

Oscar Wilde's Gift and Oxford's 'Coarse Impertinence'

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I

I must also, for the sake of the good fame and position of the Oxford Union, express a hope that no other poet or writer of English will ever be subjected to what I feel sure you as well as myself are conscious of, the coarse impertinence of having a work officially rejected which has been no less officially sought for.¹

The early biographies regard Wilde's gift of his *Poems* to the Oxford Union, Oxford's undergraduate debating society, as an instance of his inflated sense of himself. This early view of Wilde's insuppressible, flamboyant, and self-dramatizing pursuit of notoriety has persisted across every decade of Anglo-American criticism. Rodney Shewan, writing in the late 1970s, remarks that '... Wilde's latest commentator dismisses all of the pre-1886 work as "an exercise in imitation", the productions of that "boyish, carefree plagiarizer"'.² A decade later, in his sustained scholarly study published in 1980, Norbert Kohl joins Wilde's 'flamboyance' with his 'plagiarism' as twin expressions of one motive. How familiar Kohl's Wilde is: 'In 1881 ... they [the poems] were printed ... in London. Wilde paid for the publication himself.'³ This is one sign, for Kohl, of Wilde's pursuit of notoriety. Kohl does not point out, as he might have, that in the late nineteenth century publishing one's own work was common practice. Kohl continues: 'The letter that [Wilde] wrote in May 1881, try-

1 Oscar Wilde, in a letter to the Librarian of the Oxford Union Society, early November 1881, as dated by Rupert Hart-Davis (ed.), *More Letters of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 36-7.

2 Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (London, 1977), p. 7. Shewan is referring here to Christopher Nassar's *Into the Demon Universe* (New Haven, 1974).

3 Norbert Kohl, *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*, trans. David Henry Wilson (Cambridge, 1989), p. 15.

ing to interest the publisher in his juvenilia' concludes with 'the sly confident claim that "Possibly my name requires no introduction."' Kohl goes on to say that the success of the book '... appeared to confirm the audacious self-advertisement of its author ...' He cites four brief censorious passages from reviews published during the summer of 1881. Although he inflects them differently, he reiterates earlier biographical narratives of those responses: 'Particularly galling [to Wilde],' Kohl continues, 'was the rejection of a copy of *Poems* that [he] sent to the library of the Oxford Union ... Normally little attention was paid to such gifts, and they would certainly not be refused, but on this occasion there was a veritable explosion. Oliver Elton, who was later to make a name for himself as a literary historian, was already, at the age of twenty, so well read as a student that he was able to identify the innumerable allusions in Wilde's poems to earlier literary works, and he protested vigorously against acceptance of the volume.' Kohl quotes several lines from Elton's putative remarks, and concludes: 'As a result, the book was rejected and sent back to the author.'⁴ The pages that follow introduce two stories: one is of the Oxford Union and the other is of Oscar Wilde. I bring into view considerations about both subjects which differ from those that Wilde's biographers characteristically emphasize. These considerations enable us to locate in the encounter between them the decorous optimism of affability and their refusal to acknowledge their mutual animosity.

II

Kohl's source for what young Oliver Elton said is Hesketh Pearson's *Oscar Wilde, His Life and Wit* (1946). This life of Wilde, so richly and memorably woven with biographical and anecdotal details, has neither a complete bibliography nor any notes.⁵ H. Montgomery Hyde, in his *Oscar Wilde* (1975), does provide notes. From Elton's speech he quotes about twenty lines. For this reference, however, there is no source.⁶

Richard Ellmann, whose biography was published after Kohl's, cites the same putative speech that Elton made at the meeting of the Oxford Union. Ellmann, unlike Pearson, does provide a source. It is a memoir by the poet, Henry Newbolt, that claims to recall decades later precisely what Elton said in 1881.⁷ Yet even in the one source that Ellmann cites, Newbolt himself admonishes his readers: 'The speech was no doubt better than my recollections of it.

4 Ibid., p. 15.

5 Hesketh Pearson, *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Wit* (New York, 1946), p. 46.

6 H. Montgomery Hyde, *Oscar Wilde* (New York, 1981), p. 49.

7 Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London, 1987), p. 140.

...⁸ In fact, neither have Kohl, Ellmann, nor any other biographer verified Elton's apocryphal speeches or otherwise looked at the episode as closely as it deserves, nor do we know from any reliable sources what Elton said. A few further observations will illuminate somewhat differently the familiar version of this encounter and its principal players.

