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Review of 'Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity' and 'Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentent Years'

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Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity, edited by Kathleen Riley, Alastair J. L. Blanshard, and Iarla Manny; pp. xvii + 382. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, £75.00.

Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years, by Nicholas Frankel; pp. 374. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2017 $29.95, £23.95.

In July 1896, when Oscar Wilde was in the middle of his two-year sentence of hard labor at Reading Prison, he wrote to the Home Secretary pleading for early release. He described himself as "one to whom Literature was once the first thing of life, the mode by which perfection could be realized, by which, and by which alone, the intellect could feel itself alive" (cited in Frankel, 57). When deprived of books and the other "conditions necessary for healthy intellectual development," he wrote, the mind "becomes…the sure prey of morbid passions, and obscene fancies, and thoughts that defile, desecrate, and destroy" (cited in Frankel, 57). Thanks to the merciful intervention of relatively enlightened administrators, he was eventually allowed some access to books, and in this time of gravest psychological and emotional need, Wilde turned to some of the works that shaped his thinking and writing in the early days of its maturation, before he had become the *fin-de-siècle* aesthete par excellence, the composer of dazzlingly brilliant Society plays, or the man broken by public humiliation and draconian prison sentence.

The two studies under review frame in powerful terms the beginning and the ending of Wilde's writerly life. *Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity*, edited by Kathleen Riley, Alastair J. L. Blanshard, and Iarla Manny, aims to trace the influence of Classical literature and philosophy throughout Wilde's oeuvre, with some of its most intriguing chapters exploring Wilde's early scholarly formation. Nicholas Frankel's *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years* offers a richly detailed account of Wilde's final five years, from the trial and his subsequent imprisonment to his lonely death in Paris in 1900.

Blanchard et al. rightly note that, given Wilde's investment in Classical scholarship, it has relatively understudied in his canon. The collection aims to address the lacuna, with some eighteen contributions divided into five sections: on Wilde's classical education; on classical echoes in his drama, his non-fiction prose, and *The Picture of Dorian* Gray; and on his relationship to Rome. (Given the collection's length, it is rather surprising that Wilde's poetry goes unexplored, as does much of his shorter fiction.) Wilde's classical training is not shown to be the central force shaping his intellectual development: Greek is not the key to all Wilde's mythologies. Rather, his studies in Greek and Latin enriched Wilde's panoply of influences, joining Pater, Ruskin, Arnold, the Romantics, the Symbolists, and countless others that informed his thinking and writing. "Especially significant," Joseph Bristow writes in his astute assessment of the "Philosophy" notebook from Wilde's Oxford years, "is the adept manner that Wilde developed in moving back and forth between… prescribed texts by Aristotle and Plato, and … innovative nineteenth-century works" (70). Philip E. Smith II, editor of three of Wilde's other Oxford notebooks, offers a similar conclusion in his chapter, suggesting that Wilde cultivated "a synthesis of philosophical, scientific, social-scientific, and aesthetic approaches to cultural and historical criticism" (290) while at university.

This nimble synthesis is built upon the foundation of formal instruction Wilde received from J. P. Mahaffy (at Trinity College Dublin) and Benjamin Jowett (at Oxford), relationships examined by a number of the pieces in the collection (e.g. Blanshard and Leanne Grech). Other essays focus more closely on individual Wildean texts or seemingly direct lines of transmission, including Serena Witzke's on Plautus's *Menaechmi* as a source for *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Marylu Hill's piece on the traces of *The Republic* in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Manny's on Ovidian echoes in Wilde's life and works. These add nuance to our understanding of Wilde's massive corpus of influences, but are on the whole not revelatory. More illuminating are those that explore instantiations of the multivalent synthesis described by Bristow and Smith. John Stokes shows that Wilde's familiarity of Greek drama extended well beyond "what might be

expected of an exceptionally well-read late Victorian" (91), and that this knowledge mixed with contemporary performance theory to inform Wilde's many theatre reviews as well as his 1886 essay "Shakespeare and Stage Costume," later revised as "The Truth of Masks." In a related vein, Kate Hext refers to an "irreducible interplay" of influences in Wilde's grasp of Hedonism, as "he borrowed alike from the Transcendental Idealism re-emerging in Oxford, from the Empiricism that patterned the Victorian consciousness, and from the Presocratic and Platonic philosophy that defined his degree" (196).

