

"THE POETRY OF OSCAR WILDE: A CRITICAL STUDY"

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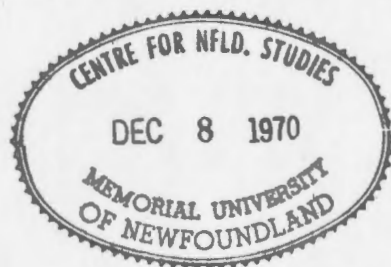
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THE POETRY OF OSCAR WILDE: A CRITICAL STUDY

by

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

Though the name of Oscar Wilde is a familiar one both to the general reader and to students of English Literature, little serious critical attention has been given to his work and, in English at least, almost none at all to his poetry, which he wrote with varying degrees of concentration throughout his literary career.

This study has been undertaken partly in order to rectify what seems an unnecessary omission by simply examining Wilde's poetry in some detail and thus restoring it to critical notice, and partly in order to discover whether it has any merits or whether the neglect of it hitherto is entirely justified.

The first Chapter surveys generally the extent and amount of Wilde's poetry as a necessary preliminary to more detailed descriptive and critical discussion. Chapter II is concerned with the contents of Wilde's first volume, Poems (1881), which it finds to be, on the whole, an immature and imitative production, with no fixed views of life or individuality of style. Because the scale of Wilde's imitativeness in this volume provoked contemporary accusations of plagiarism, Chapter III examines Wilde's debts to other English poets at some length and offers

very tentative reasons (though not justifications) for his frequent pilfering.

Chapter IV considers Wilde's less prolific but more accomplished poetry from 1882 to 1894, his 'aesthetic' and 'decadent' phase, paying particular attention to the influence of painting and that of mid-nineteenth-century French poets, especially as this is seen in his long poem The Sphinx. Chapter V is devoted to a lengthy discussion of The Ballad of Reading Gaol, Wilde's best-known poem and one of his few which can challenge, and sustain, comparison with the work of his contemporaries.

Chapter VI points in conclusion to a division in Wilde's poetry between a bulk of work which is of no more than juvenile or 'period' significance, and a handful of mainly later poems which have merit and individuality sufficient to establish Wilde's claim to serious consideration. In particular, the outstanding quality of The Ballad of Reading Gaol, not only when compared with most of Wilde's poetry but when compared with the poetry of his time, prompts the final verdict (not perhaps original but at least arrived at after due weighing of the evidence) that Wilde was a minor poet who, as a result of experiences which forcibly deepened his human responses, produced a major poem.

This thesis has been examined and approved by



TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Preface	iii
Chapter	
I Introduction	1
II <u>Poems</u> 1881	12
III 'Literary Petty Larceny'	56
IV Poems 1882-1894	86
V <u>The Ballad of Reading Gaol</u>	119
VI Conclusion	151
Bibliography	161

PREFACE

When Oscar Wilde said that his genius had gone into his life, but only his talent into his work, he in effect predicted the position in literary history which twentieth-century commentators have assigned to him. His life and sayings have exerted a continuous fascination, which has found its most recent expression in Philippe Jullian's biography,¹ but his work, though widely read, has rarely been paid the further compliment of close critical study. Arthur Ransome's book on Wilde, published in 1912, remains the only attempt, in English, to discuss his work at any length.

In addition, it may safely be said that to those who are aware of Wilde as a writer rather than simply as a reputation, he is better known as a witty playwright, an 'aesthetic' novelist, even a composer of fairy tales, than as a poet. Though Ransome devotes some thirty-five pages of his book to Wilde's poetry,² the only full-length work

¹ Philippe Jullian, Oscar Wilde, trans. Violet Wyndham (1969).

² Arthur Ransome, Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study (1912), pp. 34-60, 199-208.

on it is by a German, Bernhard Fehr.³ The widespread neglect of Wilde's poetry by critics since the First World War may indicate no more than a change in literary fashions, but its likelier implication is that Wilde's poetry is thought to be of little merit or interest. It seems in these circumstances fair to look at the poetry in some detail in order to discover what it is about and whether, in fact, it has anything of value to offer.

The primary motive for such a study as this is therefore to fill a gap, but two further justifications may carry equal weight. First, it was as a poet that Wilde both began and ended his literary career, and it is clear even from the infrequent occurrence of poems later in his career that this form of expression never completely lost its appeal for him. Even his reticence in making pronouncements about his poetry, so far from suggesting indifference to it, makes one feel that he wished, perhaps subconsciously, to protect his status as a poet from the attitude of intelligent mockery which came naturally to him in other areas of art and life. The second justification is related to the first. With the exception of The Ballad of Reading Gaol, Wilde's poetry is far less well-

³ Bernhard Fehr, Studien zu Oscar Wilde's Gedichten (1918).

known than his non-poetic work, but while the non-poetic work is crowded into a very short section of Wilde's literary life, the poetry spans his whole career and covers a wider range of subject matter and attitudes. Thus, taken as a whole, it reveals more of Wilde's complexity as a man and of his attempted range as an artist than does any individual non-poetic work, however successful.

I should like to acknowledge here the help I have received during the preparation and writing of this thesis from the following: the staffs of the library of Memorial University of Newfoundland and of the Harold Cohen Library, University of Liverpool; my colleagues Mr. John Jordan and Mrs. Roberta Driver, for the loan of material; Dr. Iain Fletcher and Dr. Walter Redfern, of the University of Reading, for a number of useful suggestions; and my Head of Department, Professor E.R. Seary, for his patience. My supervisor, Dr. Patrick O'Flaherty, has helped me to clarify my ideas through his demanding concern for exactness of expression. I am also grateful to my husband for his assistance and encouragement.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Wilde's poetry is an unfamiliar subject of study. Before embarking on a close critical examination of the poems themselves, it seems convenient to offer a brief resumé of Wilde's activities as a poet, indicating just how much poetry he wrote, when he wrote it, in what magazines and volumes it was published, and how it takes its place in the context of his life as a whole.

In his biography of Wilde, Hesketh Pearson mentions, though not, unfortunately, by name, a poem Wilde wrote between 1871 and 1874, while he was a student at Trinity College Dublin,¹ but as no letters appear to have survived from this period of Wilde's life, neither this, nor other possible poems of Wilde's Dublin days, can be identified.² The earliest printed poem of Wilde's which can be traced, 'Spring Days to Winter', appeared in January 1876, when he was at Oxford. A further seven poems date from this year.

¹ Hesketh Pearson, The Life of Oscar Wilde, Methuen 1946, Penguin Edition 1960, p. 32.

² Wilde's complete letters were edited and published by Rupert Hart-Davis in 1962. Apart from one letter of 1868, the first in this edition dates from June 1875.

Of these eight poems in all, two are based upon Wilde's experiences during the previous year, when he spent the summer travelling in Italy with John Pentland Mahaffy, Professor of Ancient History at Trinity College and one of Wilde's former tutors there. All but one of the poems appeared in Irish magazines: one in the Irish Monthly, two in Kottabos (a Trinity College magazine), and four in the Dublin University Magazine. The other, 'Rome Unvisited', was appropriately -- considering its Roman Catholic flavour -- published in The Month.³

Eight poems were published in the following year, all of them in Irish magazines. Four came out in the Irish Monthly, two in Kottabos, and the remaining two, their subject-matter deriving from Wilde's second visit to Italy, with his Oxford friend David Hunter-Blair,⁴ in The Illustrated Monitor. The same year saw the composition of three sonnets. One was the heavily Miltonic 'Sonnet on the Massacre of the Christians in Bulgaria', a copy of which Wilde sent to Mr. Gladstone, partly, it would appear, to obtain from the Prime Minister a testimonial to his poetic merit. In this object he succeeded, but the mention of Gladstone's name seems to have had no effect on the editor

³ The Month, Vol. IX, No. 33, Sept. 1876.

⁴ See Pearson, p. 46.

of the Spectator.⁵ Gladstone's interest tempted Wilde into sending him another sonnet, entitled 'Easter Day', which was eventually published two years later, though, again, not in the Spectator. The third sonnet, revealing one of Wilde's closest literary affinities, was called 'The Grave of Keats'; on his 1876 visit to Rome Wilde had 'stopped at the Protestant Cemetery in order to throw himself on the turf in reverence'.⁶

Three more poems appeared in 1878, all of them again in Irish magazines. It seems that up to this point in his career Wilde had sought convenient, rather than particularly distinguished, outlets for his poems, making the most both of his Irish origins and of the Roman Catholic themes of many of the poems themselves. From 1879 onwards, however, only two of Wilde's poems were first published in Ireland, and his name became better known in London, where he had now settled. The reason for the change was with little doubt his winning in 1878 of the Newdigate Prize for Poetry at Oxford. For Wilde, the set subject for the prize poem -- 'Ravenna' -- was a lucky accident: he had visited Ravenna in 1877, on the way to Greece with Mahaffy, and 'could therefore put in bits of

⁵ See The Letters of Oscar Wilde, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962, p. 38.

⁶ Pearson, p. 46.

local colour which the other competitors had to glean from books'.⁷ Ravenna is a respectable, if rhetorical and academic performance, cast by the rules of the competition into heroic couplets (a metrical form uncharacteristic of Wilde) but its effect was to add 'a blaze of glory'⁸ to his parting with Oxford, a parting already made distinguished by a brilliant First in Greats.

In January 1879 Edmund Yates, who had founded five years previously a 'Journal for Men and Women' called The World, wrote to William Wilde: 'I wish you would put me en rapport with your brother the Newdigate man, of whom I hear so much and so favourably.'⁹ Six of Wilde's poems were published in 1879, two of which, one dedicated to Sarah Bernhardt¹⁰ and the other to Ellen Terry, appeared in The World. 'Ballade de Marguerite', a poem distinctly reminiscent of Rossetti, was published in Kottabos; 'Easter Day' in the Oxford poetry magazine Waifs and Strays; and two other poems in Time, which Edmund Yates edited. Three more poems, one of them, 'Portia', again dedicated to

⁷ Pearson, p. 49.

⁸ Pearson, p. 49.

⁹ Stuart Mason, Bibliography of Oscar Wilde (1914), New Edition, Bertram Rota 1967, pp. 225-6.

¹⁰ Reprinted in Poems (1881) with the title 'Phèdre'.

Ellen Terry, came out in The World in 1880, 'Impression de Voyage', about Wilde's arrival in Greece, appeared in Waifs and Strays, and a villanelle called 'Pan' was contributed by Wilde to the first number of a short-lived magazine of the same name. Two more poems were printed in Pan in 1881, a further poem in The World, and 'The Grave of Keats', finally, in the Irish Monthly.

1881 also saw the publication of Wilde's first volume of poems. Hesketh Pearson sees this as a money-making scheme forced on Wilde by family circumstances. Wilde himself apparently later put about a suggestion that his aesthetic 'pose' in society was adopted as a way of gaining the notoriety necessary to persuade reluctant publishers of the commercial possibilities of his volume.¹¹ Wilde's letters provide no explanations, but the one he wrote to David Bogue, his prospective publisher, certainly indicates some sort of urgency:

I am anxious to publish a volume of poems immediately, and should like to enter into a treaty with your house about it. I can forward the manuscript on hearing that you will begin negotiations. 12

¹¹ Pearson, p. 59.

¹² Oscar Wilde to David Bogue, Letters, pp. 76-7.

Publication, however, was at Wilde's expense, which seems to indicate both his high opinion of himself as a poet and the fact that this opinion was not generally subscribed to by publishers. Wilde's gamble, or faith, was rewarded, and 1250 copies of the book were printed within a year, in five editions. Wilde, following a pattern now familiar to him, a mixture of sincere admiration and indirect self-advertisement, sent his poems to Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold and Mr. Gladstone. The volume reprinted, often in emended form, most of Wilde's magazine poems, together with thirty-two poems hitherto unpublished. Its reception was mixed, to say the least. Punch stated maliciously that 'There is a certain amount of originality about the binding, but that is more than can be said for the inside of the volume.'¹³ The Athenaeum was more weighty, but its final verdict was also unfavourable.¹⁴ What is just as interesting as the Athenaeum's adverse criticism, however, is the fact that its review occupied the entire front page of the issue -- a clear indication that Wilde's general policy of drawing attention to himself had succeeded. The author's personal reputation guaranteed his work a more attentive hearing than its intrinsic merits perhaps deserved.

¹³ Punch, July 23, 1881, p. 26.

¹⁴ Athenaeum, July 23, 1881, pp. 103-4.

Wilde wrote far fewer poems in the last two decades of his life, but the best of them are more interesting and original than his previous work. Whereas the Poems of 1881 are full of echoes of earlier English poets, such as Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Arnold and Tennyson, the reminiscence of whose poetic power blurs the effect of the far lesser talent of Wilde, his later poems are influenced by Whistler, Gautier, Flaubert and Baudelaire. Such influences, even when detected, are less obtrusive than those visible in his early work. Whistler was not a poet at all; Gautier, Flaubert and Baudelaire had not written in Wilde's own language. Wilde, however, was quite willing to indicate his acquaintance with French literature by giving some of his 'impressionist' poems French titles.

Two poems by Wilde appeared in 1882 while he was in America on a lecture tour. They were published in Philadelphia, in the first issue of a magazine called Our Continent, and it seems that at least one of them, 'Le Jardin', was written to order. The World quoted in January 1882 a cablegram which had asked Wilde to 'write poem, twenty lines, terms guinea a line; subject -- sunflower or lily'.¹⁵ The poem is of only twelve lines, but Wilde, as if to compensate for its brevity, mentions both sunflower

¹⁵ Mason, p. 125.

and lily. Though 'Le Jardin' is in itself a pleasant sketch, the circumstances of its composition suggest that Wilde was well able to turn his aestheticism to financial advantage.

In 1883 Wilde was for a time in Paris, and there wrote The Sphinx, though this long poem was not published until 1894.¹⁶ Only one poem, 'Under the Balcony', appeared in 1884. This was contributed to a volume got up for charitable purposes and entitled Shaksperean Show Book. In fact, much of Wilde's poetry publication at this time has a desultory air. 'Le Jardin des Tuileries', with its mention of 'children ... like little things of dancing gold' appeared in 1885 in a volume entitled In A Good Cause, published for the benefit of a Children's Hospital in Hackney. 'Roses and Rue' (dedicated to Lily Langtry) appeared in the Summer 1885 number of Society, and 'In the Forest', a very slight 'Swinburne-and-water',¹⁷ piece came out in the Christmas 1889 number of The Lady's Pictorial, where exactly two years earlier two more impressionist sketches, 'Le Panneau' and 'Les Ballons', had been published. 'The Harlot's House', a more important poem, was published

¹⁶ See Mason, p. 398. A letter to R.H. Sherard of May-June 1883, after Wilde had returned to London, says that 'the splendid whirl and swirl of life in London sweeps me from my Sphinx'. (Letters, p. 147.)

¹⁷ This phrase is used in the review of Poems (1881) in Punch, July 23, 1881, p. 26.

in the Dramatic Review in April 1885, and 'Symphony in Yellow', a Whistlerian poem whose title is also an unmistakable echo of Gautier's 'Symphonie en Blanc Majeur', in The Centennial Magazine of Sydney, Australia.¹⁸

Wilde's very small output of poems during the late eighteen-eighties and most of the eighteen-nineties may be due to nothing more complex than his preoccupation with other matters: the writing of Salomé, The Picture of Dorian Gray, his tales, and his comedies, all of which allowed Wilde to fuse two major creative impulses which had hitherto been expressed separately -- the poetic and the conversational. These works also permitted greater scope to Wilde's wit and to his desire to shock.

In 1895 Wilde was imprisoned for two years. His period in Reading Gaol may be called the most "real" experience of his life, in the crude sense that he was thrown largely on his own resources and forced to realise miseries of which there is little hint in his early poetry. His moving letters from prison show clearly how aware he was of the miseries of others as well as his own, and it is as a generalised comment on human sorrow rather than as a direct personal complaint that he wrote his last poem,

¹⁸ This poem was refused by W.E. Henley for The Scots Observer, though the refusal does not explain Wilde's strange choice of an even remoter magazine for its publication.

The Ballad of Reading Gaol, published in 1898. This is generally considered to be Wilde's best poem, and it is perhaps the only one whose intrinsic emotional force is strong enough completely to overcome its literary associations. At the very least, the Ballad's subject-matter is sufficiently unusual in literature to make it more original than anything else in Wilde's poetry.

Wilde's poems -- eighty-five of them -- were first assembled, after Wilde's death, by Robert Ross and published in one volume by Methuen in 1908. The twenty-first edition of this volume appeared in 1951.¹⁹ The poems were also published in the first collected edition of Wilde's work, issued by Collins in 1948. This was reprinted eight times, from 1949 to 1963, and when a new and comprehensive edition was finally published in 1966 it included six of Wilde's poems which had been omitted from Ross's collection.²⁰ It is therefore to this revised edition²¹ that I shall refer when discussing the poems. However,

¹⁹ Oscar Wilde, Poems, with The Ballad of Reading Gaol, Methuen, 1908.

²⁰ The poems are 'Wasted Days', 'Lotus Leaves', and four translations: 'Chorus of Cloud Maidens', 'A Song of Lamentation' ('Threnodia'), 'A Fragment from the Agamemnon of Aeschylus', and 'The Artist's Dream or San Artysty'.

²¹ Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Collins, New Edition 1966. (General Editor J.B. Foreman.)

neither the Collins nor the Methuen edition is scholarly -- in fact no authoritative edition of Wilde's poetry exists²² -- and neither takes into account the frequent variations between different texts of poems, or indicates the order in which the poems were composed.²³

²² The nearest approach to one is: The Poetical Works of Oscar Wilde, including Poems in Prose, with Notes, Bibliographical Introduction, Index and Facsimiles of Title Pages, T.B. Mosher, Portland, Maine, 1908. This contains bibliographical details of the first edition of each of Wilde's volumes of poetry, together with an index giving details of the first publication of individual poems. It also prints, in brackets, stanzas rejected by Wilde (e.g. in 'Charmides'). The notes, however, are not of a critical kind, nor are variant readings included.

²³ The Collins Edition indicates briefly their order of publication.

CHAPTER II

POEMS (1881)

Wilde's first volume, published in 1881, consists of sixty-two poems, five of which, roughly alike in mood and in their employment of a rather unwieldy six-line stanza, are a mixture of lyrical description and somewhat diffuse narrative. The remainder are broken up into groups, so that the volume as a whole offers sequences of shorter poems alternating with individual longer ones - an over-all design more 'artistic' than thematic. Only two of the groups - 'Eleutheria' and 'Rosa Mystica' - have anything like unity of subject-matter, and these groups were the only ones actually given names in the first edition of 1881. The other three groups were given, in the fifth edition (1882), the purely decorative names 'Wind Flowers', 'Flowers of Gold'¹, and (quite illogically) 'The Fourth Movement', these additional titles probably being supplied not only for the sake of balance but in order that Wilde might avail himself of the blank sheets by which in the first edition these groups of poems were

¹ The influence on Wilde's choice of titles was probably Baudelaire's title Les Fleurs du Mal.

preceded.² The poems are not printed in their order either of composition or of original magazine publication, and in fact many of the poems of 'Rosa Mystica' were written before those of 'Eleutheria' to which precise dates can be assigned. One suspects that Wilde chose to open his volume with 'Eleutheria' because those poems, superficially observed, would strike a more traditional, patriotic, even 'manly' note, and thus appeal more to his London audience than the flirtation with Roman Catholicism represented by most of 'Rosa Mystica'.

Despite their collective title 'Eleutheria', the six sonnets and two poems in quatrains which make up this first group by no means show Wilde as completely committed to any view of freedom closely connected with nineteenth-century republicanism or democracy: the poem 'Libertatis Sacra Fames', with an irony perhaps deliberate, contradicts its title with the phrase 'this modern fret for Liberty'. Though the poems appear at first sight to deal with political, or at least public themes, and thus to be uncharacteristic of Wilde's work as a whole, more closely scrutinised they fall into line with his general subjectivity in that they are really concerned with himself and his feeling of being ill at ease in the contemporary

² Oddly enough, perhaps by the compositor's neglect, 'The Fourth Movement' appeared as a group-title only on the page of Contents.

world. In fact, 'Freedom' for Wilde is a quality nostalgically located in an idealised past, and these poems reveal not a poet sworn to engaged socio-political views but one whose conscience as a man makes him guiltily aware that he ought to show an interest in events around him. There is a touch of immature, school-magazine idealism about the poems which might even prompt the cynical reflection that Wilde felt 'freedom' to be a respectable theme for a young man's poetry. More kindly, one may remark the waverings of attitude which indicate a poet trying to discover his true feelings by testing in the act of composition his response to stock subjects.

The social consciences of Matthew Arnold and of John Ruskin, the latter of whom was Slade Professor of Art when Wilde was at Oxford, lie not far behind some of these poems³, though it is the Arnold who spoke for Art and Culture against Philistinism and Commerce with whom Wilde has more in common in 'Theoretikos' and 'Quantum Mutata'. The strongest influence, however, is that of Milton, seen, in 'To Milton', as a lost archetype of republican freedom. This sonnet also shows Wilde deliberately putting himself forward as a member of a republican literary tradition

³ Wilde's story that he had helped Ruskin in his abortive project of mending a road at Hinksey, even if untrue, suggests admiration for Ruskin. (See Pearson, pp. 36-7.

transmitted to him through Wordsworth, whose own sonnet on Milton, with its identical invocation, Wilde's seems designed to recall. The predominantly literary influence at work here - rather than an impulse deriving from the pressure of Wilde's own times - is emphasised by the distracting verbal echoes of two quite different Wordsworth sonnets⁴ and by the equally clear overtone of Shakespeare:

. . . this little isle on which we stand,
This England, this sea-lion of the sea,
By ignorant demagogues is held in fee,
Who love her not: Dear God! is this the land
Which bare a triple empire in her hand
When Cromwell spake the word Democracy!

A similar appeal to Milton as an authority occurs at the end of 'Quantum Mutata', which blames the decay of Britain's concern for 'freedom anywhere' on the materialist greed of the mercantile middle-classes:

How comes it then that from such high estate
We have thus fallen, save that Luxury
With barren merchandise piles up the gate
Where noble thoughts and deeds should enter by:
Else might we still be Milton's heritors.

However true Wilde's reflections may be, their point is considerably blunted by their derivativeness and the hackneyed language in which they are expressed.

⁴ 'On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic' and 'Westminster Bridge'.

