

# Poor Oscar!

OSCAR WILDE: INTERVIEWS AND RECOLLECTIONS

Edited by E. H. Mikhail/Macmillan Press, 2 vols., £12.00 each.

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ON THE 25th May 1895 Sir Alfred Wills, Knight and Justice of Her Majesty's High Court, found that he had to exercise "stern self-restraint" in dealing with a defendant who was "the centre of a circle of extensive corruption of the most hideous kind among young men". Oscar Wilde received two years hard labour. His crime — the corruption of minors — had a long history. Socrates was arraigned on a similar offence (though with theological rather than moral overtones) and paid with his life. Wilde's imprisonment broke his health; and ended for the rest of the twentieth century the possibility of an art free from social and moral statement. The trial itself was less a condemnation of the man than a fatal warning that society takes art seriously — though not as art! In the earlier trial Edward Carson sought in vain to make Wilde confess that the matter of his writing was reality and not fiction. In the last trial Wilde, the man, was tried for the supposed crimes of Wilde, the "apostle of aestheticism". Nowhere in history does the debate between the fictive worlds of imagination and the legalistic quotidian become so acute. Wilde, with a strong sense of prophecy, fell martyr for the entire aesthetic movement.

Beyond the "apostle of the lily" or the apostle of the "utterly-utter and too-too" there exists another, little-known, man. Part of his headstone inscription reads:

For his mourners will be out-cast men  
And outcasts always mourn.

Today the interest in Wilde is very diverse, being centred mainly in Wilde's theory of drama, of the mask, and in the attitude towards fiction and

and the seven poems selected celebrate friendship and also the richness of life on Paros, O'Grady's Greek island. "Jack and Maja" tells us that "like/ its wine maturing, friendship's process/takes its patience." And "Limerick Town" has an attitude much different from that of "Homecoming":

This wide wacky world's just one small town  
with its watchers and watched and genius unsung  
and a marble of meaning may be quarried quite simply  
right where you stand.

There are only two poems from *Stations* (1976) but seven from *Sing Me Creation* (1977). These latter poems are splendid, and "My Room," describing O'Grady's room in Greece, has a sense of arrival and fulfilment. "Purpose" reaffirms his choice to settle abroad: "I saw my life and I walked out to it, as a seaman walks out alone at night from his house down to the port with his bundled/belongings, and sails into the dark."

To conclude the selections, Fallon includes a few poems from two forthcoming collections. It is difficult to judge *The Suras of the Wandering*

criticism put forward in *The Critic as Artist* and *The Decay of Lying*. Much work needs to be done on Wilde as rebel, as iconoclast, as anti-hero, now that the nineteenth century morality which killed Wilde is itself beleaguered, engaged in a last ditch stand with obscenity trials of "blasphemous" poems written by gays, and the "Save Ulster from Sodomy" campaign. Poor Oscar indeed. Wilde was a socialist who, despite his affection and "class-snobbery", sympathised deeply with the working-class. His socialism was of a unique kind, leading directly to Individualism, as he argues in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. It is indeed the "outcast" who will mourn Oscar, particularly as his sympathy with the anarchist movement becomes more widely known. Wilde courageously signed a petition in defence of the Chicago Martyrs and went bail for a man who fired his pistol at the House of Commons. Later, with regard to his own bitter experience, he became involved in prison reform, though his letters on the subject belong to history, while his *Ballad of Reading Gaol* has been immortalised.

In view of the tremendous enigma of Wilde himself, it is exciting to receive the new collection of reminiscences of

Celt from these excerpts. It is, as Fallon calls it, "a telegraphic history and geography of culture." But the two poems from *His Skaldcrane's Nest* are impressive. "St. Dimitrios' Day," although it deals with an awkward leavetaking, is a mature and moving love poem — a tremendous advance from *Beilley*.

The collections from *St. Beuno's* are hand-printed, limited editions. *The Lilac-Tree* gives the impression of an undeveloped talent. Fallon's title poem has rimes, rhythms and images which are pleasant though seldom original. John F. Deane, however, fits real speech into traditional forms and continually surprises with apt imagery. The beach scenes present well sustained themes of entropy. I found "Sea-Smell", with its detailed description of a dead shark, especially moving.

