A Wildean Table Talk. Interview with Thomas Wright

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GS: *Could you imagine one or more reasons why you should be interviewed by an Italian academic journal in an issue on Oscar Wilde?*

TW: That's a rather abrupt way to begin our conversation; surprising too, considering everything I have done to explore and emphasise the importance of Italy, and Italian culture, in Wilde's life and work. Still, I shall attribute the *faux pas* to your youth and over eagerness, and prepare myself to forgive you, while I answer.

In *Oscar's Books* (Wright 2008), I identified a number of Italian-language authors Wilde read, and considered their possible influence on him. These included not only the usual suspects – Dante, Petrarch and the compiler(s) of the *Fioretti di S. Francesco* – but also modern writers such as D'Annunzio, whose career Wilde followed with interest. In late February 1895 – a period of Wilde's life that was even more than usually crowded with incident – he found time to purchase, from a London bookshop, D'Annunzio's first-person novel *Episcopo*, the narrative of a modest clerk who murders his wife's lover. In Naples, in 1897, when Wilde was equally busy (though with other, mostly pleasanter, matters, than he had been in February 1895) he read *La città morta*, a drama in which two modern-day heterosexual Italian couples visit the ruins of Argos where King Agamemnon met his bloody fate at the hands of Clytemnestra. The characters are vouchsafed terrible visions of the events that took place at Agamemnon's court, as the ancient past intermittently breaks through the fabric of the present.

What did Wilde make of D'Annunzio's works and the other Italian-language books he read – as a reader, and writer? What

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do they tell us about his taste, character, and vast, ostentatiously cosmopolitan and polyglot culture? These kinds of questions (which I ask, and only begin to try to answer in my book) are, I imagine, of interest to all Italian students, scholars, and aficionados of Wilde. It is pleasant and profitable, for example, to consider the personal and professional vibrations *La città morta* may have produced in Wilde, who was of course fascinated by Greek culture, and its relevance to nineteenth-century Europe, and who was, in 1897, contemplating a return to the drama.

In my other works on Wilde I have explored another question that is perhaps of equal interest to Italian Wildeans – what did the great man's spoken Italian sound like? You and your readers will know, of course, that Wilde described his Italian conversation as an "astonishing mixture of Dante and the worst modern slang". But does that mean he actually blended Neapolitan street patois with quotations from the *Paradiso* when he passed the time of day with bar staff, writers, rent boys, and flower sellers?

I had to confront this issue, in my two plays on Wilde – *Death in Genoa*, which recreates the day of Wilde's visit to his wife's grave in Staglieno Cemetery, Genova, in February 1899[1]; and *Wrestling with Caliban*, whose first Act is set in 1893 in an Italian restaurant in London. In both plays Wilde speaks Italian to Italian characters. Here's an extract from Wilde's conversation – about England and the English – with an Italian waiter in *Wrestling with Caliban*:

Oscar: E voi come state?
Mauro: Bene, grazie, nonostante il clima e la gente fredda che pensa solo al lavoro, ai soldi e al tempo.
Oscar: Sì, e questo è il motivo che gli anglo-sassoni non hanno mai tempo. "La puntualità è il ladro del tempo".

[1] *Death in Genoa* was originally written as an audio play for the website of *The Independent* newspaper. It starred Simon Callow as Wilde (Melmoth) as well as Marcello Magni. It can still be listened to, free of charge, here: https://www.madeinmanchester.tv/drama Two stage productions followed. The London Irish Theatre Company produced a two-hander version, in The Tipperary Pub, Fleet Street, London in 2010. Then it was staged in 2014 and 2015 by The Genoa English Theatre Club in a version directed and produced by Nicholas Brandon in Staglieno Cemetery, Genova (in front of Constance Wilde's grave) and also at the Teatro della Tosse in Genova.

But did Wilde really speak Italian like this, translating his English paradoxes in the most direct and economical way? It makes his Italian sound unnatural, and unusual, does it not? An effect Wilde may have cultivated, or which may be simply the result of my limited Italian (which is, I have been told by my "friends" in Italy, "an appalling mixture of Da Ponte, De André, and the best – i.e. worst – football stadium slang").

