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Excerpt

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CONTEXT

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Biography and the art of lying

Three days before he died in the Hôtel d'Alsace, Oscar Wilde was asked by the proprietor Jean Dupoirier about his life in London. 'Some said my life was a lie but I always knew it to be the truth; for like the truth it was rarely pure and never simple', he replied, echoing Algy Moncrieff, paradoxical as always and never one to lose the opportunity of recycling a well-turned phrase.¹ Biographers ever since have been by turn delighted at the rich pickings and exasperated by the contradictions. The duality of Wilde in all aspects fascinates, confuses: the Anglo-Irishman with Nationalist sympathies; the Protestant with life-long Catholic leanings; the married homosexual; the musician of words and painter of language who confessed to André Gide that writing bored him;² the artist astride not two but three cultures, an Anglo-Francophile and a Celt at heart. And overlaid on it all is the question of which facets of the Wildean dichotomy were real and involuntary and which were artificial and contrived for effect.

For the biographer it becomes important to find out, but for Wilde, who confessed that he lived in permanent fear of not being misunderstood, it becomes equally important that he should not. What is one to make of Wilde's response to the New York reporter who asked whether he had indeed walked down Piccadilly with a lily in his hand? 'To have done it was nothing, but to make people think one had done it was a triumph.'³ Wilde blurs the edges and hides behind a non-alignment with his own utterances:

Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. (CW 1173)

Equivocality is maintained by both man and artist, and the biographer's nightmare continues. Some who have tried to pin him down have found that he turns to quicksilver in their fingers. The shimmering whole suddenly

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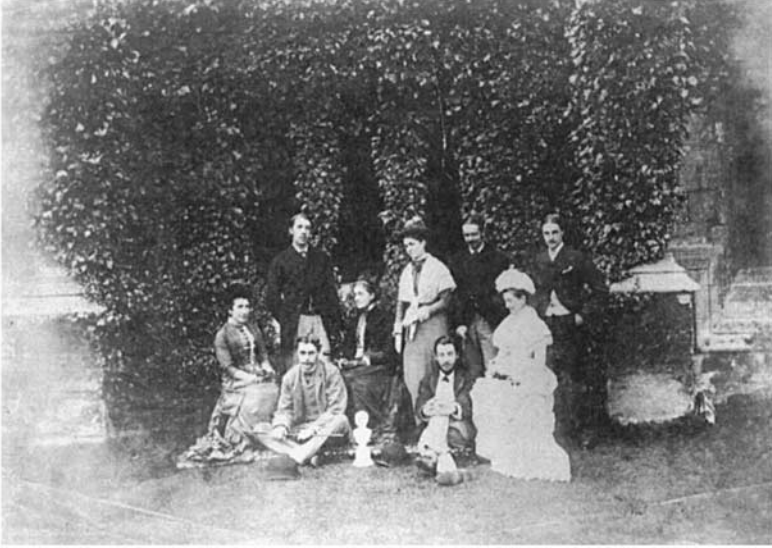


Figure 1 Oscar Wilde with his friends at Magdalen College, Oxford; it seems likely that the bust in the foreground was the one of Augustus bequeathed by Dr Daubeny to the first Member of Magdalen after his death to win the Newdigate Prize Poem

divides momentarily, not into fragments, but into a myriad smaller globes, each different and complete in itself, and just as suddenly re-forms leaving no trace of the parts. Others have attempted to fit him into moulds of their own making and, on discovering that he overlaps the edges in a tiresomely uncooperative way, have simply trimmed off the surplus.

