

**THE SATURDAY REVIEW
NEW YORK, NEW YORK
17 AUGUST 1940**

Some Postscripts to Oscar Wilde

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Oscar Wilde

When Oscar Wilde was laid in his grave on the morning of December 3, 1900, one might have hoped that he had at last found rest. But the concession which Robert Ross, his literary executor, had rented at the cemetery of Bagneux on the outskirts of Paris, allowed only temporary hostage to the man who had been variously known as convict C.3.3. and Sebastian Melmoth. Ten years later, after the devotion of Ross and the loyalty of other friends had restored to Wilde some of the fame that was rightfully his, it was thought fitting that his body be removed from its obscure grave to Père Lachaise, already tenanted by Chopin, Alfred de Musset, Balzac, and many another of France's great dead. Ross had raised money for the cemetery plot. Mrs. Carew, the mother of Sir Coleridge Kennard, donated the monument, the execution of which was entrusted to Jacob Epstein. It was all simple, beautiful, and noble. But the perverse fatality that pursued Wilde in life did not spare him after death.

During the month of June, 1912, the Epstein sculpture, a nude, virile angel whose Sphinx-like face bore a distinct resemblance to Wilde's, was exhibited in England before it was sent

to Paris. No one had anything to say against it on the grounds of obscenity or of bad taste. When, however, it was transported to Père Lachaise in September, a minor revolution broke out. With appropriate irony, it was started by the proletariat. The employees at Père Lachaise, the masons, the gravediggers, and the custodians, saw nothing of art in the great flying Sphinx. They did see, however, that unlike the rest of the funerary sculptures, it was naked and decidedly unashamed. Accordingly, they made their complaints to the proper authority which proceeded to take what it considered adequate measures. Epstein himself, however, found them an offense to his art, and with his own hands, when he went to supervise the placing of his Sphinx, shipped off several kilos of plaster that had not been on the original.

For a time everything was quiet until one day in February, 1913, Robert Ross received a letter from M. Delanney, Prefect of the Seine, informing him that the Epstein monument daily offended the sensibilities of the French people who went to the cemetery to meditate. Since Mr. Epstein had refused to make certain necessary modifications, and since the monument could not remain as it was, M. Delanney had the honor to warn Mr. Ross that unless something was done to remedy the situation, he would be obliged to remove the offending Sphinx at Mr. Toss's expense and at his risk "by virtue of Article 16 of the decree of the 23rd prairial, year 12." Moreover, the Prefect assured him, he was not alone in making the demand, but was supported by the Comité d'Esthétique de la Préfecture de la Seine.

All of Paris was up in arms. Who comprised this Esthetic Committee? And what was the Decree of the 23rd prairial? Upon investigation it was found that the committee consisted of more than a score of artists and sculptors, some of them members of the Institute. As for the decree—there it was, in black and white, among the archives of the first years of the Republic. The law showed a singular pudicity in a generation that had witnessed such outrages as those committed on the body of Mme. de Lamballe. Anyway, the article forbade the use of nudes as commemorative monuments in cemeteries unless such nudes were duly furnished with a *cache-sexe*.

In vain Wilde's friends circulated petitions and wrote letters to the newspapers. In vain Rémy de Gourmont made a public statement defending the statue and ridiculing the taste of the bourgeois with a pungency that had in it not a little of Wilde's manner. "I find nothing to object to in the monument. . . .

What offends, believe me, is its originality. . . . It is the same with literature. Banality wins the day." In vain Aleister Crowley, that last shoot of the English decadence, unveiled the Sphinx in a gesture of defiance against the Paris authorities. Epstein's monument in the end had to submit to the adornment of a bronze fig-leaf. "I should have much preferred," wrote the disheartened sculptor, "the monument to remain veiled until such time as the alleged improvements made against my express desires have been removed." During the years that followed zealous undergraduates took him at his word, and periodically one or another of them would appear in some public space wearing the bronze improvement round his neck. Today the winged Sphinx remains at Père Lachaise as the sculptor executed it except that some unknown hand has ended all controversy by mutilating the stone.

