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978-0-521-03530-9 - Oscar Wilde: Myths, Miracles, and Imitations

John Stokes

Excerpt

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Introduction

GETTING IN TOUCH

A few years ago I was sent a posthumous poem said to have been written by Oscar Wilde and communicated to the world via a spiritualist medium. My name had been mentioned, or so the accompanying letter said, as someone who might be able to help with authentication. Before I had even read the poem I was livid, and once I had done so (it was, of course, the inevitable mush) I sent off a short, sharp reply in which I made it plain what I feel about people who thrive upon the gullibility of others.

Only much later did it occur to me that in being true to myself I was betraying Wilde, who would undoubtedly have found the situation of considerable interest and some amusement. Wilde was fascinated by mysteries of all kinds. He was happy to take part when Dr. Onofroff of Paris gave a public demonstration of his extraordinary skills in “thought-reading” in London in 1889;¹ he visited Mrs. Robinson, a Society fortune-teller, in 1894 (and was impressed by what she had to tell him); and he even employed a palmist, the fashionable “Cheiro” who, in later life, was able to boast of his contact with a famously doomed man. Premonitions, prophecies, and strange coincidences are, as many critics have noticed, a constant thread in Wilde’s work, at least from *Lord Arthur Saville’s Crime* and *The Canterville Ghost* through *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

This concern with the paranormal bears an obvious but disturbing relationship to the curiosity about more orthodox beliefs that would eventually allow Wilde’s death-bed entry into the Catholic church. He seems to have turned toward Rome on

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at least two previous occasions: as an Oxford undergraduate, when his friends were surprised and perturbed by his apparent fervor; immediately after his release from Reading Gaol in 1897, when he applied for six months' retreat among the Jesuits at Farm Street, and was refused. Only on a third occasion, when he was beyond speech, was he admitted.

It is a pattern that suggests sporadic desperation rather than a long-delayed homecoming. Catholicism was only another option; and only occasionally, at times of great personal crisis, was it attractive. In Wilde's mind there were many possibilities for belief, and they coexisted. So, for instance, whereas the long prison letter that came to be known as *De Profundis* may look on the surface to be his most Christian statement, in fact it offers a radically different dispensation, based on outright agnosticism.

The faith that others give to what is unseen, I give to what one can touch, and look at. My Gods dwell in temples made with hands, and within the circle of actual experience is my creed made perfect and complete: too complete it may be, for like many or all of those who have placed their Heaven in this earth, I found in it not merely the beauty of Heaven, but the horror of Hell also. When I think about religion at all, I feel as if I would like to found an order for those who cannot believe: the Confraternity of the Fatherless one might call it, where on an altar, on which no taper burned, a priest, in whose heart peace had no dwelling, might celebrate with unblessed bread and a chalice empty of wine. Everything to be true must become a religion. And agnosticism should have its ritual no less than faith. . . Its symbols must be of my own creating. (*Works*, 1019–20)

The eclectic appeal of agnosticism made it quite different from most versions of Christianity, with their stress on atonement and the afterlife, their essential dreariness. As Vivian complains in *The Decay of Lying*, despite the fact that priests are “men whose duty it is to believe in the supernatural, to perform daily miracles,” in the Church of England “a man succeeds, not through his capacity for belief, but through his capacity for disbelief” (*Works*, 1089). Wilde was always on the side of belief, of acceptance, of making the impossible real, and recognizing the material world as a marvelous place.

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My own instinctive preference is for the more straightforwardly materialist Wilde, but I now realize that in order to get in touch with that side of him, it is sometimes necessary to engage with his double, the seemingly superstitious man. Together they form the whole. The rationalist was no sceptic, nor was the adept simply naive. Like many of his contemporaries – W. T. Stead, Arthur Conan Doyle, W. B. Yeats among them – Wilde was drawn to manifestations of the supposedly supernatural because he could see there what the feminist historian of spiritualism Alex Owen has called “the unfolding of a vision of human fulfilment.”² Yet always he looked for signs of that human fulfilment within the phenomenal world. “It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible,” he wrote in “Cheiro’s” visitor’s book – slightly misquoting Lord Henry Wotton’s unacknowledged borrowing from Gautier.³

The reason why Wilde loved mystery so much is, paradoxically, that he was at heart a rationalist, willing to accept that scientific discovery could offer an increasingly adequate account of the visible world. One of the “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young” proposes that “religions die when they are proved to be true. Science is the record of dead religions” (*Works*, 1244). Questioned about this by Edward Carson at the Queensberry libel trial in 1895, he described it as “a suggestion towards a philosophy of the absorption of religions by science” though that, naturally enough, was “too big a question to go into now.”⁴

It was, though, a question that had interested him for many years.⁵ In the short story *The Canterville Ghost*, written in the 1880s, the ghost is first defied, and then made afraid by mortals. It is finally relieved of its obligation to haunt because of an unnamed act of charity carried out by a living girl. “The mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death”: that principle is reasserted again and again throughout Wilde’s works (*Works*, 198, 604).