At least nine reviews of *Poems* were published in England several months before Wilde presented his gift to the Union, and at least three of these circulated widely. The critical reception was mixed: some reviews did indeed point disdainfully to the various literary echoes and allusions, which in them were cited liberally, and which cast doubt on Wilde's resourcefulness as a poet. These reviews were undoubtedly fresh in the mind of young Oliver Elton, whose erudition Kohl admires and on whose authority, in Kohl's account, the Oxford Union wisely and justifiably rejected Wilde's gift. Other reviews, however, praise Wilde's artfulness and admire his reliance on the traditions that inspire him to seek and, at times, find, his distinctive voice.⁹

Any consideration of the debate that was staged at the meeting – although I will not take up that consideration fully here – must acknowledge that Wilde had been selected only a few years earlier as the recipient of the Newdigate Prize whose Selection Committee read submissions that were signed pseudonymously.

Wilde's 'plagiarism', which some of the reviews abjured and which, at the Oxford Union, was likely to have been rehearsed when the question arose of accepting Wilde's gift, belongs to a considerably wider controversy. That controversy was made familiar by the accusations directed, in the mid-1860s and after, against the young Swinburne; by Chatterton's forgeries; by Macpherson's *Ossian*; and by discussions within the emergent cosmopolitan literary culture of whether art is originary or representational. Obvious examples of such discussions were Arnold, of whom Wilde's opinion was deeply divided, in *The Study of Poetry* and *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time*, and Emerson, of whom his opinion was deeply respectful, in *Quotation and Originality* and *Nature*. There is a great deal more to be said about the currency of the subject of 'plagiarism' and 'originality', a subject to which Wilde would soon turn his attention, first in his fiction and then in his critical essays. That more speculative controversy about the origin of art and the relation of the 'artist' to the artwork he or she produces, a controversy that divided literary opinion and was thought to have practical moral consequences, belongs to a different subject than refiguring, as I wish briefly to do here, Wilde's encounter with Oxford.

8 Henry Newbolt, *My World as in My Time: Memoirs of Henry Newbolt* (London, 1932), pp. 96-7.

9 See, for example, *The Athenaeum*, 23 July 1881, pp. 103-04; *The Dial*, ii, no. 16 (August 1881), pp. 82-5; and *The Academy*, 30 July 1881, p. 85.

Rupert Hart-Davis, in *More Letters* (1985), and Richard Ellmann, in his biography (1987), point out that Wilde had been invited by the Librarian to present his book to the Union. Ellmann also points out that after the gift was returned, Wilde received an apology from the Union to which he replied. Nevertheless, for Ellmann, the episode reveals, as it does for Kohl, Wilde's pursuit of notoriety, his dandiacal self-absorption, and his eagerness to promote himself. A little more needs to be said about the episode and about Wilde.

The orchestrated bi-monthly meetings at the Union were preceded by a business meeting during which the Librarian reported on the books he had received. He then moved that the members accept them which, typically, they did. On 11 July 1881, when the Librarian moved that 'Oscar Wilde's *Poems*, presented by the author, be accepted by the Society,' the Minutes record that Oliver Elton opposed the motion. The Minutes record further that four members of the Union rose to speak against and four members spoke in favor of acceptance, although the minutes do not record what was said. It was uncommon at meetings of the Union for debate, greatly anticipated as the principal activity of the meetings, which were convened for topics of which members were duly apprised, to occur during the discussions of items of business. On this occasion, however, Elton, and, perhaps, five other speakers, were poised and prepared to object to the Librarian's motion. Nor do the minutes record what was said when a member from Keble 'asked a question of the Librarian relative to "the discharge of officers of their official duties"'. The minutes do record that 'Questions were asked relative to the Librarian writing to authors to ask them to present their works to the society and the Hon. President and Hon. Librarian replied' (my emphasis).¹⁰

It is likely that the interrogation of the Librarian's authority to solicit books revealed certain local animosities, perhaps personal, perhaps political, that the members were conveying to one another and it is unlikely, whatever those animosities and allegiances were, that Wilde himself, who had left Oxford in 1879, played any significant part in the immediate internecine enactments that characterized college life. At the July meeting that voted to return to Wilde the gift he had sent, the consideration of his poems diverted those in attendance from the orderly progression of the programme. Typically, the time allocated for items of business was brief. As the subject of accepting Wilde's gift unexpectedly became the unannounced subject of debate, the Union arrived at the unprecedented decision to refuse Wilde's *Poems*.¹¹ This undoubtedly prompted the apology to Wilde from the Librarian whose request had set into motion

10 *Minutes of the Oxford Union Society*, 11 July 1881.

11 Hart-Davis, *More Letters*, pp. 36-7.

such untoward behavior on the part of others. Never before had a book been presented that had not been accepted: but in this case, the more indecorous precedent had been established of rejecting a gift that the author had been invited to present.

