

ON THE OCCASION OF A
SENSATIONAL TRIAL

Eduard Bernstein

London,
April, 1895

“Reggie, are you going to make this marriage?”

*“I don’t know”, said the boy, rather fretfully.
“Do you want me to?”*

“I never want any one to do anything. And I should be delighted to continue not paying for your suppers. Besides, I am afraid that marriage might cause you to develop, and then I should lose you. Marriage is a sort of forcing house. It brings strange sins to fruit, and sometimes strange renunciations. . . .

I should be afraid for you to marry, Reggie! So few people have sufficient strength to resist the preposterous claims of orthodoxy. They promise and vow in matrimony, Reggie? – and they keep their promises. Nothing is so fatal to a personality as the keeping of promises, unless it be telling the truth. To lie finely is an Art, to tell the truth is to act according to Nature, and Nature is the first of the Philistines. Nothing on earth is so absolutely middle-class as Nature. She always reminds me of Clement Scott’s articles in the Daily Telegraph. No, Reggie, do not marry unless you have the strength to be a bad husband.”

“I have no intention of being a good one,” Reggie said earnestly. . . .It is only people without brains who make good husbands. Virtue is generally merely a form of deficiency, just as vice is an assertion of intellect. Shelley showed the poetry that was in his soul more by his treatment of Harriet than by his writing of ‘Adonais’; and if Byron had never broken his wife’s heart, he would have been forgotten even sooner than he has been. No, Esme; I shall not make a good husband.”

“. . .Waiter, open another bottle of champagne, and bring some more strawberries. Yes it is not easy to be wicked, although stupid people think so. To sin beautifully, as you sin, Reggie, and as I have sinned for years, is one of the most complicated of the arts. There are hardly six people in a century who can master it. Sin has its technique, just as painting has its technique. . . . How exquisitely coloured these strawberries are, yet if Sargent painted them he would idealise them, would give to them a beauty such as Nature never gave to anything. So it is with the artist in sinning. He improves upon the sins that Nature has put, as it were, ready to his hand. He idealises, he invents, he develops. . . .The passion of the creator is upon him. The man who invents a new sin is greater than the man who invents a new religion, Reggie. . . .What sin that has ever been invented has every been demolished? There are always new human beings springing into life to commit it, and to find pleasure in it. Reggie, some day I

will write a gospel of strange sins, and I will persuade the S.P.C.K Society to publish it in dull, misty scarlet, powdered with golden devils."

"Oh Esme, you are great!"

"How true that its! And how seldom people tell the truths that are worth telling. We ought to choose our truths as carefully as we choose our lies, and to select our virtues with as much thought as we bestow upon the selection of our enemies. Conceit is one of the greatest virtues, yet how few people recognise it as a thing to aim at and to strive after. In conceit many a man and woman has found salvation, yet the average person goes on all fours grovelling after modesty. You and I, Reggie, at least have found that salvation. We know ourselves as we are, and understand our own greatness. We do not hoodwink ourselves into the blind belief that we are ordinary men, with the intellects of Cabinet Ministers, or the passions of the proletariat. No, we - Closing time, waiter? How absurd! Why is it forbidden in England to eat strawberries after midnight, or to go to bed at one o'clock in the day?"

This conversation is taken from a book which appeared less than a year ago and is called, The Green Carnation. It is an extraordinarily successful piece of persiflage by a modern English sensationalist author. The speeches put in the mouths of the hero and his young friend in the story are mostly gathered from the sayings of their originals and always remain in character. To anyone familiar with his writings and public

behaviour it was immediately obvious that “Esme Amaranth” was none other than the poet and artistic writer, Oscar Wilde, and anyone informed of Wilde’s associates also knew that the original of “Lord Reginald (Reggie) Hastings” in the story was Lord Alfred Douglas, the son of the eccentric Marquis of Queensberry. The author or authors of the persiflage - the book is supposed to have two originators - had enough taste to confine themselves to describing Wilde’s literary personality manifested by the way he wrote and spoke, as well as the way he behaved in public. However, a row between Wilde and the father of his young friend has now revealed one of the more intimate sides of his private life to the public at large. And this has occurred just as the success of several of Wilde’s comedies has brought him fame outside the limited circle of artistic litterateurs and their readers. He is accused of the practice of male love and his conviction has proceeded to the extent that he has now to account for himself in court.

