The Importance of Being Earnest
About Oscar Wilde

By Liam Brophy, Ph.B.

"HAPPY the man who has never known what it is to taste of fame—to have it is a purgatory, to want it is a hell." Oscar Wilde might have said that, and probably did. It was originally said by Lord Lytton, but most certainly applies to the type of fame or notoriety Wilde tasted till it turned to gall in his aesthetic mouth. It is now almost half a century after his death, and he is still in that purgatory of fame. Perhaps another half century will have to pass before posterity will lift him from it to the heaven of immortality, as it lifted Verlaine and agreed to forget his sordidness for the marvellous beauty of his Sagesse. Oscar is still very much in the public eye and in the Philistine's hair. Hesketh Pearson's "Life" of the plaguing and plagiarising poet, recently published by Methuen, is helping to keep him there, as well as the various lesser books and pamphlets written with so much ant-industry to prove Wilde a writer of no importance. No one can hope to solve the enigma of Wilde's life who has not troubled to find the depths of earnestness in him, just as no one can hope to understand his paradoxes who does not see that he was standing truths on their heads for the same reason that he wore exotic vests—the better to attract attention. Most critics dismiss his crimes as perversity or just another form of posing. Wilde himself stated their cause quite plainly to a friend. "'My moral obliquity,'” he said, "'was largely due to the fact that my father would never allow me to become a Catholic.'"
Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854. His father, William Wilde, knighted in 1864, was a popular oculist and a man of passionate intensity and violent dislikes. His mother was vivacious, vivid and versatile. She contributed under the pen-name of “Speranza” to The Nation, a periodical founded by a group of scholarly patriots with the object of overthrowing English domination in Ireland. In many ways she resembled the American mother of Charles Stewart Parnell. Sir William and Lady Wilde made a collection of Irish folklore which was fast disappearing before the Anglo-Saxon culture, and the young Oscar often accompanied them in their searches for relics of Ireland’s past glories. It is hard to imagine the future dandy of Piccadilly delving into his country’s heroic past, for just as some of the English immigrants were said to have become Hibernior Hibernicus ipsis—“more Irish than the Irish themselves”, so Wilde was later to become more British than John Bull.

Wilde passed through Trinity College, Dublin, to Oxford. There he matriculated at Magdalen College, where he made the acquaintance of the future Rt. Rev. Sir David Hunter Blair, Bt., O.S.B., Abbot of Dunfermline, who has given us an insight into Wilde’s character more illuminating than even the biographers Ransome and Ross, for these latter were deceived by his pose; indeed even Wilde himself was so deceived. Dom Hunter Blair’s description of Wilde in Victorian Days shows a brilliant youth, with large features lit up with an intelligent smile—“altogether an attractive personality, enhanced by his extraordinary conversational abilities”. What the Abbot most vividly remembered about the poet was his capacity for hard work and his genuine appreciation of the classics. “The illiterate critics who sneered at Wilde’s poetry as affected ‘piffle’ were, of course, profoundly ignorant that he was an
ABOUT OSCAR WILDE

admirable and sensitive classical scholar, with the same delicate feeling for, and appreciation of, the beauties (in particular) of Greek poetry as distinguished the young Harrovian scholar and convert, now an eminent Jesuit." (Rev. Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J.)

Sir David was converted to the Catholic Church in 1875 while on a holiday in Leipsic. His Oxford friends adopted an attitude of gentlemanly British indifference to his conversion, but Wilde was deeply interested, asked many questions, and showed, what his friend had not known before, "how genuine was his own sympathy with Catholicism". He then revealed the fact that he had often attended Catholic services while a student in Dublin, and that he had made friends among the Jesuits there. Fr. Matthew Russell, S.J., the first editor of THE IRISH MONTHLY, was of opinion that Wilde received infant baptism. Wilde's father was very irate at his son's Romish tendencies. "I am sure," said the scholar-poet, "that if I had become a Catholic at that time he would have cast me off altogether, and that he would do the same to-day. That is why he rejoiced at my winning a scholarship at Oxford, where I should not be exposed to these pernicious influences. And now my best friend turns out to be a Papist. Lucky you, my dear Dunsky, to be, as you are, independent of your father. My case is very different." Wilde accompanied the young convert nobleman to various Catholic gatherings and functions. "I never had any doubt where his interests and sympathy lay," comments the Abbot.

