



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 3, Issue 2

Winter 2020

Review: Michèle Mendelssohn, *Making Oscar Wilde* (Oxford University Press, 2018)
& Matthew Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life* (Head of Zeus Ltd, 2018)

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ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 December 2020

Date of Publication: 21 December 2020

Citation: Richard Haslam, 'Michèle Mendelssohn, *Making Oscar Wilde* (Oxford University Press, 2018) & Matthew Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life* (Head of Zeus Ltd, 2018)', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 3.2 (2020), 143–149.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v3i2.1457.g1570

volupte.gold.ac.uk



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Michèle Mendelsohn, *Making Oscar Wilde*
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 360 pp.
ISBN 9780198802365

Matthew Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life*
(London: Head of Zeus Ltd, 2018), 890 pp.
ISBN 9781788545976

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In 'The Critic as Artist' (1890; 1891), Oscar Wilde's spokesperson Gilbert declares 'Every great man nowadays has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography.'¹ One book that bears out Gilbert's claim is Lord Alfred Douglas' *Oscar Wilde and Myself* (1914), but many later biographers have served Wilde more charitably, and none more so than Richard Ellmann, whose influential 1987 account concludes that Wilde was 'so generous, so amusing, and so right'.²

Of course, as Horst Schroeder and others have argued, Ellmann's book (although itself 'generous' and 'amusing') was not always 'right' about the details of Wilde's life, and Matthew Sturgis mentions this deficiency as one justification for producing another biography. Sturgis' other justifications include the discovery of significant documents and the introduction of novel research perspectives and techniques over the past three decades. In particular, Sturgis and fellow Wilde biographer Michèle Mendelsohn emphasize the importance of recently digitalized archives for the recovery of fresh information about Wilde's life. Drawing upon these resources, they have filled their deeply-researched biographies with absorbing new insights on Wilde's life and art. At the same time, their differing emphases furnish insights into the hermeneutics of biography.

Mendelsohn focuses principally on Wilde's visit to the USA from January to December 1882. (She does not examine his lecture-tour visits to Canada in May and October 1882, nor his second visit to the USA, from August to September 1883, when he attended the New York premiere of his play *Vera; or, The Nihilists*.) Part One (comprising a fifth of the book) briskly scans Wilde's development from 1854 to 1881; Part Two (around three fifths of the book) investigates

in depth his USA lecture tour from January to July 1882; and Part Three rapidly surveys his careering career from 1883 to 1900. This choice of temporal structure arises from Mendelssohn's framing of the biography as a 'quest to solve the mystery of Wilde's identity', a project catalyzed by her archival encounter with some of the racist caricatures that assailed Wilde during his American tour.³ For the book's epigraph, she chooses W. B. Yeats's claim that '[t]here is for every man some one scene, some one adventure, some one picture that is the image of his secret life, for wisdom first speaks in images' (p. 1). This seems to imply that Wilde's 1882 American tour was the key 'adventure' of his 'secret life,' the solution to 'the mystery'.

Mendelssohn's hypothesis may strike some readers as surprising, given Wilde's declaration in *De Profundis* (1897) that one of 'the two great turning-points of my life' was 'when my father sent me to Oxford'. He hoped someday to 'be able to say' that the second major 'turning-point' was 'when society sent me to prison'.⁴ However, Mendelssohn explicitly labels her approach 'a revisionist history of Wilde's early life and rise to fame', and even if one ultimately remains unconvinced that the 1882 tour constitutes the Casaubonic key to all Wildean mythologies, her biography encourages readers to view the circumstances and significance of those crucial months with new eyes. The book's other major goal – and major success – is to offer 'an intimate history' of the 'powerful globalizing mechanisms' of 'America's ethnic melting pot and Britain's imperial enterprise' in the late nineteenth century (p. 6). According to Mendelssohn, 'Wilde's place in this system fluctuated dramatically from high to low', since 'America's ethnic hierarchies put Irishmen and blacks together at the bottom, a precarious social position' that Wilde struggled to overcome during his visit (pp. 6–7).

In Part One, she foreshadows the racially charged features of Wilde's American tour by highlighting three elements: the experiences of Christian Cole (an African student who attended the University of Oxford at the same time as Wilde); the presence of an American slaveholder in Wilde's family (his mother's brother); and *Punch's* use of blackface Christy minstrel allusions to attack Wilde's *Poems* (1881). In Part Two, Mendelssohn examines caricatures, songs, advertising,

Christy minstrel sketches, and student protests, in tracking the racist satirizing of Wilde during the first seven months of his American tour. She also shows how Wilde's observations about African Americans and the Confederacy sometimes reveal him to be not only a target of racism but also a perpetrator. Finally, in Part Three, she searches for evidence of how Wilde's tour experiences might have informed his later writings, especially the society plays.