To the Union's letter of apology, probably in November 1881, Wilde replied that he regretted their decision, his 'chief regret indeed being that there should still be at Oxford such a large number of young men who are ready to accept their own ignorance as an index, and their own conceit a criterion of any imaginative and beautiful work.' In the same letter, he expressed the hope that 'no other poet or writer of English will ever be subjected to what I feel sure you as well as myself are conscious of, the coarse impertinence of having a work officially rejected which has been no less officially sought for.' Two weeks following, at the 17 November meeting of the Union, George Curzon raised once again the question of the behavior of the Union for which, in another letter, Wilde thanked him.¹²

It is worth pausing to notice in the foregoing passage Wilde's innocence and his wishfulness. His innocence permitted him to attribute the behavior of 'such a large number of young men' to their 'conceit' and to their acceptance of their own 'ignorance' – as though the reception of his *Poems* were a simple aesthetic matter. His wishfulness permitted him to imagine that 'ignorance,' rather than knowledge or ill-will, explained the 'coarse impertinence' of the Oxford undergraduates who came only a few years after he left.

Certainly not every undergraduate who voted at the meeting had read Wilde's poems or formed an opinion about them. On the contrary, the debates at the Union that followed the business meeting whose conventions were practiced in this instance, as well, were typically exercises in the ingenuity, wit and rhetorical canniness of those who spoke on controversial subjects: degrees for women, women's suffrage, Home Rule for Ireland, dissolving the monarchy, socialism or free-enterprise, all of these topics – impersonal social issues – the Union considered. It was not only unprecedented to have officially rejected what had been officially sought. Perhaps, more astonishing still, was that when the Union debated upon and then voted to refuse Wilde's gift, it applied the conventions of debate in place for social issues to a collection of poems of a private person. In doing this the Union engaged in yet another odd breach of decorum.¹³

How are we to understand this exchange between Wilde and Oxford, this exchange that Oxford initiated and that Wilde terminated when the Union

12 Ibid., pp. 36-7, as dated, according to Hart-Davis, by the recipient, November 1881.

13 See, for example, David Walter, *The Oxford Union: Playground of Power* (London, 1984), chapter 1 and appendix 8; and Herbert Arthur Morrah, *The Oxford Union: 1823-1923* (London, 1923).

requested a gift of his poems, this exchange which, in turn, provoked Wilde's accusation of Oxford's 'coarse impertinence'?

During his years at Oxford (1874-78) Wilde had not been an active member of the Union. It was the training ground, for the most part, of those who planned to enter the civil service or to pursue a career in politics, neither of which held Wilde's interest. Nevertheless, when he presented his *Poems* to the Library he acknowledged his gratitude to Oxford: in receiving the volume Oxford, by honoring him, would have acknowledged his success. His gift might have consolidated his fragile link to the centre of English literary culture. By refusing the gift, Oxford distanced itself from that association. The offense to Wilde could not have been simple: it was an offense to have had his poems thought unworthy; it was an offense to have had his gift refused; above all, he must have found himself offended by realizing that the conventions of decorum in which Oxford took pride were not observed in dealing with him.

IV

All encounters are a form of exchange: they reveal desires as well as expectations; they confirm or confound what one anticipates; they introduce or foreclose possibilities. Encounters mediate our perceptions of ourselves as well as our perceptions of others. They confirm our sense of who we are. Encounters incline us to test and to revise what we think we know: they confirm possibilities we anticipate or they unfold possibilities that surprise us. Encounters mediated by gifts enjoy a place apart from other exchanges: encounters mediated by gifts express the donor's attachment to the recipient: they express the donor's desire to become or to remain attached; gifts are an expression of being joined, one to the other.

The way in which gift giving joins donor to receiver is perhaps more complicated than at first appears. Though gifts join donor to recipient, this exchange is not exhausted by a single donation and reception. Gifts are presented as gratuitous, yet, at the same time, they incur a debt on the part of the recipient. The donor thus becomes a creditor. Although giving a gift is a generous act, it is as much guided by self interest. Emerson, to whom Mauss, in his remarkable essay on the gift, acknowledged his indebtedness, understood that gifts enrich the giver.

V

If gifts enrich the giver, donors whose gifts are refused are depleted. The circuit of exchange having been broken, the promise of reciprocity is foreclosed. That is one reason for depletion. The second is that a gift is at once an indicator of

power and an attempt to preserve it. To refuse a gift renders the donor powerless.