It is relevant to seek an inner link between Wilde’s literary and sexual inclinations, and to a certain extent such a link can be easily proven. Wilde, as a literary person is utterly ‘decadent’, a pupil and imitator - if not a mimic - of the French decadent literateurs, whose first conscious and most famous exponent was Baudelaire, author of Fleurs du mal. In an excellent essay by Wilhelm Weigand about the latter, we find sentences which apply literally to Wilde.

“Naïve freshness of spirit is united in him with the whims of worn-out fancy. . . .The inclination for the artificial and the histrionic emerged very early in this child of the city, whose entire youth lacked the wholesome background of free, pure, healthy nature. . . .The word ‘dandy’ takes on a quite singular meaning for Baudelaire: for him the dandy is a kind of gentleman who. . . .is very intelligent and above all fears being duped. . . .Instead of plucking the usual rose, he prefers the lily or violet, the burning, luminous, poisonous plants with the bewitching scent. . . .He is at odds with nature, and dreams of a landscape composed of marble created by the hand of man. . . .a task for unwholesome epicures, revellers in fancies, and romantics who gladly seek the most forbidden pleasures of modern life. . . .He believes in sin, but always as fanfaron de son viceApart from (theoretical) cruelty we also find self-deification, auto-idolatry. . . .His poetry is artistic, his words: *l’art pour l’art*, are of romantic origin. . . .An over-cultivated product of civilisation, he approaches the barbarian. Clever and discriminating people saw that Baudelaire’s forced pose made him a charlatan, whilst the outer appearance (*Hautgout* – trans.) of his feelings ensnared young, immature,*

* the boaster of his vice

impressionable minds into seeing originality in corruption.”**

Baudelaire has been dead for nearly thirty years, and thus one can view the Wilde of today not so much as his pupil as his Epigone. Perhaps the word ‘importer’ will fit Wilde, for it took a lot to make protestant England accept this particular fruit from the tree of modern experience. Even now there is the consolation that it was a born Irishman - Wilde is the son of a Dublin doctor - who was the medium. However, Wilde with all the daring of his race only took the lead in opening up the English market for this imported commodity; he did not remain the only importer. England’s insular days are gone - both economically and spiritually. Despite their laws about labelling the country of origin, the English are not even in a position to protect themselves from deception about the origin of articles in the majority of cases. The circumstances which created decadent literature in France also exist in England, perhaps even to a greater extent, for England became urbanised - if we may express ourselves in this way - in quite different conditions to France. Living in a city makes everyone blasé, its stimulants outbid the simple pleasures and thus constantly blunt the susceptibilities in this epoch of exaggerated competition. In the last century, dissatisfied townsfolk sought out the open

** From “*Zur psychologie der Decadence*” (On the Psychology of Decadence – trans.) in Essays, by Wilhelm Weigand, (Munich, G. Franz). This convincing and controversial book is the product of great learning and fine analysis.

country under the delusion that they would find there that innocent and pure paradise which they lacked in the town. But at close quarters, the innocence of the countryside appeared to be quite different to what the townsfolk had imagined, and the true townsman soon got disgusted with it. Then came the epoch of travel: that which could not be found at home was sought abroad - outside one's own or any civilisation. But travel has lost its charm as well, or at least only keeps it for a brief duration. The civilised man is chained to the arrangements of the modern city; he can never again do without them. He flees from them, yet carries as many of them along with him as he can. Schiller could be altered to read:

*The world remains a simple place
Till townsman comes with harrowed face.**

For them hotels soon go up, post and telegraph communications are established, newspaper shops are opened, etc. It is only those who emigrate 'to make money', who can hold out without the benefits of civilisation for any length of time, but there is an ever-growing corresponding increase in the number of rentiers and capitalists for whom money is made 'somewhere abroad', and nowhere is this number greater than in England, the biggest colonial country in the world.

