Oscar Wilde

His Life and Confessions

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Frank Harris was a well-known rogue in his time. An Irish boy, a year or two younger than Wilde, but with a wild and mixed background as an enterprising youngster in the States, with a degree of law under his belt and a subsequent career as a journalist and successful editor and raconteur, whose multi-volumed autobiography 'My Life and Loves' was banned for many decades due to its graphic description of sexual acts. On the back-cover of the little slim paperback volume I picked up by chance in an antiquarian book-shop in Stockholm while hunting for Christmas presents for my children, there is a small fuzzy portrait of he author. It is hard to make anything out of the face, suppressed as it is in the shadow of a gigantic top hat, but one makes out a big burly moustache and a coarse, pockmarked face, intimating the virility of a sexually preying male, such a contrast to the passive, effeminity of the subject of his memoirs.

Harris did not like Wilde when he met him at first. He was appalled by his physical grossness. A towering height notwithstanding, but the effect of it was made gross by his bulk and the biliousness and dirtiness of his skin. His handshake was limp and he appeared over-dressed rather than well-dressed, and his appearance was furthermore marred by all kinds of tics. Soon, however, the author was overwhelmed by his charm, the beauty and quickness of his eyes matched by his outpuring wit. His talk was simply gorgeous. There never was a more refined nor more engaging talker. He was a master of the scene, and naturally always at the center of any social gathering.

Harris presents not so much a regular biography, systematically unfolding the development of a personality, as a recollection of anecdotes and past conversations, which make up most of the bulk of the book, and mostly take place after his release from prison, the last few years of his short life. Harris, is not considered very reliable, after all most of what he tells cannot be corroborated, and what can more often than not turns out not to be perfectly in accordance with the facts. Personal recollection is a most unreliable method of historical inquiry, and as such it thus does not pass muster with Collingwood who rejects it outright. Collingwood incidentally considers biography to a be most inferior case of history, speculative and merely entertaining at best. Harris memoirs are entertaining, once one allows oneself uncritically to embrace his tales. There is a thin line between memory and imagination, in fact it is not clear whether there even is one. Imagination is the most powerful tool to revive memory, and as such a most seductive one, Harris makes no amends about recalling verbatim long pieces of conversations and it stands to reason that most of it must simply be made up, in fact some of it may even have no precedence whatsoever in factual circumstances.

Wilde was a most voluble talker, and amusing as his surviving prose may be, one suspects that it might just be a pale shadow of the real thing. Presence means so much,

even the most prosaic of stories, may come to life through engaging enthusiasm, as we all know from our consorting with friends, and Wilde's voice was supposed to be mesmerizing, and his delivery artful and charming, employing all the hidden tricks of the trade. In fact, Harris notes, that it was not into his life Wilde put his genius as he claimed, but into his talk. Plays and stories, only being the outcomes of his talent. In fact, his talk only got better and better as he grew older, the author assures us.

Wilde was a precious plant nursed in the hothouses of exclusive schools and established universities. He made a success in the academic setting, going from one triumph to the other, winning prizes and the accolade of his fellow students and admiring tutors. But the world of school is not the real world, that is a commonplace that is often echoed. Harris notes that varsity students at least learn certain things, such as discipline, that serve them well in future occupations, no matter what they may turn out to be. Wilde learned nothing but to expect applause and sun himself in admiration. Leaving Oxford he was set to conquer the world of London. And that was another matter.

Wilde was utterly vain and with a self-confidence to support it. His vanity was for his own literary talents and the impression they could make. Not surprisingly he was also an unadultered snob, who reveled in titled society and set great store in formal entitlements. He was also kind, his wit was never sarcastic, always intended to amuse and win approval, never to hurt and wound and make enemies. His most decadent play, that of Salome, was illustrated by the young genius draughtsman Beardsley, with such a success, that his drawings outshone the play itself. However, the two, in spite of good intentions on the part of Wilde, never hit off. As Kenneth Clark observed in a an article in the NYR in 1976[1]that Beardsley had a far darker temperament than the shallow, sunny one of Wilde. Harris explains the lack of sympathy between the two by the typical Englishness of Wilde as far as taking exception to frankness of expression. Better to hint, than come out boldly. As far as Beardsley had an influence on him, it was for the worse, by darkening and hardening him. Like all charming personalities he was an unabashed egotist, and Harris remarks bitterly at the end that for all his kindness and generosity he never understood the value of friendship.

