrivances of "The Portrait of Mr W.H." and links the themes of the essay to the other critical work, in "Antinomianism or Anarchy? A Note
on Oscar Wilde’s ‘Pen, Pencil and Poison’ he relates the subject of that essay to Wilde’s other concerns, particularly the opposition of ethics and aesthetics. In “Oscar Wilde’s Quest for Utopia,” Buckler discusses Wilde’s attitudes towards socialism, and in “Building a Bulwark Against Despair: ‘The Critic as Artist’,” he examines, by means of close textual commentary, the relationship between Wilde and the persons of his dialogue, detecting the influence of Browning, Arnold, and Pater in the piece.

On the topic of influence in the critical work, Horst Schroeder (1991) detects Wilde using John Addington Symonds’s An Introduction to the Study of Dante (1872) for a source in “The Critic as Artist” and James Robinson Planché’s Cyclopedia of Costume (1876–1879) for “The Truth of Masks.” And in a separate but related article in the same number of the same periodical, Schroeder finds echoes of Andrew Lang in “The Decay of Lying.”

The subject of Wilde the early or proto-modernist has naturally been taken up most enthusiastically by recent critics. Gerhard Joseph (1987) writes briefly but stimulatingly on the topic of framing in Wilde and locates Wilde’s modernity or proto-modernity initially by identifying certain repeated formal characteristics in his work. Linking Wilde and Pater, Joseph draws attention to the use of framing devices in modern and “pre-modern” authors. In this taxonomy, pre-modernists “frame or stress an ‘inner’ substance or field under investigation” while modernists “emphasize the very act of framing as it calls attention to itself” (61). Joseph uses this distinction to examine some of those sets of oppositions which Dollimore observes at work in Wilde’s writing—particularly the opposition of the natural and the artificial, and of substance and surface. Ian Small (1985) also notes the modernity of Wilde’s views about the pre-eminence of the cultural above the natural by contrasting the arguments made by modern semioticians about the signifying functions of portraits with Wilde’s views on the various functions of art.

The modernity of Wilde’s critical writing is also discussed in an allusive and densely argued essay by Eugenio Donato on the notion of self-awareness and its relation to representation. Donato suggests that the loss of a simple, unmediated concept of the “natural” was a feature of nineteenth-century European culture, thus the contemporary (i.e. 1979) “confrontation” between “deconstructive critical id-
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... and recuperative criticism" is an acute form of this nineteenth-century dilemma. Donato studies this dilemma specifically in relation to nineteenth-century metaphors for Japan, and sees in "The Decay of Lying" the first instance of the systematic distinction between the search for Japan as "original 'Natural Object'" and "Japan" as a "necessary but constructed object" (52). Later in the same periodical Marie-Rosé Logan takes issue with Donato's thesis, but not with his observations about Wilde.

In a suggestive essay which picks up these themes, Zhang Longxi describes Wilde's criticism in the light of modern critical practice, suggesting that in Wilde's "creative" criticism we can witness a precursor of modern post-structuralism and deconstruction.

The Picture of Dorian Gray

Few works of Wilde have been subject to close textual scholarship: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is one of those few. The textual problems of the novel are described in the editions listed elsewhere. Those problems and Wilde's revisions of the novel are also discussed by Donald E. Lawler (1972 and 1988) and by Isobel Murray (1972). For a debate about the reasons for Wilde's revisions to the novel, see Isobel Murray's edition and an exchange in the TLS (26 June-13 Sept. 1974). Details of the controversy surrounding the publication of the novel in its original periodical form are given in Stuart Mason, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Morality* (1908). But here required reading is Donald Lawler's comprehensive and informative *An Enquiry into Oscar Wilde's Revisions of The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1988). A different idea of Dorian Gray as text is pursued by Peter G. Christensen, who discusses the use made of Wilde's novel by Jean Cocteau in his play *Le portrait sumaturel de Dorian Gray* (1909).