The same limitation affects Wilde's Sonnet 'On the Massacre of the Christians in Bulgaria', which he sent to Mr. Gladstone in May, 1877. The occasion was certainly one to stir indignation. In their suppression of the nationalist insurgence of Bulgarian Christians in May, 1876, the Turks massacred 12,000 people in all, 5,000 of them in the small village of Batak. This action resulted, among other things, in two 'impassioned protests'⁵ by Gladstone in the form of pamphlets published in September, 1876 and March, 1877. It is uncertain from Wilde's letter whether he had responded to the incident itself or to the power of Gladstone's eloquence about it, but whatever sincere feeling Wilde had experienced must be balanced by the artful ingenuousness of his bid for Gladstone's influence with editors. The close modelling of the sonnet on Milton's Sonnet XV ('On the late Massacre in Piedmont') certainly focusses attention on the literary impulse behind Wilde's choice of subject: three of the rhyme-words, 'bones', 'groans' and 'stones', are taken directly from Milton, and the first two are used in identical positions in the two sonnets. Wilde seems less interested in the sufferings of the Bulgarian Christians than in his own agnostic-sounding appeals to God (of whose existence

⁵ Letters, p. 37. (to W.E. Gladstone.)

Milton was at least quite certain) to prove his power in the world by combating that of Islam. Milton's appeal to God had some possibility of practical effectiveness; Wilde's seems by contrast self-indulgent, and his poem histrionic rather than deeply-felt. The actual massacre is the poem's excuse, not its subject.

Wilde's only partial interest in liberty is admitted in his 'Sonnet to Liberty'. The opening statement is somewhat repugnant: 'Not that I love thy children, whose dull eyes /See nothing save their own unlovely woe ...' But this view - the fastidiousness of the conscious aristocrat - may be as deliberately exaggerated for effect as the later lines certainly are, in which Wilde purports to say why Liberty as a movement does appeal to him:

But that the roar of thy Democracies,
Thy reigns of Terror, thy great Anarchies,
Mirror my wildest passions like the sea
And give my rage a brother -! Liberty!
For this sake only do thy dissonant cries
Delight my discreet soul

Not only do 'rage' and 'wildest passions' seem out of keeping with a soul described as 'discreet', but also there is nothing in Wilde's early letters to suggest anything in his nature harsher than a pleasant indolence and a capacity for generosity and friendship. This part of the poem, taken literally, can be dismissed as a Byronic

pose, though it does hint at a truth - the habit of a poet to use events for his own purposes rather than simply to provide a mouthpiece for them. The last lines, however, allow the possibility of kinship with ordinary people, though even here Wilde cannot avoid exaggerating, in the form of an idealisation perhaps intended to counterbalance his earlier unpleasantness:

... and yet, and yet,
These Christs that die upon the barricades,
God knows it I am with them, in some things.

Yet the very humanity of this final gesture is called in question by Wilde's inability to find his own words for it: the first phrase of the last line is quoted from Arnold's 'To a Republican Friend, 1848', a poem whose taut, concerned bareness of language shows up Wilde's tendency to strike attitudes. Even if one takes Wilde's lines as completely sincere, they sound slightly patronising, and those 'things' he might have felt in common with the 'Christs of the barricades' are not made clear. The poem 'Libertatis Sacra Fames' certainly shows Wilde in a different mood, preferring 'the rule of One, whom all obey' to that of those

.... whose hands profane
Plant the red flag upon the piled-up street
For no right cause, beneath whose ignorant reign
Arts, Culture, Reverence, Honour, all things fade.

Similarly, though in 'Louis Napoleon' he talks approvingly of 'the giant wave Democracy' which 'Breaks on the shores where Kings lay couched at ease', he is quick, in 'Urbs Sacra Aeterna' (in 'Rosa Mystica') to call the flag of a united Italy 'the hated flag of red and white and green' when it appears to menace the sovereignty of a Pope whom in his Roman Catholic poems he considers a romantic prisoner-figure.

The last sonnet of the group, 'Theoretikos', appears to provide the only possible resolution of the conflict, demonstrated by the others, between an avowed republicanism which Wilde may have inherited from his mother (who, as 'Speranza', wrote political poetry as part of her contribution to the Young Ireland movement of the eighteen forties⁶) and a distaste for 'clamorous demagogues' and the philistinism of Victorian England. Wilde finally presents himself simply as an artist who, disgusted in his literary idealism to find that 'this mighty empire hath but feet of clay', wishes to retire into the neutrality of art. Wilde's quitting the contemporary scene, where

... the rude people rage with ignorant cries
Against an heritage of centuries,

⁶ See Pearson, pp. 16-7.

recalls Arnold's mention of the clash of 'ignorant armies' at the end of 'Dover Beach', and is in itself not perhaps reprehensible. It might, however, have been easier to accept had Wilde not set up as a republican in the first place, but, having done so, he seems now to be making no more than a hasty and somewhat ignominious escape from complexities he cannot otherwise cope with:

It mars my calm: wherefore in dreams of Art
And loftiest culture I would stand apart,
Neither for God, nor for his enemies.

There is a touch of affectation and petulance about these lines which is unworthy of the seriousness of the situation, and which perhaps deserved thus to be parodied in Punch:

It mars my calm! In dreams of moony Art,
And maudlin Cultchaw, I will stand apart,
Since Providence proceeds not as I please. ⁷

The six sonnets of the 'Eleutheria' section, then, along with 'Louis Napoleon', attract attention only for the confusion of ideas which they show, and not for their language. The longer poem 'Ave Imperatrix', though no less unsatisfactory if considered as the embodiment of a consistent socio-political position (Wilde is depressed by the British deaths which result from imperialist

⁷ Punch, Nov. 26, 1881. Quoted in Mason, p. 293.

ambitions,⁸ yet avoids the intellectual implications of his depression by a vague and blasphemous concluding equation of imperialist England and Christ) is of interest as showing Wilde adopting a contemporary 'political' theme - the Second Afghan War, begun in November 1878 - and using it for its descriptive and elegiac possibilities. 'Sentimental', however, would be a more accurate word than 'elegiac', and the sentimentality is the less easy to condone because of Wilde's cheap adaptation of Tennysonian phrase and patterning:

O wandering graves! O restless sleep!
 O silence of the sunless day!
 O still ravine! O stormy deep!
 Give up your prey! Give up your prey! 9

Along with these emotional apostrophes goes a tendency to archaise, to romanticise contemporary facts, which reduces the effect of an occasional arresting simile:

What profit ~~that our galleys ride,~~
 Pine-forest-like, on every main? 10

⁸ The New York Evening Post's description of it as 'a whole-hearted panegyric to England' is not quite accurate. See Mason, p. 291.

⁹ Cf. In Memoriam VI, 4: 'his vast and wandering grave', and LV, 7: 'Behind the veil, behind the veil'. Wilde also uses this latter pattern in Stanza 29 of the poem.

¹⁰ The second line is a version of Ravenna VI, 11.
 11-2.

The rhetoric of the poem is on the whole tired, and sometimes can lead to absurdity if its mixed metaphors are visualised:

The strong sea-lion of England's wars
Hath left his sapphire cave of sea,
To battle with the storm that mars
The star of England's chivalry.

Three stanzas show Wilde as more at ease with his material, and these, significantly enough, are really part of a short digression from the poem's public manner, an excursion into Central Asia which Wilde makes not, one feels, in order to fill in details about Russia's political sphere of influence, but because the place names have for him an attraction in themselves. The stanzas have a thin, but real, charm; the adjectival dabs of bright colour exemplify Wilde's method of simple scene-painting and provide a link between the otherwise uncharacteristic phenomenon of 'Ave Imperatrix' and his 'impressionist' pieces in Poems (1881) and later in his career. They afford relief not only to the reader but also, perhaps, to Wilde himself, who on the whole preferred to observe and depict rather than to pursue an argument or commit himself to a definite intellectual position:

The almond groves of Samarcand,
 Bokhara, where red lilies blow,
 And Oxus, by whose yellow sand
 The grave, white-turbaned merchants go:

And on from thence to Ispahan,
 The gilded garden of the sun,
 Whence the long dusty caravan
 Brings cedar wood and vermilion;

And that dread city of Cabool
 Set at the mountain's scarp'd feet,
 Whose marble tanks are ever full
 With water for the noonday heat.

Most of the poems of 'Rosa Mystica' deal with Wilde's reactions to two trips abroad, one to northern Italy in the summer of 1875, the other to Rome in the spring of 1876. Their 'mystical' tone is provided by Wilde's interest in the Roman Catholic church. This interest may have first begun in Ireland, but it showed itself mainly during Wilde's years at Oxford, where one of his college friends, David Hunter-Blair, was a recent convert.¹¹ Oxford had of course been the home of Anglo-Catholicism some forty years before and the place in which Newman had enunciated the ideas which finally led him into the Roman church in 1845. It may be added that for many poets of the last thirty years of the century an attraction to Catholicism seems to have become almost obligatory, and Wilde was partly following a fashion. It was the ritual

¹¹ Hunter-Blair became many years later Abbot of Fort Augustus. His memoirs, In Victorian Days (1939), contain a chapter entitled 'Oscar Wilde as I knew him'.

and the sense of a long historical tradition that captured his affections - one might say the decorative aspects of Catholicism rather than the dogmatic - and just as the poems of 'Eleutheria' represent a hovering round the idea of liberty and its final abandonment, so the poems of 'Rosa Mystica' indulge an emotional response to religion which is soon superseded by Wilde's greater response to the charms of Greece.

It was Wilde's first visit to Italy which stimulated his interest in Catholicism. As Hesketh Pearson puts it:

..... he was so deeply impressed by the buildings and pictures that he could not remain untouched by the faith which had inspired them. 12

His 'Sonnet on Approaching Italy', written at Turin in 1875, described Italy as 'the land for which my life had yearned', but his appreciation of the scenery was given further depth by his romantic view of the Pope, whom he saw as a prisoner immured in a capital properly his own by the forces of Victor Emmanuel, who had entered Rome in 1870:

The pine-trees waved as waves a woman's hair,
And in the orchards every twining spray
Was breaking into flakes of blossoming foam:
But when I knew that far away at Rome
In evil bonds a second Peter lay,
I wept to see the land so very fair.

¹² Pearson, p. 45.

The same motif, of mixed sorrow and indignation for a rather unreal figure of hero-worship beset by the forces of Italian democracy, is repeated in 'Italia' and in 'Urbs Sacra Aeterna'.

From Turin Wilde moved on to Florence, where his reactions to the beauties of San Miniato and to religious paintings are strongly tinged by religiosity of a rather Pre-Raphaelite cast. One feels that Wilde had come to Italy determined to be properly impressed:

And now with wondering eyes and heart I stand
Before this supreme mystery of Love:
Some kneeling girl with passionless pale face,
An angel with a lily in his hand,
And over both with outstretched wings the Dove.
("Ave Maria Gratia Plena")

On this first visit to Italy Wilde came to a stop at Arona on Lake Maggiore. Lack of money prevented him from going as far as Rome, but what he described in a letter to his mother as a 'delightful tour'¹³ is dignified into a 'pilgrimage' in his poem 'Rome Unvisited'. Clearly at this stage in his career Wilde was magnetized by the religious implications of Rome, with its 'priest and holy Cardinal... bright with purple and with gold', and was even hoping, in heavily Tennysonian language, for something amounting to a conversion:

¹³ Letters, p. 10.

Before yon field of trembling gold
 Is garnered into dusty sheaves,
 Or ere the autumn's scarlet leaves
 Flutter as birds adown the wold,

I may have run the glorious race,
 And caught the torch while yet aflame,
 And called upon the holy name
 Of Him who now doth hide His face.

In the spring of 1876¹⁴ Wilde finally visited Rome, in the company of Hunter-Blair, with whom he enjoyed an audience with Pope Pius IX. The result, according to Hunter-Blair many years later, was not conversion but a poem.¹⁵ One may take his sonnet 'E Tenebris' as an

¹⁴ This is the date given by Hesketh Pearson, Life, p. 46. Pearson is probably following Hunter-Blair's dating in In Victorian Days (1939). Hart-Davis, however, in his edition of the Letters (p. 35, footnote 1), believes that Hunter-Blair was mistaken and that the visit was made in 1877, on Wilde's way back from Greece. William Ward, in 'Oscar Wilde: An Oxford Reminiscence' (printed in Vyvyan Holland, Son of Oscar Wilde (1954), Penguin Edn, 1957, pp. 220-5), ascribes both the visit and the audience to Spring 1877, when Wilde 'came out in the Easter Vacation and joined' himself and Hunter-Blair. The truth seems impossible to determine, as no letters were written by Wilde from Rome either in 1876 or 1877. A visit in 1876, however, fits in better with Wilde's Catholic preoccupations at Oxford later in that year, whereas after his visit to Greece in 1877 nothing is heard of his Catholicism.

¹⁵ See Sir David Hunter Blair, In Victorian Days (1939) pp. 134-5. The particular poem Hunter Blair mentions, however, seems hardly likely to have been written at this time. In Poems (1881) it was entitled 'Rome Unvisited', and the place (or occasion) of composition given as Arona; when it was published in The Month in September 1876, it bore the title 'Graffiti d'Italia (Arona. Lago Maggiore)'. These titles suggest that it was composed

indication of the state of his feelings during the remainder of 1876. It expresses a sense of inadequacy and guilt, but it is difficult to determine its sincerity as Wilde could always immerse himself in the mood of the moment:

Come down, O Christ, and help me! reach thy hand,
 For I am drowning in a stormier sea
 Than Simon on thy lake of Galilee:
 The wine of life is spilt upon the sand,
 My heart is as some famine-murdered land
 Whence all good things have perished utterly....

Wilde's trip to Rome had considerably increased his infatuation with Catholicism, among other things affecting the décor of his college room which, from being previously adorned with engravings of naked women and with blue china vases, was now 'filled with photographs of the Pope and Cardinal Manning'.¹⁶ His letters to friends during 1876 frequently refer to his religious state of

in 1875 at the end of Wilde's first trip to Italy. If Hunter Blair's memory is correct, and this was really the poem Wilde presented to him after the audience with the Pope, one can only conclude either that Wilde was anxious to please his friend even if this involved duplicity, or that he added on this occasion a few new stanzas to an old poem. The stanzas which Hunter Blair actually quotes come from the last two sections, and are sufficiently ambiguous to have been written either in 1875 or 1876.

¹⁶ Diary of Lord Ronald Sutherland-Gower, 4 June 1876. Quoted in Pearson, p. 46, and in Letters, p. 14, footnote 3.

mind. He argued about Catholicism with an uncle who was an Anglican vicar in Lincolnshire¹⁷; he heard Cardinal Manning preach on July 9, 1876, and found him 'more fascinating than ever'¹⁸. But his waverings, and the theatrical nature of his feelings, emerge most plainly in a letter of March, 1877:

I now breakfast with Father Parkinson, go to St. Aloysius, talk sentimental religion to Dunlop, and altogether am caught in the fowler's snare, in the wiles of the Scarlet Woman - I may go over in the vac. I have dreams of a visit to Newman, of the holy sacrament in a new Church, and of a quiet and peace afterwards in my soul. I need not say, though, that I shift with every breath of thought and am weaker and more self-deceiving than ever.

If I could hope that the Church would wake in me some earnestness and purity, I would go over as a luxury, if for no better reasons. But I can hardly hope it would, and to go over to Rome would be to sacrifice and give up my two great gods "Money and Ambition".

Still I get so wretched and low and troubled that in some desperate mood I will seek the shelter of a Church which simply enthralls me by its fascination.

I hope that now in the Sacred City you are wakened up from the Egyptian darkness that has blinded you. Do be touched by it, feel the awful fascination of the Church, its extreme beauty and sentiment, and let every part of your nature have play and room. 19

¹⁷ Letters, p. 14. (to Reginald Harding.)

¹⁸ Letters, p. 16. (to William Ward.)

¹⁹ Letters, p. 31. (to William Ward.)

This is hopelessly mixed up, though Wilde's more serious feelings cannot therefore be dismissed out of hand. It seems, simply, that he saw himself playing a role, and in the same month, about to start for Rome again, he wrote to Reginald Harding - perhaps unseriously - in the tone of a convert:

This is an era in my life, a crisis. I wish I could look into the seeds of time and see what is coming. I shall not forget you in Rome, and will burn a candle for you at the shrine of Our Lady. 20

That Wilde had doubts about Catholicism, though not necessarily about religion, is clear from two of the 'Rosa Mystica' sonnets. The one entitled 'On Hearing the Dies Irae sung in the Sistine Chapel' disclaims the efficacy of 'terrors of red flame and thundering' in favour of more peaceful expressions of God in

... white lilies in the spring,
Sad olive-groves, or silver-breasted dove,

and in pastoral images associated with a probably English harvest-time. 'Easter Day', written some time between the spring of 1876 and that of 1877, gives Wilde's response to the majesty of the Pope, but in an ambiguous way and with a touch of irony unusual in Wilde's poetry. He is

described as 'borne upon the necks of men', rather than (as in 'Rome Unvisited') as 'the gentle shepherd of the Fold', and his pomp leads Wilde to contrast him with the far simpler figure of an outcast Christ²¹:

My heart stole back across wide wastes of years
 To one who wandered by a lonely sea,
 And sought in vain for any place of rest:
 'Foxes have holes, and every bird its nest.
 I, only I, must wander wearily,
 And bruise my feet, and drink wine salt with tears'.

'The seeds of time' in fact brought Wilde not membership in the Roman Catholic church but a more powerful and pervasive influence, that of Greece. Instead of going to Rome in 1877 as he had expected, 'Mahaffy my old tutor has carried me off to Greece with him to see Mykenae and Athens.'²² 'Santa Decca', written in Corfu in April, suggests a certain resentment against Christianity for having taken the place of paganism:

For Pan is dead, and all the wantoning
 By secret glade and devious haunt is o'er:
 Young Hylas seeks the water-springs no more;
 Great Pan is dead, and Mary's son is King.

²¹ The fluctuations in Wilde's view of the Pope are exemplified in the textual history of l. 6. In the 1881 version, and in that sent to Gladstone in May 1877, the Pope is described as wearing 'royal red', but when the poem appeared in Waifs and Strays, vol. 1, No. 1, June 1879, the phrase was, damningly, 'Nero's red'.

²² Letters, p. 34. (to Reginald Harding.)

Along with this goes a willingness to entertain the possibility that 'the Gods', in fact, are not 'dead':

..... nay, but see,
The leaves are stirring: let us watch awhile.

Wilde's 'Sonnet: Written in Holy Week at Genoa', which seems from its last lines to have been composed on the way back from Greece, shows how the potent influence of its atmosphere had supplanted in his mind his Catholic leanings of the year before. What he now reacts to is the pictorial beauty of Genoa, and it is only at the end that he turns with a belated pang of guilt to the sort of reflection with which his previous Italian poems had been mainly occupied:

..... at my feet
Like silver moons the pale narcissi lay:
And the curved waves that streaked the sapphire bay
Laughed i' the sun, and life seemed very sweet.

.....

Ah God! Ah God! those dear Hellenic hours
Had drowned all memory of thy bitter pain,
The Cross, the Crown, the Soldiers and the Spear.

The farewell to Catholicism is made most obviously in the first seven stanzas of 'The Burden of Itys', one of five long poems full of references to Greek mythology. Greece seems not only to have re-inspired Wilde with a love of its own myths, planted in him originally by his

study of the classics at Dublin and Oxford, but to have increased his appreciation of the beauties of the English countryside, and in contrast with this he finds Rome no longer able to engross him. In fact, his farewell to the rituals of Rome is almost a repudiation, and his memories of them seem now to belong to a very distant past:

This English Thames is holier far than Rome
Those harebells like a sudden flush of sea
Breaking across the woodland, with the foam
Of meadow-sweet and white anemone
To fleck their blue waves - God likelier there
Than hidden in that crystal-hearted star the pale
monks bear!

.....

Is not yon lingering orange after-glow
That stays to vex the moon more fair than all
Rome's lordliest pageants! strange, a year ago
I knelt before some crimson Cardinal
Who bare the Host across the Esquiline,
And now - those common poppies in the wheat seem
twice as fine!

In a superficial sense, Wilde's poems prompted by Italy and Rome are related to external phenomena - landscape and religious occasions - and thus seem different from those inspired by Greece, only one of which, 'Impression de Voyage', relates to Wilde's actual trip to Greece in 1877. Even 'Impression de Voyage', however, is more concerned with the resonant properties of Greek place-names than with a painstaking description of landscape:

From the steep prow I marked with quickening eye
Zakynthos, every olive-grove and creek,
Ithaca's cliff, Lycaon's snowy peak,
And all the flower-strewn hills of Arcady.

But when one compares more carefully the Italian poems of 'Rosa Mystica' with the 'Greek' poems scattered through Wilde's first volume one discerns an essential similarity: both are really concerned with emotionalised figments of his imagination - in the first case the romanticised image of the Roman Catholic church, in the second that of a long-past epoch seen in terms not of history but of mythology and remembered literature. Much is said of the influence of Greece on Wilde, but the Greece which appears in his poems is little more than a nostalgic 'Arcady', a Theocritean pastoral landscape viewed through the eyes of Keats and Matthew Arnold. Wilde's constant references to mythological figures could have been made by anyone capable of looking up their names in a Classical encyclopaedia, and certainly did not require the long Classical education which Wilde actually underwent. To state the position more tartly one may say that on the whole Wilde's picture of Greece is a vulgarisation; Greece provided him with a stock of allusions which may have seemed to him 'poetic' merely of themselves, and its great influence unfortunately led to poetry the reverse of great.

Where Wilde contents himself with an address to Theocritus, a tribute to the Greek poet in the elegant form of a villanelle, he can be pleasantly evocative:

O singer of Persephone!
 In the dim meadows desolate
 Dost thou remember Sicily?

 Still through the ivy flits the bee
 Where Amaryllis lies in state;
 O singer of Persephone!

One expects of such an unambitious poem only that it charm the ear, and in this 'Theocritus' succeeds. But the five long poems in the volume - 'The Garden of Eros', 'The Burden of Itys', 'Charmides', 'Panthea' and 'Humanitad' - require judgement by higher standards than that of euphony: organisation, felicity of language, and cogency of thought. By these standards they must be pronounced failures.

All these poems, the last two to a lesser degree, are sprinkled with Greek allusions, and all of them use the same stanza-form of five pentameters rounded off by an alexandrine. One cannot but marvel at Wilde's fascination with a metrical scheme with which he has so little success: the alexandrine is an extremely difficult line to handle in English with any naturalness, and as Wilde frequently runs on his syntax from stanza to stanza the poems tend to degenerate into rambling, mindless daydreams.