It is not surprising then that no sooner was Wilde dead than he began to reappear in the visions of those who had known and, sometimes, loved him. Lord Alfred Douglas’s poem “The Dead Poet”, written in Paris in 1901, is only the most famous instance:

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I dreamed of him last night, I saw his face
 All radiant and unshadowed of distress,
 And as of old, in music measureless,
 I heard his golden voice and marked him trace
 Under the common thing the hidden grace,
 And conjure wonder out of emptiness,
 Till mean things put on beauty like a dress
 And all the world was an enchanted place.⁶

Douglas had the advantage of having known the face, having heard the voice, though lack of direct contact never deterred others from dreaming of Wilde, from pretending to be him and, in a few cases, from claiming to have seen him after his death. Wilde was glimpsed in New York in 1905⁷ and, as late as 1934, the then occupant of his rooms in Magdalen College, “an Australian who plays ice-hockey for the University – not a man given to aesthetic fancies,” saw him standing by the window: “a tall man, with a long jacket, very old-fashioned, with rows of buttons and very short lapels. His tie was loose, and tied in a big knot.”⁸ The phantom left through a wall, uncharacteristically silent.

It is more common for such ghosts to speak. The strangest report, by far, is the one given by Wilde’s nephew, the poet “Arthur Cravan.” Cravan’s real name was Fabian Avenatius Lloyd: born in 1887,⁹ he was the son of Otho Holland, Constance Wilde’s brother. In 1912 Cravan founded in Paris a literary magazine called *Maintenant*, and it is in the third issue, under the title “Oscar Wilde est vivant,” that the visitation is described.

Wilde arrives at Cravan’s Paris flat one dark rainy night. Old, wrinkled, gray, and bald, he is nevertheless “beautiful,” as an elephant is “beautiful”; his rear overwhelms the seat upon which he sits; he has enormous arms and legs, but small, flat feet give him the dreamy and rhythmic allure of a “pachyderm.” Cravan loves him for this, imagines him “in the green madness of Africa, amid the music of the flies making mountains of excrement” (56).

The two men compare notes and Cravan offers to put his uncle on the music hall, but then, after a great deal of drink, Cravan turns abusive: “Get out of it! You bum, you good for nothing, with your rotting face, you shovel-load of shit, water-cress from a

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urinal, you faker, old queen, great cow!" (61). As Wilde leaves, his nephew is suddenly overcome by pity: remembering that the old man has no overcoat, he runs after him, shouting his name. When he realizes that Wilde has gone for ever he slowly returns – a desolate man.

"Oscar Wilde est vivant" is offered as fiction, though a previous issue of *Maintenant* has a piece entitled "Document inédit," attributed to "W. Cooper" (one of Cravan's pseudonyms), which is presumably factual. Here Cravan gives Wilde more conventional but still exotic features: Greek profile, aristocratic nose, and a sculptured mouth curved like an antique mask, which gave him "a sort of cruelty in repose" (30). When Wilde entered a room he was like a French king, full of "elegant nonchalance" (42); his presence seemed to reverberate, to carry on rolling and shining like a luminous ball. He was, says Cravan, both radiant and intangible.

This more sober though still dazzling description may bear some relation to the impression given by the real Wilde, but the Paris sighting is certainly true to Cravan, a famously cantankerous man – modernist poet of sorts, acquaintance of Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars, husband of the poet Mina Loy, an amateur boxer who fought the great black heavyweight Jack Johnson in 1916 (and lost). When Cravan disappeared in South America in 1918 he left behind him a vision of Wilde unrivalled for its *bizarrierie* yet curiously lacking in aura. As Sigmund Freud was to say about *The Canterville Ghost*, an apparition "loses all power of at least arousing *gruesome* feelings in us as soon as the author begins to amuse himself by being ironical about it and allows liberties to be taken with it."¹⁰

It is precisely for this reason that most Wildean visitations tend to avoid outright comedy, though they, too, often involve a high degree of self-projection. The reasons for reappearance given by the spirit who communicated with Mrs. Hester Travers Smith in 1923 was that he needed to correct rumors that he was still alive:

Men are ever interested, my dear lady, in the remains of those who have had the audacity to be distinguished, and when, added to this, the corpse has the flavour of crime, the carrion birds are eager to light on it. In my case the corpse was taken from the humble place where it was

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cast off by my mental portion and conveyed to a retreat where it might decay quietly and in peace. It had none of the gaudy obsequies which would have fitted such as I was.¹¹