Fortunately, when I explored this overwhelming question on another occasion, I had the help of two experts. In 2000, I edited and introduced *Table Talk: Oscar Wilde* (Wright 2000), a collection of Wilde's 'spoken' stories – that is, the stories he narrated to friends, who then wrote them down in their diaries and memories. A dozen years after its publication, Annamaria Biavasco and Valentina Guani prepared an Italian version of the book, *Table talk. Oscar Wilde racconta* (see Wright 2012). According to the book's title page, the Italian version was translated by Biavasco and Guani "con il contributo dell'autore", which must have been a reference to the tea I prepared for the experts while they worked on the book, or a cunning ploy by my Genoese publisher to pay me a compliment instead of a decent advance (I'm joking, of course). In *Table talk. Oscar Wilde racconta*, Biavasco and Guani came up with the best Wildean Italian I've ever read. They found excellent Italian equivalents of the *King James Bible* English which Wilde used for his biblical tales; the subtle and sardonic English he employed for his philosophical anecdotes; and the evocative, emotive and poetical English in which he told his fairy tales. Wilde must have narrated some of his stories in Italian during his lengthy post-prison stays in Naples and Liguria. There is no record of his having done so, but you can take it from me that he did. I'd like to think he used the golden Italian Biavasco and Guani put into his golden mouth, or something very much like it.

One final aspect of my non-fiction work on Wilde may be of interest to Italian Oscarians – it has been written and published outside of academia. My books on Wilde were issued by two commercial English publishers, Cassell & Co. and Chatto & Windus, while many of my articles on Wilde have been written for English newspapers, such as *The Independent*. It is true I have sometimes written for scholarly publications – e.g. *The TLS*, *The Wildean: A Journal of Oscar Wilde Studies*, *Heine-Jahrbuch* and *The*

Oscholars – but even in these august organs I have tried to address that personage we used to call 'the general reader' in the good-old-bad-old late twentieth century.

The reason why I mostly write for commercial publishers and newspapers is simple: I am a freelance author who has to earn money to feed himself or clothe his children (or both, if possible and absolutely necessary); also, I lack the academic qualifications. (Please don't tell your readers this, but I do not have a PhD, while the MA mentioned on my CV was not earned through scholarly labour but bought from Oxford University for the exorbitant sum of £12).

I don't know enough about Italian literary culture to say whether it would be unusual for a non-academic to write books and articles about Wilde, but I suspect it might be, if only because it has become increasingly rare in English-language culture since I started writing. Most English-language works on Wilde are now published by university presses, and their authors are *bona fide* scholars – not people posing as academics, like me. So I am an anomaly or curiosity, or, better still, a relic from a late-twentieth-century English-literary culture in which a general reading public and market existed for books about literature, and publishers believed it was their civil duty to cater for and foster that readership. You and your readers may point to Matthew Sturgis' recent Wilde biography as an example of this kind of writing, but I think Matthew is the exception that proves the rule; anyway, I believe his comprehensive book will be the last of its kind (see Sturgis 2018).

GS: *Your first book on Oscar Wilde was about his spoken stories, and his oral story-telling style. How did you get the idea and how did you develop it?*

TW: The memoirs of Wilde's contemporaries contain many references to the marvellous stories he told, usually over dinner or drinks, to one or more friends. Many of Wilde's listeners rated his spoken stories higher than his written work, higher also than any stories they'd ever heard, or even heard tell of. Sometimes, in their memoirs, they offer transcriptions of the tales Wilde told them, and some of these go some way to justifying their high opinion of

Wilde's gifts. For example, in *Recollections of Oscar Wilde*, Charles Ricketts preserved two exquisite Wildean spoken stories – "The Poet" and "Our Lady of Sorrows" – which are equal, I think, even in their second-hand form, to Wilde's published *Poems in Prose*, in terms of their imaginative and intellectual suggestiveness and range, and their emotional and aesthetic appeal. Something of the original stylistic charm of these two stories has survived their long and perilous journey from Wilde's golden mouth to Ricketts' diary and from there to the memoir Ricketts published decades later. I was struck by the beauty and brilliance of these "little coloured parables", which Wilde had written, as it were, on the air. I wanted to find as many examples as I could – at first for my own pleasure and profit (which, as you know, comes to much the same thing when one is studying Wilde).