If wide-ranging encounters with classical antiquity mediated Wilde's approach to his contemporaries, it is also true that Wilde's contemporaries mediated his encounter with classical ideas. As Evangelista notes, "Wilde's reception of classical culture should not be understood simply as a vertical relationship of one modern author to a body of classical texts, material artefacts, and ideas," but rather as a result of "a horizontal trans national network that shaped nineteenth-century writers' and readers' understanding of Greece" (209). Evangelista deftly tracks the movement of Wilde's sources from their classical origins through the filters of Parnassian and symbolist aesthetics, via Wilde's affiliations with poets Marcel Schwob and Pierre Löuys in the 1890s. Gideon Nesbit's excellent piece considers Wilde's engagement with John Addington Symonds's *Studies of the Greek Poets,* another contemporary filter that "shaped his ideas and intellectual growth" (37). Taken as a whole, *Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity* powerfully demonstrates the degree to which Wilde's reading fueled the development of a mind that "could feel itself alive" only through encounters with literature.

The Unrepentant Years is of course a very different kind of work from *Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity,* staging in attentive detail the tribulations of Wilde's peripatetic final years. As suggested by his title, Frankel is particularly interested in confronting Wilde's "unapologetic, frequently defiant" quality (20), a characteristic often downplayed in biographies. The Wilde that emerges from this compelling and important portrait is on an unceasing quest for a life on his

own terms, regardless of those that are sacrificed in the process. He is a man more desperate than that represented the often-hagiographical depictions to date, but equally far bolder in his desires and clearly aware of their repercussions. Wilde was, in Frankel's telling, no passive victim of Victorian institutions or their supposed morality; "[Wilde] was a subversive" (297). To be sure, the unforgiving Victorian penal system was "designed to break the spirit of even the toughest offenders" (38) and, as Frankel carefully documents, calculated to inflict the kind of mind-numbing cruelty which proved especially vicious to Wilde. Even in prison he used the limited means available to him to rail against the system of his confinement—as seen in the missive that opened this review—and the writing he was able to complete after his release helped to change that system.

This reoriented focus amplifies Wilde's agency and reveals the deep ambivalence that characterized many of the other figures in Wilde's life. Lord Alfred Douglas, frequently portrayed as a villain in Wilde's life story, benefits from the treatment: "If we are wrong to see Wilde as a martyr to Victorian morality, we are wrong too to see him as Alfred Douglas's victim," Frankel writes in his epilogue (298). Robert Ross, whose dedication to Wilde during and after his imprisonment earned him the title as Wilde's most devoted acolyte and protector, also becomes more three-dimensional. During Wilde's imprisonment, Ross's efforts to keep Bosie away are shown to be as likely motivated by jealousy as they were by an earnest desire to protect his friend from his most self-destructive impulses. These men loved Wilde and were loved by him, and the complex and conflicting dynamics of those relationships are depicted vividly and sensitively.

Also made vivid is the difficulty of knowing Wilde, much less loving him, in his final years. The late correspondence has long been in print, but as narrativized by Frankel, Wilde's increasing desperation is rendered afresh, equally moving and enraging. Some episodes, such as Wilde's selling the exclusive production rights for an unwritten play to multiple people when he

knew that he would never complete any version of the project, attests to his need for money and to his carelessness with people. It is no wonder that Wilde's increasing financial precariousness coincided with his increasing disregard for the criticism or concern of both friends and strangers.

The study's grounding in archival research enlivens the familiar rhythms of the biography. Even so, there is some unfortunate repetition, including a few rather lengthy quotations that are repeated verbatim. Wilde's comments on emerging from jail when the laburnum is in bloom appear twice in close succession (82, 90), and some of Wilde's comments to Carlos Blacker on his relationship with Constance also get two airings (106, 154; 105, 175), for example. Frankel's interpretive gestures can also feel familiar, starting with the suggestion that "Wilde's pre-prison writing begins to appear like a carefully constructed masks" that anticipate "the life that lay ahead of him" (18), a truism of Wilde scholarship at least since Richard Ellmann's biography. An extended analysis of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," though, is very welcome, particularly as the poem's composition and publication is inextricably bound up in and clarified by the logistics of Wilde's early exile. Even more interesting is the suggestion that the exigencies of his last years perpetuated a shift in Wilde's creative output from the written to the verbal. "If Wilde lost the art of writing plays," Frankel writes, "he nonetheless used the cafés and bars of Paris to perfect what he'd once called 'the delightful art of brilliant chatter'" (302). Such a change would explain the dearth of evidence of serious writing by Wilde during this period. But it also poses the tantalizing prospect that in his final months, Wilde was revising his view that literature was the sole means by which "perfection could be realized" and the mind "feel itself alive," developing an understanding or expression of literature that included the spoken as well as the written word.

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