Rarely can a poet have written so much to so little effect. There is space to examine only one of them in any detail, but the others may be briefly mentioned. 'Panthea', as its first stanza makes clear, is strongly influenced by Swinburne:

Nay, let us walk from fire unto fire,
 From passionate pain to deadlier delight, -
 I am too young to live without desire,
 Too young art thou to waste this summer night....

The poem is concerned with the apotheosis of men at their death into the life of nature, and the peroration is a good example of its grand, and vague, rhetorical gesturing:

We shall be notes in that great Symphony
 Whose cadence circles through the rhythmic spheres,
 And all the live World's throbbing heart shall be
 One with our heart; the stealthy creeping years
 Have lost their terrors now, we shall not die,
 The Universe itself shall be our Immortality.

'Humanitad' resembles some of the poems in the 'Eleutheria' section in being concerned, when it emerges from the nature-fantasy and classical references of the earlier stanzas about the moral decline of the modern world, in contrast to which the magic names of Wordsworth, Milton and Cromwell are all invoked. But the sixth stanza from the end illustrates the abstract superficiality of Wilde's attempt at social criticism:

Somehow the grace, the bloom of things has flown,
And of all men we are most wretched who
Must live each other's lives and not our own
For very pity's sake and then undo
All that we lived for - it was otherwise
When soul and body seemed to blend in mystic symphonies.

'The Garden of Eros' and 'The Burden of Itys', in addition to the 'Greek' elements they both contain, reveal the common influences of Keats's Odes and Arnold's 'The Scholar Gipsy'. In part they are an undergraduate's attempts to invest the landscape around Oxford with the fanciful terms of pseudo-Greek pastoral. It seems that Wilde was unable to see the natural world around him except through the poems of more gifted men than himself. These long poems could be called reveries, or pot-pourris, and their main motive seems to be escapism; but in trying to counter a dull and rationalist modern world from which

.... all romance has flown,
 And men can prophesy about the sun,
 And lecture on his arrows
 ('The Garden of Eros' ll. 217-9)

Wilde seems to 'out-Herod Herod' in his extravagant and affected emotionalism:

Sing on! sing on! I would be drunk with life,
 Drunk with the trampled vintage of my youth,
 I would forget the wearying wasted strife,
 The riven veil, the Gorgon eyes of Truth,
 The prayerless vigil and the cry for prayer,
 The barren gifts, the lifted arms, the dull insensate
 air!
 ('The Burden of Itys' ll. 235-40)

The suggestion of himself as a man with secret sorrows and overpowering passions, or as a reincarnation of Keats addressing his nightingale, is so remote from the Wilde revealed in his early letters, and so rantingly expressed, that it is hard to take him seriously. It is with literature and fancy that these long poems are drunk, not with life.

'Charmides', the longest poem in Poems (1881), is also the ultimate in escapism. Its faults epitomise those of the other four long poems, though it is with little doubt the worst of the five, and arguably Wilde's worst poem. The influence of Pater had caused Wilde to allude to the former's recommended mental state - 'this hard, gemlike flame'²³ - in both 'Panthea' and 'Humanitad', and the influence of another dictum of Pater - 'it does not matter what is said provided it is said beautifully'²⁴ - may perhaps lie behind 'Charmides'. Even granting the very doubtful truth of Pater's statement, it still remains highly debateable whether Wilde does in fact render his absence of meaningful subject-matter with any beauty. The 'beauties' of 'Charmides' are of a very crude kind,

²³ Walter Pater, The Renaissance (1873), Macmillan, 1910 edition, Conclusion, p. 236.

²⁴ Quoted in William Gaunt, The Aesthetic Adventure (1945), p. 57.

consisting largely in facile and slipshod word-spinning, an elaborate and over-sugared languor, and a factitious emotionalism. Oddly enough, it is said that 'Charmides' was Wilde's favourite among his poems:

Asked if Charmides was his favourite poem, the author is said to have replied: 'Yes, that is my favourite poem. I think it my best. It is the most perfect and finished.' ²⁵

Such a view reveals how limited were Wilde's critical powers when he applied them to his own poetry, however acute was the criticism brought to bear, in his many reviews during the 1880s, on the poetry of others.

Ostensibly, 'Charmides' tells a story. The narrative was allegedly suggested to Wilde by an anecdote in a dialogue by Lucian entitled Amores²⁶; but the name for the protagonist was probably taken from a dialogue of Plato bearing that title, and the sentimentality of the poem prompts the suspicion that 'Charmides' was chosen as a title because it contained the syllable 'charm': there is little in Wilde's 'Greek' poems to suggest a scholar's knowledge of, and response to, the classics - nothing for

²⁵ Mason, p. 305.

²⁶ Ibid.

instance of that verbal tautness and stoic dignity distilled by Housman into his poems - but much to suggest the infatuation of an adolescent with raw material which allowed him to give free rein to his rather commonplace fantasies. It would be an error of emphasis to follow the narrative line in any detail: its absurdity is fairly indicated by saying that the poem describes the protagonist profaning the temple of Minerva by caressing the statue of the goddess, being pursued by her out to sea and drowned in punishment, and being washed up dead on an island where a young girl tries to revive him by her passion. The girl is killed by Diana and she and Charmides are reunited in the nether world. Silliness and vulgar taste are the qualities evidenced by the 'story', and the description of Charmides' assaults on the statue, the young girl's assaults on Charmides, and their mutual loves in the next world reveal in Wilde what can only be described as a voyeurism of the fancy or a verbal masturbation.

Two stanzas concerned with Charmides and Minerva's statue illustrate also Wilde's lapses of language and imagery, and suggest the purely technical faultiness of the poem:

Never I ween did lover hold such tryst,
 For all night long he murmured honeyed word,
 And saw her sweet unravished limbs, and kissed
 Her pale and argent body undisturbed,
 And paddled with the polished throat, and pressed
 His hot and beating heart upon her chill and icy breast.

It was as if Numidian javelins
 Pierced through and through his wild and whirling brain,
 And his nerves thrilled like throbbing violins
 In exquisite pulsation, and the pain
 Was such sweet anguish that he never drew
 His lips from hers till overhead the lark of warning flew.
 (11. 121-32)

The first stanza, mixing Chattertonian archaism ('ween'), quotation from Keats ('unravished') and a totally unsuitable use of Shakespeare's word 'paddled', reveal the lack of any proper calculation of the effects of language, and the anachronistic mixing of images of 'javelins' and 'violins' to describe Charmides' state of feeling is careless in the extreme. One feels that Wilde is passing from one disparate effect to another without any sense of an over-all unity. Archaisms like 'forgat', 'hest', and 'wight' are also used, and Wilde pads out his lines, particularly the alexandrines, with functionless or pleonastic phrases: for example 'well-built city', 'naked unshod feet', 'passed on his simple way', a picture of the 'warder' closing the temple gates 'with stout hands', and a description of '.... the neat-herd's lad, his empty pail / Well slung upon his back.' Drunken incapability with words,

The occasional felicities in these lines may charm the ear, but they do not satisfy a desire for geographical accuracy.

One could go on multiplying examples of Wilde's inability either to present a worthwhile theme or to express himself in a language really his own. Only one line in the whole poem, the one which begins Section III - 'In melancholy moonless Acheron' - hints at a more deeply suggestive use of words. Though the poems of 'Eleutheria' and 'Rosa Mystica' are as a whole undistinguished, they are kept in bounds by their brevity; but Wilde's replacement of the influences of Liberty and the Roman church by that of a 'Greece' largely of his own invention leads to the real vices which I have tried to illustrate. Not the least of these is Wilde's indulgence in a kind of syrupy sensuousness, a fatuous 'prettiness' which spins itself out in endless, narcissistic decoration. Wilde is frequently, for instance, not content to let an object speak for itself, but prefers to amplify it by an appositive phrase. The habit is the verbal equivalent of doodling: Stanza Two of 'The Garden of Eros' calls the daffodil 'that love-child of the Spring', and Stanza Five translates the celandine into 'that yellow-kirtled chorister of eve'. These stanzas from 'Charmides', with which this survey of Wilde's 'Greek' poems may fittingly conclude, serve as a

miniature anthology of most of their other faults:

Then come away into my ambuscade
Where clustering woodbine weaves a canopy
For amorous pleasaunce, and the rustling shade
Of Paphian myrtles seems to sanctify
The dearest rites of love; there in the cool
And green recesses of its farthest depth there is a pool.

The ouzel's haunt, the wild bee's pasturage,
For round its rim great creamy lilies float
Through their flat leaves in verdant anchorage,
Each cup a white-sailed golden-laden boat
Steered by a dragon-fly - be not afraid
To leave this wan and wave-kissed shore, surely the
place was made

For lovers such as we; the Cyprian Queen,
One arm around her boyish paramour,
Strays often there at eve, and I have seen
The moon strip off her misty vestiture
For young Endymion's eyes; be not afraid,
The panther feet of Dian never tread that secret glade.
(11. 487-504)

It may be as well at this point to redress the balance of unfavourable criticism by looking at four poems, on different themes, all of which show Wilde in greater control of his medium and thus to better advantage.

'Requiescat' was deservedly popular both in Wilde's lifetime and for some years after his death, being frequently reprinted in selections and anthologies, among others in W.B. Yeats's A Book of Irish Verse (1895). It was written at Avignon - the date has not been established - in memory of Wilde's younger sister Isola, who died in 1867 at the age of eight. Her death upset the schoolboy Wilde

considerably, but his eventual tribute to her, though it does not seem thereby insincere, is couched in a controlled style which displays his awareness of a literary tradition of elegiac writing. The short-lined metre of the poem derives from Hood's 'The Bridge of Sighs', but it is handled delicately - Wilde avoids Hood's trisyllabic rhymes - and the first stanza disguises Hood's influence with a subtle ambiguity of stress-pattern:

Tread lightly, she is near
Under the snow,
Speak gently, she can hear
The daisies grow.

The second stanza is a commonplace, clearly recalling Shakespeare's 'Fear No More the Heat o' the Sun' and Nashe's famous Dirge from Summer's Last Will and Testament, especially its lines 'Queens have died young and fair,/ Dust hath closed Helen's eye':

All her bright golden hair
Tarnished with rust,
She that was young and fair
Fallen to dust.

The brevity of the lines combines with the grace of the rhythm to make the commonplace acceptable, however, and the poem is only slightly marred by a touch of egotism in the last two stanzas, the gesture of the final line being an appropriate recollection of the burial of Ophelia:

Peace, peace, she cannot hear
 Lyre or sonnet,
 All my life's buried here,
 Heap earth upon it.

Wilde's most frequently adopted poetic form was the sonnet, though only once, in 'Hélas!', does he use the Shakespearean type. He wrote thirty-four sonnets in all, thirty of them being published in the 1881 volume. Generally the sonnet was not a form in which he excelled, though the comparative strictness of the form protected him from the disasters into which, in his early long poems, his unrestrained fancy could lead him. 'The Grave of Shelley' is perceptibly above his usual standard. The octave is spoilt by touches of melodrama ('Surely some Old-World Sphinx lurks darkly hid,/ Grim warder of this pleasaunce of the dead') and the sketching in of a natural background by the use of rather mincing diminutives ('the little night-owl' and 'the slight lizard'), but the first two lines have an unusual concision and aptness, as well as a satisfying balance:

Like burnt-out torches by a sick man's bed
 Gaunt cypress-trees stand round the sun-bleached
 stone.

For once in Wilde's poetry one feels, if not quite the shock of the inevitable, at least a close approach to finality of phrasing. The sestet of the sonnet, perhaps

because the rhyme-sounds, each three times repeated, are arranged in a quietly emphatic parallel pattern, rather than diminished by being interwoven, creates an appropriate verbal equivalent to the rocking motion of the sea which is simple but completely satisfying:

Ah! sweet indeed to rest within the womb
 Of Earth, great mother of eternal sleep,
 But sweeter far for thee a restless tomb
 In the blue cavern of an echoing deep,
 Or where the tall ships founder in the gloom
 Against the rocks of some wave-shattered steep. 29

Another sonnet which is successful, though in a quite different way, dealing faithfully with facts rather than making the most of lyrical opportunities, is 'Fabien dei Franchi', one of five sonnets inspired by Wilde's London theatre-going. It is simply an appeal to Henry Irving to give up playing in Victorian melodrama - its stock devices neatly summed up as

The silent room, the heavy creeping shade,
 The dead that travel fast, the opening door,
 The murdered brother rising through the floor,
 The ghost's white fingers on thy shoulder laid -

and instead employ his talents to the full by acting Shakespeare. There are no subtle effects of language to

29 It must be admitted, however, that the phrase 'tall ships founder' is a quotation from Swinburne, 'Hymn to Proserpine', l. 50.

comment on, but it is precisely Wilde's faithful flatness which is the virtue of this particular sonnet. The sonnet is also marked by the careful arrangement of phrases mounting to climax at the end of the octave, a neatly abrupt transition of subject into the sestet, and the emergence in the last line of the opinion of Irving which originally prompted Wilde to write it. Thus one receives the impression of a sonnet which has been carefully built up as a unity, rather than one which adds line to line merely to fill out mechanically the mould provided by the form.

'My Voice' is one of a small group of poems (including 'Quia Multum Amavi', 'Silentium Amoris', and the strangely Hardy-esque 'Her Voice') probably written at the end of Wilde's relationship with Florence Balcombe, whom he met in Dublin in the summer of 1876 when she was 'just seventeen ... with the most perfectly beautiful face I ever saw'³⁰, and who eventually married the novelist Bram Stoker in December 1878. Wilde's last three letters³¹ to her just before her marriage, suggest, as much in their

³⁰ Letters, p. 24 (to Reginald Harding); see also p. 36 (to Harding) and p. 51 (to Florence Balcombe). A photograph of her is reproduced in Letters, facing p. 62, and a drawing of her by Wilde in Vyvyan Holland, Son of Oscar Wilde, Penguin 1957, facing p. 113.

³¹ Letters, pp. 54-5.

rather stilted tone of one consciously taking a last farewell as in their content, an attachment of considerable importance, to Wilde at least. 'My Voice' is a remarkable example in Wilde of economy of expression and arrangement, each stanza dealing with the situation from a different aspect:

Within this restless, hurried modern world
 We took our hearts' full pleasure - You and I,
 And now the white sails of our ship are furled,
 And spent the lading of our argosy.

Wherefore my cheeks before their time are wan,
 For very weeping is my gladness fled,
 Sorrow has paled my young mouth's vermillion,
 And Ruin draws the curtains of my bed.

But all this crowded life has been to thee
 No more than lyre, or lute, or subtle spell
 Of viols, or the music of the sea
 That sleeps, a mimic echo, in the shell.

The middle stanza has serious faults: 'very' is empty rhetoric, the personification of 'Ruin' is theatrical, the distorted stress on 'vermillion' is affected; and the imagination reacts with distaste to the picture of a young man whose lips were ever of that colour. The language, also, of the fourth line of stanza one is perhaps too consciously fragile. The final stanza, however, is of considerable lyrical delicacy, and demonstrates an unwontedly functional adaptation from another writer. The first two lines are a version of part of Pater's famous description of the Mona Lisa: 'all this has been to her

but as the sound of lyres and flutes'³². The effect in the context of Wilde's poem is not one of pastiche but of ~~modifying a reproach~~ already slight by a gracefully-turned compliment. Even the 'argosy', and the 'restless ... modern world' of stanza one have behind them another phrase of Pater's about the Mona Lisa, '[she has] ... trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants', and thus add to one's sense of the poem's fruitful use of literary material.

The poems in Wilde's 1881 volume which most clearly point forward to the kind of work in which he interested himself in the later eighteen-eighties are those entitled 'Impressions'. In the various essays collected as Intentions (1891) Wilde professed not to be concerned with the moral aspects of art, or with subject-matter, at least in the sense that he felt subject-matter should not determine the reader's judgement of a literary work.³³

³² Walter Pater, The Renaissance (1873), Macmillan, 1910, p. 125.

³³ Richard Ellmann, in Eminent Domain, (1967), p. 15, describes 'The Decay of Lying' as an essay in which Wilde summed up 'the disdain for experience of writers from Gautier to Mallarmé, the disdain for morality of Poe and Baudelaire, the disdain for content of Verlaine and Whistler'.

In these points he greatly differed from Matthew Arnold, whose opinions were expounded in the Preface to his Poems (1853), though the pastoral elegies of Arnold were of great influence on his own early style. Replying to criticism of his poetry Wilde summed up his own views very concisely thus:

The enjoyment of poetry does not come from the subject, but from the language and rhythm. Art must be loved for its own sake, and not criticised by a standard of morality. 34

These views derived not only from Pater, whose The Renaissance Wilde called his 'holy writ of beauty'³⁵, but from the French writers, particularly Gautier, Baudelaire and Flaubert, with whose work he early became familiar and whose ideas were also transmitted to him by the painter Whistler, whom he first met in 1877. The French influence on Wilde's work is first discernible in his use of the term 'Impression' in the titles of poems, and it is noteworthy that even the poem he wrote at Katakolo about his first sight of Greece bears the name 'Impression de Voyage'.

³⁴ Quoted in Mason, p. 325.

³⁵ 'Mr. Pater's Last Volume', Speaker, 22 March 1890. Reprinted in Oscar Wilde, Reviews, (1908), p. 539. The phrase is quoted from Swinburne's 'Sonnet (with a copy of Mlle de Maupin)' Collected Poetical Works (1927) I, 362.

There are four 'Impressions' in Poems (1881). For this kind of poem Wilde always used the octosyllabic quatrain, rhyming abba, perhaps because Tennyson had already demonstrated, in In Memoriam, its powers as a vehicle for atmospheric, and rather static, description. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the early 'Impressions', despite their French titles, 'Les Silhouettes', 'La Fuite de la Lune' and 'Le Réveillon', are couched in distinctly Tennysonian language:

To outer senses there is peace,
A dreamy peace on either hand,
Deep silence in the shadowy land,
Deep silence where the shadows cease.
(*'La Fuite de la Lune'*)³⁶

In a sense this sort of writing can be called nature-description, but it would be more accurate to call it scene-painting in words, with the emphasis as much on the words themselves, and the mood they create in the mind, as on absolute fidelity to the object observed. Wilde's poems are in a way precursors of the twentieth-century Imagist movement in their use of short, sharp, but evocative simile or metaphor:

³⁶ Cf. Tennyson, In Memoriam XI.

The sea is flecked with bars of grey,
 The dull dead wind is out of tune,
 And like a withered leaf the moon
 Is blown across the stormy bay.
 ('Les Silhouettes')

This 'verbal equivalent' of visual phenomena exists in its own right, and Wilde feels quite able to change his focus, to mix different angles of view, talking of 'silhouettes against the sky' in the last stanza, but in the second giving a close-up shot of a 'sailor boy' who

Clambers aboard in careless joy
 With laughing face and gleaming hand.

What the poem seems to be attempting is a reproduction of various light-effects, as in a painting.

The affinity with painting is shown quite obviously in 'Impression du Matin'. In 1877 Wilde wrote a review of an exhibition held at the Grosvenor Gallery in London in May.³⁷ Among the paintings displayed were a number by Whistler which aroused the anger of Ruskin and led to the Ruskin - Whistler libel suit later in the same year. Wilde's poem, first published in The World in March 1881, seems to be partly a version of one of these pictures, Nocturne: Battersea Bridge, in terms of blocks of words³⁸ -

³⁷ See Letters, p. 39. (to Keningale Cook.)

³⁸ The painting is reproduced in William Gaunt, The Aesthetic Adventure (1945), facing p. 80.

equivalent to Whistler's different blocks of colour - and partly, in its third and fourth stanzas, an imaginative elaboration of the painting in terms of vignettes of human life:

The Thames nocturne of blue and gold 39
 Changed to a Harmony in grey:
 A barge with ochre-coloured hay
 Dropt from the wharf: and chill and cold

The yellow fog came creeping down
 The bridges, till the houses' walls
 Seemed changed to shadows and St. Paul's
 Loomed like a bubble o'er the town.

Whistler's concentration on colour and form, rather than on an obvious delineation of subject-matter, appealed to Wilde's own interest in colour, form and beautiful objects and led him later to write his poem 'Symphony in Yellow', where even the slight moral overtone provided in 'Impression du Matin' by the 'pale woman ... with lips of flame and heart of stone' is eliminated. Wilde's poems of the eighteen-eighties are all more concerned with verbal, visual and rhythmical 'beauty' than with the expression of views of an intellectual or moral kind.

³⁹ This phrase is a conflation of the titles of two other Whistler paintings at the exhibition: Nocturne in Blue and Silver and Nocturne in Black and Gold.

A brief final word should be said about 'Hélas!', the sonnet which Wilde prefixed to his first volume. Richard Ellmann, in a short essay on Wilde⁴⁰, ingeniously describes the fluctuations of self-assessment discernible between the lines of this sonnet, but it can be read in a simpler way as revealing a sense of disappointment with the book of poems he had been so eager to publish. The language is extremely vague, and attributes like 'ancient wisdom and austere control' appear fictitious, but the literary posturing seems a device to disguise - whether from the reader or from himself is uncertain - a real awareness of inadequacy. The limitations of these early poems - their immaturity of expression and their inability to fix on any lasting attitude to experience or deal with the problems of belief and the complexities of the contemporary world - which I have tried to indicate in this chapter seem to have been realised by Wilde himself. Despite the dogmas of his later literary philosophy, one is not entirely convinced that in 1881 he had abandoned a hankering for themes of some moral relevance. In 'Hélas!' he reproaches himself for giving away something valuable

⁴⁰ Richard Ellmann, 'The Critic as Artist as Wilde', Wilde and the Nineties, ed. Charles Ryskamp, Princeton University Library, 1966, pp. 5-10.

in return for

... idle songs of pipe and virelay,
Which do but mar the secret of the whole.

Whatever the 'sunlit heights' really are, Wilde feels that
he 'might have trod' them and thus

... from life's dissonance
Struck one clear chord to reach the ears of God.

The poem ends in uncertainty, with Wilde seeming to wonder
whether his decline is reversible or not. The sonnet's
style is affected, but what can be guessed of its content
suggests that Wilde had ambitions for some stature which
his first volume of poems had fallen short of.