When I discovered that many of Wilde's 'spoken stories' had survived, in the scattered published and unpublished writings of his contemporaries or near-contemporaries, and that some of them were of decent quality, the idea of making a book out of them formed in my mind. The decisive moment came when I found out that a French writer called Guillot De Saix had compiled two French-language anthologies of Wilde's 'spoken' stories in the 1940s, after interviewing some of Wilde's surviving friends, and scouring the writings of Wilde's French contemporaries. De Saix's books include the only surviving versions of some wonderful Wildean spoken stories – such as "The Counterfeit Coin" and "The Useless Resurrection" – which are mentioned by Wilde's English and Irish friends but which none of them appears to have written down. When I realised I could include the first English translations of the best "De Saix" stories in my anthology, I knew I had a book proposal that might attract a publisher courageous enough to put their money where Wilde's golden mouth was (as I say, such publishers existed in those distant days).

Apart from my desire to share the pleasure I'd taken in the stories with the 'general reader', and the need to make money to pay the rent on my London studio flat, my aim was to try to establish Wilde's spoken stories as part of his *oeuvre*. I thought that necessary, and interesting, not only because Wilde was one of the greatest story-tellers since Scheherazade, but because there is a symbiotic relationship between Wilde's oral and written works – a subject

rarely touched on by Wilde scholars at that time[2]. As you and your readers will know, many of Wilde's works were conceived and then elaborated as spoken stories long before they were written down (*Salomé*, "The Happy Prince", *Dorian Gray*, and "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" were, for example, told by Wilde to friends, over many years and in various versions, before he worked them out on paper). Wilde also continued to tell new versions of his works *after* they had been published. Apropos of literature, Samuel Johnson famously said "print settles it", but Wilde did not agree with 'the good doctor', on this as on so much else – his works were not 'settled' by publication, the printed word did not represent his last word – they had a chequered after-publication life, as part of his oral repertoire.

The challenge of translating De Saix's French into Wildean English interested me almost as much as the stories he had collected. In my translations, I drew on Wilde's fairy tales, *De Profundis*, and well-known Wildean sources such as the *King James Bible*. I enjoyed the experience of writing 'in' Wilde's voice so much, I added a few Wildean touches to some of the tales that had survived in English only in outline, or draft form. My aim was to offer the reader an echo of Wilde's talk and the vicarious pleasure of his company. To that end, I accompanied the tales with descriptions of the various contexts in which they had been narrated, and of how Wilde had told them: his voice, facial expressions, gestures and so on. Wilde's body language was an essential part of the performance, and perhaps the part most difficult to recover or imagine, unless one is an accomplished actor, such as Simon Callow, Liam Neeson or Rupert Everett. The settings in which Wilde performed were crucial. Wilde told the 'same' story differently, according to the context and company, as well as to his mood, which is why many versions of the stories survive. "Our Lady of Sorrows" (to give it the Ricketts title it is best known by) survives in three versions. Ricketts' English rendition is around 300 words, but Robert Ross' English extends to almost 1000, while Ernest La Jeunesse's French version – which he told to De Saix – is under 200. The versions differ greatly, in style as well as length: La Jeunesse's has limited poetical effects, in comparison with the other two, but

[2] There were two notable exceptions, i.e. Toomey (1998) and Kinsella (2003).

it achieves a much more powerful philosophical impact, as though it were an elongated paradox. It is likely this was a deliberate attempt on Wilde's part to appeal to La Jeunesse, who had a taste for philosophical paradoxes.

I faced many other challenges while working on *Table Talk*, but they too were fascinating. How did I know Wilde had told a story and that it wasn't the invention of his listener, or even of the listener of his listener (in the case of the "De Saix" tales)? Even if I was almost sure Wilde had told a particular tale to a particular individual, how could I be certain the memory of his amanuensis had not been faulty? In instances where several versions of a story survived which one should I select? Or could I combine elements of different versions to create a composite text, or would that be grossly insensitive to the all-important context in which the stories were told?