* Dorian Gray has been discussed most persistently in terms of the theme of the Doppelgänger or double. In general the notion of the double has been treated as a late nineteenth-century trope whose origins and history can be located within literary-historical culture; or it has been treated as a psychological condition, and one capable therefore of psychoanalytical exploration. Robert Rogers (1970) and C. F. Keppler (1972) examine these elements of the novel (but see also the work of Miller, Mayer, Tymms and Miyoshi discussed in other
sections of this work). Martine Vieron also discusses doubling in "Le mythe du double" (1985). Jacob Korg (1967) relates duality and doubling to cultural issues such as the social consequences of the notion of identity, especially as they relate to the literary artist. Jan B. Gordon (1968) also explores the notion of duality in cultural terms, by relating it to Arnold’s dialectic of human history and human nature—Hebraism and Hellenism—and in an earlier essay in Criticism he discusses the motif of doubling in terms of an art/life dualism. (See also, however, the reference to the notion of doubling in the section on literary history, above.) Equally prominent, and indeed related themes, those of narcissism and ageing, are discussed by Douglas Robillard Jr. (1989) and by Ellie Ragland-Sullivan (1986).

The tracing of analogues, parallels and sources has had an equally long history: and in the process striking testimony to Wilde’s eclecticism has been established. Walther Fischer (1917) indicated debts to Balzac, Edgar Allen Poe and Joris-Karl Huysmans; Lucius H. Cook (1928) assembled evidence to establish the extent of those borrowings from Huysmans; Oscar Maurer (1947) saw the influence of George Sala; R.D. Brown (1956) saw sources in the work of Suetonius, Symonds and Gibbon; Houston A. Baker, Jr. (1969) compares the novel with Goethe’s Faust [a comparison with Mephistopheles was first made by Ted R. Spivey in 1960]. Dominick Rossi (1969) also sees comparisons with Faust; Louis J. Poteet (1971) sees sources in the Gothic novel, particularly in Melmoth the Wanderer; and Gerald Monsman in the same year traces the connexions and disjunctions between Pater’s heroes and Dorian; William Evans Portnoy (1974) itemizes Wilde’s debts to Tennyson. Apryl L. D. Heath (1988) notes an allusion to Matthew Arnold’s 1879 “Wordsworth” essay.

Other critics continue to find sources for Dorian Gray in remoter areas. However Wolfgang Maier’s account of the novel (1984) is critical of the work of most literary historians in this respect; he suggests that the overall effect of Wilde’s transactions with his sources is not dependent upon a detailed knowledge of every one of them. In 1987 Isobel Murray detected the influence of Robert Louis Stevenson’s Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde upon the novel and upon other works by Wilde; and also in that year she noted the influence of William Sharp’s Children of To-morrow. J. V. Stevenson (1979) suggests that A Rebours is not the book that influences Dorian Gray, and notes that Wilde’s references to the chapters and to the
contents of the book do not correspond to Huysmans's text. Frédéric Monneyron, looking for subtexts of a different sort, sees parallels (although not influences) between Dorian Gray and Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy. In particular, Monneyron discusses the relationship between Dorian's existence as an individual and his existence in portraiture. He goes on to analyze the relationship between art and death in the novel, seeing in these concerns an embodiment of Nietzsche's distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian modes of existence.

The parallels between Dionysian legend and the novel are also of interest to Terence Dawson (1987), although for other purposes. Dawson lists the parallels between the descriptions of Bacchus (Dionysus) in Ovid's Metamorphoses and some of Wilde's descriptions of Dorian, suggesting that Dorian is "invested with the attributes" of Dionysus; and by contrast the portrait of him stands for "Apollonian perfection." Dawson relates this double image of Dorian to Jung's definition of the self: the "god-image of the psyche." Supernatural influence of another kind is detected by Madame Eusebi (1987), who writes on "The Devil in Dorian Gray." More recently, but in keeping with the theological theme, Charles Swann writes on "The Picture of Dorian Gray, the Bible, and the Unpardonable Sin"; and Horst Schroeder (1991) finds a quotation from Mrs Humphry Ward's Robert Elsmere (1888).

