

Wilde Lectures

Intro - The Art of Biography and the Biography of Art

“Would you like to know the great drama of my life? It is that I have put my genius into my life – I have put only my talent into my works.”

(In conversation. Quoted in *The Wit and Humor of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Alvin Redman (Dover publications: N.Y., 1959), p.202)

“...you had not yet been able to acquire the ‘Oxford temper’ in intellectual matters, never, I mean, been one who could play gracefully with ideas but had arrived at the violence of opinion merely.”

(‘Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis’, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, vol.II, *De Profundis*, ‘Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis’, ed. Ian Small (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.39.)

“Surely you do not think that criticism is like the answer to a sum. The richer the work of art the more diverse are the true interpretations. There is not one answer only, but many answers. I pity that book on which critics are agreed. It must be a very obvious and shallow production.”

(Letter to W. E. Henley, (?Dec. 1888), *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart Davis, (Fourth Estate: London, 2000) pp.372-3)

“It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.” (Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

HEROD: Neither at things, nor at people should one look. Only in mirrors should one look, for mirrors do but show us masks. (*Salome*)

My dear Robbie, I send you, in a roll separate from this, my letter to Alfred Douglas, which I hope will arrive safe. As soon as you, and of course More Adey whom I always include with you, have read it, I want you to have it carefully copied for me. There are many reasons why I wish this to be done. One will suffice. I want you to be my literary executor...and would like you to have all my works.

...Well, if you are my literary executor, you must be in possession of the only document that really gives any explanation of my extraordinary behaviour with regard to Queensberry and Alfred Douglas. When you have read the letter you will see the psychological explanation of a course of conduct that from the outside seems a combination of absolute idiocy with vulgar bravado.... I don’t defend my conduct. I explain it.

Also there are in the letter certain passages which deal with my mental development in prison, and the inevitable evolution of character and intellectual attitude towards life that has taken place: and I want you, and others who still stand by me and have affection for me, to know exactly in what mood and manner I hope to face the world.... Of course I need not remind *you* how fluid a thing thought is with me – with us all – and of what an evanescent substance are our emotions made.

(Letter to Robert Ross (1 April 1897), *Complete Letters*, pp.780-81)

“I wish the copy to be done not on tissue paper but on good paper such as is used for plays, and a wide rubricated margin should be left for corrections. The copy done and verified from the manuscript, the original should be despatched to A.D. by More, and another copy done by the type-writer so that *you* should have a copy as well as myself.” (Ibid, 781.)

“Blindly I staggered as an ox to the shambles.” (‘Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis’, p.43)

“At the end I was of course arrested and your father became the hero of the hour: more indeed than the hero of the hour merely: your family now ranks, strangely enough, with the Immortals: for with that grotesqueness of effect that is as it were a Gothic element in history, and makes Clio the least serious of all the Muses, your father will always live among the kind pure-minded parents of Sunday-school literature, your place is with the infant Samuel, and in the lowest mire of Malebolge I sit between Giles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade.” (‘Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis’ p.44)

“I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age...”

“The gods had given me almost everything. I had genius, a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring: I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art: I altered the minds of men and the colours of things: there was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder: I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or the sonnet, at the same time that I widened its range and enriched its characterisation: drama, novel, poem in rhyme, poem in prose, subtle or fantastic dialogue, whatever I touched I made beautiful in a new mode of beauty: to truth itself I gave what is false no less than what is true as its rightful province, and showed that the false and the true are merely forms of intellectual existence. I treated Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction: I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me: I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram.” (Ibid, pp.94-5)

“[Christ’s] chief war was against the Philistines. That is the war every child of light has to wage. Philistinism was the note of the age and community in which he lived. In their heavy inaccessibility to ideas, their dull respectability, their tedious orthodoxy, their worship of vulgar success, their entire preoccupation with the gross materialistic side of life, and their ridiculous estimate of themselves and their importance, the Jew of Jerusalem in Christ’s day was the exact counterpart of the British Philistine of our own. Christ mocked at the ‘whited sepulchre’ of respectability, and fixed that phrase for ever.” (Ibid, p.121)

“If the copying is done at Honiton Street the lady type-writer might be fed through a lattice in the door like the Cardinals when they elect a Pope, till she comes out on the balcony and can say to the world *‘Habet Mundus Epistolam’*; for indeed it is an Encyclical Letter, and as the Bulls of the

Holy Father are named for their opening words, it may be spoken of as the *Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis*.”
(Letter to Robert Ross (1 April 1897), *Complete Letters*, p.782)

“I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me....There is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into a spiritualising of the soul.

I want to get to the point then I shall be able to say, quite simply and without affectation, that the two great turning-points of my life were when my father sent me to Oxford and when society sent me to prison.” (‘*Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis*’, p.99)

“Do not be afraid of the past. If people tell you that it is irrevocable, do not believe them. The past, the present and the future are but one moment in the sight of God, in whose sight we should try to live. Time and space, succession and extension, are merely accidental conditions of Thought. The Imagination can transcend them, and move in a free sphere of ideal existences. Things, also, are in their essence what we choose to make them. A thing *is*, according to the mode in which one looks at it. ‘Where others,’ says Blake, ‘see but the Dawn coming over the hill, I see the sons of God shouting for joy.’ What seemed to the world and to myself my future I lost irretrievably when I let myself be taunted into taking the action against your father: had, I dare say, lost it really long before that. What lies before me is my past. I have got to make myself look on that with different eyes, to make the world look on it with different eyes. This I cannot do by ignoring it, or slighting it, or praising it, or denying it. It is only to be done fully by accepting it, fully as an inevitable part of the evolution of my life and character: by bowing my head to everything that I have suffered. How far I am away from the true temper of soul, this letter in its changing, uncertain moods, its scorn and bitterness, its aspirations and its failure to realise those aspirations, shows you quite clearly.” (Ibid, p.155)

Selected further reading (ie a starting point for exploring some of these issues further):

The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, vol.II, *De Profundis*, 'Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis', ed. Ian Small (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis: A Facsimile*. Introduction by Merlin Holland (London: The British Library, 2000)

- Joseph Bristow, "'A complex multiform creature' – Wilde's sexual identities", in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (CUP, 1997)
- Francesca Coppa, 'Performance theory and performativity' in *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, ed. Frederick S. Roden (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004)
- Dennis Denisoff, 'Oscar Wilde, commodity, culture', in *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, ed. Frederick S. Roden (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004)
- Josephine Guy and Ian Small, 'Reading *De Profundis*', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* (2006, Vol. 49, Iss. 2)
- Merlin Holland, 'Biography and the art of lying', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (CUP, 1997)
- Daniel A. Novak, "Sexuality in the Age of Technical Reproducibility: Oscar Wilde, Photography, and Identity", in *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Ohio University Press, 2008)