Wilde made no effort to conceal his Catholic proclivities while at Oxford, and objects of Catholic piety began to find place among the curious objets d'art in his rooms. The Abbot records one curious interview between himself, Wilde, and a certain German Jesuit to whom he introduced the already celebrated poet. Sir David was sanguine that Wilde would soon
become a Catholic and said so to the Jesuit. The priest was less hopeful but very penetrating. "Beneath his superficial veneer of vanity and foolish talk," he said, "there is, I am convinced, something deeper and more sincere, including a genuine attraction towards Catholic belief and practice. But the time has not come. The finger of God has not yet touched him. There will come some day, I am convinced, a crisis in his life when he will turn to the Ark of Peter as his only refuge. Till then we can only pray. And you, his friend, for whom he has a true affection, can help him in that way, and in many others."

As long as they remained at Oxford Sir David never lost hope of Wilde's conversion, but the time was not yet. To accelerate that wished-for consummation the young nobleman planned a trip to Rome with the poet during the Eastertide of 1876. Oscar's travelling expenses were paid with his friend's winnings at Monte Carlo, for the poet was even then living, even as he died—"above his means". His classical learning and Catholic sympathies helped Wilde to feel at home in the Eternal City. He fixed his impressions of that pilgrimage in the filigree of some beautiful poems, such as Urbs Sacra Eterna, Sonnet on Hearing the Dies Irae in the Sistine Chapel, Easter Day, E Tenebris, Vita Nuova and Madonna Mia. The two pilgrims secured an audience with the Supreme Pontiff, Pius IX, who laid his hands on Wilde's head and expressed the hope that he would soon follow his friend into the Church. Oscar recorded his impressions of the audience in a poem which appears in his collected works as Rome Unvisited. Here are the concluding stanzas, with their strain of prophecy:

"A pilgrim from the northern seas—
What joy for me to seek alone
The wondrous Temple and the Throne
Of Him who holds the awful keys."
ABOUT OSCAR WILDE

When, bright with purple and with gold, 
Come priest and holy Cardinal, 
And borne above the heads of all 
The gentle Shepherd of the Fold.

O joy to see before I die 
The only God-anointed King, 
To hear the silver trumpets ring 
A triumph as He passes by.

Or at the altar of the shrine 
Holds high the Mystic Sacrifice, 
And shows His God to human eyes 
Beneath the veil of bread and wine.

For lo, what changes time can bring. 
The cycle of revolving years 
May free my heart from all its fears, 
And teach my lips a song to sing. . . ."

Time did bring many changes in Wilde's life, and the cycle of revolving years found him in Rome a second time—in 1900, the year of his conversion and death.