Basically Wilde was an aesthete, and in fact his interests were rather narrow, Harris remarks, being exclusively concerned with art and literature. But even his aesthetic interests were narrow, his French was quite good[2], and he was quite well-read as to French literature, but sadly lacking in German. A deeper acquaintance with Goethe would have done him good, Harries muses going on to claim that Goethe is indeed the best guide to the mysteries of Life whom the Modern World has of yet produced. But while Goethe also was interested in the good, Wilde professed only to be concerned with the beautiful, regardless of its moral value. Consequently he was dismissive of the poor, at best they could provide the virgin soil out of which geniuses, like himself, could grow. As noted he wanted to make an impression, and the way to do it was to repeat as often as you could how great you were, until, as he termed it, the dull crowd come to believe it. And there

[1] Actually in one of the first issues of that journal that I ever read, and I recall how impressed I was by the erudition and sophistication of the articles, going beyond anything I had up to then encountered.

[2] But 'Salome' which he wrote in French, was styled according to the simplicity of a Maeterlinck, in order to disguise his own deficiencies in literary composition, when that language was concerned

is a certain truth to this strategy of self-promotion. In the same vein, he claimed that he did not care what people said about him, as long as they talked. The wind that blows out a small fire, plays bellows to a large one, like himself.

Wilde was obviously homosexual, which was a crime in his days and would so remain until the 60's in England. An obsession that although socially condemned was most openly engaged in, especially by the upper classes, making for the kind of hypocrisy many see as the hallmark of Victorian Society. It is hard to make out the precise nature of Wilde's homosexual leanings, because the subject was never dwelled on in his prose nor in any of his recollections. However, it is tempting to see it as basically immature, an extension of the sentimentalism that pervaded many of the adolescent friendships nurtured in same-sex boarding schools, and celebrated in the poetry of the most acclaimed British poets of the 19th century. Technically Wilde was bisexual, at least for part of his adult life, as there is no reason to doubt his paternity of the issue that his marriage brought about[3]. One suspects that the physicality of sex appalled him, that he sought out the submissive position and confined love-making to furtive kisses and gentle, caresses, accompanied by purple protestations of love. His tongue sought not flesh as much as to unleash the spirit. What moved him was beauty, as he tried to explain to the puzzled Harris. The body of the young male is simply more beautiful than that of the woman, he claimed. The sculptor presented with the task of exhibiting the beauty of a nude woman is up to a challenge. The big fat hips have to be slimmed down and the frightful udders made into small firm globules. With the young man there are no such obstacles to perfection, it is present from the start.

Harris has a hard time sympathizing with the sexual proclivities of his friend. He makes no bones about it, he founds them vile and disgusting. He is puzzled by the romantic passion Wilde can be inspired by when it comes to young boys. Such encounters add nothing to your experience, a male can never bring anything to you that you do not already know, he argues. Differently it is with women, they can bring love and tenderness and devotion of the kind that a man is unable to provide. They bring mystery to life. Wilde counters that a male lover is far more understanding, his love is not marred by any kind of jealousy, he is only concerned with the happiness of his lover. To which Harris counters that the absence of jealousy is not a sign of high-mindedness as much as indifference. The kind of love that a woman can be brought to, is so much deeper and more intense. Wilde protests. His ideal is that of the pagan Greeks, and he finds support in his sexual proclivities from the greatest of artists, referring to Michelangelo and Shakespeare. Harris, who is about to write biographies on the great bard, begs to differ, there is no evidence that those famous sonnets are actually addressed to a male lover. Harris wants his Shakespeare solidly heterosexual. Naturally such interchanges must remain inconclusive. Bur it is interesting to note in retrospect that while Wilde prophesizes that society will become more and more tolerant as to so called deviant sexual tastes, Harris claims that prejudice has its points. That by reason alone we would fatten babies and eat them on the spit, as human flesh is supposed to be delicious, but that we are barred to do so by inherent

[3] In Ellmann's biography it is stated that Wilde incurred syphilis as a student from consorting with prostitutes in a brothel, and that this condition eventually killed him. Harris incidentally, instead refers to an abcess by his ear, resulting from an accident in prison.

prejudices. The same way with homosexuality he reasons, a temporary fad, which will be abandoned. There is a very good survival reason for such prejudice, he points out, mouthing arguments, which today would be given a Darwian selective touch.