Yet for all the contradictions there is a strange consistency about Wilde's story. There is a Faustian element about this classical scholar who thirsted for sensation and experience. In Reading Gaol he was to reflect on the conflicting patterns of his past:

I remember when I was at Oxford saying to one of my friends – as we were strolling round Magdalen's narrow bird-haunted walks one morning in the June before I took my degree – that I wanted to eat of the fruit of all the trees in the garden of the world, and that I was going out into the world with that passion in my soul ... I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure ... There was no pleasure I did not experience ... Tired of being on the heights I deliberately went to the depths for new sensations. (CW 1026)

It is simply not a life which can tolerate an either/or approach with logical conclusions, but demands the flexibility of a both/and treatment, often raising questions for which there are no answers. Few of Wilde's biographers have been able to tackle it satisfactorily. Too many have come to

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him with an agenda of their own or a depth of personal feeling which limits their view and somehow dilutes the richness of his character. Peel the onion and you separate it into its component parts; slice it down the middle and you reveal the intricate relationship between all the layers yet still retain the form. Richard Ellmann's blade was certainly sharp enough but his untimely death prevented the follow-through of a clean cut. His predecessors, with the notable exception of Hesketh Pearson, for the most part took rough aim with a meat-cleaver.

If this sounds unduly harsh, it should be remembered that most of them did not even have access to the whole onion, let alone the proper implements. For ten years after his death Wilde's reputation was cloaked in what Christopher Millard called 'a vague fog of obscenity'. Letters were destroyed lest they implied guilt or even sympathy by association – Oscar's letters to his wife Constance, especially from the weeks after prison, being among the worst casualties. Those friends who could have given balanced and reliable (even if strongly personal) accounts, the likes of Robert Ross, Reggie Turner, Carlos Blacker and More Adey, did not, except in letters which only surfaced in private archives decades afterwards. Others, Robert Sherard and Frank Harris, journalists both, wrote vividly if with questionable accuracy about their friendship with Wilde. Those who had known him less well found that by 1920 the connection was more beneficial than harmful and slipped a few paragraphs or even a chapter into their memoirs. But the view of his life was fragmentary, even impressionistic, and books for the most part alluded to his downfall in veiled terms. In England between the wars homosexuality was tolerated in artistic circles with a knowing wink and a nudge but with little approaching understanding. Even as late as 1948 when Montgomery Hyde published his reconstruction of Wilde's trials it was not intended for the general reader but rather for lawyers and a 'specialist' market, as it was then called. Wilde's collected letters were only published in 1962, and even then with severe misgivings from my father, Wilde's only surviving son, since they were quite explicit in places about his sexuality. There was an inherent irony in having to separate the man from his work in order to gain public approval for him. At the time the British could not have accepted him otherwise, but the approach was sadly misguided, and assessments of his life and literature both suffered in consequence. My father's misgivings, however, were totally unfounded as it turned out. Publication of the letters gave an entirely new impetus to Wilde studies and a much greater understanding of the complexities of his character. They also, most importantly, helped to corroborate or disprove certain facts and statements about him made posthumously by his friends and contemporaries.

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Ironically it was this ‘monstrous worship of facts’, as Wilde once called it, which has led to an unfortunate and fashionable trend: to regard many of Oscar Wilde’s early biographers with a good deal of suspicion, even to dismiss some of them outright as self-seeking liars. In retrospect it is hardly surprising since the majority of what was published in English had been written by those whose public squabbles about the ‘truth’ of his life had, until the 1940s, assumed all the elements of a sort of boulevard theatre. Each had needed to tell the story from an intensely personal point of view. If most (‘Bosie’ Douglas being the notable exception) were coloured with deep affection for the subject on the one hand, on the other there was inevitably a tendency for the authors to present themselves in the best possible light. This combined with varying degrees of journalistic if not poetic licence led to almost farcical exchanges of the ‘Oh yes I did! – Oh no you didn’t!’ variety. Stories with the same pay-off had a curious way of changing the supporting cast around Oscar’s lead, often to include the author of the memoir. A half-remembered snatch of conversation or a memorable witticism had hung, suspended in time’s cupboard, waiting for the full scenario to bring it back to life, but when two or even three claimed the right to authenticity, it became suspect – even unusable – to later writers.