I read Mendelssohn's biography in June 2020, a month after the killing of George Floyd in the USA led to worldwide anti-racist protests, calls to defund the police, the toppling of Confederacy statues, and apologies by several white comedians for using blackface. Against that backdrop, her skilful examination of nineteenth-century racist stereotyping (especially the exploration of Christy minstrelsy's popularity in the USA and UK) achieves a painful and powerful contemporary relevance. However, the book is less persuasive in demonstrating precisely how Wilde's experience of racist satire affected his sense of self and art. Mendelssohn acknowledges that 'Wilde didn't mention these satirists in his correspondence', so she has to speculate that they must have 'had an effect' on the later creation of what she calls 'his own kind of whiteface theatre' (p. 239). It is true that Charles Brookfield's *The Poet and the Puppets* (1892), a 'Travestie' on Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), employs Christy minstrelsy allusions (briefly) in its mockery. It is also true that *Punch and Judy* and the *Guardian* newspaper compared the dialogue in *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) to Christy minstrelsy exchanges. But these (astutely researched) discoveries do not constitute definitive proof that Wilde deliberately drew upon minstrelsy devices. As Mendelssohn admits, 'Nowhere did he mention that [his dramatic techniques] were also hallmarks of Christy minstrelsy' (p. 231), and so her argument that his 'approach' was 'minstrel-inspired' relies more on inference than explicit evidence (p. 239). Nevertheless, by highlighting the reviewers' Christy minstrelsy comparisons, she provides fresh and fruitful scholarly contexts for Wilde's society plays, and the biography as a whole motivates readers to rethink the significance and influence of his first American visit.

Towards the close of her book, Mendelssohn notes that Wilde's autobiographical efforts in *De Profundis* to convert 'chaos' into 'order' inadvertently draw attention to 'the thickets of experience that had been cut down to size or cleared altogether to create a well-ordered panorama' (p. 251). Of course, the '[b]lessed rage for order' (as Wallace Stevens called it) can curse biographers too.⁵ In the preface to his mammoth 900-page study of Wilde, Matthew Sturgis maintains that Richard Ellmann's 'approach was that of a literary critic rather than an historian': '[t]he Life is seen largely through the prism of the Work', and this led Ellmann 'not to pay as much attention as he might have done to the facts and the chronology of Wilde's life, or to the testing and assessing [of] his sources'. Sturgis also disagrees with Ellmann's decision to structure Wilde's life as 'Greek tragedy, foreshadowing the narrative arc from the outset, and suggesting an awful inevitability to its course'. Instead, he seeks 'to return Wilde to his times, and to the facts', '[t]o view him with an historian's eye, to give a sense of contingency, to chart his own experience of his life as he experienced it'.⁶

Overall, Sturgis succeeds in this goal, positioning the reader on the ground and in the moment, not with the gods, gazing down coolly from above. In addition, he devotes more space than did Ellmann to Wilde's experiences at Portora Royal School and Trinity College Dublin. (Sturgis claims that Ellmann devotes 'scarcely more than a couple of pages' [p. xiv] to Portora, but the actual number is seven, spread out over Chapter One.) Yet, in expanding these youthful episodes, he frequently relies upon Frank Harris, whose 1916 biography *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions* includes (as Sturgis himself admits) 'its moments of invention' (p. 719). The same goes for Robert Sherard's Wilde biographies, from which Sturgis also draws regularly. Nevertheless, Sturgis draws upon plenty of other sources and unearths little-known events from Wilde's earlier life. Scholars of the Irish Wilde will be intrigued to learn that, in August 1878, shortly after graduating from Oxford with a Double First and winning the Newdigate prize for his poem *Ravenna* (1878), Wilde delivered a short talk in Ireland to visiting members of the British Association: standing in front of the cromlech at Howth, he stated that the location also contained

the tomb of the legendary Irish hero Oscar and declared that ‘the ancient Irish believed a bard could, by poetic invective, bring down temporal misfortune on the object of his satire’ (p. 130).

Wilde’s brother Willie chronicled this event, and Sturgis’ biography reveals how frequently Willie boosted Oscar’s growing celebrity in the late 1870s and early 1880s, using his journalistic contacts to plant stories in Irish and British journals, a process Willie termed ‘the trick of advertisement’ (p. 173). Sturgis also deftly traces the intricate interactions and appropriations between Wilde and the caricatures of aestheticism featured in *Punch* magazine (especially through the drawings of George du Maurier) and between Wilde and the characters of Gilbert and Sullivan’s comic opera *Patience* (1881). Although Mendelssohn provides many examples of Wilde’s education in self-promotion during his American tour, Sturgis reveals just how hard the Wilde brothers worked before 1882 in order to make Oscar the kind of celebrity deemed worthy of such a tour.