Exigencies of space (i.e. production costs) meant I had to choose only one version, and that it had to be fairly short, so I usually chose the version I liked most from the most compact surviving examples. External evidence played a part in my evaluation of whether a story was authentic (I didn't include a story that hadn't been mentioned by one of Wilde's close friends); the main criterion was, however, whether I believed Wilde could have told a particular tale, and whether I thought the surviving transcription preserved an echo of his golden voice.

GS: *How did the academic world receive your first book on Oscar Wilde?*

TW: I didn't receive many scholarly reviews for *Table Talk*; there was a favourable one in the *TLS*, and that was about it. Although I was disappointed, it was fair enough, I think, because the book wasn't a scholarly edition of Wilde's spoken stories, but an anthology aimed at the 'general reader'.

I also attribute the lack of scholarly interest to two other factors. At the time my book was published – in 2000 – the Oscar Wilde scholarship industry was still in its infancy. Only a single volume of the Oxford University Press scholarly edition of Wilde's writings had been published; there were no scholarly editions or even many

extended criticisms of Wildean masterpieces such as "The Soul of Man" and *De Profundis*; and there were relatively few published monographs on him (relative to other English-language authors, as well as to the vast number of Wilde monographs that have been published since). In those circumstances it is perhaps understandable – if not entirely forgivable – that Wilde's lovely spoken stories were regarded as peripheral.

Concerns about authenticity and provenance also made some scholars wary, and reluctant to consider the stories for inclusion in the Wilde canon. The debates such concerns tend to stir up – about authenticity, literary ownership, the relationship between (and relative importance of) oral and written literature, and how an official canon should be defined and established – are fascinating, and fascinatingly Wildean, not least because they remind us that Wilde often aimed to confuse categories and evade definition. It strikes me as interesting, and ironic, that anonymous written works of doubtful provenance and no aesthetic value whatsoever ("For Love of the King" is a very good bad example) have been attributed to Wilde by some scholars, when brilliant, utterly characteristic and undoubtedly 'authentic' spoken stories such as "Our Lady of Sorrows" have never been included in collected or selected editions of Wilde's works.

Since 2000, however, things have changed, more (I should – and regret to – say) because of the burgeoning interest in all things Wildean, than because of my book, or the various articles I wrote around the time of its publication (see Wright 2001). Numerous theses, books and articles about Wilde's spoken stories have been published in the last twenty years, while some of stories will be included – or so I have heard – in the final volume of the Oxford University Press scholarly edition of Wilde's work (which will, I believe, focus on Wilde's unfinished, unpublished and little-known productions). I look forward to the publication of that volume with eagerness, and hope it will do more justice to the variety, quality and extent of Wilde's spoken stories than I was able to do within the confines of my small commercial book. I also look forward to the discussions that will be prompted by the appearance of Wilde's spoken stories in print.

If I was disappointed not to receive many scholarly criticisms for *Table Talk*, it was more than made up for by the slew of academic reviews and comments I received for *Oscar's Books*. Most scholars

were complimentary, and their criticisms were constructive; a few were almost Wildean in the generosity and extravagance of their praise. Yet one or two academics were – how shall I put it? – rather curmudgeonly and mean. When I read their waspish words I remembered Wilde's phrase "Praise makes me humble. But when I am abused I know I have touched the stars". I was also reminded of Oscar's – or perhaps Oscar's and Constance's[3] – famous fairy-tale giant:

"My own garden is my own garden," said the Giant; "anyone can understand that, and I will allow nobody to play in it but myself." So he built a high wall all round it, and put up a notice-board: TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED.