For example the well-known story of Wilde envying a Whistler *bon mot*, wishing out loud that he had said it and being cut down by the latter’s ‘You will, Oscar, you will’ appears in several guises. Herbert Vivian recalls it in 1889 occurring at a dinner after Wilde had delivered his lecture on art to the students of the Royal Academy at which Whistler was present; in 1915 Douglas Sladen remembers it from a party of Louise Jopling’s when the original remark which Wilde envied had not been made by Whistler at all; Frank Harris tells it in 1916 as taking place at an exhibition of Whistler’s pictures when the artist had a witty exchange with Humphry Ward, art critic of *The Times*.⁴ Hesketh Pearson repeats Harris’s story in 1946 and Richard Ellmann repeats Pearson rather than Harris which gives the anecdote more credibility since Harris is ‘known’ to be utterly unreliable. Indeed, in his bibliography Pearson says of Harris’s *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions* ‘This work is nowhere reliable’ but quotes the story nonetheless, immune from accusations of inconsistency since he himself cites no sources.

Harris was a journalist, and journalists live by writing for a sensation-hungry public. He may have been a braggart and occasionally a liar but his life of Wilde is long overdue for re-evaluation. It first appeared in America in 1916 published privately, one suspects, because he discussed far more openly than anyone had before him Wilde’s homosexuality as well as Douglas’s role in Wilde’s downfall. Douglas had already been to court in

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1913 over Arthur Ransome's fairly circumspect study of Wilde which, he complained, had libelled him, so Harris's far more outspoken approach only infuriated him further. Douglas threatened legal action if so much as one copy were sold in England. In 1925, however, he visited Harris in Nice and, on the strength of new 'evidence' from Douglas, together they wrote the *New Preface to 'The Life and Confessions of Oscar Wilde'*. It was intended to correct Harris's misstatements and allow his life of Wilde to be sold without further hindrance from Douglas. Within days of Douglas's departure Harris found out, as he wrote to my father, that he had been told 'one truth and twenty lies' and insisted that the piece be rewritten.⁵ Douglas, realising that their joint preface was tantamount to a retraction and an apology by Harris, refused to allow it to be changed and published it as a separate work.

Harris was also taken to task by Robert Sherard, whose friendship with Wilde had started in Paris in 1883 and lasted until the latter's death seventeen years later. He had already published two accounts of Wilde's life before Harris's book appeared and one shortly after: *The Story of an Unhappy Friendship* (1902), *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (1906) and *The Real Oscar Wilde* (1917), in which his spaniel-like devotion to Wilde's memory is at times an embarrassment. He attempts to explain Wilde's homosexual behaviour as a form of epilepsy or madness brought on by excessive indulgence in food and drink, and seems incapable of accepting that Wilde was perfectly well aware of what he was doing. Also, in a memorably ignorant passage, he entirely overlooks Wilde's subterfuges and begging letters during the last years in Paris, for which the 1962 *Letters* provide ample and pathetic testimony: 'Not on one single occasion in the whole of his life – even in the starveling years after his release from prison – did he obtain or attempt to obtain resources by any means unworthy of proper pride, of self-respect, of delicacy.'⁶

Harris's blunt but curiously sympathetic account of Wilde's life, given the imprimatur from its second edition by Bernard Shaw, so incensed Sherard that he was even prepared to associate himself with Douglas in order to discredit Harris. The result was an entire volume *Bernard Shaw, Frank Harris & Oscar Wilde* (1937) attempting to expose Harris as a liar. Unfortunately Sherard's method is largely one of nitpicking over details, and he inflicts as much damage on himself as on Harris with his own inaccuracies when attempting to show Harris in the wrong. Wilde, for instance, did not, as Sherard claims, return to England from America in September 1882; nor was he late in delivering the script of *The Duchess of Padua* to Mary Anderson.⁷ Once again the *Letters* provide cast-iron evidence.