CHAPTER III

'LITERARY PETTY LARCENY'

On June 26, 1878, Oscar Wilde recited his Newdigate Prize Poem, Ravenna, in the Sheldonian Theatre at Oxford. Anyone who had read Wilde's poems already published in magazines might have felt, as the recital proceeded, an odd sense of déjà vu as he listened to some of the lines. In fact, many of them were direct quotations from, or only slightly adapted versions of lines in, earlier poems such as 'Magdalen Walks', 'Sonnet on Approaching Italy', 'Urbs Sacra Aeterna' and 'Rome Unvisited'. A neat example of this economical practice of borrowing from one's own poems is provided by three lines near the beginning of the fifth section of Ravenna:

Some startled bird, with fluttering wings and fleet,
Made snow of all the blossoms; at my feet,
Like silver crowns, the pale narcissi lay...

If one changes 'crowns' into 'moons', these lines are identical with lines 3-6 of 'Sonnet Written in Holy Week at Genoa', published in July, 1877. Wilde also made use in Ravenna of lines and phrases to be found in poems written by that time but not yet published, such as 'The

Grave of Keats', 'The Burden of Itys', 'The Garden of Eros' and 'Impression de Voyage'. The latter poem, written to celebrate Wilde's arrival in Greece in the summer of 1877, contributed its last line, 'I stood upon the strand of Greece at last'¹; this was adapted into 'I stood within Ravenna's walls at last' and became the concluding line of Ravenna's first section.

In addition to copying himself in individual lines - a time-saving device perhaps excusable in the writer of a prize poem on a set subject - Wilde adopted throughout Ravenna a derivative style which entitles one to call the poem 'academic'. The competence of Wilde's performance is a second-hand competence: either because he had not developed by this time a style of his own, or because he felt that the adjudicators would respond more favourably to a style with which they were already familiar, he imitates in many places the accents of eighteenth-century poetry. This imitation probably came the more easily to him because of the form - pentameter couplets - prescribed by the competition. Many of the couplets are strongly reminiscent, despite the Romantic flavour of the poem as a whole, of Augustan pastoral writing:

¹ The original version of the line, as it appeared in Waifs and Strays, Vol. 1, No. 3, March 1880. For Poems (1881) the word 'strand' was altered to 'soil'.

Where flower and fruit to purple radiance blow,
 And like bright lamps the fabled apples glow.
 (ll. 21-2)

Some couplets, though they deal in a kind of beauty which particularly appealed to Wilde, display in their arrangement of words the neat, antithetical balance characteristic of the Augustan period:

Where the tall tower of Giotto seems to rise
 A marble lily under sapphire skies.

So far, the borrowing revealed is not of a very reprehensible kind. One does not look for maturity in Ravenna any more than one looks for it in Arnold's Newdigate Prize Poem, 'Cromwell', or in Tennyson's early poem, 'Timbuctoo', with which he won the equivalent Chancellor's Medal at Cambridge. More serious charges of plagiarism, however, can be levelled at Poems (1881). When Wilde presented a copy of this to the Oxford Union, Oliver Elton was able to propose a motion, which was unanimously carried, that 'it be not accepted'² on the grounds that it was no more than a tissue of borrowings from 'better-known and more deservedly-reputed authors.' The refusal of the gift was ill-mannered, but the charge of excessive borrowing is not exaggerated. The volume is

² Pearson, pp. 59-60.

full of echoes, either 'atmospheric' or specifically verbal, of earlier English poets, and not only Oliver Elton but reviewers in the Athenaeum and in Punch were quick to point out its indebtedness. As the Athenaeum reviewer said: 'Imitation of previous writers goes far enough seriously to damage the claim to originality.'³ Bernhard Fehr has indicated the scope of Wilde's borrowings in one long poem, 'Humanitad', by listing its ingredients: very sweepingly:

'Humanitad' = Shelley's Sensitive Plant + Pater's Schlusswort + Swinburne's Dolores + Hesperia + Eve of Revolution + A Song of Italy + Siena + Halt Before Rome + Super Flumina Babylonis + Perinde ac Cadaver + Morris's Anti-Scrape society⁴ + Pater's Winkelman + Swinburne's Before a Crucifix + Hymn of Man + Hertha + Baudelaire's Héautontimoroumenos. 5

Such a list, as it makes no distinction between the different degrees of plagiarism, is of course not a final verdict. A more exact examination of Wilde's echoes, adaptations and borrowings needs to be made, even at the risk of monotony, in order to determine more precisely their nature and extent. Though Wilde's poetry, even as late as The Ballad of Reading Gaol, is never entirely free of borrow-

³ Athenaeum, 23 July 1881.

⁴ See 'Humanitad', ll. 325-42.

⁵ Bernhard Fehr, Studien zu Oscar Wilde's Gedichten (1918), p. 132.

ings, conscious or unconscious, after 1881 they are either less frequent or less offensive. Poems (1881) is full of them, so it seems most convenient to deal with Wilde's borrowings in relation to this volume rather than to defer the question until later and so run the risk of suggesting that none of Wilde's poetry can be examined simply as his own work.

Wilde's views about plagiarism appear to be rather confused. About his own borrowings he made two statements. The first of these, 'I appropriate only what is already mine',⁶ sounds merely high-handed. Its meaning is perhaps clarified by a more considered pronouncement: 'The only writers who have influenced me are Keats, Flaubert and Pater, and before I came across them I had already gone more than halfway to meet them.'⁷ In the sense that it suggests those writers who influenced his ideas rather than his language, Wilde's first phrase may command assent, but the truth of the latter half of his statement cannot be proved and sounds rather pretentious, especially as it would be generally agreed that Keats and Flaubert, at least, were greater writers than Wilde. One would, however, grant Wilde the right to be influenced. In reviewing other poets he certainly granted this right to

⁶ Quoted in Pearson, p. 103.

⁷ Pearson, p. 38.

them: 'The temper of Keats, the moods of Matthew Arnold, have influenced Mr. Ghose [a young Oxford poet], and what better influence could a young writer have?'⁸ But it is Keats's words as well as his temper, Matthew Arnold's words as well as his moods, that one comes across in Wilde's own poems, and it is not only doubtful whether Wilde had the right to borrow actual phrases but also doubtful whether it was indeed sensible of him to do so, considering that his own lesser talent was likely to be obscured by the recalled excellence of his creditors.⁹ Wilde himself was loftily sarcastic when writing of other plagiarists. Reviewing a volume by 'Two Tramps', entitled Low Down, he seems to fail to realise that his words could equally well apply to himself:

... we are sorry to see that that disregard of the rights of property which always characterises the able-bodied vagrant is extended by our tramps from the defensible pilfering from hen-roosts to the indefensible pilfering from poets.... From highway robbery and crimes of violence one sinks gradually to literary petty larceny. 10

⁸ Review of Primavera, Pall Mall Gazette, 24 May 1890. Reprinted in Oscar Wilde, Reviews (1908), p. 546.

⁹ This view is expressed in Ransome, Oscar Wilde (1912), pp. 39-40.

¹⁰ 'The Poets' Corner', Pall Mall Gazette, 27 Sept. 1886. Reprinted in Reviews, pp. 90-1.

A review of Alfred Austin is more detailed in its criticism, and even more pointed in its application to Wilde:

Wordsworth is a great poet, but bad echoes of Wordsworth are extremely depressing, and when Mr. Austin calls the cuckoo a 'voyaging voice' and tells us that 'The stockdove broods/ Low to itself', we must really enter a protest against such silly plagiarism. 11

Not only do some of Wilde's own poems depressingly echo Wordsworth, for instance in the phrase 'How my heart leaps up' ('Panthea', l. 139), but Wilde also removes Wordsworth's same 'stock-dove' from 'Resolution and Independence' and deposits it in 'The Burden of Itys' (l. 45). Wilde's later criticisms of others would be easier to accept if they were accompanied by some indication that he realised that he himself had been guilty of the same crimes.

Imitation, it may be said, was prevalent in the eighteenth century in the form of graceful and complimentary borrowing from one's poetic seniors.¹² But:

¹¹ 'A New Calendar', Pall Mall Gazette, 17 Feb. 1887. Reprinted in Reviews, p. 131.

¹² Geoffrey Tillotson (Augustan Studies, 1961, p. 64, note 1) records such a borrowing, of the unusual phrase 'the blue languish of soft Alia's eye', originally used by Pope in his translation of the Iliad. This is reproduced with little change by Collins in one of his Persian Eclogues: 'Their eyes' blue languish, and their golden hair'.

The poet himself rarely showed any anxiety to conceal his poetical borrowings, and indeed was often at some pains to point them out to the reader. ¹³

Wilde certainly did not follow the examples of certain eighteenth century poets and 'print ... in a distinct character',¹⁴ the specific phrases he borrowed. Whether he expected that the reader would recognise similarities without help from him is uncertain, but by not pointing them out he lays himself open to the charge of being not unwilling to deceive the reader where this is possible. It is interesting to see Hesketh Pearson quoting as one of Wilde's 'best verses',¹⁵ a stanza from 'Humanitad' two of whose lines seem to derive from Swinburne and Baudelaire.¹⁶

¹³ James Sutherland, A Preface to Eighteenth Century Poetry (1948), p. 132.

¹⁴ Sutherland, op. cit., p. 135. (Quoting the eighteenth century poet John Smith.)

¹⁵ Life, p. 61.

¹⁶ 'Humanitad', ll. 421-7. L. 421: 'Being ourselves the sowers and the seeds' derives from Swinburne, 'Hertha', l. 40: 'The deed and the doer, the seed and the sower'. L. 423: 'The spear that pierces and the side that bleeds' derives partly from 'Hertha', l. 20: '... I am stricken, and I am the blow', and partly from Baudelaire, 'l'Héautontimorouménos', ll. 21-2: 'Je suis la plaie et le couteau! / Je suis le soufflet et la joue!'

Another aspect of eighteenth century poetic imitation was pointed out by Pope:

A mutual commerce makes poetry flourish; but
then poets, like merchants, should repay with
something of their own what they take from
others; not, like pirates, make prize of all
they meet. ¹⁷

One may perhaps put this another way by saying that imitation is only bad when indulged in by poets whose own style is too undeveloped to rise to the level of their borrowings. One may also demand that a poet borrow with the conscious intention, attested to by the success in context of the actual result, of making something new of his borrowing. Eliot's use of quotations from earlier poets, which at the end of The Waste Land throws into relief the disintegration he wishes to describe, belongs to this positive category of borrowing, where the whole point is that the borrowings should be recognised as such. A similar instance is furnished by A.J.M. Smith's poem 'Fear as Normal 1954', where the references to Shakespeare (Portia's 'Mercy' speech in The Merchant of Venice) and to Hopkins (the last two lines of 'God's Grandeur') are made with the deliberately ironic intention of emphasising the unmerciful nature of the atomic age:

¹⁷ Letter to William Walsh, 2 July 1706. Pope, Works (ed. Elwin-Courthope) vi, p. 52. Quoted in Sutherland, op. cit., p. 134.

How skilful! How efficient!
 The active cloud is our clenched fist.
 Hysteria, dropping like the gentle dew,
 Over the bent world broods with ah! bright wings.¹⁸

Rarely, if ever, does Wilde indulge in borrowing of this kind.¹⁹ His plagiarism is either the understandable, though irritating, tendency of the immature poet to remember and unconsciously reproduce, or garble, lines he has read in other poets, or - and from the amount of borrowing in Poems (1881) this may be suspected as more likely - the less pardonable, deliberate theft of words, titles, phrases and lines which Wilde envied. One sometimes feels that Wilde's borrowings were an attempt to turn back the clock and pretend that it was really he who was saying these beautiful things for the first time, and one recollects with a stronger sense of its relevance the story told of Wilde and Whistler, when, after a neat sally by Whistler, Wilde remarked: 'I wish I had said that!' Whistler's reply is famous: 'You will, Oscar, you will'.²⁰

¹⁸ A.J.M. Smith, Collected Poems. Toronto. O.U.P. 1962, No. 75.

¹⁹ The last stanza of 'My Voice', referred to in the previous chapter, is practically the only example.

²⁰ Quoted in Pearson, p. 104.

To a certain extent Wilde's borrowing is one of subject-matter and through this, in some poems, of atmosphere. His 'political' poems in the 1881 volume owe their origin at least as much to the political poems of Milton and Wordsworth as to any independent interest in contemporary social questions. Here one may speak more fairly of a young poet's imitative efforts rather than of outright plagiarism of language, though l. 11 of 'To Milton', 'By ignorant demagogues is held in fee', is an unmistakable echo of the first line - 'Once she did hold the gorgeous East in fee' - of Wordsworth's 'Sonnet on the Extinction of the Venetian Republic'. The over-elaborate richness of texture of Wilde's long 'Greek' poems betrays a youthful infatuation with Keats, and in 'The Burden of Itys' Wilde the undergraduate fairly obviously sees himself in the role of a second Matthew Arnold, immortalising the countryside around Oxford. In poems like 'La Bella Donna della Mia Mente', 'Chanson' and 'The Dole of the King's Daughter' we can see the influence of such Swinburne ballads as 'May Janet'²¹ and 'The King's Daughter' and also that

²¹ Swinburne's subtitle - 'BRETON' - for 'May Janet' was adopted by Wilde as his subtitle for 'The Dole of the King's Daughter'.

of a similar pseudo-medieval poem, 'John of Tours'²², from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Poems (1870). Though by the eighteen-nineties Wilde considered such poems 'not very characteristic of my work'²³, it is interesting to note that in an interview he gave to a San Francisco newspaper in 1882 Wilde referred to 'the pre-Raphaelite school to which I belong'.²⁴

Were this the sum total of Wilde's borrowing one would have little to complain of but his immaturity, though his first volume arguably labours more under the influence of other poets than do other first volumes; for instance, those of Rossetti and Swinburne themselves. As one reads through Poems (1881), however, the number of verbal similarities leads to a hardening of critical attitude into a mixture of shock at the effrontery of a would-be impostor, a feeling that Wilde was more than usually immature in his slavish regurgitation of diverse

²² Cf. 'Ballade de Marguerite' (ll. 29-32) and 'John of Tours' (ll. 19-22). Even closer is the similarity between 'Ballade de Marguerite' (ll. 47-8): 'O mother, you know I loved her true:/O mother, hath one grave room for two?' and 'John of Tours' (ll. 16-7): 'Mother, let the sexton know/ That the grave must be for two'.

²³ Letter to Alfred H. Miles, c. 1892-3. Letters, p. 325.

²⁴ Quoted in Mason, p. 326.

and unassimilated poetic tags, and impatience with his lazy refusal to replace the shorthand of quotation by a carefully thought-out phrasing of his own. Yet it may well be true, though this is to the credit neither of Wilde nor of his nineteenth century readers, that the comparative commercial success of his volume was due, in Arthur Ransome's words, to the very fact that Wilde

... happened to summarize in himself the poetry of his time. He made himself, as it were, the representative poet of his period, a middleman between the muses and the public. People who had heard of Rossetti and Swinburne, but never read them, were able to recover their self-respect by purchasing Wilde. 25

Wilde is indebted, either for actual phrases or for syntactical patterns so close to those used by earlier writers that they can hardly be other than at least semi-deliberate echoes, to no fewer than eleven English poets: Shakespeare, Milton, Marvell, Johnson, Gray, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Arnold, Rossetti and Swinburne.²⁶

²⁵ Ransome, p. 46.

²⁶ Ll. 14-6 of 'The Garden of Eros' are related by Fehr (p. 115) to Shelley's 'The Sensitive Plant', ll. 18-20: 'And narcissi ... /Who gaze on their eyes in the stream's recess /Till they die of their own dear loveliness', but Wilde's lines are in fact closer to ll. 10-2 of Helena Modjeska's Polish poem 'San Artysty' (also mentioned by Fehr, p. 114), which Wilde renders in his translation 'The Artist's Dream' as '... violets /Peered from their nooks of hiding, half afraid /Of their own loveliness'.

One is by no means certain that this list is exhaustive: it represents only those poets whose echoes have been tracked down. Even as many borrowings as this, however, are enough to give Poems (1881) the appearance of a one-man anthology of the centuries' poetry.

There are two borrowings from Gray and Johnson and they are precisely identifiable. Three lines from 'Humanitad':

... and no trump of war
Can wake to passionate voice the silent dust
That was Mazzini once!

(11. 285-7)

are clearly derived, in one particular phrase, in the situation they present, and in transposition of words, from l. 43 of Gray's Elegy: 'Can Honour's Voice provoke the silent dust?'. A similar situational and verbal parallel, reinforced by the use of identical rhyme-words, can be seen in Stanza One of 'Louis Napoleon':

Eagle of Austerlitz! where were thy wings
When far away upon a barbarous strand,
In fight unequal, by an obscure hand,
Fell the last scion of thy brood of Kings!

Here the obvious source is Johnson's description of the fate of Charles XII of Sweden in 'The Vanity of Human Wishes':

His Fall was destined to a barren Strand,
A petty fortress, and a dubious Hand.
(11. 219-20)

The borrowing from Marvell is also confined to only one of his poems, 'Bermudas', whose lines

He hangs in shades the orange bright,
Like golden lamps in a green night.
(ll. 17-8)

seem so to have caught Wilde's fancy that he copied them in two places, in ll. 159-60 of 'Panthea' and even more closely in 'Sonnet Written in Holy Week at Genoa':

The oranges on each o'erhanging spray
Burned as bright lamps of gold to shame the day.
(ll. 2-3)

Enough has already been said about Wilde's borrowings from Wordsworth.²⁷ He makes the same number of borrowings (five) from Milton. The wilful reference to 'daffadillies' rather than 'daffodils' in l. 48 of 'Humanitad' derives from a liking for Milton's use of this word in Lycidas (l. 150): 'And daffadillies fill their cups with tears'. A similar liking for Milton's phrase 'moonèd Ashtaroth' ('Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity', l. 200) results in its transportation into 'The Burden of Itys', where it appears as 'the moonèd wings of

²⁷ In addition to the three mentioned earlier, see 'Charmides' (l. 380): '... a huge Triton blows his horn' (cf. 'The World is Too Much with us', l. 14: 'And hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn'), and 'To Milton' (l. 12): '... Dear God! is this the land/ ...' (cf. 'The World is Too Much with us', l. 9: '... Great God! I'd rather be/ ...')

Ashtaroth' (l. 182). A larger theft is made from 'L'Allegro'. The two lines

And the milkmaid singeth blithe,
And the mower whets his scythe
(ll. 65-6)

are lifted bodily and redistributed in 'The Burden of Itys' as

At daybreak, when the mower whets his scythe,
And stock-doves murmur, and the milkmaid leaves
Her little lonely bed, and carols blithe.
(ll. 44-6)

Such tactless borrowings have the effect of making Wilde's pastoral writing seem absurdly archaic: his flowers and milkmaids are those of English literature rather than of the English countryside.

The barefacedness of Wilde's pilfering from Milton is equalled by that of his pilfering - on about twelve occasions - from Shakespeare. He appears not to worry about stealing from the most time-hackneyed Shakespearean speeches, as when he uses John of Gaunt's line (R II, II, l. 46), 'This precious stone set in a silver sea', to furnish his description of England in 'Ave Imperatrix' with the cliché 'Set in this stormy Northern sea' (l. 1). The 'tiny sober-suited advocate' of 'The Burden of Itys' (l. 157) is dressed in his sober suit by courtesy of

'Night/ Thou sober-suited matron' in Romeo and Juliet (III, 2, ll. 10-1). The 'ouzel-cock' who 'splashed circles in the reeds' in 'Charmides' (l. 219) is a migrant from A Midsummer Night's Dream, where Bottom sings of 'The ouzel-cock, so black of hue' (III, 1, l. 131). The line in 'Panthea', 'So soft she sings the envious moon is pale' (l. 15) derives from Romeo's speech under Juliet's balcony:

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief.
(R & J, II, 2, ll. 4-5)

A last example is a trifle more subtle, and illustrates a frequent tendency of Wilde's memory to scramble his original in such a way that words are quoted in a different pattern but the general shape of remembered syntax is retained. His description in 'The Garden of Eros' of Bagley

... Where the rustling bluebells come
Almost before the blackbird finds a mate
And overstay the swallow

is no unrecognisable reshaping of Perdita's speech about

... daffodils
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty.
(The Winter's Tale, IV, 3,
ll. 118-20.)

The mention of Bagley brings one to the influence of Matthew Arnold, which is particularly noticeable in a number of the long poems, usually in the form of references to 'The Scholar-Gipsy', whose description of the countryside around Oxford seems to have greatly affected the bias of Wilde's pastoral writing. Whether, for instance, Wilde would have been interested in mentioning 'Bagley Wood' and the 'Cumnor Hills' ('The Burden of Itys', ll. 155-6) if Matthew Arnold had not already given these places poetic resonance in 'The Scholar-Gipsy' (ll. 69, 101, 111), is very doubtful. The second line of 'The Scholar-Gipsy' - 'Go, shepherd, and untie the wattled cotes' - seems to have stuck especially strongly in Wilde's memory, as in various permutations it crops up in three distinct places.²⁸ In 'The Burden of Itys' (l. 60) he talks of 'reapers' who 'dance about the wattled fold', and later on of a 'shepherd'

²⁸ A similar re-shuffling of words from an earlier poet has been pointed out in Arnold himself. Kenneth Allott, in his edition of The Poems of Matthew Arnold (1965, p. 331, note) quotes a phrase from l. 878 of 'Sohrab and Rustum' - 'through the hushed Chorasmian waste.. ' - and places beside it these lines from Shelley's 'Alastor' (ll. 272-4): 'At length along the lone Chorasmian shore/ He paused, a wide and melancholy waste/ Of putrid marshes'. Whether this borrowing be conscious or not, it occurs so late in a poem that has built up its own individual atmosphere that one does not question its use. With Wilde this is rarely if ever true.

who

... drives his bleating flock
Back to their wattled sheep-cotes....
(ll. 320-1).

The closest parallel is in 'Charmides':

And soon the shepherd in rough woollen cloak
With his long crook undid the wattled cotes.
(ll. 163-4.)

'The Scholar-Gipsy's warning to the 'shepherd', in its first four lines, not to 'let thy bawling fellows wrack their throats' is truncated by Wilde in 'Humanitad' (l. 15) into a reference to 'bawling shepherds'. The most obvious example of daylight robbery from Arnold is found in 'The Garden of Eros', where Wilde steals Arnold's title 'The Strayed Reveller' and uses it for his phrase 'And like a strayed and wandering reveller' (l. 11).