After his sojourn in Rome Wilde passed on to Greece and the Ionian Islands with Professor Mahaffy, and in the course of time his passion for Hellenic beauty put Catholicism out of his mind. He passed out of Dom Hunter Blair's life when the latter joined the Benedictine Order in 1878, but he did not pass out of his friend's memory, for the wayward poet had prayers offered up for his conversion day and night from the holy silence of Benedictine Cloisters, while he himself strutted and posed in the glare of the world's footlights, unaware that Grace and Mercy were pursuing him.
We are not concerned here with Wilde’s life after he left Oxford to dazzle the social and literary life of London. He made himself conspicuous enough to be caricatured in Punch and Patience. Patience had been a great success in England, where the public recognised the witty references to Wilde and the æsthetic movement. It did not succeed so well in America, where the point of the cracks and caricatures was lost on audiences who had no knowledge of the originals. So Wilde was sent over in 1882, wearing a velvet beret, lace-trimmed shirts, puce knickerbockers with buckles and black silk stockings, and expressed his disapproval of Niagara Falls: “I was disappointed with Niagara,” he said. “Every American bride is taken there, and the sight of the stupendous waterfall must be one of the earliest if not the keenest disappointments in American married life.” He visited the U.S. a second time in the following year to supervise the production of his Vera. America was amused, but it was not converted to æstheticism. Till the year 1889, when disaster overtook him, Wilde held the stage as a brilliant conversationalist, a dramatist, a story-writer and a poseur. But, above all, he held it as a conversationalist. His description of Lord Wotton’s talk in The Picture of Dorian Gray is a fair account of his own and a good sample of his style: “He played with the idea, and grew wilful; tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy, and winged it with paradox. The praise of folly, as he went on, soared into a philosophy, and Philosophy herself became young, and catching the mad music of Pleasure, wearing, one might fancy, her wine-stained robe and wreath of ivy, danced like a Bacchante over the hills of life and mocked the slow Silenus for being sober. . . . It was an extraordinary improvisation.” Wilde fled from the Hound of Heaven with unwonted cunning and wilfulness. Down the labyrinthine ways of his complex mind, under the running
laughter which his famous *bon mots* provoked, up vistaed hopes of fame and down titanic glooms of his final chasméd fear he fled from the strong Feet that were catching up "with unperturbed pace".

Wilde put his talents into living rather than into literature, a process that might have been possible to a man of the Renaissance but was futile in the mercantile and mercenary environment of 19th-century England. Jacques Maritain has well said: "To put in his life, not in his work, his genius as an artist, nothing could be more absurd than this design of Wilde; it is to carry over into a flute the art of the cithara, into a bird the law of the snow. His life was only a useless phrase." The last statement is tragically true of the man who could coin golden phrases at will in the spoken and written word, and many, including Chesterton, were glad to keep them in currency long after the despised mint had moulded in Père Lachaise. Ross, his executor and biographer, described Wilde as "an artist in attitudes ", and such he was! He made a pose of posing and found that it went down so well with the British public that he stuck to it, and stuck to it so long as to deceive even himself not a little. He bartered his genius for a pottage of publicity. He chose a brief space before the garish footlights instead of an enduring niche in Westminster. There was much of his native Irish superficiality and brilliance in that. But there was another Irish trait in Wilde, a negative one, which is seldom commented on. He had the almost morbid sensitivity of an Irishman to be laughed at in the things he held sacred. He could take the hard-hitting banter of *Punch* and *Patience* with good humour, but in his inmost heart he kept a recess too deep for prying and prurient eyes to see. He himself once wrote that "it is in ultimates that we see God ", and, "How else save through a broken heart can the Lord God enter in?" The German Jesuit had foretold well when he said that the
finger of God would not touch Wilde till a great crisis occurred in his life.

That crisis came in 1895 when Wilde was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment with hard labour. His crime, says Ransome, was to have indulged in a vice that, “openly alluded to in the days and verses of Catullus, is generally abhorred and hidden in our own . . . the vice needs none but a pathological explanation; it was a disease, a malady of the brain.” The British public, which is the most Philistine in the world, enjoys a high reputation for hypocrisy and hatred for sanctity and song, mysticism and music, and whatever does not accord with its bourgeois standards. Recall the fury wherewith it exiled Keats and Shelley and banished Byron. It was overjoyed to have an open and legalised chance to turn its righteous wrath on Wilde and the whole artistic movement for which he stood. For us the main point of interest in Wilde’s disgrace and imprisonment is the change it wrought in his life.