It is for this reason that it suffers from the effects of surfeit more than anywhere else. In

* *Die Welt behält inren Charackter uberall, wo der Grossstadtler nicht hinkommt mit seiner Qual.*

France - or rather, Paris - the signs began to show earlier, but that is because life there lacked certain safety valves. To the Parisian, Paris is the world, whilst the English gentlemen were by far the first to seek out opportunities abroad to relieve their feelings. They have arranged everything so thoroughly that the travelling Englishman is certain to find England, Englishmen and English institutions in any place worth visiting. Travel has become banal, escape from civilisation has lost its charm for those who have found that they hate the vulgar - for people with fine-feeling, sensitive natures, and those who wish to pass as such. The substitute is to become over-civilised, to develop the cult of the unusual, the abnormal, of the cultural foundation of civilisation. They know that this is a symbol of decay and for this reason they provocatively call themselves, "*Decadents*".

The decadent is, after all, a not very untypical descendent from the romantic. Unlike the latter, he does not look to the past, but neither does he look to the future, regarding which he remains sceptical. He does not seek the bloom of romanticism upon the mountains, in the battlements of ruined castles, or in pictures of the future, but in the fashionable dens of the metropolis. The refinement of a metropolitan existence appeals to him. In fact, taking the "*green carnation*" as the symbol of decadence was very much to the point. This flower does not owe its colour to nature, but to the hand of man, to the craftsman; it is not even cultivated, but simply dyed - a *gilded* bloom. Nature is not able to bring

forth such a sublime product: it is “*beyond nature’s power of invention*”, says Amaranth-Wilde. For him, nature is “*middle class*”. Like the romantic, the decadent hates and despises the bourgeoisie, and this opposition is even more anachronistic in his case, and mostly only affected; for the decadent is chained to the bourgeois world by all his fibres. Artistically, he is the modern court jester. His paradoxes and cynicisms amuse the bourgeoisie, just as the corrupt jokes of the court-jesters once amused princes, even when made at their expense. But the court-jester is no revolutionary. He speaks the truth only if and when his “*art*” requires it.

Oscar Wilde’s cynicisms and paradoxes were famous in London. They formed the strong side of his pieces and were disseminated with ecstatic delight by the press and in the clubs and salons. And neither can it be disputed that they were often very witty, for even if Wilde was not original, he was undoubtedly at least a talented epigone. Several of his poems are very beautiful, and his French-language, dramatic poem, Salome, is most impressive. But his paradoxes are over-valued; anyone who practises these can easily acquire virtuosity. Exaggerate every sentence a bit, incorporate a bit (and sometimes more than a bit) of untruth, stir the mixture somewhat, and one has a paradox with a seed of truth, which appears subtle and often enough is quite ordinary underneath: schoolboy wit which only impresses because it confounds. And it is the same with cynicism.

What does this cult of cynicism, paradox and refinement in literature and art relate to in real life?

Occasionally, every author feels the urge to shake the self-satisfied establishment or to puzzle the mean bourgeois understanding. But anyone who makes a profession out of speaking paradoxes, makes cynicism a cult, glorifies the abnormal simply because it is unusual, must finally become his own victim, even if the cult was originally only a pose. Manners maketh man. The false prophet finally comes to believe his lies. It may be that Oscar Wilde and the boys who shared his suppers and who were allowed to address him by his Christian name, did nothing to offend the law, but his art, his writing - the intellectual direction which marks all his utterances, his pose is pederastic. I don't know how well informed the authors of the "Green Carnation" were about his private life. In any case they have delineated the character of his "muse" both clearly and discretely.