*Pot-Pourri* is printed on flake parchment and the seven poems offer humane sentiments; but Smythe's craft is amateurish. Here is the concluding couplet of the title poem, a sonnet: "The date was her birthday, the twelfth of September./After her death, I was given that vase, I remember."

the man which Professor E. H. Mikhail has collected from a variety of sources, including interviews Wilde gave to American newspapers in the 1880s.

Professor Mikhail is well-known for his careful groundwork, chiefly bibliographies, on the great figures of Irish literature — Synge and O'Casey. The present two volumes are the fourth in a series of interviews and recollections which Mikhail has gathered and edited — the previous three being Synge, Yeats and Lady Gregory. He has produced an elegant and well-annotated collection of reminiscences, most of which have been published before, but some of which have been translated specially for these volumes. His aim is, as stated in the Preface, "to restore the true perspective on Wilde's career, to revive the conversationalist, to recreate him first and foremost as a genial wit and humorist". In support of this claim he marshals the evidence of Wilde's acquaintances and friends — we have Wilde's wit at Oxford, his disappointment with the Atlantic, his conversational epigrams on art and criticism. Yeats called him "the greatest talker of his time", Max Beerbohm exalted him, and George Alexander, actor-manager of the St. James Theatre commissioned *Lady Windermere's Fan* after hearing Wilde at table.

But is this the "true perspective" on Wilde? And does it really need to be restored? Surely this is the caricature of Wilde that we all know, the dazzling wit, the raconteur, the bon vivant darling of fashionable society. Indeed as we read further into this massive collection, many of the pieces seem to argue for a stranger yet more interesting Wilde. There is, for instance, a strong argument in favour of the thesis that Wilde was not such a great "live" talker at all, that most of his best wit appears in his plays, not in his everyday encounters, and that his own epigram, that he had given only his talent to his work while reserving his genius for his life, is unfounded. Many of Wilde's lectures in America are ungainly in expression and do not show the fluidity and well-formed thought for which he was renowned. While appreciating the value of Mikhail's selection, I would take issue with his main aim — to defend Wilde as the genial humorist. For this would be to betray Wilde the serious antagonist of the crumbling British social system of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It

would further undermine Wilde as artist, as dreamer. Surely we need to understand better that strange man who stood for hours at jewellers' windows imagining the perfect gems which would adorn the body of Salome, the blood-thirsty dancer about whom Wilde dreamed, as Gomez Carrillo recounts in his contribution to the collection. Or try to understand the many masks of the artist who compared himself to another character in fiction—Huysmans des Esseintes. Like Flaubert, Wilde saw his fictitious creations as truer than mere ordinary life. Why else would he cry out in sleep, while at Wormwood Scrubs, a line from Huysmans' *Against Nature* or say repeatedly: "I am mad just like des Esseintes"? Unfortunately Mikhail's collection merely deepens the enigma.

*Shosha* by Isaac Bashevis Singer (Cape, £4.95).

Magically delicate novel which must be at least spiritually, if not factually, autobiographical. Aaron Greidinger is the son of a Warsaw rabbi with the gift of writing and the unselfconscious self-negating instincts of a Hasidic saint. As a boy in the Ghetto he is fascinated by a beautiful, strangely retarded child Shosha and when in young manhood he has the chance of a career as a Yiddish playwright in New York he forgoes it to marry the still childlike Shosha. The story has an obvious symbolic application but as an account of the rich darkening life of Polish Jews in the late thirties, it is unequalled.

*Strawboss* by Stephen Longstreet (W. H. Allen, £5.50).

Coarse-grained, spasmodically lively (feisty, its characters would call it) account of labour organisation in California and other parts of the US. American strawbosses make our own shop-stewards look like shrinking violets but then strike-breaking is an obvious opening for any clean-living young thug. The career of Mike Brant (born Mikolaj Brandicki, but who needs a name like that?) proves that a hard head is more than coronets and it is an obvious starring-vehicle for Charles Bronson. Apart from some good set-pieces — life among migrant fruit-pickers, for example — the novel is predictable and not worth the effort of its 400-action-packed pages.

*Finding Out* by Virginia Fassinidge (Constable, £4.95).

Dreamy, altogether rather unlikely tale of an inexperienced twenty-four-year-old girl's relationship with a much older man who may have killed his wife. The scene is a south English coast resort during a hot summer season. Richard the man is dimly perceived, almost a wish-fulfilment figure in the tentative, slow, almost off-hand development of their relationship. The special situation of permanent residents of a seaside place is well-described but the affair is frail and the denouement irresolute.