Wilde's most extensive borrowings - nineteen in all - are from Keats. There is, however, little to suggest that Wilde 'had gone halfway to meet' him. It is far more a case of a young man's persistent memory of lines with which he was thoroughly familiar. This memory, working perhaps automatically, sneaks in admired words and phrases, and if Wilde afterwards became aware of this he made no attempt to revise what he had written. The carelessness of Wilde's critical sense is evident in his retention, too

blatant to be anything but deliberate, of references to Keats's perhaps most famous title: 'Camma' begins with the line 'As one who poring on a Grecian urn', and in 'The Burden of Itys' Wilde talks fatuously of 'all those tales imperishably stored/ In little Grecian urns' (ll. 141-2). There is a quality in Wilde's quotations from Keats that suggests he was attempting deliberately to present himself to the world as Keats's disciple and even successor. He uses in 'Charmides' (l. 337), for instance, Keats's word 'brede' ('Ode on a Grecian Urn', l. 41): in both poems the word draws attention to itself by its unusualness and archaic tone. Wilde's frequent use of 'argent'²⁹ probably stems from Keats's use of 'argent spheres' to describe the moon in Endymion (Bk. 1, l. 595). He makes many references to the Odes, and one notices here, as with his plagiarisms from other poets, that Wilde generally steals from well-known poems.

There are further imitations of Keats's syntactical patterns, particularly of his rhetorical gestures, a notable example being 'O happy field! and O thrice happy tree' ('Humanitad', l. 67), a line clearly modelled on 'More happy love! more happy, happy love!' in the 'Ode on a

²⁹ See 'Athanasia' (l. 39), 'argent shield'), 'Vita Nuova' (l. 14, 'argent splendour',) 'Charmides' (l. 124, 'argent body'), 'Panthea' (l. 111, 'argent breasts'.)

Grecian Urn' (l. 25).³⁰ Wilde also makes use of Keats's adjectives, converting 'purple-stained mouth' ('Ode to a Nightingale', l. 18) into both 'purple-lidded sleep' ('Panthea', l. 42) and 'crimson-stained mouth' ('Panthea', l. 128). The only imitation of Keats which serves a positive purpose occurs in 'The Garden of Eros':

No simple priest conducts his lowing steer
Up the steep marble way.
(ll. 118-9)

These lines are perhaps intended to recall the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', with the purpose of making a derogatory comparison between prosaic nineteenth century England and the pastoral Utopia created by Keats:

To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Leads't thou that heifer lowing at the skies?
('Grecian Urn', ll. 32-3)

But the mindlessness of Wilde's reproduction elsewhere of Keatsian phraseology makes one uncertain whether such a comparison was in fact intended here.

Some of the parallels with Tennyson have already been pointed out in Chapter II. There are altogether seventeen of these in Poems (1881), but many of them

³⁰ Cf. 'Sing on! sing on! I would be drunk with life' ('The Burden of Itys', l. 235; other stanzas also begin with this pattern) with 'Away! Away! for I will fly to thee' ('Ode to a Nightingale', l. 31.)

represent similarities of pattern or metre, the In Memoriam stanza recurring particularly often, though at this stage in Wilde's career it is almost inevitably accompanied by Tennysonian language. Lines 7-8 of 'Le Réveillon':

And a long wave of yellow light
Breaks silently on tower and hall

are suspiciously akin to Section VIII of In Memoriam:

... all the magic light
Dies off at once from bower and hall.
(ll. 5-6)

The repetitions, in In Memoriam XI, of the adjective 'calm' and the phrase 'calm and deep peace' with little doubt suggested the echoing of 'peace' by 'deep peace' and the repetition of 'deep silence' in Stanza One of 'La Fuite de la Lune'. Wilde's fondness for the word 'wold' (frequently rhymed with 'gold') probably also reveals Tennyson's influence.³¹ Fehr suggests a Tennysonian origin for three lines in 'Impression de Voyage', comparing the parallelism of

The flapping of the sail against the mast,
The ripple of the water on the side,
The ripple of girls' laughter at the stern
(ll. 9-11)

³¹ Cf. particularly 'Le Réveillon' (ll. 9-12) and In Memoriam XI, (ll. 5-8)

with a similar pattern in 'Enoch Arden':

The blaze upon the waters to the east;
The blaze upon his island overhead;
The blaze upon the waters to the west. 32

A refrain (l. 10) in 'Chanson' - '(O the red rose is fair to see)' - seems a clear enough echo of the refrain in Tennyson's 'The Sisters' - 'O the Earl was fair to see', and as a final example of Tennyson's more general influence, this time from Wilde's later work, one may note how reminiscent, in rhythm and in its atmosphere of 'rapture', is 'Under the Balcony' of stanza XXII of Maud.

From Swinburne Wilde first of all appropriated two of his titles. The title 'Madonna Mia' had already appeared in Poems and Ballads, First Series (1866), and 'Quia Multum Amavi' lacks only one letter of 'Quia Multum Amavit', which came out in Songs Before Sunrise (1871). Before Wilde in 'Urbs Sacra Aeterna' had spoken of Rome as a 'city crowned by God, discrowned by man!', Swinburne had employed this unusual negative in 'On the Downs':

As a queen taken and stripped and bound,
Sat earth, discoloured and discrowned. 33

³² Fehr, p. 41. The similarity of pattern is of course reinforced by the similarity of Wilde's subject matter.

³³ These lines are even more closely paralleled by l. 43 of 'The New Helen': 'That discrowned Queen men call the Erycine'.

Wilde's phrase 'silver-sandalled foot'³⁴ ('The Burden of Itys', l. 67) is a pedestrian reduction of Swinburne's 'silver-sandalled shadows' ('A Vision of Spring in Winter', l. 28), and even the line 'The passionate purity of brown-limbed boys' ('Charmides', l. 207), whose language, one feels, might well have been guaranteed authenticity by the relation of its subject to Wilde's latent homosexuality, is probably only a telescoping of hints from Swinburne's 'A Song of Italy':

Thou whose least looks, whose smiles and little sighs,
 Whose passionate pure eyes,
 Whose dear fair limbs that neither bonds could bruise
 Nor hate of men misuse...
 (ll. 131-4)

Rossetti contributed his phrasing to Wilde on some half-dozen occasions, two of which have already been mentioned. Another occurs in the last three lines of Wilde's 'At Verona':

Nay peace: behind my prison's blinded bars
 I do possess what none can take away
 My love, and all the glory of the stars.

The situation here derives from Paradiso xvii, in which Dante describes his exile in Verona, but the language

³⁴ Also 'silver-sandalled feet' ('The Harlot's House', l. 35).

itself is a version of lines in Rossetti's poem on the same subject, 'Dante at Verona':

Even through the body's prison-bars
His soul possessed the sun and stars.
(ll. 353-4)

Two examples from Poems (1881) are more complex in their origins: they reveal, in palimpsest-fashion, first the influence of Rossetti, and then, fainter behind it, that of Swinburne. The first example is also from 'At Verona', this time the first four lines:

How steep the stairs within Kings' houses are
For exile-wearied feet as mine to tread,
And O how salt and bitter is the bread
Which falls from this Hound's table...

ll. 1-3 have their likeliest source in Rossetti's 'Dante At Verona':

... Some glimpses reach us, - somewhat still
Of the steep stairs and bitter bread.
(ll. 21-2)

Closely similar language, and the same motif of exile, however, are also traceable in Swinburne's 'Tiresias':

The steepness of strange stairs had tired his feet,
And his lips yet seemed sick of that salt bread
Wherewith the lips of banishment are fed.
(ll. 289-91)

The second example of virtually joint influence is found in the first and last stanzas of 'The Dole of the King's Daughter':

Seven stars in the still water,
And seven in the sky;
Seven sins on the King's daughter,
Deep in her soul to lie.

.....

No moon in the still heaven,
In the black water none,
The sins on her soul are seven,
The sin upon his is one.

This ersatz ballad-mongering, in some of its rhymes, and in the prominence given to 'stars' and the number seven, is in the first instance little more than a reshuffling of counters taken from Stanza One of 'The Blessed Damozel':

The Blessed Damozel leaned out
From the gold bar of Heaven;
Her eyes were deeper than the depth
Of waters stilled at even;
She had three lilies in her hand,
And the stars in her hair were seven.

With this, however, Wilde's memory seems to have crossed elements from the first stanza of Swinburne's 'The King's Daughter':

We were ten maidens in the green corn,
Small red leaves in the mill-water:
Fairer maidens never were born,
Apples of gold for the King's daughter.

As the foregoing survey has tried to reveal, Wilde's borrowings from other poets were widespread and indiscriminate, and almost never give the impression of subserving a conscious purpose. Arthur Ransome, speaking of plagiarism in the long poems, concisely identifies the missing element in Wilde's early poems as a whole ('the firm intellectual substructure that could have infused into ornament and elaboration the vitalizing breath of unity') and neatly sums up one's impression of them:

Wilde was uncertain of himself, and ... rambled on, gathering flowers that would have seemed better worth having if he had not had so many of them. 35

To put the matter succinctly, either Wilde did not really know what to say, or what he did want to say he never examined to see if it was really worth saying. He frequently seems to aim too low, but an occasional striking phrase, such as

Gold world by world the silent stars appear
(*'The Burden of Itys'*, l. 327)

or the slightly melodramatic but nevertheless concise lines

Keen winter stabs the breasts of May
Whose crimson roses burst his frost
(*'Her Voice'*, ll. 31-2)

suggests that, with self-criticism, a sense of humour and sheer hard work, Wilde could on more occasions have repaid with something of his own what he had taken from others. One must, unfortunately, add that an undue amount of plagiarism produces in the critic a state of mind akin to that created by the boy who cried wolf. The lines quoted immediately above are good poetry, but an uneasy suspicion remains that they may be no more than the unidentified lost property of some other poet. In this way Wilde's bad habits backfire on him.

How far Wilde's borrowings were intentional (though quite what the intention might then be is hard to fathom) seems to me a problem incapable of final solution. A negative intention - to make good a deficiency in himself by the efforts of others - is possibly indicated by the antepenultimate stanza of 'The Burden of Itys':

'Tis I, 'tis I, whose soul is as the reed
Which has no message of its own to play,
So pipes another's bidding, it is I,
Drifting with every wind on the wide sea of misery.

One feels, however, doubtful whether Wilde would in full seriousness have made an admission so damaging to himself - the lines are perhaps only the histrionic indulgence of a mood. Of course, it may be thought that they convey an unconscious truth.

Wilde's sonnet 'Amor Intellectualis', though essentially no more than a list of those writers whom Wilde admired and had often read, may also indicate his awareness not only of being strongly influenced by other poets but of having borrowed from them - this much could be inferred from the line 'Till we had freighted well our argosy', with its suggestions of trade and profit-making. The line also fits in well with Pope's 'pirates [who] make prize of all they meet', and though one sees little in Wilde of Browning or Marlowe, there is enough Keats and Milton, and certainly the last line of 'Apologia' is translated from Dante.³⁶ An awareness of likeness in particular poems only seemed to strike Wilde once, however, when he referred to 'Tristitia' and 'The True Knowledge', both published in September 1876 in Dublin magazines, as 'Tennysonian'.³⁷ Significantly, Wilde did not print these poems in the 1881 volume, and it was left to Robert Ross to disinter them in 1908. If Wilde omitted them for fear of being thought a plagiarist, his failure to accord the same treatment to other equally derivative poems (or at least to amend their phrasing) becomes all the more puzzling.

³⁶ See 'Apologia', l. 36: 'The Love which moves the Sun and all the stars'. Translation of *Paradiso*: 'L'amor che muove il suol e l'altre stelle'. (Fehr, *Studien*, p. 157, note 2.)

³⁷ *Letters*, p. 26. Letter to William Ward, ? 6 Sept. 1876.

But if in 1881 Wilde was too permissive towards his own plagiarism, by 1889 he took a more critical view of plagiarism itself, being in certain instances not unduly harsh to those who copied, but nevertheless, like Pope, demanding something more from them. A review by Wilde in 1889 of Richard Le Gallienne's first book of poems, Volumes in Folio, is by way of being a comment, at that point both retrospective and anticipatory, on the differences - whether consciously worked for or unconsciously achieved - between Wilde's own first volume of 1881 and his last of 1898:

He is keenly conscious how derivative his inspiration is....³⁸ Yet now that he has played his prelude with so sensitive and so graceful a touch, we have no doubt that he will pass to larger themes and nobler subject-matter, and fulfil the hope he expresses in his sextet [whose concluding lines are:]

O for some power to fill my shrunken line,
And make a trumpet of my oaten reed. ³⁹

³⁸ At this point Wilde quotes three stanzas which in effect say: 'Why write poor verse of my own when I can do so much better recalling Shakespeare, Spenser, Keats, Shelley, Rossetti, Swinburne....?'

³⁹ 'Three New Poets', Pall Mall Gazette, 12 July 1889. Reprinted in Reviews (1908), p. 527.

CHAPTER IV

POEMS 1882-1894

In what may be called his 'middle period', from Poems (1881) to his arrest in 1895, Wilde published only sixteen poems. Not all of these are worth commenting upon at any length. The sonnet 'On the Sale by Auction of Keats' Love Letters', which Wilde thought 'one of the best sonnets I have written',¹ is marred by its rather tasteless implied comparison between Keats and Christ; 'Roses and Rue', with its tripping couplets of unequal length, is silly and sentimental; and 'The New Remorse' (the title itself hinting at some unspecified fin-de-siècle pose)² reverts to Wilde's bad habit of over a decade earlier of pilfering patterns and phrases from other English poets - 'unravished roses' from Keats, and the first four lines of the sestet from Arnold's 'Apollo Musagetes'.³

¹ Letters, p. 325.

² See Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties (1913), Life and Letters Series, 1931, pp. 21-2.

³ Fehr, p. 157, note 1. Cf. Arnold's lines:
'What forms are these coming so white through the gloom?/
What garments outglistening the gold flower'd broom/ ...
It is Apollo comes leading his choir, the Nine'.

Most of the others, however, particularly The Sphinx, which requires extended treatment, are by virtue of their greater technical polish and verbal originality a distinct improvement on their predecessors.

But while technical polish and verbal originality can be accepted as laudable ingredients in the success of these later poems, a further ingredient suggests a limitation which must be borne in mind when one is examining them. In his early poems Wilde seems occasionally to be trying to say something about humanity and society, but fails because of immaturity (either intellectual or technical) to say anything consistent or convincing. His poetry of the eighteen-eighties is usually concerned with the beauty of objects and their rendering in beautiful words and artful verbal patterns. Thus this later poetry achieves on the whole a less ruffled, more finished surface texture which is in one sense an improvement on earlier work, but in another a kind of side-stepping into a type of art which invites judgement by aesthetic standards alone. One does not feel that Wilde's 'middle period' poetry is inferior to what went before it, but one may feel that it is inferior to what, with a different set of standards, or a different talent, Wilde might at that stage in his career have written.

The type of theorising that lies behind Wilde's poetry of the eighteen-eighties is exemplified by a phrase in his preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891): 'An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style'. The poetry is largely free of this 'mannerism', and if one is disposed to agree with Wilde's view (and with another which seems closely akin to it, that 'Poetry should be like a crystal, it should make life more beautiful and less real')⁴, his poems, of which the most notable group is named 'Impressions', may be judged successful. If, instead, one feels that such views leave a great deal out of account, one may conclude that these particular poems succeed only on a modest level. Wilde has clearly narrowed his range of subject matter and social awareness, and though the poems are 'better' it seems necessary to set them, right from the start, in a wider critical perspective than that provided by Wilde's aesthetic theories of the period, partly because those theories seem incomplete, and partly because Wilde himself, in his best poem, The Ballad of Reading Gaol, was to get beyond them to a more deeply human view of the poetic impulse.

Having indicated, however, this reservation about their ultimate value, one may again admit the artistic

⁴ Letters, p. 217. (? Early 1888, to W. Graham Robertson.)

accomplishment of most of these later poems. After the embarrassing lack of restraint, and the sheer uncontrolled length of Wilde's early 'Greek' pieces, one turns with relief to such a simple pastoral lyric as 'Canzonet' (1888), in which the slow-marching rhythm and wistful elegiac note are produced by dividing the iambic pentameter into two shorter lines with an extra rhyme-sound:

What dost thou fear?
 Young Hyacinth is slain,
 Pan is not here,
 And will not come again.
 No horned Faun
 Treads down the yellow leas,
 No God at dawn
 Steals through the olive trees.

Hylas is dead,
 Nor will he e'er divine
 Those little red
 Rose-petalled lips of thine.
 On the high hill
 No ivory dryads play,
 Silver and still
 Sinks the sad autumn day.

There is certainly evidence here of sensitivity to sound, and the self-conscious form of the poem is a suitable vehicle for its rather artificial sentiment.

Artificiality, decorativeness and a concern for form are in fact the dominant characteristics of most of Wilde's poetry of this decade. The two 'Impressions' that were published in Philadelphia in 1882 (when Wilde was on tour in America) reveal in their imagery how far at this time he preferred art to nature, or rather, perhaps, how

instinctive it was for him to describe natural phenomena in terms of artificial, man-made objects. The three stanzas of 'Le Jardin' may be seen as revealing a movement away from the influence of earlier poets to a kind of imagery which one thinks of as characteristically Wildean. The 'lily' and the 'sunflower' were of course stock properties of Wilde the aesthete, but whereas stanza one describes a Tennysonian landscape of 'wood-pigeons' and 'beech-trees on the wold', and stanza two, with its phrase 'hour by hour', recalls Keats,⁵ the poem's last stanza emerges into something more original:

The roses lie upon the grass
Like little shreds of crimson silk.

This is visually apt as well as pretty, but one feels that Wilde is reducing the scale of what he is describing. His interest seems to reside not in the flowers but in the silk to which he can compare them. The same process is going on at the end of 'La Mer', where

... the thin threads of yellow foam
Float on the waves like ravelled lace.

His comparison, in this poem's first stanza, of the moon

⁵ Cf. 'Ode to Autumn', l. 22: 'Thou watchest the last oozyings, hours by hours'.

to 'an angry lion's eye' is striking, but again draws attention more to Wilde's fancy than to the natural object which stimulates it. In all three examples the effect is to replace nature by verbal decoration; we notice the same phenomenon in his description, in The Picture of Dorian Gray, of a 'jade-green pile of vegetables'.⁶ Wilde's general tendency to fancifulness and preciosity is thrown into relief by two vigorous lines in the second stanza of 'La Mer':

And in the throbbing engine-room
Leap the long rods of polished steel.

The image - probably suggested by a visit to the Chicago waterworks⁷ - transmits vividly a response to an experience not automatically 'poetic', but the ability to translate imaginatively this kind of experience is precisely what is missing in most of Wilde's poetry.

⁶ Works, p. 77.

⁷ See the lecture 'Impressions of America' (1883): 'There is no country in the world where machinery is so lovely as in America. I have always wished to believe that the line of strength and the line of beauty are one. That wish was realised when I contemplated American machinery. It was not until I had seen the waterworks at Chicago that I realized the wonders of machinery; the rise and fall of the steel rods, the symmetrical motion of great wheels, is the most beautifully rhythmic thing I have ever seen'. Quoted in Peter Latham, Travel, Business, Study and Art in the U.S.A., Blackie, 1964, p. 156.

It will be noticed that in these two 'Impressions' there is no sign of Wilde himself. He observes and records but does not participate. As well as being artificial, many of his poems of this period are impersonal. Wilde's interest in the impersonality of art derived from his admiration for Flaubert, whom in a letter of 1888 he referred to as 'my master'.⁸ Flaubert's view was that the artist should be totally objective, above and outside his own work. Wilde stated his own version of this idea in the preface to Dorian Gray as: 'To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim'. Along with Wilde's admiration for Flaubert went his admiration for Gautier,⁹ from whom he took the view that art should not be concerned with conveying doctrine or moral lessons but should rather strive for perfection of form. In Dorian Gray¹⁰ Wilde quotes almost with envy three stanzas of Gautier's poem about Venice entitled 'Sur les Lagunes', and just as the influence of Tennyson may be seen in Wilde's early impressionistic poems, so in his later ones may be felt the influence of Gautier, whose

⁸ Letters, p. 233. (to W.E. Henley ? Dec. 1888.)

⁹ Letters, p. 122: 'I can't travel without Balzac and Gautier'. (to Julia Ward Howe, 6 July 1882.)

¹⁰ Works, pp. 126-7.

octosyllabic quatrains are sometimes so close to the rhythms of English octosyllabic verse:

Marbre, perle, rose, colombe,
 Tout se dissout, tout se détruit;
 La perle fond, le marbre tombe,
 La fleur se fane et l'oiseau fuit. 11

At the beginning of 1883 Wilde spent three months or so in Paris, and though his letters are few and reveal little, it seems highly likely that this period reinforced in his mind the importance of the work and theories of Flaubert and Gautier and also his liking for Baudelaire. The three writers had of course died earlier, Flaubert as recently as 1880, but in the poems written during, or inspired by, his stay in Paris - The Sphinx, 'The Harlot's House' and some impressionist pieces - one can certainly detect their influence.

The concern for neatness of form is most apparent in a pair of poems entitled 'Fantaisies Décoratives', published in 1887. The title itself may owe something to Gautier, whose Emaux et Camées contains a group of five short poems called 'Fantaisies d'Hiver'. The 'decorativeness' is emphasised by the original manuscript titles of the first poem, 'Le Panneau', which were 'Impression Japonais. Rose et Ivoire' and 'Symphonie en

11 'Affinités Secrètes', ll. 17-20.

Rose', the latter a very Gautieresque label.¹² 'Le Panneau' was called by Wilde 'a suggestion for a design for a Japanese panel',¹³ and illustrates the vogue at the time for things oriental - the girl of the poem, with her 'pale green nails of polished jade', seems in fact far more Chinese than Japanese. Because the poem is a flight of fancy Wilde is freed of the bother of using words to recreate external phenomena and is able to concentrate on making the poem a self-contained entity, its beauty consisting in pattern and verbal colour. The first and last stanzas are mirror-images of each other, and the six intervening stanzas are arranged in pairs, each pair beginning with the same syntactical trick: 'She takes ... she takes' (ll. 4-5); 'And now ... and now' (ll. 6-7); and, most ingeniously, the phrases 'The red leaves fall .../ The white leaves flutter' of stanza two are almost inverted by the third stanza into 'The white leaves float.../ The red leaves flutter ...' This is all very neatly done, but the air of arbitrariness about it is increased when one finds that a manuscript version of the poem has the first

¹² Cf. Gautier's 'Symphonie en Blanc Majeur'. Wilde also wanted the poems to be illustrated, and they were so published. See Letters, p. 206.