Other critics have suggested a more generalized notion of influence and have attempted to locate the novel within Victorian literary conventions and sub-genres. Charles Altieri (1971) considers the novel in terms of a Bildungsroman; and Jan B. Gordon (1967, 1970) traces the connexions to be made between the novel and contemporary writers. Kerry Powell (1978) discusses the theatrical elements in the novel. Elsewhere John Pappas (1972) examines its imagery (see also Beckson's account of the term "wild," discussed below); Robert Keefe (1973) and John E. Hart (1978) draw attention to the treatment of art and of the artist; and the wider context of the work is discussed by G. A. Covasco (1981). Other elements in the book's reference are indicated by John Espey in Ellmann and Espey (1977). In a perceptive essay, Joyce Carol Oates (1981) emphasizes the simple, parable-like aspects of the novel and its enigmatic qualities—the sense of longing beneath its bright, epigrammatic surface, itself produced by a combination of the elements of the Gothic and of Restoration comedy.
Dorian Gray has for a long time attracted attention as a significant transitional novel. In this respect Donald R. Dickson (1983) takes issue with what he sees as a bias among literary historians in their propensity to over-emphasize the "pre-modern" or "proto-modern" elements in the novel. Elsewhere Dominic Manganiello (1983) contrasts the significance of the ethical and the aesthetic in the novel and Karl Beckson (1986) examines the occurrence of the adjective "wild" and its related forms, "wildly" and "wilder," in the final revision of the text. Beckson claims that the use of the name "shorn of the e" is a "symbolic form of self-mutilation consistent with [Wilde's] own masochistic tendencies" (30). Beckson argues that in the frequency of their occurrence and the nature of their collocations, these lexical items amount to an autobiographical "signature" in the text. (Beckson's data, though, is "raw" evidence, as a stylistician would understand the term; indeed, in this respect it would be as helpful to know whether these lexical items occur more or less frequently in Wilde's other works and how their incidence changes in the revisions to the novel.)

The generic anomalies of Dorian Gray is another topic which interests critics. For details of the relationship of the novel to the Gothic and to diabolism, see Fletcher and Stokes (1976, 41). Kerry Powell (1980, 1983, 1984) has written an informed and informative series of essays which attempt to draw parallels between Dorian Gray and various Victorian sub-genres. The general thesis in all his essays on the topic is that Wilde's works often have their origins in popular Victorian forms. So Powell notes that the sources of Wilde's novel have been sought by recent critics among genres as varied as Gothic fiction and the "decadent" novel (such as A Rebours and Marius the Epicurean), but he emphasizes that in late nineteenth-century popular literature there was a "thriving sub-genre of fiction in which the props, the themes, and even to some degree the dialogue and characterization of Dorian Gray are anticipated." One such sub-genre to which Powell gives particular emphasis is that of the "magic picture" novel—a tradition in which he suggests Wilde was "steeped, even to the extent of using names from other fictions in that tradition." For further reference to accounts of the haunted picture tradition, though, see Fletcher and Stokes (1976, 41). Elsewhere Powell (1984) suggests that Dorian Gray shares certain similarities with popular mesmeric fictions of the time. Powell's account, however, is challenged by
Nathan Cervo (1985) in a later issue of the same periodical. Cervo sees the novel presenting a fundamental antithesis between good and evil, and thus he locates it within a tradition of "spiritual autobiography." In a rejoinder Powell concedes that the novel may indeed go beyond its immediate generic origins, but he nonetheless asserts that Wilde "strangely enough, achieved his best work when he stooped to mine the worn-out veins of Victorian literature," in this respect Powell's suggestions about Wilde's exploitation of the devices and conventions of popular forms reinforce the observations made by recent critics of the plays (including those made by Powell himself).