If the reality of the discarnate Wilde were to be established then it was essential to maintain that he died in the first place. All questions of authenticity of manner would follow upon that premise. Mrs. Smith was a well-known medium who communicated with Wilde in the best professional way, with the help of automatic writing, ouija boards, and an intermediary or “control.” On this occasion, however, her most recognizable control is *De Profundis*, since the visitation comes after its partial revelations as well as after several informative books: two by Robert Sherard (1902 and 1906); Arthur Ransome’s *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (1912), which prompted famous lawsuits; and Frank Harris’s *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions* (1916). It is inevitable then that Mrs. Smith should produce an inspirational Wilde who brings a message of comfort: “I wither here in twilight, but I know that I shall rise from it again to ecstasy. That thought is given to us to help to endure,” the voice pronounces. “The human spirit must pierce to the innermost retreats of good and evil before its consummation is complete” (55). In the “dimness” of another world Wilde reenacts the purgatorial experiences prefigured in *De Profundis*. For this is also a repentant Wilde (quite why is never made clear), who makes the unlikely confession that he adores rustic people because “they are at least near to nature, and, besides, they remind me of all the simple pleasures I somehow missed in life.” Nevertheless he remains poetic, anxious to replace the solecism of his “control,” who describes the moon as “like a great golden cheese,” with “like a great golden pumpkin hanging in the blue night” (7).

This, too, is Wilde the critic, prepared to pronounce even upon those who have survived or come after him. Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells, for instance, “believe they are fit for the company of the gods who drink the nectar of pure mind” (21). Shaw “cannot analyse, he is merely trying to overturn the furniture and laughs with delight when he sees the canvas bottoms of the chairs he has flung over” (22). Galsworthy, rather surprisingly, is “the only

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mind I have entered into which appeals to my literary sense" (23), while Joyce's *Ulysses* is castigated because "the creatures he gives birth to leap from him in shapeless masses of hideousness, as dragons might, which in their foulsome birth contaminate their parent" (39). Hardy and Meredith are briefly dismissed and the Sitwells passed by altogether: "I do not spend my precious hours in catching tadpoles" (46).

With some of these judgments Mrs. Smith concurs, with others she parts company, providing incidental evidence of the separate reality of the spirit Wilde. Should there be any lingering doubts about the quality of the witticisms, Mrs. Smith is on hand with excuses, pointing out that after all he had been through, Wilde could hardly be expected to maintain his old standards.

But Mrs. Smith didn't really need an excuse, because her Wilde's inability to imitate his own inimitable style neatly coincided with the widespread belief, which she repeats, that the great *mots* were always prepared well in advance (107). Smith's Wilde, speaking from his "place of dimness," makes his entry with such awesome promise that his failure to touch the heights gains an alternative authenticity from the evidence of Wilde's later years (95), reproducing the pattern of the earliest biographies: a tragic life cut down at its peak.

The issue, as usual, is not so much authenticity as appropriateness. Mrs. Smith's Wilde represents an act of biographical reinterpretation that, however much she would deny it, reflects her own involvement in current debates about the reality of the spirit world.

That said, by the side of Mrs. Smith's effusions, *The Ghost-Epigrams of Oscar Wilde as Taken Down through Automatic Writing by Lazar*, which appeared in print in New York in 1929, seem even less Wildean.¹² "Wrinkles are the deathbed wherein women bury their illusions"; "Out of a love affair a man emerges bored to death; woman completely exhausted"; "All works of art are the autobiographies of liars"; "Nothing kills love like an overdose of it"; "Infidelity in woman is a masculine trait." These contain superfluous words, rarely reverse the familiar, and are often deeply misogynistic. They are also inexplicably American: "Bachelors are the bootleggers of love," and "People who live in glass

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houses try to sublet their apartments.” Whoever he may have been professionally, all that “Lazar” produces here are the leaden quips of a mediocre stand-up comedian.

As time went by, memories of Wilde became stronger – which is no paradox because the facts of his life had become increasingly available through such widely read books as Hesketh Pearson’s biography (1946) and H. Montgomery Hyde’s account of the trials (1948). John Furnell’s *The Stringed Lute*, “An Evocation in Dialogue” of 1955, opens with “a massive and somewhat corpulent gentleman,” appearing in a dream to the author, who currently occupies Wilde’s Tite Street house:

He wore an overcoat and seemed to be about to set out on some journey for there was a bundle of rugs beside him fastened with a leather strap. There was an extraordinary dignity and kindness about him which gave him the appearance of a benevolent but rather dissipated Roman Emperor, and I at once recognised him as Oscar Wilde, the Wilde whom Toulouse-Lautrec had painted. . .¹³

What follows is, in fact, a drama, its dialogue based on actual quotes, mainly from Wilde, but also from Douglas, Ada Levenson, and others. At the end the narrator awakes, depressed to realize that Wilde has been nothing but a figment of his own imagination. As he does so, a violet falls to the floor: “Reverently I placed the flower between two folded sheets of paper, and as I did so I knew that it had been no dream; that although my friend was already far away on his travels, yet something of him remained with me here, in this room” (191).