The life of Wilde was heading towards disaster. And in retrospect it is almost as if it was willed. His nemesis was Lord Alfred Douglas, a beautiful youth of twenty-one who had a penchant for turning out charming verse to boot. Wilde was caught by his beauty, and his modest talent simply rationalized his desire, while his social standing and title, egged him on further. Douglas was a spoiled youth, the kind of dandy who epitomizes the leisured life of charmed circles at the turn of the century, and who would later morph into the playboy of the mid 20th century. Used to inexhaustible fonts of cash he introduced into the life of Wilde a financial recklessness going counter to the prudence of the latter. Furthermore Douglas was embroiled in a bitter family quarrel with his father, a beastly fellow of only the coarsest tastes, who also had antagonized his wife, who was divorcing him. Wilde was never a man of action, as Harris will have many an opportunity to regret, his forte was the social scene and the witty epigram, and being blinded by love, he willingly let himself be used by the young Douglas, and encouraged by solicitors brought a suit for libel against the Marquise of Queensberry, the father of the young rascal. He was assured by his legal council that he had every chance to win. Of course Wilde had no real opinion of his own, common sense should have held him back, what better argument of a father than to protect his son. And furthermore Wilde may not have been exactly forthcoming when it came to describing his position to his lawyers. Although Wilde made a spirited defense at the box, the defense had brought incriminating evidence against him, and Wilde in conjunction with his lawyers, sought it best to beat a retreat. But there was a catch to such an admission, by accepting that the accusations of Queensberry were not libelous, Wilde admitted that they were true, and hence making himself the target of legal proceedings[4]. Now, in normal circumstances, the authorities would have warned him, allowing him to escape to the continent, just as they had allowed countless other offenders, not only among the upper classes, to escape ridiculous laws. Ridiculous, because they were so openly and generally flaunted, especially by the peers of the law-enforcers. But these were not normal circumstances, Wilde was a celebrity. Raised to the skies by a coterie of young leisured men with literary pretensions, admired by multitudes, but also envied and shunned, his fall made the mob, of which the media makes up the avant-garde smell blood. There is no reason for us to moralize, the same thing would happen today if a controversial media-personality were suspected of being a pedophiliac. The sensation would be immense. Wilde could still escape. His friend Harris procured a yacht ready to take off on a minutes notice. It is so easy, Harris tries to persuade him to raise above his inertia, to allow himself to be whisked to the dock, and twenty-four hours later dine in a nice French sea-side restaurant. It would not even be illegal, as long as he would return by the time set for the trial, would he get second thoughts. Wilde is tempted, sorely tempted, the prospects brings tears to his eyes. But still he cannot take the plunge. Harris, a man of action, is exasperated, and realizes that Wilde is far too effeminate, too mired into the

[4] One is reminded of the unhappy case of the British historian Irving, who brought a suit against his critics for libel, and thus ended up in an Austrian jail as a holocaust denier. The situation here was less straightforward as there is no legal injunction against holocaust denial in the UK.

world of thought, and thus the courage he may process is just the courage of obduracy. All the arguments, such as failing those who put up his bail[5], or that he would live in constant fear of being apprehended by foreign police, could easily be disposed of. In the end, Harris has to concede defeat.

Two trials follow in quick order. The defense is competent but not exceptional nor inspired. No effort is made to bring up the animosity residing between son and father. Wilde himself has lost his spirit, in fact he never was a fighter, as Harris ruefully notes, and the judge is prejudiced against him, bringing up in his summary to the jury, claims such as Wilde having been a corrupter of innocent youth which had not in any way been established in the court proceedings[6], were freely bandied around. Wilde never got a fair trial, and besides he was in fact guilty of what the law disapproved of, which further set limits to the success of any defense. The judge gave him the harshest punishment that the law could give, namely two years of hard labor.

The contrast between his former pampered life and the conditions of a English jail, could not have been greater. Harris notes, that conditions in France and Germany were far more humane than in England, and there is little reason to doubt him, this being in the 1890's. Wilde became a broken man. The food was inedible, the plank on which to sleep made insomnia inevitable, the wardens, with some exceptions, were harsh and hostile, and he was denied books to read and paper to write on. Only a collapse gave him a reprieve by sending him to an infirmary. Eventually he was moved to Reading, and the authorities were understanding of his condition and allowed it to be much easened. He was given leisure to read and write, his spirits rose and he wrote 'de Profundis' in jail, a book to which I will return. However, Harris attempts to petition for an earlier release of Wilde failed. On legal grounds Wilde was not eligible for early release based on good conduct, as he had been subjected to many petty punishments by the prison authorities, which was not thought indicative of exemplary conduct. But the necessary signatures for a petition, which could have overruled, turned out to be hard to get. As Harris notes, the kind of collegiate loyalty present among writers on the continent, was not to be found in England. The acclaimed poet Meridith refused to sign, and so did others, no one wanting to be associated with Wilde. Harris, at the time engaged in the upcoming Boer war, gave up, but perhaps more persistence on his part may have born fruit. Although Harris may at first have believed in the innocence of Wilde, he was soon relieved of his illusions, nevertheless he was to champion the cause of his friend, arguing that against the professed vileness of Wildes conduct one should balance his merits and the greatness of his literary accomplishments. Why should generals, attacking unarmed naives in Africa, be given special treatment, and not artists and writers? The immortality of a politician is of short duration, who will in a hundred years remember Gladstone and Disraeli and to that he adds a couple of names

[5] When the warrant was brought against Wilde, his house was ransacked and his belongings, including manuscripts, were spread to the wind bringing home just a fraction of what they were actually worth, resulting in a bankruptcy. When Wilde needed his money the most, it was taken away from him, reducing him to a helpless dependency on the goodwill of his friends, of whom there would naturally be much less than one would normally expect.