Finally, it should be noted that, like other aspects of Wilde's oeuvre, Dorian Gray has generated a lively academic debate among German critics in both English and German. The translated work, including Norbert Kohl, Oscar Wilde: The Work of a Conformist Rebel (1989), is discussed in the appropriate sections of this essay, but for an account of the work by Kohl in German—Oscar Wilde: Leben und Werk in Daten und Bilder (1976) and Oscar Wilde: Das literarische Werk zwischen Provokation und Anpassung (1980)—and Ria Omasreiter's Oscar Wilde (1978), see Fletcher and Stokes (1983). Wolfgang Maier's account of the The Picture of Dorian Gray is discussed above. For details of earlier German scholarship, see Fletcher and Stokes (1976, 109).

Other Fiction

As Dorian Gray has allowed critics to focus attention on concepts such as genre and intertextuality, so, predictably perhaps, the other fiction has been marginalized, not the least by Ellmann (1987), who barely mentions it. Moreover the methodologies which have been been so rewarding when applied to the major works have been conspicuously absent from what little discussion there has been of the stories.

So, for example, Jean M. D'Alessandro's monograph Hues of Mutability: The Waning Vision in Oscar Wilde's Narrative discusses Wilde's prose fiction only in terms of its emerging complexity. The exceptions to this general pattern are as follows: the suggestive and highly original discussion of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." (if indeed this work may be counted as fiction) by Linda Dowling (1980), who
relates the story to those concerns she discusses at length elsewhere, Decadence and language; Bruce Bashford's intelligent discussion (1988) of the idea of interpretation in relation to the same story; and Horst Schroeder's instructive account of "The Canterville Ghost" (1977). Lewis L. Poteet (1970) discusses the same piece in relation to Wilde's other work, in particular to the criticism. A similar strategy is employed by Lydia Reineck Wilburn, who examines "The Canterville Ghost" by suggesting that Wilde was using the story as a means to explore "various concepts of a theory of performance," especially the artist's and the audience's role in artistic performance and she relates the novel to Wilde's account of performance in Intentions.


Poems and Aphorisms

Wilde's poems and the collections of his aphorisms have not received much critical attention. In general the poems (with the exception of The Ballad of Reading Gaol) have not been valued highly, and from their first publication they were considered derivative to the point of plagiarism (although, as I have suggested in other parts of this work, the concept of plagiarism in a writer so careless of the authority and uniqueness of the "text" could bear a more general and more systematic examination). Jerome H. Buckley outlines the critical reception of the Poems in "Echo and Artifice: The Poetry of Oscar Wilde" and discusses the charges of plagiarism. He examines in particular the poems which deal with impressions, and contrasts
the early work with *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. If the poetry was condemned as unoriginal or juvenile during Wilde's life, it was virtually ignored after his death. Fletcher and Stokes (1976, 121–23) document this general disdain and, by contrast, the general and consistent admiration for the poetry in Germany (124). Bobby Fong's unpublished edition of the poems (1978) and his account of some of the manuscripts (1979) remain the best studies of textual problems.

Most critical accounts of the poetry are to be found in the general studies of Wilde, described in the previous section. See, in addition, Arthur Symons, *A Study of Oscar Wilde* (1930) and the work of Douglas Bush (1937) and A. E. Rodway (1958), all of which are discussed above; see also the discussions by Robert Louis Peters (1957), and by Kingsley Amis (1956) in his anthology of Wilde's poems and essays. At the level of individual study, J. D. Thomas (1951) discusses the composition of "The Harlot's House." *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* has in general been more favourably and more frequently discussed than the other poems. See, for example the essays by Houston A. Baker (1937) and G. Arms and J. E. Whitesell (1943). Albert Camus' remarks (1952) on the poem are interesting, if only for the fact that they are by Camus; and in a lucid discussion of Orwell and Wilde in *Modes of Modern Writing* (1977), David Lodge analyzes the fictive qualities of the poem. In "Oscar Wilde's 'Chant du cygne','" William E. Buckler (1990) discusses *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and sets the poem against the prison letter to the *Daily Chronicle* ("The Case of Warder Martin") and *De Profundis*. He analyzes the poem and Wilde's changing attitudes to it.