To find oneself powerless when one imagined oneself to be powerful is also the condition of shame, which is the same shame that Wilde must have felt when the Union returned his volume of poems in which he had inscribed: 'To the Oxford Union, My first Volume of *Poems*'.¹⁴ When his *Poems* were returned he might have chosen to call Oxford's attention to a half-dozen odd departures from the Union's customary behavior and about which he might have conveyed his displeasure. In the letter he wrote, however, he chose to reprimand Oxford for 'coarse impertinence' to which, he wrote, he hopes 'no other poet or writer of English will ever be subjected'.¹⁵ This is a strange inversion of a larger encounter that enacted the same cultural logic. That larger encounter is not of a gift given and refused but of a conquest that refused to acknowledge resistance. The one entailed Wilde and Oxford: the other entailed Ireland and England.

Both encounters involve refusal: the one of Oxford's refusal of a gift that ruptured a promising circuit of exchange; the other, of England's conquest of Ireland, that persisted despite successive acts of Irish resistance. When Wilde accused Oxford of 'coarse impertinence,' when accusation replaced the shame he must have felt for having thought himself more worthy in Oxford's eyes than Oxford was prepared to acknowledge, he expressed the same boldness with which, in 1889, eight years later, he reflected on English history: 'Blue-books ... form the record of one of the great tragedies of modern Europe. In them England has written down her indictment against herself and has given the world the history of her shame'.¹⁶

Here, of course, Wilde invokes England's shame not because England acknowledged the indictment against herself that her own official history records. Wilde invokes England's shame because England fails to acknowledge the discrepancy between the ideology she professes and the ideology she practices. Wilde, writing in 1889, points to England's failure to feel shame. Her shame is her shamelessness. In his earlier encounter at Oxford, Wilde felt shamed although Oxford was impertinent. This larger encounter should have evoked England's shame, yet she felt none.

In 1882, shortly after Oxford returned Wilde's gift, he lectured widely in North America. We are greatly indebted to Robert D. Pepper for his recon-

14 I wish to thank Lady Eccles for having made this book available to me, and Princeton University for its services.

15 Hart-Davis, *More Letters*, pp. 36-7.

16 *The Prose of Oscar Wilde* (New York, 1916) p. 529. Hereafter, quotations are from this edition. The essay first appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, above the initials 'O. W.', as a review of J.A. Froude's *The Two Chiefs of Dunboy*. See Stuart Mason, *Oscar Wilde: A Bibliography* (London, 1967), p. 160.

struction, with valuable annotations, of Wilde's lecture, 'Irish Poets of the Nineteenth Century', which he delivered in San Francisco on 5 April 1882. It was the last of four lectures that he presented in San Francisco and the penultimate of the fifteen lectures that he presented on his California tour.¹⁷ Pepper, like Wilde's early biographers, considers Wilde to be a typically self-absorbed dandy who was indifferent to politics as – according to that elusive construction – dandies are. Rather than consider the lecture, which is decidedly political in its inflection and decidedly 'Nationalist' in its allegiance, as an expression of Wilde's heartfelt reflections upon Anglo-Irish affairs, Pepper considers the lecture to be an expression of Wilde's attempt to promote himself by appealing to his 'Hibernian' audience. In lecturing on the subject of Irish poetry and poets he was exercising what Pepper attributes to Wilde as his 'considerable talent for self-advertisement'.¹⁸ Although Pepper's reconstruction and annotation of 'Irish Poets and Poetry of the Nineteenth Century' brings into view a consideration of Wilde that continues to draw little attention and drew even less when, in 1957, Pepper published his edition, it is interesting that Pepper regards Wilde as 'apolitical'. Accordingly, Pepper subordinates the argument Wilde presents in 'Irish Poets' to what Pepper considers to be Wilde's principal motivation: his desire, by pleasing his audience, to promote – and to indulge – his dandiacal self. Neither before Wilde gave this lecture – nor after – did he ever turn to the subject of Irish poets and poetry nor does Pepper consider Wilde to have made 'any public comments whatever on Irish politics, except for a half-dozen impromptu remarks, mostly to reporters, before and after his West Coast tour'.¹⁹ If Pepper's presumption of Wilde's habitual 'flippancy' inclines him to dismiss the seriousness of his interest in Anglo-Irish affairs, Pepper's presumption that Wilde is not speaking in his own voice – he is speaking, according to Pepper, as an habitual 'plagiarizer'. Pepper considers Wilde's 'Irish Poets' to be largely a reiteration of Arnold's lectures, *The Study of Celtic Literature*. This is not the place to contest Pepper's reading of Arnold, Wilde, and the influence each exerted on the other. What interests me here is that Pepper directs our attention to Wilde's character rather than to his argument.²⁰

Pepper's observations about Wilde's public comments on Irish politics are not entirely accurate. In fact, those few excerpts which he provides of Wilde's

17 Oscar Wilde, *Irish Poets and Poetry of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Robert D. Pepper (San Francisco, 1972) p. 45.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

20 To take up here the complicated issue of plagiarism would require more time than this paper allows. What I wish to call to attention is the way in which the issue of plagiarism serves Pepper as a means of obviating the seriousness of Wilde's political responses. *Ibid.*, 'Introduction'.