The same year that witnessed the furor over the Epstein monument released another sensation before its close. Ever since Wilde's death there had been persistent rumors that he was still alive and pursuing his existence incognito. Considering the myths sprung up during Wilde's life, it was no wonder the rumors were half believed by many who had swallowed whole the most preposterous inventions. What was to prevent the master of the pose, the arch-mystifier, from perpetrating another mystification?

George Sylvester Viereck, then a young newspaperman, found in the reports a core of plausibility, and out of his admiration for Wilde, wrote an article which he published in the *Critic*. The whole matter would have created only a mild stir were it not that the Paris correspondent of the *New York Times* took it up and promised to investigate it. Today, against the body of published source material, the testimony advanced seems weak, if not suspect. It hinges chiefly on the authority of a certain Arthur Craven Lloyd who claimed Oscar Wilde as his uncle by marriage, (Wilde's wife was Constance Mary Lloyd.)

On the 23rd of March, 1913—Mr. Lloyd is at least definite about the date—Oscar *redivivus*, fat, browned from his sojourn in sunny lands, and wearing a beard, came to look up his nephew in Paris. One might have thought that like Hamlet's father's ghost the very much materialized Oscar would have brought some startling message, pleaded for his vindication, or, to prove himself the real Simon Pure, uttered some memorable epigram. No. He merely quenched his thirst and said he was writing his memoirs. Nevertheless the Paris correspondent of the *New York Times* saw fit to declare by special cable on the

8th of November, that he almost believed "we shall see Wilde back in Paris some day." Robert Ross who had watched at Wilde's deathbed, Vyvyan Holland who had been called to the exhumation of his father at Bagneux, the remaining friends of Wilde who had been present at the funeral, maintained a disdainful silence. Only Henry Davray who had come to the wretched hotel room on the Rue des Beaux Arts before the coffin was nailed down cried in exasperated denial: "I have touched his corpse!" In spite of the hope of the Paris correspondent, the bearded Wilde never again appeared in the flesh. In the spirit world, however, he leads an active life, to judge by the recorded Wildean epigrams of the medium Lazar.

Works purported to be Wilde's began making their appearance shortly after his death. Indeed, a translation of the "Satyricon of Petronius," and another of Barbey d'Aurevilly's flamboyant novel, "Ce Qui Ne Meurt Pas" (*What Never Dies*) are still issued as genuine Wildeana by publishers who may, or may not, be acting in good faith.

"What Never Dies" appeared in Paris toward 1902 in an English version attributed to Sebastian Melmoth. Wilde's most intimate friends knew of no such work of his, but since the translation had something of Wilde's style, and since they had no facts with which to refute the assertion of the publisher, they could do nothing beyond wondering when Sebastian Melmoth had done his literary hack work.

Robert Sherard, in "The Real Oscar Wilde," quotes M. Dupoirier, the landlord of the Hôtel d'Alsace, on Wilde's activities toward the end of his life: "He used to work at nights . . . all night long. As a rule he used to come in at one o'clock in the morning and sit down to his table, and in the morning he would show me what he had written, and 'I have earned a hundred francs tonight,' he would say."

What had Wilde been writing? Had he been doing work of which he kept secret from his friends? Who would have paid him at the rate of a hundred francs for the labor of a night? "At an important newspaper office," Sherard writes elsewhere in his book, "I was told that he had been invited to collaborate, regularly, a weekly *chronique* at three hundred francs the article." Had Wilde been writing part of such a *chronique*? Was that what he showed M. Dupoirier? Or, tortured by his intellectual impotence which, with for once bitter humor he called his *cacorthes tacendi*, was Wilde offering the simple Dupoirier hope that the debts he owed him would be paid—by a pen that had been broken in Reading Gaol? Whatever it was that kept him

at his table till morning, it was neither "What Never Dies" nor Petronius's pagan banquet; for on an end-leaf in colored paper, inserted in the edition of "The Picture of Dorian Gray" brought out in Paris in 1909 by Charles Carrington, there is a *nota bene* apprising the reader that the published no longer offers the two translations as the works of Sebastian Melmoth or Oscar Wilde.

Nevertheless short stories, poems, and other writings continued to be thrust upon the public . . .