Elsewhere the idea of subversion, a familiar way of discussing Wilde's other work, is central to a stimulating essay by Sandra Siegel on an unlikely part of the *œuvre*—his aphorisms. Siegel writes briefly about the popularity of collections of aphorisms at the turn of the century—there were evidently more published then than ever before; and this popularity she connects to their function in ideology. By claiming for themselves a transhistorical nature, they seem to embody "timeless sayings which require neither context nor narrative," and are hence to be seen as confirmatory of or "compatible with the prevailing current of opinion" [16–17]. Wilde's collected and uncollected aphorisms, Siegel suggests, subvert these expectations, implying a world in which words "are subject to ironic reversals of meaning." Wilde's aphorisms therefore encapsulate those ironic re-
versals of meaning and inversions of truths which are in many ways characteristic of the *oeuvre*. Siegel concludes by relating this aspect of Wilde's work to the then precarious nature of the colonial relationship between English and Irish culture, a line of investigation that could perhaps be usefully expanded to other aspects of Wilde's wit.

**The Plays**

Not surprisingly, the plays have received the most consistent critical attention. What troubled most contemporary reviewers was the relationship between what they saw as two quite disparate features—the comic elements and the "problem-play" themes. The most important reactions during the early years of this century also focused upon the related problem of generic definition. Hence essays such as those by St. John Hankin (1908), C. E. Montague (1911) and Hesketh Pearson (1921) tried to isolate what is distinctive about Wilde's drama. (Reactions to the plays in the first two decades of this century are given in fuller detail by Fletcher and Stokes, 1976, 96; contemporary reviews are listed by Mikhail, 1978; some are reprinted by Beckson, 1970).

The issue of genre definition persisted through studies in the 1950s in works by Louis Kronenberger; it was taken up in important essays by Eric Bentley (1948), Arthur Canz (1960) and Ian Gregor (1966). The concern of all these essays is the particular nature of Wilde's comedy. Gregor's case, for example, is that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the central play in the *oeuvre* because it succeeds in creating an arena where the values of the dandy are at a premium and may be celebrated. But Gregor's essay should be read alongside recent studies, particularly the introduction to Russell Jackson's edition (1980), which draws attention to the radicalism of the plays—more specifically to the ways in which Wilde's plots invert Victorian melodramatic conventions. (See also in this respect "Fallen Women, Lost Children: Wilde and the Theatre of the Nineties" (1984) where Wendell Stacy Johnson also discusses Wilde's relation to contemporary theatrical conventions.)

A subject not unrelated to an aspect of Gregor's essay—that of masking—is discussed by Arthur Ganz (1963) and R.K.R. Thornton (1989) and, in a penetrating and suggestive essay, by Jerusha McCor-
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mack (1976). More recently Antony Easthope (1987) discusses jokes and ideology in *Earnest*. (But on this topic compare recent work on Salomé discussed below.)

Another critical issue with a long pedigree is the familiar one of European influence—in this context, that of European dramatic models upon Wilde's work. Here individual studies by Stanley Schwarz (1933), Z. Raafat (1966), E. H. Mikhail (1968) and most importantly Charles B. Paul and Robert D. Pepper (1971) all draw attention to the influence of French models on Wilde—particularly the work of Scribe, Sardou, and Musset. Important, too, for the French context of Wilde's drama is Kelver Hartley's *Oscar Wilde: L'Influence française dans son oeuvre* (1935). (But, as I have already indicated, recent work has problematized the whole notion and nature of influence.) Another, more local, perceived line of influence is that of Restoration comedy. Here the issue is broached by N. W. Sawyer (1931), but the most convincing essays have been by James A. Ware (1970), Geoffrey Stone (1976) and David Parker (1974), works which should be read alongside David L. Hirst's illuminating general study, *Comedy of Manners* (1979).