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Sherard's own biographies are filled with factual errors: Wilde was not initially imprisoned in, nor released from, Wandsworth Gaol; he was not born in Merrion Square; he did not translate Barbey d'Aureilly; and the conjecture that his hopelessness at mathematics while at Portora School was responsible for his life-long extravagance is almost worthy of Harris as depicted by Sherard.⁸

Alfred Douglas's attempt at biography was worse. His impotent scream of rage at discovering that *De Profundis* had been addressed to him, but had been deposited out of his destructive reach for fifty years in the British Museum, found its voice in *Oscar Wilde and Myself* (1914), largely written for him by T. W. H. Crosland. It was full of inaccuracies, untruths and attempts at self-justification, even going to the extent of denying that he knew Wilde was homosexual until the trials, though he later had the sense to repudiate the book and express his regret over publishing it.⁹

As for Harris there are unquestionably parts of his life of Wilde which are Harris exaggerations; his total recall of Wilde's words twenty years after the event is quite clearly an impossibility. At one time he even plunders the 1912 transcript of the trials for material and incorporates it in the form of a conversation which was supposed to have taken place between Wilde and himself. In another fictitious exchange he uses one of Wilde's letters to Ross in which he asks for certain books on his release; and Frank Harris not Robbie Ross becomes the generous provider.¹⁰ The bare facts are respected but the journalist feels they are more readable in fancy dress.

But for all their faults these early biographers of Wilde knew the man in person. Without Sherard we would know only half of what we do about Wilde's various stays in France from the start of their friendship in 1883 to the poignant sketch of their last meeting in Paris at the Hôtel d'Alsace. The writing of *The Duchess of Padua*, Mary Anderson's rejection of it, Wilde's disappointment, Sherard's consolation dinner (and many other evenings spent in each other's company) – all would have been lost; we would not have had the astute observations of Wilde's effect on the French literary scene of the 1890s, trying too hard to impress at first but coming into his own as Wilde the natural *raconteur*,¹¹ and a host of anecdotes which have the clear ring of truth about them and which bring to life, for instance, Oscar's relationships with his mother and his brother Willie.

Despite Douglas's belittling of Wilde's abilities and achievements (understandable if not forgivable when you had lived nearly twenty years in his shadow), there is the odd valuable character sketch both in his disgraceful 1914 book and his *Autobiography* published in 1929. Wilde, he maintained, was something of a social snob. This fits in with Douglas's overall arrogant criticism of his friend and could easily be dismissed were it not

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corroborated by the three most unlikely sources, namely Harris, Sherard and Shaw. Their view was more gentle and sympathetic, noting Wilde's almost childlike pleasure in the grandeur of historic names: 'Surely everyone prefers Norfolk, Hamilton and Buckingham to Smith or Jones or Robinson', he is supposed to have remarked to Frank Harris.¹² The truth probably lies somewhere between the two – a fascination rather than an obsession with the aristocracy. More important, though, are Douglas's claims about his financial support of Wilde. It is generally assumed that he lied about or at best exaggerated the extent of his support during Wilde's libel case against his father and later when they were together in Naples, but what seems indisputable, and backed by evidence from his bank, is that during the last ten months of Wilde's life in Paris he gave him £332 in cheques quite apart from the occasional cash handout.¹³ This is in direct contradiction to all that Wilde says in his letters about Bosie's meanness and raises the more serious problem of how much we can trust anything that Wilde says at that time about his finances. He writes to Robbie Ross on one occasion, saying that he needs money because an innkeeper at Nogent was about to sell his clothes for an unpaid bill and then openly admits his fib: 'I am so sorry about my excuse. I had forgotten I had used Nogent before. It shows the utter collapse of my imagination and rather distresses me' (*L* 763). This manipulation of the truth for financial advantage needs to be considered carefully by biographers before using Wilde's post-prison letters at face value. At the end of 1898, Frank Harris invited Wilde to spend three months on the Riviera. In his 1916 biography he describes their train journey from Paris a week before Christmas and their first days at Napoule. Ten days later Wilde writes to Ross asking for money and saying that Harris did not come to Napoule after all. Harris, 'always unreliable', must have been inventing again and yet a letter to him from Wilde later in February states quite clearly '... since our arrival nine weeks ago' (*L* 780).

