Mr. Wilde and His Gospel.

MR. OSCAR WILDE'S lecture, delivered on Monday at Chickering Hall, was not strictly a theatrical entertainment. At the same time it had little to do with literature, music, or the fine arts; and as people went to it as they would go to a circus or a fair, it may well be reviewed in a department which views with equal eye the midgets and the giants, the 'School for Scandal' and the new play of Messrs. Harrigan and Hart. What Mr. Wilde proposed it is hard to determine. He is a very young man, and belongs to a class which the expressive slang of the hour characterizes as 'fresh.' He has plainly seen nothing of the world, though he may have visited several other countries besides his own. In England he has met with many rebuffs which would predispose Americans in his favor. He has encoun-

tered ridicule with a serenity that would betoken courage if it did not savor of self-conceit. He has had the misfortune, possessing very mediocre abilities, to gather round him a band of young men as poorly endowed as himself, and has thus been persuaded that he has a mission, that he has something to tell the world. The results of this conviction were embodied in his lecture, which was pretentious, sophomorical, and dull.

The theme was 'The English Renaissance.' The point at which the lecturer wanted to arrive, but which, like all muddled thinkers, he constantly missed, was exceedingly simple. There has grown up in England a mania for house decoration. It is not, in most cases, born of an enthusiasm for the arts, but, having become the fashion, it has done something to encourage artistic feeling. Hence there is a great deal of slipshod talk about poets and painters in English drawing-rooms; many hand-books have been published concerning the old Italian masters, and a set of critics has come into existence —guided by Messrs. Colvin, Wedmore, and Comyns Carr—who judge a work chiefly by the effect it produces on their nerves. As a rule English people have deplorably little taste for art, and persons of very small wit and knowledge are able to influence them. And it happened that Mr. William Morris, an upholsterer, who had designed some tasteful wall papers, had obtained a reputation as a poet of the Spenserian school. The combination of poetry and upholstery was so uncommon that many people were induced to buy his wall-papers. Having bought them, they were bound to find gimcracks that should match them. Their houses being thus furnished in a new style, they found it necessary to dress in harmony with the prevailing colors. Then the jokers said that they must not only dress but live up to their furniture. So a few wall-papers effected a revolution in English households, and the result was pretty, simple, and picturesque. It would also have been harmless if the purpose of art were to while away an idle hour.

This wall-paper movement was translated in Mr. Wilde's lecture into a fine æsthetic jargon. Standing on the platform in knee-breeches, pumps, a white waistcoat, and silk stockings, he defined the English Renaissance as being a desire to produce a type of general culture, a desire for a more gracious and comely mode of life, a passion for physical beauty, and a seeking for new forms of poetry, new forms of art, and new intellectual and imaginative enjoyments. In other words, he advised us to know more, feel keenlier, dress better, mend our manners, have an eye for shape, and be as original as we can. Fancy a man crossing the Atlantic, coming three thousand miles, to tell us that. Imagine a hall filled with educated people, each paying a dollar, to hear such platitudes. And really that was all the lecturer had to say. He craved 'a flawless devotion to form,' whatever a 'flawless devotion' may be; he appealed only to 'exclusive sensitive natures'; he invited chosen spirits to come and sit with him in 'the secure and sacred house of Beauty.' What little Mr. Wilde has yet achieved, has been done, we believe, at college. He has not yet had the battle of life to fight. He doubtless believes that an admiration for pretty things will carry him a long way. Everybody has had the same enthusiasm in his time; everybody has outlived it. Look round on all the artistic producers of our time—its novelists, poets, painters, playwrights, journalists—who of them did not believe in his youth that the form of things was enough? Each of them grew older, and found that beneath the form was the substance, and that the purpose of art was chiefly ethical.

Poets live mainly by their moral force. Those of them who are music-makers, mere jinglers of words, are soon forgotten. And if there are three poets of our century who had no moral force they are Shelley, Keats, and Swinburne. These are, of course, the chief divinities in Mr. Wilde's Pantheon. Shelley, it appears, gave æstheticism its first and Swinburne its latest 'glory of song.' Keats is the 'pure and serene artist—the forerunner of the pre-raphaelite school.' All three have their admirers; they are essentially poets' poets; and many young gentlemen who write verses in this country incline to think each of them a 'bigger man than old' Shakspeare. But the world at large cares little for them, and still less for the pre-raphaelites. Mr. Wilde says that these painters had on their side what the English never forgive—youth, power, and enthusiasm; they had Ruskin's 'faultless eloquence' to help them; and after much parturition, they gave birth to Mr. Burne-Jones. If Mr. Burne-Jones and 'his exquisite spirit of choice' is all the pre-raphaelite revolution has given us, the public will be disposed to say with Madame Angot, 'c' n' était pas la peine assurément, de changer le gouvernement.'

The style of the lecture was worthy of its matter. It was of the flowery order peculiar to prize compositions at school. 'The epics of Asia are not ended,' cried the orator: 'the Sphinx is not yet silent, nor the fountain of Castaly dry.' And here again the thunder rolled: 'Those strange, wild-eyed sibyls, fixed eternally in the whirlwind of ecstacy: those mighty limbed and Titan prophets, laboring with the secret of the earth and the burden of mystery, that guard and glorify the chapel of the Pope Sixtus at Rome—do they not tell us more of the real spirit of the Italian Renaissance, of the dream of Savonarola, than all the brawling boors and cooking women of Dutch art can teach us of the real spirit of the history of Holland?' Nor was this the limit of the lecturer's flatulency. Anybody could see that he had no definite aim; that he was stuffed with book-lore and was drawing it out at random. He is not likely to find much encouragement here. We have poetasters enough. We should like to see Mr. Wilde put his hand to some manual labor. He might buy a few acres at Mr. Hughes's colony of Rugby or even a sheep farm in Colorado; and there, having disciplined himself with bodily toil, and having unlearned by a course of sound reading all the pernicious nonsense he now seems to have imbibed, he might come forth from his 'whirlwind of ecstacy,' clothed and in his right mind, and might do some credit to the profession of letters.