Recently critics have broadened the scope of their search for sources. Emil Roy (1972) and Katharine Worth (1978) are more concerned to give Wilde's work an Irish context, while J. L. Styan (1960) compares *Earnest* with Ibsen's work, an influence seen as increasingly important in recent years. So an essay by Kerry Powell in 1985 also traces the nature of the relationship between Wilde and Ibsen. Both here and in his later book, already mentioned, Powell points out that Wilde's contemporaries usually made comparisons between his work and that of French dramatists of the 1880s and 1890s, but in so doing they failed to see the connections between Wilde's comedies and the plays of Ibsen, then being performed in Britain in private theatres. Powell describes in general terms the ways in which Ibsen's work was adapted and imitated by British playwrights in the 1890s, and he then goes on to suggest that in Wilde's case there is "undiscovered common ground" between his and Ibsen's work—in, for example, the affinities of elements of the plots in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *Ghosts*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Hedda Gabler* and most importantly, *An Ideal Husband* and *Pillars of Society*. However it should be noted that Powell's essay overlooks some British studies—particularly that of Katharine Worth (1983)—which
emphasize Wilde's commerce with topical social issues and his relationship with the work of contemporary British and European playwrights.

The question of influence is pursued in a brief essay by Ali A. Al-Hejazi (1985). Al-Hejazi suggests that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is in several key ways indebted to W. S. Gilbert's *Engaged*, especially in its moral attitudes to those familiar and well-worked Victorian concerns, wealth and marriage. Influence, too, figures in an essay by Werner Vortriede (1955), who sees comparisons between *Earnest* and *Faust*. Joseph Loewenstein, following the same line of enquiry, explains the brilliance of *Earnest* by seeing Wilde's work in relation to both Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and to the work of Sardou. Hence for Loewenstein Wilde "flirts brilliantly" with *Oedipus Rex*, and in so doing "converts" the tragic to comedy: such dramatic tactics exemplify, in Loewenstein's view, the provisionality of all Wilde's moral positions.

Regenia Gagnier (1986), in a work already mentioned, investigates Wilde's manipulation of his theatrical audiences, and Kristin Morrisson (1981) and Alan Andrews (1982) debate Wilde's stage directions, Morrison claiming that "description of external behaviour and the interpretation of motive" in Shaw's drama provided a model for Wilde's use of similar stage directions. Later Andrews points out that the text of Shaw which Wilde would have seen was an acting edition devoid of both detailed character descriptions and elaborate stage directions. Russell Jackson (1983) takes up this debate about the nature of Wilde's and Shaw's stage directions, pointing out that many of the stage directions for Wilde's last two plays were added by him to the proofs of the published versions of the plays, and in that sense are the retrospective thoughts—the "idealization of his prelapsarian self"—of the "late" Wilde.


On the two middle society dramas, *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband*, very little has been written: however, in
addition to the critical monographs described above and the work on
the plays by Bird and Worth, see essays by Stanley Schwarz [1933] and
E. H. Mikhail [1968] and the introduction to Two Society Comedies
[1983] by Ian Small and Russell Jackson. Even less has been written
on the minor dramatic pieces: Frances Miriam Reed [1985] provides
one of the rare accounts of Vera; or The Nihilist [but see also Worth
[1983] for an excellent discussion of the central issues of the minor
plays, and the scholarly introductory material to Reed's excellent
edition of the play, discussed elsewhere].

Inevitably Earnest has received much more detailed critical atten-
tion than the other plays. Otto Reinert [1956] discusses satire and
comic inversion in the play, and E. B. Partridge [1960] relates the
concept of truth-telling in the critical essays to the representation of
mores in the play; and later Christopher Craft [1990] analyzes the
subject of sexuality in it. The topic of Earnest as a dramatic text
occupies Joseph Donohue [1971], who, in a ground-breaking essay,
indicates the preconditions for a reconstruction of the first perform-
ance. Also good on the dramatic contexts of the play are Joseph
Loewenstein [1985], and the introduction to Russell Jackson's edition
[1980].