¹³ Letters, p. 206.

and last stanzas each written in reverse order from the one finally adopted, and it really makes little difference which order is chosen.¹⁴ There is a curious deadness about the poem, a lack of reverberation in the language, which results from its being at two removes from reality - a verbal equivalent of a non-existent panel depicting a non-existent girl.

'Les Ballons', which is 'a description of children flying balloons in the Tuileries Gardens in Paris',¹⁵ is more promising, and its subject gives it a lightness which its companion-piece lacks. The flight of the balloons is nevertheless verbally formalised: they

Reel with every windy gust,
Rise and reel like dancing girls,
Float like strange transparent pearls,
Float and fall like silver dust.

One may feel that this stylised stopping-and-starting is significantly related to the hesitant movement of the balloons, an acceptable verbal equivalent. The last stanza, however, in its comparison of the balloons to jewels (a favourite epitome of the beautiful for Wilde),

¹⁴ See Mason, pp. 102-3.

¹⁵ Letters, p. 206.

simply tries to cram in too much at once, as though Wilde had been led by his savouring of the words for jewels into forgetting that words refer to things, and that an amethyst can hardly be an opal as well:

Then to the tall trees they climb,
Like thin globes of amethyst,
Wandering opals keeping tryst
With the rubies of the lime.

'Le Jardin des Tuileries', published in 1885, starts with the same kind of pattern-making that one notices in 'Le Panneau' and 'Les Ballons':

This winter air is keen and cold,
And keen and cold this winter sun ...

But in this poem Wilde's liking for children asserts itself so that one is able to see beyond the words and patterns to an actual scene. In addition, though Wilde at first describes the children, as 'little things of dancing gold',¹⁶ this charming fancy is quickly superseded by the sturdy alliterations and manly metaphors of stanza two, which make it quite clear that they are flesh-and-blood:

¹⁶ It has been suggested (Fehr, p. 102) that this image may have been influenced by a phrase in Flaubert, La Tentation de Sainte Antoine (Oeuvres Complètes de Gustave Flaubert, Louis Conard, Paris, 1924) p. 2: '... et dans l'espace flotte une poudre d'or tellement menue qu'elle se confond avec les vibrations de la lumière'. (See also 'Les Ballons', ll. 7-8.) Cf. also the phrase 'Courir ses arabesques d'or' in Gautier, 'Dans la Rue', l. 28.

Sometimes about the painted kiosk
 The mimic soldiers strut and stride,
 Sometimes the blue-eyed brigands hide
 In the bleak tangles of the bosk.

The first three stanzas are correctly objective, the arresting phrase 'paper navies' in line eleven maintaining the poet's air of slightly ironic detachment. In describing the children climbing, 'tiny hand on tiny hand', up 'the black and leafless tree', however, Wilde suddenly seems to come emotionally closer to them, and the last stanza is quite unashamedly a reproach - light-hearted perhaps - to the tree:

Ah! cruel tree! if I were you,
 And children climbed me, for their sake
 Though it be winter I would break
 Into spring blossoms white and blue. 17

This may seem to some critics a sentimental gesture, but it brings about an identification of the poet and his material which makes the poem more poignant than 'Le Panneau' and 'Les Ballons'. Distance and objectivity are not always the best recipes where the subject is human beings.

Where the subject is simply a landscape cool objectivity is more appropriate, and 'Symphony in Yellow',

¹⁷ Cf. 'The Selfish Giant', Works, p. 299.

written late in 1888, is a fine example of the careful selection of small details to make the poetic equivalent of some imaginary Whistler painting. The poem was prompted 'by seeing an omnibus (yellow omnibus) crawl across Blackfriars Bridge one foggy day',¹⁸ and out of this Wilde has made a verbal picture which is concise and controlled, the comparisons to 'yellow butterfly', 'yellow silken scarf' and 'a rod of rippled jade' being decorative but not so fanciful as to divert all attention to themselves. The interest created by these images is balanced by the simplicity of the description of the falling leaves and the close, but not obtrusive, sound-patterning of a line like 'Big barges full of yellow hay'. The inert symmetry found in 'Le Panneau' is also avoided by making half the rhyme-pairs imperfect:

An omnibus across the bridge
 Crawls like a yellow butterfly,
 And, here and there, a passer-by
 Shows like a little restless midge.

Big barges full of yellow hay
 Are moored against the shadowy wharf,
 And, like a yellow silken scarf,
 The thick fog hangs along the quay.

The yellow leaves begin to fade
 And flutter from the Temple elms,
 And at my feet the pale green Thames
 Lies like a rod of rippled jade.

¹⁸ Letters, p. 233. (to W.E. Henley, Nov.-Dec. 1888.)

This is an improvement on Wilde's earlier painting of an urban scene, 'Impression du Matin' (1881), which tries to make use of too many disparate details and even, in its reference to 'one pale woman', hint at a story. In 'Symphony in Yellow' everything - even the 'passer-by' - contributes to a single mood, the scene can be taken in at one glance, and the number of stylised patches of yellow is nicely calculated not to strain the reader's credulity.

The impressionist poems that have so far been considered can be conveniently labelled 'aesthetic'. On the whole they exemplify the doctrine of art for art's sake. Wilde's visit to Paris in 1883 brought him into contact with another French literary movement, that of the Decadents, and among the writers he met in Paris was Verlaine, with his 'nostalgie de la boue'. The influence of Decadence - its identifying characteristics an interest in sin and a preoccupation not with beauty exclusively but with the indulgence of the senses in both beautiful and ugly experiences - may be felt in the two poems most closely connected with Wilde's visit to Paris, The Sphinx and 'The Harlot's House'.¹⁹

'The Harlot's House' was published in 1885, but details of its third and eighth stanzas were assimilated

¹⁹ See Pearson, p. 93.

into The Picture of Dorian Gray five years later,²⁰ and so it seems to anticipate Wilde's interest in sensual indulgence and his fascination with evil and remorse. It is, however, far from being an amoral poem: the fact that the unnamed 'she', but not the narrator himself, enters 'the house of lust' suggests, if not a moral judgement, at least an awareness of diverging possibilities. Nor, despite Wilde's later confessed admiration for the art of Verlaine,²¹ does the poem reveal a 'nostalgie de la boue'; a natural fastidiousness seems to have prevented Wilde from sinking too low, and the harlot's house of the poem is not a squalid East End brothel but a rather high-class establishment, supplying art in the form of 'The 'Treues Liebes Herz' of Strauss'. It is very noticeable that the house and its patrons are observed from the outside, and the poem, with all its interest in the 'ghostly dancers', stops short of approving them:

Then, turning to my love, I said,
 'The dead are dancing with the dead,
 The dust is whirling with the dust'.

The poem does still convey a sort of horrified fascination with the dance in which the 'strange mechanical grotesques'

²⁰ See The Picture of Dorian Gray, Works, p. 141.

²¹ Letters, p. 276. (to Arthur Symons, 22 Oct. 1890.)

are caught up. They are involved in a 'danse macabre', and the language Wilde uses to describe them is strongly reminiscent of Baudelaire and Gautier:

Like wire-pulled automatons,
Slim silhouetted skeletons
Went sidling through the slow quadrille,

They took each other by the hand,
And danced a stately sarabande;
Their laughter echoed thin and shrill.

The 'skeletons' recall Baudelaire's line in his poem 'Danse Macabre': 'Pourtant, qui n'a serré dans ses bras un squelette?'²² and the 'saraband' is probably derived from Gautier's poem 'Bûchers et Tombeaux':

A chaque pas grossit la bande;
La jeyne aux vieux donne la main;
L'irrésistible sarabande
Met en branle le genre humain.
(ll. 77-80)

The mechanical activity which the poem presents is admirably transmitted by the imagery, which turns the people into dolls:

Sometimes a clockwork puppet pressed
A phantom lover to her breast,
Sometimes they seemed to try to sing.

Sometimes a horrible marionette
Came out, and smoked its cigarette
Upon the steps like a live thing.

²² 'Danse Macabre', Les Fleurs du Mal CXXI, l. 41.

Each stanza has a static quality, as though it existed complete in itself, and the poem as a result seems not so much to progress as to jerk forward, like the movements of a marionette. This metrical effect collaborates with the imagery to suggest the deadness of the experience being described, and thus to convey an implicit verdict on it. It is all the stranger therefore that the girl should enter the harlot's house, and the apparent arbitrariness of her decision exemplifies the disturbing total effect of the poem. One cannot quite identify whether its haunting quality proceeds from the touches of pathos ('Sometimes they seemed to try to sing') applied to the dancers, or whether it is a mesmerism exerted on the watcher by the 'shadows' which 'raced across the blind'. The arrival of the dawn is the conventional halt to the witches' sabbath this night-life is a replica of, but its apparent finality is immediately undermined by the simile - 'like a frightened girl' - used to describe it. This 'ending' epitomises the ambiguity of the poem as a whole and, in leaving the reader in a state of uncertainty, suggests that Wilde was himself uncertain of his attitude to temptation.

It is possible to think of The Sphinx as in effect a sequel to 'The Harlot's House'. Both poems are voyeuristic, in that they are involved with the idea of someone else's sensuality, but whereas the harlot's house

fascinates Wilde in a sort of two-dimensional way, leaving him as an observer, the imaginary love affairs with which he ornaments the Sphinx seem gradually to exert a centripetal force on him until he is personally identified with what he is describing. And just as the decadence of The Sphinx - its immersion in a world of pagan gods, evocative words and sensual experiences - is more totally enveloping, so Wilde's final reaction against its decadence is the more violent. The Sphinx is both a more decadent and, finally, a more moral poem, and illustrates with considerable power the two poles of Wilde's temperament - his worldly love of beauty and his very strong sense of guilt - which were more briefly expressed in 1881 in his sonnet 'Hélas!'.

The Sphinx is the longest and most ambitious poem of Wilde's middle period, and its composition, or at least its revision, appears to have stretched over a substantial period of time. It was sent to the publishers in 1892, at which time Wilde was still contemplating alterations to it,²³ and was finally published with handsome illustrations by Charles Ricketts in 1894. Earlier revisions had, according to Ransome,²⁴ been made in 1889, but the bulk of

²³ See Letters, p. 319.

²⁴ Ransome, p. 78.

the poem was probably composed in 1883 when Wilde was in Paris. He mentioned it in a letter to R.H. Sherard in April, 1883,²⁵ but writing to Sherard a month or so later, when he had returned to London, he indicated that the poem was still unfinished: 'the splendid whirl and swirl of life in London sweeps me from my Sphinx'.²⁶ Mason has suggested that the poem was begun when Wilde was at Oxford, and bases his theory on a page of the manuscript which bears doodlings apparently of men in academic dress, and on the occurrence of the phrase

... while I have hardly seen
Some twenty summers cast their green for Autumn's
gaudy liveries
(ll. 17-8)

which is also made use of in almost identical form in Ravenna.²⁷ Ransome finds it hard to accept Mason's view,²⁸ but additional references, the mention of 'a student's cell' (l. 162) and the suggestion of Oxford (together with the

²⁵ Letters, p. 144.

²⁶ Letters, p. 147.

²⁷ Mason, pp. 396-8.

²⁸ Ransome, pp. 78-9.

Gautier's poem 'Carnaval' (l. 29) has the phrase 'Aux paupières de satin noir'; line 4 of Baudelaire's 'A Une Malabaraise' (Les Fleurs du Mal XCII) reads: 'Tes grands yeux de velours sont plus noirs que ta chair'; and his poem 'Le Chat' (Les Fleurs du Mal XXV) asks the cat to 'laisse-moi plonger dans tes beaux yeux' (l. 3). The first lines of this same poem:

Viens, mon beau chat, sur mon coeur amoureux,
Retiens les griffes de ta patte

resemble the invocation which opens Wilde's sixth stanza:

Come forth my lovely languorous Sphinx! and put
your head upon my knee!

The Pall Mall Gazette, in a review of 9 July 1894, suggested as general influences upon the poem Gautier's La Roman de la Momie (1858) and Flaubert's La Tentation de Sainte Antoine (1874). Gautier's novel describes in its prologue the discovery, by a young English lord accompanied by a scholar, of the mummified remains of a princess inside one of the royal pyramids. Gautier uses this discovery as the springboard for a recreation of the glories of ancient Egypt in which he indulges all his descriptive gifts to portray in detail the personal appearance of princes, their strange apparel and adornment, and the religious rituals in which they took part. In so far as Wilde's poem

shares Gautier's fascination for the physical appearance of the past, one may infer the influence of Gautier's novel, as one may that of such poems of Gautier as 'Nostalgies d'Obélisques'; but the influences are not directly verbal. The influence of La Tentation de Ste. Antoine, however, may be more precisely traced, and we also know from Wilde's letters that he had a great admiration for this particular book: after his release from prison he spent many evenings in Paris in 1898 reading it,³⁰ and he wrote in 1888 of his wish to translate it.³¹ The Sphinx is essentially the record of a temptation, of a voyage to the limits of sensation, and the revulsion at the end, expressed as a return to Christian awareness, is very similar to the way in which La Tentation ends. In Flaubert's novel a phantasmagoria of monsters - Griffon, Unicorn, Basilisk, and others with outlandish names - drives St. Anthony into a delirium in which he speaks of wishing to 'pénétrer chaque atome, descendre jusqu'au fond de la matière, - être la matière'.³² After this climax Flaubert describes the coming of the dawn, in which Christ appears 'dans le disque même du soleil', and at the sight of Christ St. Anthony makes the sign of the cross and

³⁰ Letters, p. 715.

³¹ Letters, p. 233. (See also ibid., note 3)

³² La Temptation de Ste. Antoine (Oeuvres Complètes de Gustave Flaubert (1924)), p. 201.

returns to his prayers. The ending of Wilde's poem is similarly abrupt, though Wilde portrays his own feeling of revulsion rather than its outward effect, and the pattern of sensual temptation followed by repentance is the same as Flaubert's. Lines 95-108 of Wilde's poem, which describe the barbaric splendour of Ammon (whom Wilde identifies with Osiris) and his age, may well be modelled on the description given by Isis of the glories of Egypt in the days when she and Osiris were its joint rulers.³³ In this passage Isis describes how 'les morts dans leurs cerceuils paints attendaient leur tour', and this may have given rise to two of Wilde's phrases: 'the painted swathed dead' (l. 63), and 'the painted kings who sleep beneath the wedge-shaped pyramid' (l. 28). Three of Wilde's strange words, 'Mandragores' (l. 40), 'Tragelaphos' (l. 64) and 'Oreichalch' (l. 70) are also used by Flaubert in La Tentation.³⁴

France, however, had no monopoly on ancient Egypt and no copyright on cats, so that to talk of the French elements in The Sphinx is not to diminish Wilde's achievement. Such phrases as Wilde borrows from French writers generally occur in new combinations, and in any case the

³³ Ibid., pp. 142-3.

³⁴ On pp. 199, 197 and 189 respectively.

poetic overtones of the words and phrases used differ from those of their French equivalents, so that Wilde even in the act of translating is making something new of his source materials. The most one can fairly say is that The Sphinx, like Swinburne's 'Cleopatra', belongs in part to a movement, particularly noticeable in France, which was characterised by an interest in the strange, the exotic. The history and archaeology of the near East provided convenient images for the poetic hankering after new sensation. One may see in Gautier, Flaubert and Wilde an interest also in strange words, and Egypt provided them in abundance, especially proper names. In 1889 Wilde said in a letter: 'Names fascinate me terribly'.³⁵

The use of exotic names - Thoth, Anubis, Ammon, Memnon, Heliopolis - and the references to such monsters as Gryphons, Basilisks, Hippogriffs and 'the ivory-horned Tragelaphos' are only one aspect of the poem that draws attention to it as a tour-de-force. Pearson speaks of its 'comical' and 'crossword puzzle' qualities,³⁶ but although it is possible at times to feel that the poem verges unconsciously on the ridiculous (a stanza like

³⁵ Letters, p. 252.

³⁶ Pearson, p. 92.

And lapped the stream and fed your drouth and watched
 with hot and hungry stare
 The ivory body of that rare young slave with the
 pomegranate mouth!

Sing to me of the Labyrinth in which the twi-formed
 bull was stalled!
 Sing to me of the night you crawled across the
 temple's granite plinth

When through the purple corridors the screaming
 scarlet Ibis flew
 In terror, and a horrid dew dripped from the moaning
 Mandragores.

It will be noticed that in these four stanzas the pattern 'Sing to me' is used three times. The structure of the whole poem is based on such repetitions of different rhetorical patterns: much is description, but the description is given its significance by being fitted into a framework of contrasts - initial invitation balanced by eventual rejection, sequences of questions balanced by blocks of stanzas giving the answers to these questions. Contrast of mood is further provided by following the description of Ammon and the glories of his reign by an elegiac passage in which Ammon is transmuted into the dismembered Osiris whom the Sphinx has to seek for.

The first five stanzas describe the Sphinx, who, though having the enigmatic quality of timelessness, is presented sensuously as a pampered domestic cat:

Upon the mat she lies and leers and on the tawny
throat of her
Flutters the soft and silky fur or ripples to her
pointed ears.
(ll. 9-10)

Wilde then conjures her (the word, with its overtones of magic, is appropriate considering his harsh reaction later to what starts out so harmlessly) to 'come forth' and answer his questions about her past. The questions are concerned with her lovers, and are set out repetitiously in stanzas twenty-three to thirty-six, which suggest all manner of strange bestial connections, and even hint at lesbianism (the 'Nereid' with 'curious rock-crystal breasts' in stanza twenty-seven) and necrophilia (stanza thirty-two). The 'sinfulness' of the subject matter is emphasised rather too deliberately.

The longest section of the poem runs from stanza thirty-six, in which Wilde, in answer to his own questions, puts forward Ammon as the likeliest sharer of the Sphinx's embraces, up to stanza seventy-three, where after Ammon's death the Sphinx is imagined solacing herself with lions and tigers:

White Ammon was your bedfellow! Your chamber was
the steaming Nile!
And with your curved archaic smile you watched his
passion come and go.
(11. 85-6)

The description of Ammon enthroned and glorious gives Wilde an opportunity to indulge in his fondness for names of jewellery and beautiful objects. At this point one feels the accuracy of Ransome's view that Wilde 'is satisfied with an opulence, rather of things than emotion.'⁴⁰ There is an air of technicolour about Wilde's idea of beauty that is a little vulgar:

On pearl and porphyry pedestalled he was too bright
to look upon:
For on his ivory breast there shone the wondrous ocean-
emerald,

.....

And lines of swarthy Nubians bare up his litter as he
rode
Down the great granite-paven road between the nodding
peacock-fans.

The merchants brought him steatite from Sidon in
their painted ships:
The meanest cup that touched his lips was fashioned
from a crysolite.
(11. 95-6, 101-4)

The elegiac passage that follows, though parts of it are overwrought in their emotionalism ('And wake mad passions in the senseless stone', l. 124), allows Wilde to set against his earlier, external description rather more feeling, almost as if the Sphinx had changed from a lay-figure for vicarious sensuality into a human being who had

⁴⁰ Ransome, p. 80.

lost something of importance. It may be that this passage gains its greater ability to move the reader from the fact that it refers to the religious myth of the dying God who must be resurrected in order to bring the crops back to fruitfulness:

Still from his chair of porphyry gaunt Memnon strains
his lidless eyes
Across the empty land, and cries each yellow morning
unto thee.

And Nilus with his broken horn lies in his black and
oozy bed
And till thy coming will not spread his waters on the
withering corn.

The pagan sensuality of the poem is ruffled in stanza sixty-five by the phrase 'Only one God has ever died'. This is meant in the immediate context simply as a contrast with the idea that the Sphinx's lovers 'are not dead', and it is quickly superseded by Wilde's instructions to the Sphinx to continue with her search. But the Christian belief which the small phrase embodies seems to function in the poem as the match to a fuse which may be thought of as burning at the back of Wilde's mind during the ensuing stanzas until it produces the explosion, the dramatic change of mood, of stanza seventy-four:

Why are you tarrying? Get hence! I weary of your
sullen ways,
I weary of your steadfast gaze, your somnolent
magnificence.

No longer is the Sphinx either a hypnotic domestic cat or a passport to the barbaric splendours of the ancient world. Suddenly all her fascination is gone, as if the poet had wakened from a dream of pleasure and now loathed what he saw. Apart from the earlier hint about Christ, there is nothing to prepare one for the change, and one is forced without notice to reassess all one's views of the poem's earlier material. Instead of being a reverie indulged in by the poet, created by him, controlled by him, this earlier material is now seen as a temptation of which he has been the victim, and he turns with revulsion against himself as yet another betrayer of Christ who 'weeps for every soul in vain':

What songless tongueless ghost of sin crept through
the curtains of the night,
And saw my taper burning bright, and knocked, and
bade you enter in?

.....

Get hence, you loathsome mystery! Hideous animal,
get hence!
You wake in me each bestial sense, you make me what
I would not be.

You make my creed a barren sham, you wake fowl dreams
of sensual life,
And Atys with his blood-stained knife were better
than the thing I am.
(11. 163-4, 167-70)



In so far as much of The Sphinx is a sexual fantasy, Wilde's reaction at the end is a verbal equivalent of post-orgasmic disgust. In terms of structure, his rejection of the Sphinx balances his invocation of her at the beginning of the poem. How far Wilde foresaw his ending when he began the poem (how far, that is, he was consciously leading the reader through a process he had himself completely undergone and emerged from) it is impossible to say, but the ending certainly gives the descriptive pagan passages a meaning they would otherwise lack and turns the poem from a rhetorical list of questions and answers into a psychological experience. Instead of being a study of the Sphinx, a sensual wish-fulfilment and a historical recreation which could presumably go on with no end in sight except that imposed by the drying-up of Wilde's fancy, the poem is a study in the processes of the human mind.