[6] In fact the youth with which Wilde had consorted could be described as male prostitutes.

unknown to me[7], but Wilde certainly will remain in the public eye. Of course Gladstone and Disraeli are still remembered by the educated, but Wilde's reputation goes beyond that, so Harris was not too far off.

After release from prison Wilde was a changed man, but for the better according to Harris. He had lost a lot of weight and seemed in much better health[8]. And more to the point, his tenure in jail had taught him a lesson, he had begun to clearly appreciate Christian virtues and become attuned to pity and compassion in ways he previously had been unable to appreciate. Harris considers Wilde at the release to be on top of his powers. In addition to his wit he had now acquired depth, he claimed referring to the above mentioned book 'de Profundis' and the 'Ballad of Reading Goal' as testimonies, as well as pointing to his letters on prison reform as indicative of an awakened social conscience. The ballad he refers to as the best ballad ever written in the English language. This strikes me as hyperbole, but not being attuned to poetry I cannot pass judgement. However, when I read 'de Profundis' in my twenties, I was at first shocked by the outpourings of the author, so very different from those I had come to associate him with. Then I read along with some measure of sympathy, especially provoked by his diatribe against his former lover, but found his religious fervor somewhat affected and not ringing true. And I guess Wilde must have felt something similar, because in spite of the experiences imprisonment had brought him, he could not draw on it. Instead it hampered him, because sorrow interfered with his sunny temperament. He who was made to sing the love songs of joy and pleasure, could find neither in sorrow, which he hated[9]. Chastity, he found no more ennobling than hunger, and definitely as pointless. Christian virtues soon lost their appeal, by character and habit he was a Greek pagan, and it was only a matter of time before he wold revert to his old indulgent self. The expectations of Harris that sorrow would add depth to his writing and let it resonate more fully, was a vain and unfounded one.

And in fact the new Wilde did not last long. In spite of initial enthusiasm staying on the French channel coast, he soon got bored. He was not joined by his wife as soon as he had hoped, and instead he succumbed to the siren calls of Douglas from Naples. That did him in. The revival of the affair with Douglas (which so shocked me after having read his diatribe) was short-lived and after that Wilde was a a broken man. Harris tried in vain to make him work again, but Wilde refused. How can I expect to work under such dingy circumstances he told him, and Harris brought him down on his own expense (having sold the Saturday Review, which he had edited successfully also from a financial aspect) to the Riviera, but to no avail. Wilde could not do it? Why? Harris is flabbergasted at his refusal. He has fame and notoriety, anything he writes is sure to sell. By getting his own

[7] Wolseley, Roberts and Wood. Similarly Wilde asks who will remember Curzon, Wyndham or Blunt a hundred years hence. Curzon, I know of, but only because some deeper acquaintance with colonial Indian history than is expected.

[8] One is reminded of American prisoners of War during the Vietnam War, who suffered abuse, but nevertheless were released in better physical shape due to a healthier diet, and what more, kept the habits of less food and less meat, and thus made their improvement permanent. A health-cure can take strange forms.

[9] A typical Wildean remark, is that doctors are silly, who regard pleasures as their natural enemies, when it is our pleasures that provide them with a means of living.

income he will soon be financially independent and lead the life of pleasure to which he was accustomed, and to which he had reverted after his short fling with religion. But Wilde refuses, he has written enough already, he cannot do it anymore. In a way one must agree with Wilde. His refusal does him honor in a sense, proving that he was unable to write for money, in spite of his easy bragging while not yet brought down[10], when the inspiration was lacking.

Wilde was still as charming as ever[11], his talk as brilliant, but it left no trace. Harris returned to England, and a few months later, Wilde died. No other friend of his, who had passed away, does he miss more than Wilde, none was better company.

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[10] At one time he had two immensely successful plays running at the same time in London. He could have five, he claimed because writing was so easy to him, it all boiled down to a need for money.

[11] Harris relates the story of a plain French lady author who wanted to make the acquaintance of Wilde. She apologized and claimed that she was the ugliest woman in France. No, of the world, Madame, Wilde retorted right away.