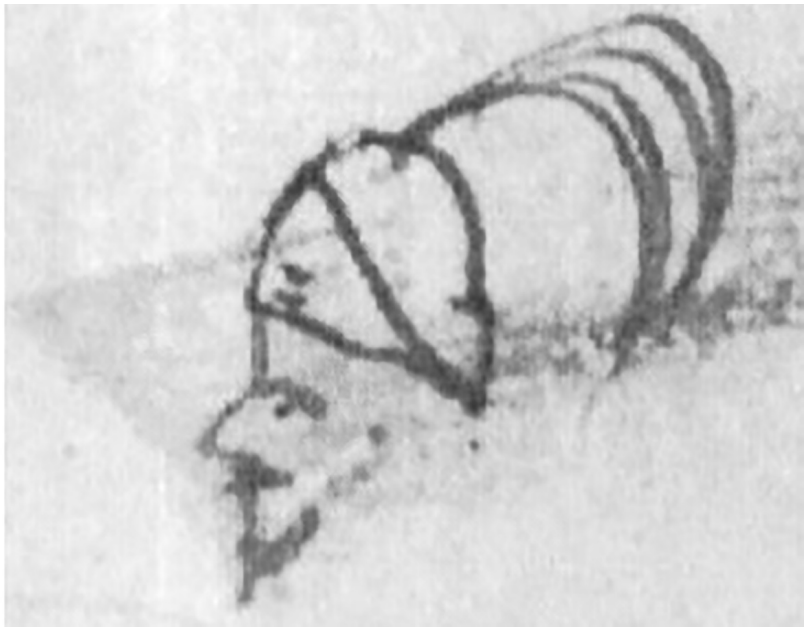
GS: *Your second book was about Wilde's library and the books that influenced him. What are the advantages of this approach? Could it give us a different perspective on Wilde and on his works?*

TW: *Oscar's Books* was an attempt to write a new kind of biography – a biography of a reader, rather than an author, or the hero of a tragi-comedy. It told the story of Wilde's life, and work, through the books he read and his response to them. I came up with the idea, partly because I couldn't face writing a conventional biography. An orthodox cradle-to-grave structure seems to encourage biographers to include accounts of a lot of experiences which are not unique to geniuses such as Wilde, but common to all mortals – birth, puberty, death and other complaints. The form also prompts some biographers to include as much information as possible. But, as Wilde pointed out, exhaustiveness usually ends up exhausting the reader (as well as the biographer, to judge by the length, and quality, of the final chapters in most biographies). The approach I came up with allowed me to leave out the dull – and familiar – aspects of

[3] The recently discovered manuscript of "The Selfish Giant" was written by Constance; only the title page and signature are in Wilde's hand. Constance may have taken it down from Wilde's dictation or written it out from her memory of Wilde having narrated it – in which case, she should be regarded as his co-author. The manuscript can be seen on-line here: https://www.themorgan.org/collection/oscar-wilde/manuscripts-letters/22, last accessed May 15, 2022.

Wilde's life, and to focus on the fascinating things that were going on inside his head, while he was in an armchair in his library, or at his writing desk.

Soon after embarking on my research I realised there was a lot of material to work with – I compiled a list of over 2000 books that Wilde had read, and started reading them – yes, even the portentous *La città morta*. In various libraries in the US and UK I also tracked down over 50 copies of the actual books that had once been part of Wilde's library, many of which contained his markings and annotations. It was extraordinary to look at Oscar's scribbles, underlinings (if that isn't a word, it is certainly a thing), and doodles (here's one from a school set text, done when Wilde was nine).



Doodle of a Cossack soldier by the nine-year-old Portora schoolboy Oscar Wilde in the back of his copy of *Histoire de Charles XII par Voltaire* (1862, Edinburgh), which contains many references to Charles XII's Cossack allies. Photo copyright: Thomas Wright.

It was as though I was reading the book through Wilde's eyes, or at least over his shoulder. Because there was so much material, I could

be selective, and include only the aspects of Wilde's readerly life that struck me as particularly interesting, or which I thought would be of particular interest to my readers – general and perhaps also scholarly. Among other topics, the book includes sections on Wilde's reading of European fiction, mythology, homoerotic literature; his interest in books with an Irish origin or angle; his love of the material and aesthetic aspects of books; the role book gifts played in his seduction campaigns; his use – and perhaps abuse – of the books he read in the preparation of his own writings (for example he ripped out pages of two biographies of Chatterton, then cut up and pasted them into a notebook he probably used for a lecture – and perhaps intended to use for an article – an act of biblio-vandalism that was not unique, according to Ricketts, who called him a "vulgar beast" because of the rough way he handled books).

While *Oscar's Books* has an overarching chronological structure, there are many digressions along the way, as the above list suggests. What the list also suggests, I hope, is the richness and extent of Wilde's readerly interests and culture, and something of the vastness and richness of his personality. That last quality, in the end, is the one I most wanted my book to convey, and the one which isn't always conveyed in conventional Wilde biographies. As Robert Ross remarked of Wilde, "To give the whole man would require the art of Boswell, Purcell or Robert Browning", and of course no Wilde biographer has possessed such art – not even Barbara Belford. *Oscar's Books* did not give the 'whole' Oscar, but it did try to give glimpses of him 'in the round', from the unfamiliar and multiple points of view made available by the books he read.