Wilde’s impressions in prison are recorded in the famous De Profundis, written in the form of letters while he was in jail, and in The Ballad of Reading Gaol, written after his release. The finest thing Verlaine ever wrote was his Sagesse, which was composed in the prison of Mons after his reconciliation with the Church of his youth. De Profundis is the best of Wilde’s compositions, though not the most popular, since the world is in no mood for such intimate dialogues between a suffering soul and its Maker. We will grant that the De Profundis is a confession to God meant to be overheard by men, but so was St. Augustine’s masterpiece. We will grant that it is unorthodox, saturated with the Rationalism of the ex-cleric Renan, but its general tone, its average temperature, is as Catholic as Shakespeare’s plays, and we agree with those critics who venture to call it “a Catholic prose-poem.” Because it is written in beautiful language the
Philistines sneer at its "insincerity". Those are the anonymous mobs that accuse the Liturgy of being theatrical and Gothic art of being too grandiose. The descendants of Knox and Calvin are sedulous to magnify the name of the Lord in unlovely and loveless ways. The De Profundis is a work of art, but it is also a veracious confession. Wilde left no doubt about that in his letters to Ross. He said that society's sending him to prison ranked with his father's sending him to Oxford as a turning point in his life. That remark went deeper than he probably guessed. His going to Oxford was a turning from God down the ways of sensationalism and scented sins. His being sent to prison was to prove a turning to God whom He learnt to know and love through the close study of the Greek Testament in the twilight of his cell and the deeper twilight of his heart. Some have been scandalised at his most untheological comments on Christ, as when he dilated on Him as the supreme Type of the Poet. The same theme will be found by those who trouble to search in St. Augustine’s De Musica, and it may not be without significance to recall that the Bishop of Hippo was once wont to pray: "Lord, make me chaste—but not just yet.” The darkness of his disgrace Wilde recognised as the shade of God’s hand outstretched caressingly, and he had heard the Voice of the Hound of Heaven: “Naught shelters thee who will not shelter Me.” Wilde had sought Beauty in strange and perverse ways. Not till he recognised that Beauty and Truth are one did his searching cease.

Wilde was released from prison on May 19, 1897, and crossed over to France to settle down in the little village of Berneval. Here he began to attend Mass. To those who asked him whether he would take up his former mode of living he replied: “Ma vie est comme un œuvre d’art ; un artiste ne recommence jamais deux fois la même chose” — "My life is like a work of art; an artist
never begins the same thing twice." He wrote to M. Gide to send him a life of St. Francis of Assisi, frequented the chapel of Notre Dame de Liesse and had Masses celebrated for him by the local curé. The Ballad of Reading Gaol was the only piece of literature he produced after leaving prison. He revised some of his plays and helped in the French translations of them. His literary work was done.

Those who were with him in the last days of his life say that Wilde became very child-like, a vast change from his studied artificialities and poses of the past, while he lost none of his intellectual powers. He went to Rome in the spring of 1900, and was blessed by the Pope seven times. When he returned to Paris in May he wandered about as one dazed and lost. He began to complain of headaches and they became acute in October, so that he was put under medical care. The doctors diagnosed meningitis.

One day, twenty-two years after he had entered the Benedictine Order, the Abbot Hunter Blair received from a non-Catholic friend, who had also been a friend of Wilde, the news of the poet's death in Paris on November 30, 1900. This friend was anxious to find some confirmation of the rumour that Wilde had died a Catholic. The Abbot immediately wrote to Fr. Osmond Cooke, Superior of the English Passionists in Paris, and received from him the consoling news that one of his Community, Fr. Cuthbert Dunne, had received Wilde into the Church at his own urgent request, and that he had administered Extreme Unction to him while he was still fully conscious. And the Abbot concluded with this prayer, one of the many prayers of a like kind we may be assured: "May my poor friend, after his strange and tragic life, prematurely cut short, have, in the Divine clemency, won at length to where beyond these voices there is peace."

Oscar Wilde was buried on December 3, 1900, in the cemetery of Bagneux. According to the testimony of Fr. Klug in Die
Tiefe der Seele, he had a Rosary Beads placed about his neck and a picture of his beloved Francis of Assisi on his breast. On July 20, 1909, his remains were moved to Père Lachaise. During his last months in Paris when Wilde was nearer death than he surmised, Robert Ross and he were discussing epitaphs in a light-hearted way. Wilde made a remark that shows to what child-like simplicity he had come: "When the Last Trumpet sounds and we are couched in our porphyry tombs, I shall turn and whisper to you, 'Robbie, Robbie, let's pretend we do not hear it.'" That is not far removed from the beata simplicitas which is said to be common to the saint, the poet and the child.