'impromptu remarks' suggest more than a casual engagement with the subject. From *Oscar Wilde Discovers America*, Pepper cites the following passage from a 'ten or fifteen minute' speech to a 'huge crowd' of Hibernians in the St Paul Opera House on the occasion of St Patrick's Day: 'When Ireland gains her independence, its schools of art and other educational branches will be revived and Ireland will regain the proud position she once held among the nations of Europe'. In Chicago, on 10 February, he referred to Ireland as 'the Niobe among nations'. In Milwaukee on 5 March, he declared himself 'strongly in sympathy' with Parnell's parliamentary movement for Irish Home Rule. And, for example, upon hearing of the Phoenix Park Murders he said this: 'When liberty comes with hands dabbled in blood it is hard to shake hands with her' but, he added, 'We forget how much England is to blame. She is reaping the fruit of seven centuries of injustice'. Or, speaking of the Land League, of which he had been a member, and which, in 1882, was successful in raising large sums from the Irish in America, he described the League's work as the most 'remarkable agitation that has ever taken place in Ireland, for it has through the influence of America, created a republican feeling in Ireland for the first time'. Perhaps if Pepper had not mistakenly considered 'Irish Poets' and these presumably 'impromptu remarks' to be discontinuous with Wilde's concerns before and after his North American tour of 1882, he might not have dismissed them as readily. It is not, for example, a disinterested, detached, apolitical dandy who, in 1877, in *Saunders' News-Letter*, wrote an impassioned letter of appeal, soliciting support for Henry O'Neill and, again, made a similar appeal, in *The Nation*, a year later. Henry O'Neill was perhaps best known as a portrait painter, as the author of an important political pamphlet, *Ireland for the Irish* (1868), and of *Fine Arts of Civilization*, in which he devotes himself to vindicating the character of the Ancient Irish 'from the errors of other Irish antiquarians, who have described [them] as vile savages'. Wilde praises O'Neill's 'unselfish patriotic devotion to Ireland'.²¹

Or, for instance, in 1889, echoing his mother's noteworthy but greatly neglected pamphlet of 1878 on the emergence of what Jane Elgee called 'the American Irish', Wilde points to the salutary influence – the 'new factor' – that has appeared in the social development of the country. 'To learn the secret of its own strength and of England's weakness, the Celtic intellect has had to cross the Atlantic. At home it had but learned the pathetic weakness of nationality; in a strange land it realized what indomitable forces nationality possesses'.²²

Nor should we think we are hearing the voice of an indifferent dandy eager for notoriety when, in 1889, Wilde writes: 'If in the last century she [England] tried to govern Ireland with an insolence intensified by race hatred

21 See Owen Dudley Edwards, 'Oscar Wilde and Henry O'Neill,' *Irish Book Lover*, i, no. 1 (Spring 1959).

22 *Prose of Oscar Wilde*, p. 530.

and religious prejudice, she has sought to rule her in this century with a stupidity that is aggravated by good intentions'.²³

VI

We have no reason to conclude from any of Wilde's extant writings that at the end of the decade of the 1880s, when he writes of England's attempt to govern Ireland with 'an insolence intensified by race hatred and religious prejudice' that he was thinking of the 'coarse impertinence' for which, at the beginning of the decade, he had reprimanded Oxford. Yet, once we introduce into view Wilde's reading of Anglo-Irish relations, no extant evidence is required to claim that his affective memory recalled that earlier encounter. Whether the impertinence of Oxford's refusal of his gift or the impertinence of the insolence of England's governance of Ireland, traces of the force of both encounters are imprinted across his life and his work.

Typically, biographies of Wilde turn away from his politics in favor of what they present or project as Wilde's pursuit of notoriety or self-dramatization or other acts that have as their purpose to mask his 'lurid secret'. These readings of his life obscure that larger encounter between Ireland and England. To locate the place of this larger encounter in the psychic economy of Wilde's affective memory – and to see Wilde's place in the economy of that exchange – will enable us to see a different Wilde than the one we have come to know – and a different England, too. When that imaginative adjustment occurs, the politics of Wilde studies as well as the politics of our perception of Wilde will have taken a new turn.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 530.