Russell Jackson [1983] describes the persistence—even up to the
present day—of the image of British "Society" which Wilde invokes
and exploits in his work. For Jackson, Wilde's comedy has attained a
"classic" status; indeed he points out that for most audiences it is
"the representative Victorian play," and as a consequence it has
become "harmless." The survival of this image of Victorian society,
Jackson argues, has tended to convert Wilde's radicalism into a
conservatism, and hence characters such as Lady Bracknell, who were
originally comic (and subversive) deviations of Victorian social and
dramatic types, tend in modern productions to become indistinguish-
able from those types.

A tendency to see Wilde as a man of the theatre rather than as a
writer-turned-dramatist is now beginning to emerge. Keith Brown
[1984] finds most critical accounts of The Importance of Being
Earnest less than adequate, simply because commentators have failed
to pay proper attention to Wilde's modes of characterization. The
power of the play, Brown suggests, derives from Wilde's attitude of
"quiet, sympathetic, philosophic amusement" which in its turn de-
rives from the figure of the post-Parisian Wilde of the mid-eighties, excited by the idea of evil, but able to create a mood of sustained dramatic innocence. Elsewhere Joel H. Kaplan writes illuminatingly on “Ernest Worthing’s London Address.” Harold Bloom (1988) devotes a whole volume in his Chelsea House series to Earnest.

The impact of Salomé on European readers has been much greater than on their English-speaking counterparts. The reason for this state of affairs is not hard to find: it is due in part, of course, to Strauss’s opera and the enormous impact of its first performances, but due also in part to the fact that, more than any other of the plays, Salomé has explicit parallels in European literature. Early reactions to the play and to the first staging of the opera are given by Fletcher and Stokes (1976, 102), and the controversy over the first British performance of the opera (and the ensuing Pemberton Billing case in 1918) is also detailed by them (104); but in this respect see also Michael Kettle (1977).

The sources and European parallels for the plays have particularly interested critics. Ernst Bendz (1917) and Helen Grace Zagona (1960) locate the parallels to be made with Flaubert. Bertrand D’Astorg (1971) and Nicholas Joost and Franklin Court (1972) discuss the myth of Salomé and its importance for the motif of the femme fatale; Christopher Nassaar (1978) points out the influence of Wilde’s “vision of evil” upon work by Yeats and Conrad. Marilyn Caddis Rose (1980) briefly describes the Salomé motif in French literature in the final years of the nineteenth century and discusses the use and limitations of Wilde’s Decadent language in the play. Robert C. Schweik (1987) also compares Wilde’s use of the Salomé theme with its other treatments in nineteenth-century culture. For a more recent and admirably detailed account of the French influences on Salomé, see Peter Raby (1989).

Indeed, Salomé is becoming an increasingly important text for many critics with a general interest in Wilde. Because it ran foul of the constraints imposed by the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays, particularly because of its representation of sexual topics, Salomé is coming to be seen as a document which allows contemporary issues in the politics of gender to be glimpsed. So Kate Millett (1970) discusses the play in the context of sexual guilt and homosexual fear of women, a reading which increasingly finds favour with
later critics. Edmund Bergler (1956) too, in a related essay, claims to have identified evidence of Wilde’s troubled psychopathology in the play’s representations of sadism and misogyny.

However, more recently such simple views of the expressive relationship between literary artefact and writer have given way to an interest in the relationship between text and ideology. So Elliot L. Gilbert’s examination of Salomé looks at details of the play’s publication, taking as its subject the question of the relationship between the text and Beardsley’s illustrations for it. Gilbert argues that the two comment on each other and thus form a “notable representation of perverse sexuality” which is in turn “a devastating attack on the conventions of patriarchal culture” while at the same time expressing a “horror at the threatening female energy which is the instrument of that attack” (133–34). Gilbert maintains that Beardsley’s “lurid” illustrations go well with the text and “illustrate” the subject matter and “spirit” of the play (138). These Gilbert relates to what he sees as partial attacks on patriarchal power and authority embodied in the play, which issue finally in both Beardsley’s and Wilde’s “undermining of clear distinctions between male and female in both play and illustrations [and] the ambivalent responses of the two artists to an aggressive female sexuality” (159). Patriarchal power, it might be noted in passing, seems to have survived the onslaught more or less unscathed.