The reaction at the end of The Sphinx is as if Wilde were standing back and realising that what he had written earlier in the poem in the confidence that it was beautiful, artistic, and needed no justification beyond its own existence, could on another level represent merely weakness of mind, lack of self-control and lack of a perspective that religion or a system of moral values could furnish. The Sphinx is the culmination of Wilde's aestheticism and of his decadence, and is perhaps the

better poem because it carries its criticism built into it. What it stood for was criticised by Wilde again after his release from Reading Gaol, where his experiences completed the process of mental change begun in its last stanzas and gave him the material and outlook for a completely different kind of poem:

I do not interest myself in that British view of morals that sets Messalina above Sporus: both pleasures are matters of temperament, and like all sensual pleasures lack nobility and slay the soul: but my reckless pursuit of mundane pleasure, my extravagance, my senseless ease, my love of fashion, my whole attitude towards life, all these things were wrong for an artist. 41

⁴¹ Letters, pp. 595-6. (to Arthur L. Humphreys, ? 3 June 1897)

CHAPTER V

THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL

In 1895 Wilde was sentenced to two years' imprisonment for homosexual practices. He began to serve his sentence at Wandsworth in July, but was transferred from there to H.M. Prison, Reading in November. He was finally released in May, 1897. His period in prison has been fully documented by H. Montgomery Hyde,¹ and will not be dealt with in this chapter except as it relates to the poem which resulted from it.

Wilde's experiences in prison affected him too rawly for him to be able initially to think of them as material for poetry. A month before his release he passed to Thomas Martin, a young warder who had been particularly kind to him, a surreptitious note in which he said: 'I hope to write about prison life and try and change it for others, but it is too terrible and ugly to make a work of art of.'² Soon after this, Martin was dismissed from the prison service for an act of unauthorised kindness to a

¹ H. Montgomery Hyde, Oscar Wilde: The Aftermath (1963).

² Letters, p. 528.

hungry child, and the first public shape in which Wilde's 'hope' issued was a long letter to the Daily Chronicle in which he not only defended Martin's conduct but also took the opportunity to draw attention to the inhumane treatment meted out in prison both to children and to mentally-disturbed convicts.³ He followed this up in March 1898 with another long letter to the same newspaper, in which he put forward such sensible and moving criticisms of prison conditions and the prison system that these were changed somewhat for the better.⁴

Knowledge of these and similar actions⁵ reinforces one's sense of the strength of the feelings out of which the Ballad sprang. Its emotional power is due not only to the simplicity and force of its language but also to the reader's knowledge from other sources that Wilde is writing of matters painfully close to his own experience. The poignancy of such a stanza as the following is twofold: the images concisely embody man's inhumanity to man and are also true, brutal and particular incidents:

³ Letters, pp. 568-74.

⁴ Letters, pp. 722-6.

⁵ Cf. the financial help which, when sorely pressed for money himself, Wilde gave to fellow-convicts on their release from Reading. Letters, pp. 601-2. (to Reginald Turner, ? 7 June 1897.)

For they starve the little frightened child
 Till it weeps both night and day:
 And they scourge the weak, and flog the fool,
 And gibe the old and grey,
 And some grow mad, and all grow bad,
 And none a word may say.
 (V, ii, 2)

Such directness of utterance was a new departure for Wilde, but his prison experiences not only gave him a subject - the sufferings of others - but also developed in him, despite the harshness of his own sentence, an ability to respond to those sufferings. He was very aware himself of a change in his own nature. In a letter to Mrs. Bernard Beere shortly after his release he spoke of the possible positive effect of imprisonment: 'Suffering is a terrible fire; it either purifies or destroys; perhaps I may be a better fellow after it all.'⁶ What form improvement had in fact taken is indicated by a letter to Michael Davitt, a Member of Parliament who had himself been frequently imprisoned and was interested in prison reform: '... I have learnt pity: and that is worth learning, if one has to tramp a yard for two years to learn it.'⁷ To the writer Selwyn Image Wilde spoke of a different but cognate virtue: 'I have learnt in prison-cells to be grateful. That, for me, is a great

⁶ Letters, p. 567.

⁷ Letters, p. 587. (May/June 1897).

discovery.'⁸ To sum up these separate statements by Wilde one may say that prison had deepened and extended his feelings; it had increased his sense of kinship with other people, making him aware of himself not as an aloof aesthete capable of creating his own fantasy world by the manipulation of language, but as a man exposed like his fellow-convicts to evils which he could as prisoner do nothing about. This change of heart, together perhaps with the physical starkness of prison life, gave him a very different view of language from the one demonstrated by his poems of the previous two decades. He expressed this new attitude in a letter to Frank Harris one month after his release:

Words, now, to me signify things, actualities, real emotions, realised thoughts.... I must say that I no longer make roulades of phrases about the deep things I feel. When I write directly to you I speak directly. Violin-variations don't interest me. ⁹

Nevertheless, the composition of The Ballad of Reading Gaol was not such a straightforward matter as this statement may suggest. Though most of the poem is admirably simple and direct - and moving, partly because of this

⁸ Letters, p. 594. (3 June 1897.)

⁹ Letters, p. 607. (13 June 1897.)

simplicity and directness - its production cost Wilde considerable effort, an effort necessitated by a developing tension in Wilde's mind between his new ideal of 'directness' and his older practices of verbal decorativeness and objectivity. Wilde's earlier views on the place of strong feelings in art had been expressed unequivocally in a review of 1887:

... the personal expression of joy or sorrow is not poetry, though it may afford excellent material for a sentimental diary. 10

Wilde's prison experiences caused him to modify this idea, but did not entirely erase it. One receives from the many letters Wilde wrote during the composition of the Ballad the impression that he was never able entirely to reconcile himself to its direct and occasionally personal manner of statement, and a letter to Frank Harris written at the time of the poem's publication shows Wilde's mixed feelings about it:

I, of course, feel that the poem is too autobiographical, and that real experiences are alien things that should never influence one, but it was wrung out of me, a cry of pain,

10 'The Poets' Corner', Pall Mall Gazette, 30 May 1887. Reprinted in Reviews (1908), p. 170.

the cry of Marsyas, not the song of Apollo.
 Still, there are some good things in it. I
 feel as if I had made a sonnet out of skilly!
 And that is something. 11

The phrase 'wrung out of me' is significant. To no other poem by Wilde could it be applied, and it suggests a vital difference between the Ballad and his earlier work. For the only time in his poetic career, Wilde was writing poetry forced out of him by a strong inner pressure that he could not withstand, was pushed by the demands of new feelings beyond his normal preconceptions about poetry and forced almost against his will to extend his range.¹² The Ballad involved him in a degree of hard work not previously required of him, and his conscious effort to find suitable expression for material he had had no practice with had a beneficial effect on his poetic style. In his earlier work he was responsible only to his own fancy; in the Ballad he had to measure himself against common human feelings and against a situation which existed outside himself. With one

¹¹ Letters, p. 708. (late Feb. 1898) It is, however, just possible that Wilde's use of the phrase 'of course' is disingenuous, and that Wilde may have been writing the sort of exaggerated apology that he thought Harris might expect of him.

¹² Cf. Ransome, p. 207: 'Nowhere else in Wilde's work is there such a feeling of tense muscles, of difficult, because passionate, articulation'.

possible exception, The Sphinx, the Ballad is the only poem of Wilde's to possess the basic element expected by Matthew Arnold in any poem of stature: that intrinsic 'high seriousness' of subject which might summon the deepest human and technical resources of the poet. One may place the Ballad in the context of Wilde's poetry as a whole in some such way as this. The social feelings sporadically expressed in his poems of the eighteen-seventies were too general, too remote from his own experience, and too derivative in their statement to communicate with any intensity, so that his reaction away from this, in the 'eighties, in favour of 'aesthetic' subjects, which gave him scope for technical improvement, was a sensible course to pursue. It took his first-hand experiences in prison to spur him into a mature version of the 'committed' verse at which his earliest work had hinted, and the greater technical expertise which he had gained in the 'eighties luckily enabled him to attempt his task with some hope of success.

On his release from Reading Wilde immediately crossed to France and settled in the village of Berneval-sur-Mer near Dieppe. He took to the place immediately, and a remark to Robert Ross explaining why he had not gone to Paris, though it indicates a slight fear of relapsing into those former ways which he now considered 'unworthy of an

artist', suggests a man very different - or at least wishing to be very different - from the 'decadent' poet of the 'eighties: 'If I live in Paris I may be doomed to things I don't desire. I am afraid of big towns.... I am frightened of Paris. I want to live here.'¹³ In July Wilde began to write the Ballad, mentioning 'my poem' in a letter that month to Ross,¹⁴ and describing it more fully in a letter to W.R. Paton the following month as 'a long poem' in 'a new style for me, full of actuality and life in its directness of message and meaning'.¹⁵ When he left Reading he had received from A.E. Housman a copy of A Shropshire Lad (1895),¹⁶ and it may well be that Housman's successful use of simple language to render such subjects as young men being hanged¹⁷ spurred Wilde to apply his new view of language to a similar purpose. In mid-August he was still at work, and apparently pleased with his progress, informing Ernest Dowson that 'I wrote four

¹³ Letters, p. 585. (1 June 1897.)

¹⁴ Letters, p. 626. (22 July 1897.)

¹⁵ Letters, p. 630.

¹⁶ Letters, p. 713, note 1.

¹⁷ Cf. A Shropshire Lad XLVII, 'The Carpenter's Son'.

splendid stanzas yesterday'.¹⁸ He was hoping at this stage to publish the poem lucratively in the New York World, but in fact these high hopes eventually came to nothing.¹⁹ On 24 August the poem, still unfinished, was sent to Leonard Smithers to be typed out. Wilde continued to add passages to it during late August and early September, and on 15 September he left Berneval and established himself at Posilipo near Naples.

The tension between a wish for direct utterance and his former theories of a kind of poetry about subjects more remote from actual experience makes itself felt in many of Wilde's letters from Posilipo. The tension, however, was not one which Wilde was able to resolve in favour of one style or the other: he sent Smithers four additional stanzas (II, ii, 7-10) of 'great power and romantic-realist suggestion',²⁰ but also added to the four sections already completed at Berneval two more sections which he frankly admitted to be propagandist in their intentions.²¹ The view of the poem which he expressed in

¹⁸ Letters, p. 632. (18 Aug. 1897.)

¹⁹ See Letters, p. 668. /

²⁰ Letters, p. 652. (? 3 Oct. 1897.)

²¹ Letters, p. 661. (To Robert Ross, 19 Oct. 1897.)
See also Mason, pp. 410-1.

a letter to Ross at this time sums up his ambivalent attitude:

The poem suffers under the difficulty of a divided aim in style. Some is realistic, some is romantic; some poetry, some propaganda. I feel it keenly, but as a whole I think the production interesting: that it is interesting from more points of view than one is artistically to be regretted. 22

It would seem that the further Wilde moved away in time from his prison experiences and the direct utterance they at first demanded, the more his earlier 'artistic' conscience reasserted itself; yet the social conscience which prison had nurtured in him was still strong enough both to inspire the final sections of the poem, and to urge Wilde to their defence. A letter written to Ross ten days later than the one quoted above speaks of the 'propaganda' as something which Wilde 'desired to make'.²³ What Wilde hoped to bring about was a 'balance' between 'the romantic vein' and that of '"banging the tins"',²⁴ and in fact one may regard the juxtaposition of the two veins in the Ballad as a fruitful tension rather than as a harmful stylistic imbalance.

²² Letters, p. 654. (8 Oct. 1897.)

²³ Letters, p. 661. (19 Oct. 1897.)

²⁴ Letters, p. 653. (To Ross, ? 3 Oct. 1897.)

Even while he and Leonard Smithers were discussing the technical aspects of the Ballad's publication, Wilde was still tinkering with the poem and polishing it. In letters to Ross in October and November he described and justified a number of minor corrections,²⁵ and alterations were made to the proofs as these were sent to him. One cannot categorically assert that Wilde did not devote as much care to any other of his poems, but what certainly differentiates the Ballad from the rest of his work (even from The Sphinx, which was composed on and off over a period of years) is the fact that he felt the need to discuss its growth and ask the advice of his friends over points of phrasing. The letters do at least indicate his absorption in the poem and the pains he devoted to it, and display his awareness that he was attempting a kind of poem quite new to him, which thus demanded an unaccustomed degree of concentration. Eventually he seems to have come to feel that his amendments could continue indefinitely if he did not deliberately put a stop to them, and accordingly in December he wrote to Smithers:

I think that you had better send me no more proofs of the poem. I have the maladie de perfection and keep on correcting. I know I have got it now to a fairly high standard, but I don't want to polish for ever. ²⁶

²⁵ Letters, pp. 667, 668, 671.

²⁶ Letters, p. 696. (11 Dec. 1897.)

The Ballad was finally published by Smithers in February 1898, Wilde adopting for the occasion the rather transparent pseudonym 'C.3.3.' (his prison number). Six editions, each of about 1000 copies, followed in the space of three months. Wilde's name first appeared on the title-page of the seventh edition, published in 1899.

The incident upon which Wilde's reactions to prison life crystallised was the execution on 7 July, 1896 of Charles Wooldridge, a young trooper in the Royal Horse Guards, for the 'very determined' murder of his wife, who had 'excited his jealousy'.²⁷ Though the Ballad is dedicated to Wooldridge's memory, and though it is clear that Wilde felt his fate deeply,²⁸ it is probably truer to say that his execution is less the theme of the poem than its central focus, serving to organise the whole of Wilde's feelings about prison. The execution is - in terms of what it physically effects rather than in terms of the Justice it represents - the most dramatic epitome possible of man's inhumanity to man, around which cluster the many smaller inhumanities that Wilde describes as the poem proceeds. Wooldridge's story provides a narrative which helps to bind together Wilde's various pictures of, and

²⁷ For a detailed account, see Mason, pp. 426-7.

²⁸ See I, i, 5: 'And though I was a soul in pain,/ My pain I did not feel'.

reflections on, prison life. Whether, without the execution, Wilde could have stated his views in some other way is a question which cannot be answered, but his opinion in 1887 that 'the personal expression of joy or sorrow is not poetry' does seem to explain why he chose to present them primarily by means of a story told about someone else rather than by directly autobiographical expression. The simplifications inherent in the rendering of Wooldridge's action as a murder of 'the thing he loved' (l. 35) create a 'distancing' effect in the poem, as does the universalising of his action by the implication that he is being punished for what everyone does, in one way or another:

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
 By each let this be heard,
 Some do it with a bitter look,
 Some with a flattering word,
 The coward does it with a kiss,
 The brave man with a sword!
 (I, ii, 1-6)

Further artistic detachment is provided by Wilde's calling the poem a 'Ballad', and by his employment of a stanza form, involving frequent internal rhyme and the flexible introduction of extra unstressed syllables, that had previously been used by Coleridge in parts of 'The Ancient Mariner' and by Thomas Hood for 'The Dream of

Eugene Aram' (1829).²⁹ The ballad form gives licence (because of the oral tradition out of which it springs) to direct and simple language, but also, by virtue of its seniority as a mode of expression, confers on this language a sort of immediate literary respectability. Wilde's story of hanging and imprisonment becomes a folk-tale, and Wooldridge a folk-hero, without the story and the man losing their contemporary immediacy. The actual words Wilde uses are simple, but his patterning of them shows some sophistication, as the very first stanza illustrates:

He did not wear his scarlet coat,
 For blood and wine are red,
 And blood and wine were on his hands,
 When they found him with the dead,
 The poor dead woman whom he loved,
 And murdered in her bed.

The logic of some of this is dubious, but the dovetailing of the lines by repetition of phrases is skilfully done. All through the poem Wilde's artistry in the use of pattern, repetition and variation is apparent, the most obvious examples being the repetition of I, i, 3 ('I never saw

²⁹ The same stanza form is used by Rossetti in 'The Blessed Damozel', but the effect is quite different (and more 'literary') because Rossetti employs neither internal rhymes nor extra unstressed syllables.

a man who looked/ With such a wistful eye') in altered form as II, i, 2 and as IV, i, 4; and the circular effect given to the poem by having its final stanza echo I, ii, 1 ('Yet each man kills the thing he loves').

Coleridge and Thomas Hood both seem to have contributed something to the poem. Guilt, remorse and repentance are key themes in 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'The Dream of Eugene Aram', as they are in the Ballad, though Wilde presents these feelings not as they are experienced by Wooldridge but as they are experienced by himself and his fellow-convicts. So far, however, one may speak only of an inevitable similarity brought about by Wilde's subject, but there are a few verbal echoes which need to be pointed out. I, i, 5 has four of them:

Dear Christ! the very prison walls
Suddenly seemed to reel,
And the sky above my head became
Like a casque of scorching steel...

Coleridge uses 'O Christ!' twice in 'The Ancient Mariner' with just this horrified inflection, and Wilde's juxtaposition of his own 'Dear Christ!' with the word 'very' with little doubt derives from Coleridge's line 'The very deeps did rot: O Christ!' (l. 119). The metallic imagery of Coleridge's 'All in a hot and copper sky/ The bloody sun at noon...' (ll. 107-8) may have prompted Wilde's

'casque of scorching steel', and the particular adjective 'scorching' occurs in 'Eugene Aram': 'For every clot, a burning spot/ Was scorching in my brain!' (ll. 107-8). Hood uses personified abstractions like 'Guilt', 'Sin' and 'Sleep'; the last of these appears also in the Ballad (V, ii, 4). In the dream-sequence which makes up the larger part of Section III Wilde echoes Coleridge's 'About, about, in reel and rout' ('The Ancient Mariner', l. 123) with only slight disguise as 'About, about, in ghostly rout'.

There are four further derivative phrases, taken from other poets. I, ii, 1, in its description of the gallows, has the lines: 'And, green or dry, a man must die/ Before it bears its fruit.' The phrase 'green or dry' may have been suggested by Housman's

But, dead or living, drunk or dry,
 Soldier, I wish you well.
 (A Shropshire Lad XXII, ll. 11-12)

Bernhard Fehr points out that the lines

The grey cock crew, the red cock crew,
 But never came the day
 (III, iv, 1)

closely resemble two lines in the ballad 'Sweet William's Ghost', printed in Percy's Reliques:

Then up and crew the red, red cock,
And up and crew the grey. 30

Wilde's line 'Out of his mouth a red, red rose' (IV, iii, 3) is obviously indebted to Burns. Another link, pointed out by Fehr, is between Wilde's

And the iron gin that waits for Sin
Had caught us in its snare (II, ii, 7)

and Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Kháyyam:

Oh Thou, who didst with pitfall and with gin
Beset the road I was to wander in,
Thou wilt not with predestined evil round
Enmesh, and then impute my Fall to Sin!
(Rubaiyat, LXXX) 31

The initial line of Section V - 'I know not whether Laws be right' - parallels line 281 of Swinburne's 'Félice' - 'We know not whether Death be good.. ' - but perhaps it is unfair to suggest a literary origin for such a simple syntactical pattern.³²

It is significant that these few verbal echoes generally occur in the more 'romantic' parts of the Ballad.

³⁰ Fehr, pp. 199-200.

³¹ Fehr, p. 205, note 2.

³² Another example of a simple phrase which perhaps accidentally recalls the work of an earlier writer is the line 'Yet each man does not die' (I, ii, 3). Cf. 'The Ancient Mariner', l. 254: 'And yet I could not die'.

Elsewhere the nature of Wilde's subject matter - his first-hand experience of prison - was almost enough by itself to guarantee him originality of expression, and it is the direct and realistic passages which dominate the poem and dictate its over-all tone. Wilde certainly does not lapse into the melodrama, bathos and unintentional touches of comedy which punctuate 'Eugene Aram'. Hesketh Pearson sums up the unimportance of Wilde's literary borrowings to a total judgement of the poem when he says that 'the general effect is fine enough to cancel all debts to others.'³³

The poem's first four sections move forward through the short life of the trooper from his appearance at Reading among the prisoners on remand - the 'Trial Men' (I, i, 2) - to his execution nine weeks later. In order, however, to bring into immediate prominence the nature of the difference between him and the other prisoners Wilde anticipates his execution in Section IV in a sequence of seven powerful stanzas (I, ii, 4 - I, iii, 6) which show immediately the intensity of Wilde's reaction to the trooper's fate and the technical resources which he brought to the task of communicating its horror. The heavy alliterations, combined with the repeated syntactical

³³ Pearson, p. 343.

patterns at the beginnings of lines, emphasise the relentlessness of the trooper's approaching death and fix firmly in the mind the direction in which the next three sections are travelling:

He does not die a death of shame
 On a day of dark disgrace,
 Nor have a noose about his neck,
 Nor a cloth about his face,
 Nor drop feet foremost through the floor
 Into an empty space.

He does not sit with silent men
 Who watch him night and day;
 Who watch him when he tries to weep,
 And when he tries to pray;
 Who watch him lest himself should rob
 The prison of its prey.

Particularly effective use is made of the contrast between the inner horror of the condemned man and small, apparently harmless details: the 'little roof of glass' belonging to the execution shed, and the hangman, incongruously dressed for his task in 'gardener's gloves' which only emphasise the macabre, nightmarish quality of the situation:

He does not know that sickening thirst
 That sands one's throat, before
 The hangman with his gardener's gloves
 Slips through the padded door,
 And binds one with three leathern thongs,
 That the throat may thirst no more.

The pathos of the trooper's fate is, similarly, only thrown into sharper relief by such closely-observed details

as the 'cricket cap' which he wears at exercise and the 'wistful' way in which he looks up at the sky.

At the end of Section II the trooper goes for trial, and the latter part of the narrative suggests his feelings through the agency of Wilde's own and those of the other prisoners, while they wait for the day of execution to arrive. All the emotions of the convicts are centred on the idea of the trooper who, like them, is an 'outcast'; on the one hand, his fate dwarfs theirs into insignificance, but on the other he symbolises for them a state into which any of them might at some point be driven:

So with curious eyes and sick surmise
We watched him day by day,
And wondered if each one of us
Would end the self-same way,
For none can tell to what red Hell
His sightless soul may stray.

In Section III the prisoners' outward behaviour - the day-to-day routine of prison life - is described, ironically, as 'a merry masquerade', in which what can be observed by an outsider is almost ludicrously different from what the prisoners themselves feel. The verbs are harshly monosyllabic, and suggest mindless activity in which men are reduced to beasts, or to automata; but the noisiness of 'clattered', 'banged' and 'bawled' is precisely calculated by Wilde to transmit the idea of men

hiding something fearful from themselves, and both alliteration and the increase in the number of internal rhymes convey a mounting hysteria as the list of tasks is reeled off with ever-increasing speed:

We tore the tarry rope to shreds
 With blunt and bleeding nails;
 We rubbed the doors, and scrubbed the floors,
 And cleaned the shining rails:
 And, rank by rank, we soaped the plank,
 And clattered with the pails.

We sewed the sacks, we broke the stones,
 We turned the dusty drill:
 We banged the tins, we bawled the hymns,
 And sweated on the mill:
 But in the heart of every man
 Terror was lying still.