As to whether *Oscar's Books* gave readers a new perspective on Wilde and his work, I suppose it depends on the reader. The book emphasised Wilde's love of reading and books, and the extent to which he drew inspiration from them in his own writings, but such things were well known to scholars already. Some general readers were, on the other hand, surprised by the extent of Wilde's reading – in multiple languages as well as disciplines – because they had always thought of him as a facile punster, and witty playwright.

So far as this reader is concerned – because I read the book while I wrote it, and just before publication too, and I hope it shows – I was especially intrigued to discover that Wilde had owned a number of Liberal Party pamphlets, in which he was

named as a member of a Liberal club, and as a speaker at its political debates. Those booklets attested to Wilde's active engagement in the movement for Irish Home Rule, a cause the Liberal party espoused in the 1880s and 1890s[4]. Wilde's interest in Irish politics did not surprise me, but his ardent championing of the Nationalist cause, and the English as well as Irish political party that promoted it, struck me as interesting. It did not appear entirely compatible with the idea – current during those 'end of history' times – of Wilde as a post-modern author and personality, whose 'consistent political and aesthetic strategy' was the 'determined deconstruction of essentialisms of all kinds', which presumably included the 'essentialism' that is a coherent political and party-political identity. Nor did it seem fully in keeping with Ellmann's portrayal of Wilde as a man who was "never so true to himself as when he is inconsistent" and who, given a choice of alternatives (Anglo/Irish, straight/gay etc.), always managed to select both. I understood the sense, as well as the appeal, of these versions of Wilde, who once wrote (albeit as a dramatic utterance): "Taking sides is the beginning of sincerity, and earnestness follows shortly afterwards and the human being becomes a bore". Yet the pamphlets Wilde owned showed that when it came to Irish politics, Wilde did indeed take sides, and also tried to convince others of the justice of his choice, through public speaking and various other demonstrations of his allegiance to the cause. This seemed to me potentially significant for an understanding of Wilde's writings, and not only his journalism, in which he frequently espouses the nationalist cause. Exchanges such as the following, from *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for example, appeared in a different – and overtly party-political – light:

Lady Bracknell: What are your politics?
Jack: Well, I am afraid I really have none. I am a Liberal Unionist.
Lady Bracknell: Oh, they count as Tories. They dine with us. Or come in the evening, at any rate.

[4] This discovery led to several others concerning Wilde's Nationalist views and political activism, which are described in a 30,000-word article on the subject I wrote with Paul Kinsella for the *Oscholars* website. See Wright and Kinsella (2015).

I was struck too by Wilde's youthful interest in homoerotic literature, which seemed to lend weight to the idea – advanced by Neil McKenna among others (McKenna 2003) – that Wilde had not experienced a Damascene moment, on meeting Robert Ross in 1886, so far as his homosexuality was concerned, but had been interested in men – and aware of that interest – long before.

I was also surprised – and amused – to discover Wilde had kept most of the copies of books he'd reviewed, even those he'd trounced and denounced in his articles (for example, in his library there were review copies of numerous three-volume novels of a more than usually revolting sentimentality). Could it have been professional pride that prompted Oscar to keep these awful books – yet, in public, he spoke disrespectfully, if at all, of his journalism – or was he simply too busy, or lazy, or snobbish, to take them down to a second-hand bookdealer and sell them for a few shillings, as so many reviewers did? It amused me to think that Harry Quilter's "vulgar… blatant… bumptious… simply British" art criticism stood, on Wilde's shelves, in speaking distance of Pater (what on earth would these authors have to say to each other?). Yet the miscellaneous character of Wilde's library seemed to echo the multifaceted nature of Wilde's personality and career.