Since *Volupté* is a journal of decadence studies, readers may wish to know whether and how these biographies address that multivalent concept. Mendelssohn’s main focus is on Wilde in 1882, so decadence features infrequently, but her book’s design would be appreciated by the decadent (and bibliophilic) protagonist of Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890; 1891): the dustcover’s hot pink font repeats on the book’s spine and resplendently saturates the end-sheets and flyleaves. (The volume also includes 48 plates, 11 of them in colour.) Unsurprisingly, Sturgis, the author of *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s* (1995) and a biography of Aubrey Beardsley (1999), highlights decadence in his Wilde biography. He traces the impact on Wilde of English sources such as A. C. Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads* (1866) and Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) (which Wilde called ‘the very flower of decadence’), as well as the crucial significance of Wilde’s stay in Paris from late January to mid May 1883 (supported by money from the American tour).⁷ As Sturgis shows, by re-reading dead writers like Charles Baudelaire and Théophile Gautier and encountering living writers like Paul Bourget, Maurice Rollinat, and Paul

Verlaine, Wilde educated himself about ‘*Les Décadents*’ and began to write and revise poems in that style.

Another significant visit to Paris occurred a year later, during Wilde’s honeymoon, when he read Joris-Karl Huysmans’s novel *À rebours* (1884), which Sturgis (reworking Wilde on Pater) terms ‘the very breviary of decadence’ (p. 310). As Sturgis notes, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, reviewing *Dorian Gray*, claimed that Wilde’s key ‘inspiration’ was ‘the aesthetic paganism of the French “Decadents”’ (p. 399), especially *À rebours*; and *The Daily Chronicle* called *Dorian Gray* ‘a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French *Décadents*’ (p. 401). Upon Wilde’s conviction in 1895, the *National Observer* jeeringly labelled him ‘the High Priest of the Decadents’, of whose ‘hideous conceptions of the meaning of Art’ and ‘worse than Eleusinian mysteries, there must be an absolute end’ (p. 564). In addition, Sturgis notes that when staying in Naples with Douglas, two years later, Wilde was dismissively called ‘the English *Decadent*’ by a few local newspapers (p. 655).

Sturgis’ attention to decadence allows readers to view Wilde’s post-prison years in a new light. After publishing *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), Wilde achieved the final stage of his often-expressed wish to turn his life into a work of art. Meeting Laurence Housman in Paris in late September 1899, he stated:

I told you that I was going to write something: I tell everybody that. It is a thing one can repeat each day, meaning to do it the next. But in my heart – that chamber of leaden echoes – I know that I never shall. It is enough that the stories have been invented, that they actually exist: that I have been able, in my own mind, to give them the form which they demand. (p. 699)

Both Ellmann and Sturgis cite this passage, but Sturgis adds another key confession by Wilde from Housman’s account:

The artist’s mission is to live the complete life: success, as an episode (which is all it can be); failure, as the real, the final end. Death, analysed to its resultant atoms – what is it but the vindication of failure: the getting rid for ever of powers, desires, appetites, which have been a lifelong embarrassment? The poet’s noblest verse, the dramatist’s greatest scene deal always with death; because the higher function of the artist is to make perceived the beauty of failure. (pp. 699–700)

This inadvertent foreshadowing of Samuel Beckett might also be read as an effort by Wilde to turn his life's physical, social, and creative decay into a decadent work of art.

As noted at the start of this review, Wilde's Gilbert views biographers suspiciously. He claims that they are 'the mere body-snatchers of literature', and 'the soul is out of their reach'.⁸ Whether any biographer can truly evoke a subject's 'soul' is debatable, but Mendelssohn and Sturgis are no 'body-snatchers'. This does not mean that they ignore Wilde's failings: both condemn episodes during which he treated his wife Constance poorly, and Mendelssohn critiques the white supremacist nostalgia Wilde displayed during his visit to the southern states. In summing up, Mendelssohn states that Wilde is simultaneously 'daring, fresh, timeless' and 'real, broken, flawed, and human' (p. 264). Sturgis, striking a more Ellmann-like note, quotes Roger Fry's claim in 1927 that Wilde 'has a way of being right, which is astonishing at that time, or any for that matter' (p. 719). Through their insightful biographies, Mendelssohn and Sturgis help us to understand much better the writer and person who once called himself 'a problem for which there was no solution'.⁹

¹ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol, and Other Writings*, ed. by Anne Varty (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2002), p. 177.

² Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage, 1988), p. 589.

³ Michèle Mendelssohn, *Making Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 5. All subsequent page references are cited parenthetically in the text.

⁴ Wilde, p. 60.

⁵ Wallace Stevens, 'The Idea of Order at Key West', in Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, ed. by John N. Serio and Chris Beyers (New York: Vintage, 2015), p. 138.

⁶ Matthew Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life* (London: Head of Zeus Ltd, 2018), p. xiv. All subsequent page references are cited parenthetically in the text.

⁷ Cited in Ellmann, p. 301.

⁸ Wilde, p. 177.

⁹ Cited in Ellmann, p. 549.