This contrast between outward appearances and inner reality was for Wilde the essence of the peculiar horror of prison life. It is emphasised in another way by his terse account of the senior officials of the prison - the description of their public behaviour sardonically suggesting the inadequacy of their human feelings, compared with those of the convicts:

The Governor was strong upon
 The Regulations Act:
 The Doctor said that Death was but
 A scientific fact:
 And every day the Chaplain called,
 And left a little tract.

Wilde felt that his language alone was able to express

the inner reality of prison, and the contrast between the Ballad and earlier poems like The Sphinx and 'Fantaisies Décoratives', whose subjects had been enhanced by pictorial illustration, is nowhere more apparent than in Wilde's reaction to a suggestion that it also be accompanied by illustrations:

[Miss Marbury's] suggestion of illustration is of course out of the question. Pray tell her from me that I feel it would entirely spoil any beauty the poem has, and not add anything to its psychological revelations. The horror of prison life is the contrast between the grotesqueness of one's aspect, and the tragedy in one's soul. Illustrations would emphasise the former, and conceal the latter. ³⁴

To transmit 'the tragedy in one's soul' Wilde had to rely more than he would have wished on emotive adjectives which had become blunted by too frequent use in contexts where their application was exaggerated. But as there were no external aspects of prison whose description would in itself have communicated what he wanted to express, Wilde felt that he had no option but to employ phrases like 'the black dock's dreadful pen', 'this wretched man', 'the hideous prison wall', 'the hideous shed' and 'piteous haste'. He explained his predicament in a letter to Robert Ross:

³⁴ Letters, p. 691. (To Leonard Smithers, 6 Dec. 1897.)

I admit there are far too many "dreadfuls" and "fearfuls". The difficulty is that objects in prison have no shape or form.... A cell ... may be described psychologically, with reference to its effect on the soul: in itself it can only be described as "white-washed" or "dimly-lit". It has no shape, no contents ... the horror of prison is that everything is so simple and commonplace in itself, and so degrading, and hideous, and revolting in its effect. 35

In fact, the banal adjectives which Wilde was obliged to use do convey strong feelings: the real context which produced them renders them appropriate, and their appropriateness rubs off a great deal of their rust.

Certain objections can be raised, however, to the 'romantic' passages which Wilde put into the poem presumably to give it greater dignity. It would be an exaggeration to call them bad, but they add an unnecessarily "literary" quality to the poem. The three stanzas which open Part Two of Section II, which Wilde added at Posilipo, reduce the reality of the situation: phrases like 'gallows tree' and 'hempen band' are poetic verbiage. The third of these stanzas is in itself a neatly-turned piece of writing, but the play on the word 'dance', used to contrast the two activities described, is rather cheap:

35 Letters, pp. 654-5. (8 Oct. 1897.)

It is sweet to dance to violins
 When Life and Love are fair:
 To dance to flutes, to dance to lutes
 Is delicate and rare:
 But it is not sweet with nimble feet
 To dance upon the air.

It sounds too much as though Wilde were making a joke in bad taste at the expense of his subject. The dream-sequence which in the final part of Section III leads up to the execution is a useful structural device for suggesting the length and tension of the night, but it goes on a trifle too long (this part consists of nineteen stanzas, and is the longest in the poem), and recalls too obviously parts of 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'The Harlot's House':

Around, around, they waltzed and wound;
 Some wheeled in smirking pairs;
 With the mincing step of a demirep
 Some sidled up the stairs;
 And with subtle sneer, and fawning leer,
 Each helped us at our prayers.
 (III, iv, 7)

The poem is not seriously damaged, however, by this stylistic harking-back, and though one may recoil from Wilde's unsuitable archaic choice of word in the lines

O moaning wind! what had we done
 To have such a seneschal?

remembering the bad early poems in which the word 'seneschal'

had made its appearance,³⁶ its use perhaps makes even more welcome his bald reference in the next stanza to 'my three-planked bed', and the view may be advanced that the 'romantic' passages sharpen one's appreciation of the 'realistic' ones. The colloquial 'his grave has got no name' (VI, i) is certainly more acceptable to a modern reader than the affectedly poetic 'it eats the heart away' (IV, ii, 6).

The moment of execution sharply releases the tension built up, however artificially, by the dream-sequence; even the unlikely simile passes hardly noticed at this climactic point:

With sudden shock the prison-clock
Smote on the shivering air,
And from all the gaol rose up a wail
Of impotent despair,
Like the sound that frightened marshes hear
From some leper in his lair.

Section IV is mainly occupied with the mixed indignation and pity which Wilde feels for the ignominious burial in 'a heap of burning lime' which is reserved for the murderer. His feelings are further affronted by the refusal of the prison authorities to plant any kind of 'root or seedling' on his grave: this particular denial

³⁶ See 'Endymion', l. 18 ('The lily's singing seneschal'); 'Charmides', l. 315; 'Quia Multum Amavi', l. 13 (! ... remorse, youth's white-faced seneschal').

of humanity is only one example of what Wilde sees as the deliberate policy of treating prisoners as a 'herd of brutes' who must be deprived of any form of pity:

But neither milk-white rose nor red
 May bloom in prison-air;
 The shard, the pebble, and the flint
 Are what they give us there:
 For flowers have been known to heal
 A common man's despair.

Wilde's only resource, confronted with the lack of forgiveness exhibited by men in authority and particularly by the professedly Christian chaplain, lies in the sympathy he and his fellow-prisoners can extend, and he expresses this in eloquent words which were later engraved on his own tombstone:

Yet all is well; he has but passed
 To life's appointed bourne:
 And alien tears will fill for him
 Pity's long-broken urn,
 For his mourners will be outcast men,
 And outcasts always mourn. 37

³⁷ Richard Ellmann, in Eminent Domain (1967), p. 4, suggested a relationship between Wilde's view of the trooper and Yeats's 'imagery of the noble malefactor' in his story 'The Crucifixion of the Outcast' (Works, 1908, Vol. 7, pp. 7-19). While I cannot agree with this particular point, Wilde may in this stanza be intending his loyal 'outcasts' to contrast with Yeats's beggars who, annoyed by Cumhal's use of the word 'outcast' to describe them, leave him alone on his cross to be eaten by wolves and pecked by birds.

Wilde said in a letter to Robert Ross that he agreed that 'the poem should end' after this stanza, but he wished to add some 'propaganda' to it.³⁸ This is contained in Section V, but in fact not all this section is propaganda. The phrase 'All is well' (considering the Christian attitude implied earlier in the poem) suggests that there is forgiveness for the trooper from God, if not from earthly authority, and he is clearly described as having repented. In fact, his punishment is now seen in Section V, as less important than the repentance which its prospect has brought about:

Ah! happy they whose hearts can break
 And peace of pardon win!
 How else may man make straight his plan
 And cleanse his soul from Sin?
 How else but through a broken heart
 May Lord Christ enter in?

A certain amount of propaganda is straightforward attack on the inhumanity of the Victorian prison system:

With bars they blur the gracious moon
 And blind the goodly sun:
 And they do well to hide their Hell;
 For in it things are done
 That Son of God nor son of Man
 Ever should look upon!

³⁸ Letters, p. 661. (19 Oct. 1897.)

It can also, however, be more oblique in its aim, evoking not indignation but pity, and suggesting the possibility that prisons could be made more bearable if greater human sympathy were brought to their administration:

And never a human voice comes near
 To speak a gentle word:
 And the eye that watches through the door
 Is pitiless and hard:
 And by all forgot, we rot and rot,
 With soul and body marred.

Section VI rounds out the poem with an appearance of neatness, by returning to the statement of the beginning that 'all men kill the thing they love', but its last stanza is not intellectually satisfying:

And all men kill the thing they love,
 By all let this be heard,
 Some do it with a bitter look,
 Some with a flattering word,
 The coward does it with a kiss,
 The brave man with a sword!

If this means that, like Wooldridge, everyone should repent of his 'crimes', it makes a trite ending; if it means rather that our remaining unpunished for our 'murders' makes the hanging of Wooldridge unfair, then it seems simply to involve a sentimental distortion of the word 'kill'. But it is unlikely that the stanza was written with such scrutiny in mind; the impression it gives is that Wilde could not say anything more and found

its repetition a convenient device for concluding the poem. Though prisons could perhaps be improved, the abstract Justice which they served was a mystery. As Wilde says at the beginning of Section V:

I know not whether Laws be right,
Or whether Laws be wrong;
All that we know who lie in gaol
Is that the wall is strong;
And that each day is like a year,
A year whose days are long.

Death by execution was similarly a mystery: the fact that the trooper 'had such a debt to pay' was 'strange'. Read as a tract on capital punishment, the Ballad is far from conclusive: the moving depiction of Wooldridge's fate reveals views which fluctuate between 'For only blood can wipe out blood' (V, v, 3) and 'For each man kills the thing he loves,/ Yet each man does not die' (I, ii, 3). But to read the Ballad as a tract would be perverse. Wilde is concerned with feelings rather than an abstract reduction of them, and even what he called 'propaganda' is better described as emotionally-charged presentation of an actual situation, in which he was unable to reconcile 'the majesty of the Law' with the way in which, from day to day, that Law was enforced. What the Ballad very powerfully conveys, in language which sticks closely to actual experience and observed facts, is the emotional revulsion likely to be experienced by any man when he is

faced with the translation of a sentence of death into the actual killing of a fellow human being. When in the last stanza of Section III Wilde lays claim to that greater sensitivity which belongs to the creative artist, one feels that, in the Ballad at least, the claim is fully justified:

And all the woe that moved him so
That he gave his bitter cry,
And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats,
None knew so well as I:
For he who lives more lives than one
More deaths than one must die.

One final point, however, needs to be made. Hesketh Pearson quotes Wilde as saying of the Ballad:

I am not sure that I like it myself. But
catastrophes in life being about catastrophes
in art. 39

Far from being a 'catastrophe', the Ballad represents the extension of Wilde's poetic powers, by a deeply-felt experience, to a pitch he never elsewhere reached. In this poem, in all senses of the phrase, Wilde exceeded himself. With minor modifications, what he once said of Wilfred Scawen Blunt may be said of himself:

³⁹ Pearson, p. 343.

Prison has had an admirable effect on Mr. Blunt as a poet.... it must be admitted that by sending Mr. Blunt to gaol [Mr. Balfour] has converted a clever rhymers into an earnest and deep-thinking poet. 40

But whether Wilde would have been able to transfer to other subjects (had he written any more poems) the strong simple language of the Ballad is open to question. A letter written late in the process of its composition carries disturbing implications:

... I find it difficult to recapture the mood and manner of its inception. It seems alien to me now - real passions so soon become unreal - and the actual facts of one's life take different shape and remould themselves strangely. 41

The latter phrase may simply refer to a slight distortion of his experiences, of which he was aware, brought about by the use of a 'romantic vein'. On the other hand the passage as a whole certainly indicates a slackening involvement with the reality which those experiences once represented, and one may interpret the latter phrase as implying serious reservations about the 'realistic' style in which he had first presented those experiences. If

⁴⁰ 'Poetry and Prison', Pall Mall Gazette, 3 Jan, 1899. Reprinted in Reviews (1908), pp. 393-6.

⁴¹ Letters, p. 647. (To Stanley V. Makower, 22 Sept. 1897.)

this interpretation of Wilde's rather ambiguous expression is correct,⁴² it is perhaps as well that The Ballad of Reading Gaol was, as he once termed it, his 'chant de cygne'.⁴³

⁴² That it may be is suggested by Wilde's apparent attempts at Posilipo to complete A Florentine Tragedy and by the titles of his two projected but unwritten plays, Pharaoh and Ahab. (Letters, p. 649 and note 3.)

⁴³ Letters, p. 715. (To Carlos Blacker, 9 March 1898.)

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Five years after Wilde's death William Rothenstein wrote a letter to Robert Ross in which he pointed out what was for him one of Wilde's greatest limitations as a writer:

Poor Oscar, how shallow was your artistic imagination - you could not realise sorrow until you were shut up in a stone cage. ¹

Applied to Wilde's poetry, Rothenstein's statement economically suggests the gap which opens between The Ballad of Reading Gaol and the poems which preceded it, and indirectly indicates the difficulty of arriving at a judgement of Wilde as a poet which will deal fairly with the whole of his output.

One may express the problem most simply by saying that Wilde was a minor poet who wrote one major poem - the artistic equivalent, perhaps, of a borderline student who perplexes his examiners by handing in one brilliant paper. The problem is compounded when one considers that

¹ 2 March 1905. See Robert Ross: Friend of Friends, ed. Margery Ross (1952), p. 107.

the Ballad is not only unique in the poetry of Wilde himself, not only the one poem of his which could possibly merit A.E. Rodway's description: 'a magnificent and unpretentious whole';² it also stands alone in the poetry of the eighteen-nineties. To quote A.E. Rodway again, it is 'the one great poem of a popular kind in "the last phase..."'.³ For a poet who was early condemned as a plagiarist to have produced a poem of this stature is particularly surprising. It is as if - to continue the scholastic metaphor - the borderline student had not only written a paper brilliant in itself but also one brilliant enough to surpass the efforts of contemporaries normally more talented than himself. For one critic, the identifying characteristic of the poetry of the eighteen-nineties was 'a retreat into the inner life'.⁴ Against this tendency the isolated phenomenon of the Ballad, with its awareness of imprisonment as a social 'problem' and

² A.E. Rodway, 'The Last Phase', Dickens to Hardy, Pelican Guide to English Literature 6 (1966 edn.), p. 398.

³ Rodway, op. cit., p. 398.

⁴ Lionel Johnson, Complete Poems, ed. Iain Fletcher (1953), p. xiii.

its moving communication of a sorrow not confined to Wilde alone, makes itself strongly felt, the more so for being the work of one from whom such a poem was hardly to be expected. Rodway sums up the special position of the Ballad thus:

Unfortunately, the Ballad of Reading Gaol was unique. Contemporary aesthetes - generally better poets than Wilde - were too little concerned to put life on the page; other poets too limited to create major poetry. 5

The Ballad, then, is a fine poem which entitles Wilde to the respect of critics and assures him a place of importance in literary history. For the rest of his poetry, although it includes individual pieces whose merits have been suggested in the course of this study, no such large claim can be made. To the greater part of his poetry before 1898 could be applied a statement Wilde once made à propos of The Picture of Dorian Gray: 'Between me and life there is a mist of words always'.⁶ What Rothenstein refers to as Wilde's 'shallow ... artistic imagination' may be linked with his habit of verbal decoration, which gives the impression in many poems that he is not using words to communicate an emotion

⁵ Rodway, op. cit., p. 399. Rodway later mentions the 'other poets': Lionel Johnson, Dowson, Francis Thompson, W.E. Henley and John Davidson.

⁶ Pearson, p. 150.

or to describe a landscape but rather that he is interested in the emotion or the landscape because it gives him the excuse to assemble words: in brief, words are more a substitute than an expression, an end rather than a means. Wilde's 'secondhand' response to experience, together with its accompanying 'poetic' self-consciousness, was trenchantly summed up by W.B. Yeats:

[Wilde] thought he was writing beautifully when he had collected beautiful things and thrown them together in a heap. ⁷

Wilde's poetry was frequently parodied by his contemporaries. Most of these parodies are of a crude kind, the work of philistines who seemed determined to be irritated by Wilde the aesthete and who appeared to dislike any kind of non-literal description. Such a parody is 'La Fuite des Oies' by 'Oscuro Wildegoose':

To outer senses they are geese,
Dull drowsing by a weedy pool;
But try the impression trick. Cool! Cool!
Snow-slumbering sentinels of Peace. ⁸

⁷ Quoted by Richard Ellmann, Eminent Domain (1967), p. 14.

⁸ Punch, 28 May 1881, p. 242. Quoted in Mason, p. 83. This piece parodies 'La Fuite de la Lune', published in Poems (1881).

A quite different order of literary perceptiveness, however, is demonstrated by a piece entitled 'Impression de l'Automne'. This parodies one of Wilde's five long poems in Poems (1881), 'The Garden of Eros'. It is in these long poems that Wilde's shortcomings are most depressingly revealed, and apart from its mischievous excursion into bathos in line 14, 'Impression de l'Automne' is such a devastating, because deadpan, exposure of Wilde's 'silliness' that it deserves to be quoted at some length. It not only reproduces faithfully most of Wilde's mannerisms, but also suggests by its subtitle ('Stanzas by our muchly-admired Poet, Drawit Milde') that to the sin of over-luxuriance Wilde added the sin of insipidity:

It is full Autumn now, and yet I know
 Hard by there is a little dusky dell
 Where still Apollo's 'plaining hyacinths blow,
 Brushed by white feet of Dryads from the well
 With silver pails returning, or perchance
 Trod down by laughing Satyrs in their frolic noontide
 dance:

For still they haunt these woodlands, and I think
 The little primrose, that pale morning star
 Of flowers, yet blooms there by the river's brink.
 And lo! one splendid apple gleams afar.
 Amid the trammelling grasses hath it dropt -
 Oh no, by some most beauteous boy the prize was surely
 cropt

An hour ago, and wanton having bit
 One rosy cheek, he chucked it on the sward.
 For such delicious lips what fruit were fit,
 Though it were perfumed with that precious nard

With which dead ladies dainty limbs they lave,
Then lay them down to rest in some dim, richly-
sculptured nave? 9

It may be objected in Wilde's defence that the kind of poetry so accurately reflected in this parody belongs to his earliest work and should therefore be exempt from severe criticism. Yet Wilde was not as young as all that. 'The Garden of Eros' was written when he was about twenty-three, and comparison with Lionel Johnson, who at twenty-two was capable of a poem as mature as 'By the Statue of King Charles at Charing Cross',¹⁰ illuminates Wilde's deficiencies. Johnson's poem 'Dead', written when he was only twenty, displays a sensitivity to rhythm and a moving use of simple imagery which few of Wilde's poems of any period can match:

In Merioneth, over the sad moor
Drives the rain, the cold wind blows:
Past the ruinous church door,
The poor procession without music goes.

Lonely she wandered out her hour, and died.
Now the mournful curlew cries
Over her, laid down beside
Death's lonely people: lightly down she lies.

In Merioneth, the wind lives and wails,
On from hill to lonely hill:
Down the loud, triumphant gales,
A spirit cries Be strong! and cries Be still! 11

⁹ Punch, 17 Sept. 1881, p. 132. Quoted in Mason, p. 294.

¹⁰ Complete Poems, ed. Fletcher, pp. 11-3.

¹¹ Complete Poems, p. 59.

What one feels here is that direct response to experience, that sympathy with the lives of others, which Wilde did not achieve until he was 'shut up in a stone cage'. By comparison with Lionel Johnson, Wilde appears to have developed late as a poet. Much of his early poetry appears precious and rather stagnant when set beside some stanzas written by Johnson's contemporary, Ernest Dowson, when he was twenty-four:

You would have understood me, had you waited;
 I could have loved you, dear! as well as he:
 Had we not been impatient, dear! and fated
 Always to disagree.

What is the use of speech? Silence were fitter:
 Lest we should still be wishing things unsaid.
 Though all the words we ever spake were bitter,
 Shall I reproach you dead? 12

Dowson's poem is conventional and hardly exciting, a complaint of the rejected lover which recalls Michael Drayton's 'Since there's no help, come, let us kiss and part', but at least his adopted convention allows him directness and simplicity of language, and the situation he presents does not suggest an origin exclusively literary.

Dowson and Johnson would not generally be put forward as major poets, but reference to some of their

¹² The Poems of Ernest Dowson, ed. Mark Longaker (1962), p. 65.

work does indicate what is missing from most of Wilde's. Surprisingly enough, the very banality of the following definition of good poetry, by Lord Alfred Douglas, reveals Wilde's deficiencies most clearly:

Good poetry is made up of two things:
style and sincerity. Both are requisite
in equal degrees. ¹³

The 'style' apparent in Wilde's poetry is, in so many instances, a derivative style, resulting from the absence of that strongly-felt emotional involvement which one may think of as a basic ingredient of 'sincerity'. The kind of 'style' meant by Douglas, which is inseparable from 'sincerity', is rarer in Wilde's work. One certainly receives the impression, from his early 'public' poems, that Wilde is striking attitudes, and, from his landscape or pictorial poems, that he is merely indulging in cloying sentiment and verbal embroidery. It is perhaps possible to grow so accustomed to Wilde's poems that their many echoes and lapses come insidiously to have a certain charm, but when they are set beside the work of other nineteenth-century writers their artificiality quickly reveals itself: they appear as wax flowers rather than real ones. For instance, as was indicated in Chapter III,

¹³ Lord Alfred Douglas, Complete Poems (1928), p. xi.

Wilde on occasion borrows from Rossetti, but what he borrows are Rossetti's external trappings of neo-medievalism, which he attempts to copy in such literary exercises as 'Chanson' and 'La Bella Donna della Mia Mente'. What he is quite unable to duplicate, however, is the aural magic of, say, Rossetti's 'The Sea-Limits', in which the rhythm and language reflect Rossetti's intense concentration on his subject:

Consider the sea's listless chime:
 Time's self it is, made audible, -
 The murmur of the earth's own shell.
 Secret continuance sublime
 Is the sea's end: our sight may pass
 No furlong further. Since time was,
 This sound hath told the lapse of time. 14

Nevertheless Wilde did produce a number of poems which are not simply imitative or self-indulgent, which represent more than the straining of a man who responded warmly to the poetry of others after a poetic reputation of his own. Such poems as 'Symphony in Yellow', 'The Harlot's House' and The Sphinx are achieved poems, and would by themselves give Wilde a respectable, minor place among the poets of his own day. They are individual to Wilde, unlike the poems of his contemporaries, and free of borrowings from older English poets. The Ballad of

¹⁴ D.G. Rossetti, Poems, ed. W.M. Rossetti (1904), vol. 1, p. 166.

Reading Gaol, however, makes one aware of Wilde not as a 'poet of the eighteen-nineties' but simply as a poet. Arthur Ransome's views of Wilde, that 'his tasks were always too easy for him' and that 'his books are those of a wonderfully gifted and accomplished man who was an author only in his moments of leisure',¹⁵ contain a great deal of truth. They are certainly apt when applied to most of Wilde's poetry, which seems the diversion of 'a spectator, a connoisseur'¹⁶ rather than the concentrated, disciplined expression of a participant. Only in the Ballad does one feel that he accorded poetry its true importance and turned to it as the inevitable vehicle for 'an overpowering emotion'.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ransome, pp. 224, 231.

¹⁶ Ransome, p. 230.

¹⁷ Lord Alfred Douglas, Complete Poems, p. xiv.

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