GS: *In your plays, your approach was different from the approach you used in your non-fiction books on Oscar. Can you pick out the main differences between your critical and your creative work? Or do you not make a clear distinction between the two?*

TW: Wilde would have come up with a clever paradox in answer to this question – perhaps something like: "in fiction one is obliged to tell the truth, while in non-fiction you have to make things up". And there is some truth, and a lot of intellectual stimulation, as well as fun, in 'Wildean' formulations of this kind. Obviously, the past is beyond recovery, because of the inherently ambiguous and incomplete nature of the evidence that survives, the inevitable bias one brings to it and the like. How can I be sure I have interpreted correctly the significance of a vertical line Wilde pencilled in the margin of a book, when so many interpretations appear possible and equally valid, and when even Wilde himself may not have

known why he made the mark? I can't be sure, of course, and so I have to guess – or 'make up' – what Wilde might have meant by it. Equally, in my fictitious plays about Wilde, I can't stray too far away from the historical record, or my portrayal would not be credible. I could not, for example, present Wilde as a Unionist in politics, or as a champion of didacticism in literature.

Even so, I think there are some distinctions between my creative and critical writings on Wilde. One difference is that in my non-fiction I signal when I am 'making things up', with qualifiers such as 'perhaps', 'probably' and 'we may speculate…'. Another lies in the extent to which the demands of style generally – and of literary form in particular – determine content. In the case of a biography, such as *Oscar's Books*, form and style are important: you have to tell a vivid and interesting story, which makes readers want to turn the page, in a way that is economical, accessible and – if possible – elegant. Yet in biography information has value in itself, and can be included even if it obstructs the story, or is presented in a way that isn't aesthetically satisfying. Readers of biography expect 'nuggets of information', and tend to dip, as well as skip between the text and the endnotes, rather than read the text straight through at a single sitting, so the overall coherence of a biography is less important than, say, that of a conventional novel. But in my plays there is no place for nuggets, however interesting, or golden. The demands of style and form are absolute. A single distraction or digression – or one tone deaf line – can destroy the audience's belief and interest in a scene, and hold up the plot. If an invented detail, or character, or episode enhances the play's style, or better fits the form or theme and helps the spectator suspend their disbelief, than something from the historical record would, then of course that item must be preferred. That is why *Death in Genoa* contains a number of anachronisms: they create the idea that Wilde is being assailed, at the end of his life and century, by aspects of twentieth-century culture.

Another way of looking at the question is to consider the starting point for the two types of writing. The inspiration for most chapters in *Oscar's Books* was an archival discovery, or series of discoveries, relating to Wilde's library or reading. In contrast, the starting point for *Death in Genoa* was my love of the city of Genova, and of the post-prison Wilde, and Wilde's own love

of that "beautiful marble city of palaces over the sea", and the similarities I perceived – or imagined – between Wilde and the crumbling city he wandered around. The scenes owed as much to my own visits to Staglieno, and certain disreputable bars in the historical centre of Genova, as they did to Wilde's visits to those places (about which not a great deal is known). The idea for the play grew in my mind, and only when it was half-formed did I turn to the surviving historical record – for inspiration rather than information. I selected details from it, adapted others; but most of its episodes – Oscar on a tram, in Principe Station, in Palazzo Bianco, in a seedy hotel room – and all of the characters except for Melmoth and Narizzano, the gardener of Staglieno, are my invention.

Likewise, the inspiration for *Wrestling with Caliban* was not primarily the historical record, but contemporary politics: in this case, Anglo-Irish relations in our own awful Brexit times. Ever since the fateful referendum campaign began six years ago, Tory Brexiters have made aggressive, arrogant and bogus comments about Ireland. Boris Johnson compared the "frontier between Northern Ireland and the Republic" to the insignificant (indeed to all practical purposes non-existent) border between two London Boroughs; while the Home Secretary Priti Patel advised the UK government to use the threat of food shortages in Ireland as a bargaining chip in its discussions with the EU (was she ignorant of nineteenth-century Irish and UK history when she made these comments? Somehow, I doubt it.) Such remarks reminded me of the obnoxious comments Tory MPs had made during the Home Rule debates in Wilde's day. I also recalled that 'Bosie' Douglas had been a self-styled "strong Conservative of the *Diehard* variety" and had expressed vehement opposition to Irish autonomy (he said "the appalling outrages committed by the Sinn Feiners [during the War of Independence] were far worse than any attributed to Hitler" – a comment that also reminds us of his antisemitism). So, in my play, I decided to cast Bosie in the role of proto-Brexiter, and as Wilde's adversary, in a Home Rule debate. Once again, it was only when I had an idea of the play in my head that I turned to the historical record.