Observations such as those of Gilbert might perhaps be usefully read alongside Ian Fletcher’s accounts of the typology and sources of Beardsley’s obsessive images (Fletcher 1987 and 1988), and Gilbert’s conclusions about the radical nature of the representation of sexuality in Beardsley’s work might also be compared with those of Linda Gertner Zatlin (1985), who argues for a view of the artist “in favour of healthy, if bawdy, sexuality, sexual education, and sexual exploration” (6). (The theme of Beardsley and sexual politics is pursued more fully in Zatlin’s recent study, Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian Sexual Politics [1990].) For a fuller account of the relationship between Beardsley and Wilde, see Robert Langenfeld, Reconsidering Aubrey Beardsley (1989). Also interested in the relationship between Wilde’s text and Beardsley’s illustrations is Maureen T. Kravec (1983), who suggests that the “drawings strike a pose of seriousness while slyly satirizing the human folly of self-centered possessiveness by no means absent in their own society.” Such effects are achieved, Kravec
argues, partly by those well-known caricatures by Beardsley of Wilde himself in several of the illustrations.

Graham Good studies the first productions of Salomé. Seeing it as the "culminating-point" of the English Decadence, Good describes the banning of the play in Britain in 1892 and its subsequent publication in Britain, with Beardsley's illustrations, in 1894. (In passing Good maintains but does not cite any new evidence for the fairly common view that the English text was extensively revised by Wilde himself and was not the work of Douglas. But it ought to be noted in passing that such a view was in fact denied by Wilde himself in De Profundis). Good's description of the staging of the play is a preliminary one, and ought to be read along with the learned and suggestive observations made by Rodney Shewan (1986) on late nineteenth-century versions of Salomé. There is an obvious need for a full account of the first productions of all of Wilde's plays along the lines of that proposed by Joseph Donohue (1971) for The Importance of Being Earnest. Good's account of Salomé goes some way in that direction but it is, necessarily perhaps given the limitations of the means at his disposal, rather superficial in its coverage.

De Profundis

The best text of De Profundis is still that given by Hart-Davis in the Letters (1962). Reactions to the letter by contemporaries, and by those involved in its (partial) publication—particularly the reactions of Ransome, Douglas, Sherard—can be found in the works of biography listed above. Details of the circumstances of the production of the text and its textual history are given by Hart-Davis, by Ellmann (1987) and, most polemically, by Gagnier (1984). Gagnier's thesis, that the letter should read as a document written in barely tolerable prison conditions, is reinforced by Dollimore (1987) who sees in it a renunciation of Wilde's transgressive aesthetic brought about by a desire to invest suffering with meaning.

Generally speaking, De Profundis has tended to be discussed in relation to the biography or to the criticism. The context of the confessional tradition is a theme taken up by Jan B. Gordon (1970), Jerome H. Buckley (1983 and 1984) and Avrom Fleishman (1983), all noted above, and who, like Harvey Kail (1979) are concerned with the
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notion of truth-telling in the letter. Bashford (1985) contrasts some of the presuppositions of De Profundis with those of the critical dialogues. Works by Albert Camus (1954), Alick West (1958), Jacques Barzun (1964) and Rodney Shewan (1977), all also discussed above, suggestively relate the prison letter to other parts of the oeuvre; also in an essay discussed above, William E. Buckler contrasts the letter with The Ballad of Reading Gaol; and in "Oscar Wilde's Aesthetic of the Self" (1989) he argues that the writing of De Profundis was an act of self-realization. Elsewhere Steven Marcus (1982) writes a stimulating essay on Wilde's autobiographical work.