Strange, perhaps, to think of Wilde as a guardian angel, though this is what he has been for so many, right up until today. In his extraordinary meditation *Who Was That Man?*, published in 1988,¹⁴ the actor and theatre director Neil Bartlett is again stalked by a spectral Wilde. Bartlett’s book is, at one and the same time, a quest for gay lives in the past, and his own autobiography. Setting out to discover “our” history, he finds that Wilde’s words “began to ghost his writing” (26). This is a reversal of what is normally meant by the term, since Wilde becomes the “ghost-writer” whose story Bartlett must tell in order to tell his own. And in the process he discovers that he is by no

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means the first gay man to be hooked on history, to pursue the idea “that one man’s experience may be a repetition of another’s” (199).

“What if I rounded the corner of Villiers Street at midnight,” Bartlett speculates, “and suddenly found myself walking by gas-light, and the man looking over his shoulder at me as he passed had the same moustache, but different clothes, the well-cut black and white evening dress of the summer of 1891 – would we recognise each other?” (xx). But this is a Wilde who haunts a gay man of the 1980s, after “liberation” and the coming of AIDS, and although Bartlett is led to conclude that “we have a common identity, common interests,” simply to exclaim “he’s just like us” would be to abolish time, distance and difference altogether, “to refuse the task (and pleasure) of identifying where he is like us, where he differs” (217). Nor are these the questions that only an author need address. As Bartlett asks his own readers: “When you are old, who will ghost your memoirs?” (208).

ACTING THE PART

Just as ghosts play parts in the lives of the living, so actors may take on the character of the dead. There have been many theatrical impersonations of Wilde, and even more imitations of a verbal style often described though never recorded. What did he sound like, really? How to embody that legendary voice?

When the English première of *Salome* took place in 1905 the role of Herod was played by a young actor who appeared under the name of Robert Farquarson, though his real name (he was of Spanish descent) was Robin de la Condamine. Both Robert Ross and Max Beerbohm were greatly impressed,¹⁵ and it was on the basis of this performance that Farquarson was cast as Forgael in Yeats’s *The Shadowy Waters* in the same year. Yeats, though, was bitterly disappointed, complaining that “he is over-emphatic and shoots his voice up and down the scale in a perfectly accidental way.”¹⁶ Farquarson went on to play Duke Ferdinand in *The Duchess of Malfi* (1919), Count Francesco in *The Cenci* (1922 – cast by Lewis Casson because his voice could reach three octaves),¹⁷ Iachimo in a futurist *Cymbeline* (1923), Lenin in Hugh Griffith’s *Red*

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Sunday (1929), and a number of roles in innovative productions of Chekhov. When he died in 1966, both Sir John Gielgud and Sir Donald Wolfit found time to add their own memories to *The Times* obituary.¹⁸ As by all accounts he had an impressive physical and vocal presence, it is riveting to learn that Farquarson was said to have based his vocal delivery upon that of Wilde himself.¹⁹

Mythic truth or mimicry merely? Farquarson's style links him, apostolically at least, with the man in whose play he had first made his name, and he certainly carried forward, long into the twentieth century, a distinctive manner that came to stand for one version of the Wildean: an imperious hauteur coupled with an ultimately deflationary tendency to excess. Farquarson, in short, was "camp."²⁰

On stage, what Gielgud in his obituary note described as a "powerful and witty, though somewhat malevolent stage personality" gave Farquarson a career. Offstage, he seems to have been able to get away with much the same manner because he operated in the relatively closed and knowing worlds of the theater, of Chelsea, and of expatriate Italy, where Reggie Turner, for another, was renowned for his uncanny ability to mimic Wilde. When Reggie reminisced, "his voice descended to the depths of an imaginary corpulence, his gestures became sculptured and hieratic and his fingers sprouted scarab rings." "It was as if Oscar's spirit had taken possession of him," recalled Harold Acton.²¹

In certain circles Wilde lived on as a private memory, but in 1936 the chance came to imitate him on stage before a wider public. The actor was Robert Morley, the play was *Oscar Wilde* by Leslie and Sewell Stokes, and the opportunity did not come easily, because the play was initially refused a license by the Lord Chamberlain's Office on the grounds of its representation of homosexuality. *Oscar Wilde* eventually opened as a club performance at the Gate Theatre on 29 September 1936 where it was, in general, positively received. One critic noted that "the jokes remain good because Wilde had several practical things to say, and said them extremely well. And the British public, which was his butt, has not so changed that these jokes have lost their truth today."²²