"How I hate that word natural", they have Amarinth say on one occasion. "To me it means all that is middle-class, all that is the essence of jingoism, all that is colourless, and without form, and void. It might be a beautiful word, but it is the most debased coin in the currency of language. . . A boy is unnatural if he prefers looking at pictures to playing cricket, or dreaming over the white naked beauty of a Greek statue to a game of football under Rugby rules. If our virtues are not cut on a pattern, they

*are unnatural. If our vices are not according to rule, they are unnatural. . . . Nature is generally purely vulgar, just as many women are vulgarly pure. There are only a few people in the world who dare to defy the grotesque code of rules that has been drawn up by that fashionable mother, Nature, and they defy - as many women drink, and many men are vicious - in secret, with the door locked and the key in their pockets. And what is life to them? They can always hear the footsteps of the detective in the street outside.”**

There is much truth in these words. The misuse of the word “natural” is often infuriating, but fine words can cover many a mean view. The question is, what relevance has this to the case against Wilde?

Wilde has countered the testimony of the boys appearing as crown witnesses by calling attention to his aesthetic sensibilities, his artistic feelings, his good taste. It was the same with the cynicisms held up to him from his writings. He asks not what their effect could be upon ill-read people, but only whether they are art, whether they work as literature. But here the word “art” is mis-used in the same way as “nature”. The doctrine of art for art’s sake, the release of art from everything which lives and should live in the popular consciousness, the proclamation of art as the preserve of an initiated aristocratic freemasonry - this double think is corrupt: it is far

* Quotes are from the 1961 Icon edition, pages 29-32, and p82. “The Green Carnation” by Robert Hichens was first published in 1894. (trans.)

more dangerous to society than the actions of which Wilde was accused. We will think no worse of Wilde if he was found guilty, and no better if the jury acquit him. Whatever the law says, his actions were quite inconsequential. It is the mental outlook which he represented and to which he gave expression which is important and this cannot be conjured out of existence by a legal code so long as it continues to be fed by social conditions. *“Every civilisation”,* says Weigand in the essay quoted above, *“founders in the figurative sense on some epidemic of pleasure; the will to power or the will to pleasure can be taken as the essence of life.”* That is a very true observation.

Male love, like abnormalities of sexual behaviour in general, as existed amongst the most various of peoples and at very different levels of cultural development and no conclusions about the viability of a society as a whole can be drawn from isolated occurrences of this kind. Not that Wilde’s case was an isolated one; the police in recent years have repeatedly closed down the temples of this cult and it emerged from the statements of witnesses at Wilde’s trial, that the police knew a lot more than they were saying and that they simply take no action unless the proofs are almost forced on them. They were very familiar with the lodgings of Wilde’s fellow accused, Taylor, and with his visitors of both categories, and but for the row between Wilde and the Marquis of Queensberry, none of this would have come to light, which indeed would have been no great loss. For, as has been said before, anyone

familiar with his writings knew what Wilde was, or rather is, even without these revelations; it is the would-be witnesses for the prosecution, the Pharisees of the press and the hypocritical public who are playing by far the most despicable role in the trial. Hardly had the young boys, who according to their own testimony, had first sold themselves to Wilde, and then sold the man who bought them, given evidence, than Wilde was ostracised. His "*Oscarisms*", his cynical bonmots, etc. had been applauded - two of his pieces were currently box office successes. But that he had actually acted according to his "*morals*" and that he had furthermore allowed himself to get caught, seemed unpardonable. Everything changed for him, and the directors of the theatres who had acquired his pieces - of what is injured morality not capable? - removed not his pieces, but his name, from the posters. This mean trick was too low even for the "*non-conformist conscience*" - for sectarian hypocrisy - but it illustrates the unprincipled nature of society, which had relished Wilde's art most. But one must not be fooled on this account into thinking that the "*decadents*", as an articulate party, only form a small minority in art and literature. It is not a matter of how many people openly espouse a thing, but of the influence they exercise, and their relationship to the public. There is, however, no doubt that the influence of decadence or of decadent consciousness on the rest of the literature on the matter is unmistakeably extraordinary.

Wilde's trial will soon come to an end. In a second article, we will devote some time to its criminological aspect.