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Oscar Wilde and John Gray

By SYDNEY GAUNT

I FORGET in exactly what year I met Oscar Wilde; probably in 1894; certainly one night in an apartment at the top of a house, 64 Margaret Street, that had been taken for the season by Edgar Fawcett. Fawcett's verses were no more than mediocre; but Edgar Saltus had a kind of dashing talent, a fiery fashion of writing; a sensational novelist who had a certain fame. He was neither without thought nor passion; but his style generally ran away from him. He had an excitable temperament; morbid, as in his prose; and with that a certain originality.

I was standing in a corner of the room talking with Saltus when I saw enter a man I had often heard of, but did not know by sight. Saltus said: "That is Oscar Wilde." I need not describe his appearance; that is too well known; but, I admit, he puzzled me. I am uncertain now if I felt an instant repugnance at the first sight of so famous a writer, of so prodigious a wit. I gazed at him with curiosity, as I always did when I met strangers. Finally, I saw his eyes fixed on mine, in that insolent fashion he always had. He made Fawcett introduce me to him. He was effusive in his way of shaking hands, a manner he never got over. We sat down and talked for more than an hour.

I had read most of what he had written; it appeared that he had read much of my verse and prose. I remember that we chiefly talked on Paris, France and French literature, and on living French writers. What I liked in him was, first of all, his wit; a kind of brilliant sudden gymnastic, with words in which the phrase itself was always worth more than it said: it was not a wit of ideas in which the thing said was at least on the level of the way of saying it, that I found years afterwards in Whistler's conversation: for with Whistler, it was really a weapon, used as seriously as any rapier in an eternal duel with the eternal enemy. What I liked also in Wilde was his instinct for receiving other people's opinions; which often enough, the moment after he heard them, he claimed as his own.

MUCH younger as I was than Wilde, I found, gradually, that, with all his reading of French books, he could not—I think he never did—fathom in any essential sense the genius of Verlaine and of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. He saw things on the surface; was often the dupe of himself. Feeling always after *la nuance*, he never attained it. Not being creative, he never, I think, really understood the ultimate difference between the amazing and bewildering and unachieved things that he wrote and what is creation. Yet, to show his readiness in instantly accepting me for what I was, he asked me to write an article on Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, for *The Woman's World* he was then editing; and this, the first essay written in English on Villiers, he printed.

This is one of the few letters I had from Wilde:

"Dear Mr. Gaunt:

"We have no day just at present as my wife is going away for a fortnight, but I hope you will come and dine with me one night. It was a great pleasure meeting you, as I had admired your work a long time. I look forward to an evening together, and to a talk about French Art, the one art now in Europe that is worth discussing—Verlaine's art especially.

"Who has parodied our dear Pater in the Cornhill? It is clever and horrid. The parody on Kipling is excellent—one had merely to reproduce a caricature of him and of literature. Do you think Barrie wrote it?

"Truly yours, OSCAR WILDE."

Once at a Private View in the New Gallery, as I came downstairs, I came on Wilde, in the midst of his admirers, showing more than ever his gift of versatility. Seeing me he made a gesture, and as I went up he introduced me to John Gray, then in what is called "the zenith" of his youth. The adventure was certainly amusing: I was not aware that he was to be the future Dorian Gray of Wilde's novel. This novel, it is interesting to note, Walter Pater reviewed in *The Bookman*, November, 1891. He says: "His genial, laughter-loving sense of life and its enjoyable intercourse, goes far to obviate any crudity there may be in the paradox, with which, as with the bright and shining truth which often underlies it, Wilde startles his countrymen." Then he refers to the skill with which the writer depicts so cleverly, so mercilessly, his "elaborately conventional, sophisticated, disabused world." And he ends: "The special fascination of the piece is, of course, just there—at that point of contrast. Wilde's work may fairly claim to go with that of Edgar Poe, and with some good French work of the same kind, done, probably, in more or less conscious imitation of it."

I HAVE before me John Gray's *Silverpoints* (1893) in Rickett's subtly decorative and fanciful cover. Never in the nineteenth century were such decadent verses written, nor verse more perverse, nor rhythms more contorted, nor images more monstrous, nor rhymes more irregular. Yet there is in them an astonishing promise of what was certainly never achieved by that particular kind of talent.

Oscar Wilde was a prodigious entertainer; in his pages verse and prose are spoken by carefully directed marionettes; and at times the showman comes before the curtain, and, cutting a caper, argues, expostulates, and calls the attention of the audience to the perfection of the mechanism by which his effects are produced, and his own skill in the handling of the wires.

To him passion was a thing to talk about with elaborate and colored words. His Salome is a doll, as many have imagined her, soulless, set in motion by some pitiless destiny, personified momentarily by Herodias. His expression of what he conceived by beauty is developed from many models, and has no new ideas in it; one can trace it, almost verbally, to Pater, Flaubert, Goncourt, Baudelaire, and other writers from whom he drew sustenance. The attempt to write constantly in a beautiful way leads to a vast amount of grandiloquence, which is never convincing because it is evidently not sincere. In him that sense, never instinctive, goes off gradually in the course of his career, ending in the conscious sonority of such passages in *De Profundis* as this: "or to move with sufficient stateliness of music through the purple pageant of my incommunicable woe."

His *Intentions* is the most amusing book of criticism in English. It has nothing to say that has not been proved or disproved, already, but never was such boyish disrespect for ideas, such gaiety of paradox. Take, for instance, these sentences: "As for George Meredith, who could hope to reproduce him? His style is chaos, illumined by brilliant flashes of lightning. As a writer he has mastered everything, except language; as a novelist he can do everything, except tell a story; as an artist he is everything, except articulate."

Too much of Wilde's prose is Paterish and Pagan and Renaissance; but he was a maker of idols, of painted idols, Salome and the Sphinx. He bowed down before the pagan gods who were never actual to him.