All that said, I think there are many similarities between *Oscar's Books* and my two plays. While *Table Talk* probably lies somewhere

between them: it is an imaginative attempt to resurrect Oscar's lost stories, and story-telling art, which tries to be faithful to the incomplete and ambiguous historical record.

GS: *You have worked for many years with Peter Ackroyd, a fervent admirer of the divine Oscar. Has this or Ackroyd's works influenced your books and plays on him?*

TW: It has been my enormous good fortune to have worked as Peter Ackroyd's researcher and assistant for 27 years, and counting. My first encounter with the Lord of English historical fiction and biography was at eighteen, when I read his extraordinary imitation/reinvention of Oscar in the first-person novel *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*. I was so impressed – and dazzled by his audacity in mimicking my hero – that I decided to interview Peter for the university newspaper I was working for. We hit it off immediately, and he offered me a job after I finished my undergraduate degree.

So in a sense it was Oscar who introduced me to Peter, and found me the job that has kept me busy, amused, and in books and accommodation during my adult life. (Over the years, Oscar has introduced me to many people who became my friends, most of whom are animated by the great man's boundless sense of generosity and fun). It is fitting then, that Peter and I should have talked long and lovingly of Oscar, during our first meeting, and that our interview, which I later wrote up as a sketch for a national UK newspaper, was modelled on one Wilde gave to Robbie Ross for the *St. James's Gazette* in 1895.

Working for a literary *maestro* has been a liberal education, in the many senses of that adjective. In the course of my employment I have acquired an OK nose, when it comes to research, an OK brain, when it comes sifting and using it, thick skin when it comes to criticism, and a good palate when it comes to wine. Age has not dimmed Peter's passion for Oscar – since *The Last Testament* he has written a number of brilliant newspaper articles on Wildean themes, and he included a whole chapter on the Irish genius in his recent book *Revolution*, even though it is part of his *History of England*! There is a framed photograph of Oscar and Bosie in Peter's study, positioned between a sour-faced portrait of John Milton and the

grim countenance of Thomas More in the Holbein likeness: Oscar seems at ease in the company, Milton and More less so.

As for the influence of Peter's work on mine, *The Last Testament* showed me that imitating Oscar was possible, and also an interesting way of reinterpreting his life and work. And of course researching Peter's biographies and histories, and helping him sort through the research, has been the perfect apprenticeship for my own career as a non-fiction author. Finally, the friendship of an accomplished and famous writer may also have given me a few insights into certain aspects of Wilde's life, personality and work.

Occasionally, I ask Peter's opinion on specific Wildean issues. His views are always as useful as they are emphatic. I would like to conclude our pleasant conversation with an amusing example. A few years ago a certain Wilde scholar told me he'd come across an anonymous newspaper review that struck him as being possibly by Wilde; he sent me a scan of it and asked my opinion. Reading it, I heard a very faint echo of Wilde in some of the phrases, but was not convinced of his authorship, because most of the style seemed too stuffy, stilted and stale ("style" as Wilde wrote, "is one's signature"). When considering the possible attribution of an anonymous article to Wilde one must of course bear in mind how hastily he wrote some of his journalism, and allow for the possibility of editorial interference. Nevertheless, I felt pretty sure the piece in question couldn't have been written by a Lord of language. But just to be sure, I decided to show the article to Peter, who I regard as a kind of Osiris in these matters, because, like Wilde, he has an extraordinary ear for cadence.

Peter skim-read the printout of the article standing beside his desk. Half-way through, his face lost its customary amaranth colour, and he held on to his desk to stop himself falling. He uttered a few phrases from the review: "… this volume is a sealed book… it contrives to convey" more in anger than in sorrow. "Oscar would not, could not have perpetrated these: libels on the English language," he gasped, "even if he were writing in a cab – and even if it were a bad one, without suspension or even cushions – dashing to the printers, with only five minutes before his deadline. And if he did write them, then for the good of language, and dear Oscar's reputation, it is our duty to keep it a secret!".

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