Harris's sin would appear to be embellishment rather than outright fabrication. Shaw called his biography 'the best literary portrait of Wilde in existence', continued to say so for over twenty years and explained why in his preface to the first 'permitted' English edition of 1938. He would hardly have made such an endorsement had Harris been a total charlatan. Robert Ross was sent a copy in 1916 and wrote to Harris: 'I am delighted to hear that the "Life" has caught on well in America', and provided a list of corrections which Harris included as an appendix in later editions. 'I do not, of course, agree with all you say or your estimate and criticism of various incidents', he continued, 'but I would not suggest altering anything materially. The point of the book is that it is *your* view.'¹⁴

All these early accounts by Wilde's friends are essentially impressionistic

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personal views. They are the technicolour elements in a grey world of facts. To Sherard, Shaw, Douglas and Harris must be added the shorter studies of Ada Leveson, Charles Ricketts, André Gide and Vincent O'Sullivan, each in their way bringing Wilde briefly back to life as they saw him, each more or less flawed by modern standards but even the flaws adding a dimension to the picture.

Thirty-eight years after his death two of Oscar Wilde's friends were corresponding about his life. 'I don't suppose', wrote Reggie Turner to Robert Sherard, 'any book will ever be published on that limitless subject [Oscar] which will be entirely satisfactory to everybody "in the know" or will be free from inaccuracies, mostly unimportant enough, and the future historian or compiler will be puzzled to get at the most probable straight path and is sure to stray sometimes and somewhere. All these books have told me that no biography is quite to be trusted.'¹⁵

Exactly so, but there is much which is unique in these personal appraisals. Treated with caution, weeded of self-interest, they remain an invaluable source which modern critics, obsessed with factual accuracy, are too often ready to condemn out of hand.

Another sixty years have passed. All those who knew Wilde are long since dead. A few memoirs, notably Douglas's 'The Wilde Myth' and Sherard's 'Ultima Verba', remain unpublished and the flow of unrecorded letters both by and about Wilde has been reduced to a mere trickle.¹⁶ The likelihood of sensational new source material passing through the sale-rooms is slight and biographers have had to content themselves with reassessing the available material rather than springing dramatic new discoveries about Wilde on the public – at least in theory. In practice Wilde is not Wilde without the whiff of scandal and, stale scandals being as interesting as cold mutton, new books need fresh ones. And if they don't exist, they can be invented.

When Richard Ellmann's biography of Wilde was published in 1987, among the illustrations was one captioned 'Wilde in costume as Salome'. The photograph looked vaguely like a decadently soft-fleshed Wilde as one imagines him to have been in the 1890s and it was credited to a French photo archive. Originally it had illustrated a book review in *Le Monde* a few weeks before Ellmann's death. It was picked up by his editor who was in Paris at the time and who sent it to England. The publishers, sensing something of a literary scoop, included it in the book without further ado. Naturally it appeared in many of the reviews as a previously unpublished photograph of Wilde, depicting previously unsuspected transvestism and gradually found its way into half-a-dozen works wholly or partly concerned with Wilde. Photographs are seldom reproduced with corroborative evidence or footnotes. On condition they resemble their captions, they pass

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Figure 2 The Hungarian opera singer Alice Guszalewicz as Salome, Cologne, 1906; featured in Richard Ellmann's biography as 'Wilde in costume as Salome'

unquestioned. Nobody asked whether this was likely behaviour on Wilde's part or whether, if he had been in the habit of cross-dressing, he would have posed for a photograph. From what we know it would seem to have been entirely out of character, but few people did any more than express uncertainty. Such was Ellmann's reputation as a scholar that no one thought to check out its provenance. That was unwise. In 1994 an article