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CHAPTER FIVE

Oscar Wilde: 'an unclean beast'¹

Butterfly and ape

Appropriately, given his propensity for role-playing, Oscar Wilde attracted a variety of animal comparisons. These may have been largely forgotten now, replaced by the baser images of his three trials, which supplied another infamous conjunction of sex and animality.² In 1895 Wilde sued the Marquis of Queensberry for libel. Queensberry was the father of Wilde's lover Lord Alfred Douglas and had accused Wilde of 'posing as a somdomite [sic]'.³ Wilde was himself then prosecuted for, and convicted of, committing acts of indecency in private with members of his own sex, an offence which, under section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, carried a sentence of two years' imprisonment with hard labour. After the jury failed to agree on most counts, Wilde faced a retrial. Part of what was felt to be at stake is clear from a review of Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (which was published in an English translation in 1895) that appeared in the *Weekly Sun*, three weeks after Wilde's conviction and sentencing. As Ed Cohen observes, the notice drew an implicit contrast between Wilde's behaviour and Nordau's book, which it described as 'a manly, healthy, and badly-needed protest against some of the inanities and – the word is not too strong – bestialities which raise their barren and brutal heads in the literature of our time'. The reviewer declared Nordau's work to be 'entitled, therefore, to the admiration of every honest, pure, and manly man'.⁴ Cohen affirms that while the review made no direct mention of Wilde it had him in its sights: the condemnation of inanities and bestiality makes this clear.

The review reads like a desperate attempt to salvage some sense of masculinity in the face of Wilde's effeminacy. Its tautology of 'manly man' reeks of nervous desperation and insecurity. But alongside this concern to protect the boundaries of gender and sexuality is the horror of a breakdown in class positions. Cohen shows that the press coverage of the trials reported defence counsel Edward Carson's questioning of

Wilde about inappropriate liaisons with socially inferior men. These men were younger than Wilde, less well educated, and 'out of employment':

of their antecedents Wilde professed to know nothing ... in the manner of their introduction to Wilde and his subsequent treatment of them all were in the same category, leading to the same conclusion that there was something unnatural and what might not ordinarily be expected in the relations between them.⁵

Cohen deduces from this that Wilde's social crime was to flout the distinctions between the classes that those in 'polite' society thought it necessary to maintain. Carson's intention in questioning Wilde was meant, Cohen believes, 'to suggest that the very fact of these relationships was improper'.⁶

Wilde's disturbance of class positions is further discussed by Joseph Bristow. Drawing on the work of Regenia Gagnier, Bristow notes of Lord Henry Wotton in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that he and most of Wilde's dandies are

men who were born into the landed classes, and yet who have the prerogative to mock the idleness of the rich.

... Everywhere Wilde's dandies are at once aristocratic in their bearing, and yet in jeopardy of losing their reputations.⁷

That last sentence suggests the precariousness of the upper classes and the disparity between self-perception and actual status. Wilde's wit, with its irony and parody, is born of, and exploits, this disjunction. His life and writing act as a vehicle from which one can observe the changing class landscape of Britain, and this is no less pronounced than the shifts in gender that are more commonly surveyed in examinations of Wilde and his work. Had the relationships between the classes not already been permeable in some respects, the outrage at Wilde's conduct might have been more contained.

The public perception of Wilde reveals, if obliquely, the confusion of class. In his classic study of the 1890s, Holbrook Jackson, considering Wilde's position in early 1895 'at the height of his fame and power', writes that despite the flattery, amused attention, and luxury of success, Wilde never won public respect. Jackson quotes from a contemporary article that voices 'popular suspicion' of Wilde:

Where he does excel is in affectation. His mode of life, his manner of speech, his dress, his views, his work, are all masses of affectation. Affectation has become a second nature to him, and it would probably now be utterly impossible for him to revert to the original Oscar that lies beneath it all. In

fact, probably none of his friends have ever had an opportunity of finding out what manner of man the real Oscar is ... For the present ... we may content ourselves with the reflection that there is no serious danger to be apprehended to the State from the vagaries of a butterfly.⁸

The light, flighty, colourful creature is rather different from the 'sedulous ape' Wilde played to Balzac earlier⁹ and from Arthur Symons' later description of Lautrec's portrait of Wilde: 'The face is bestial.' Symons' vituperative comments are aroused by disgust with Wilde's 'vices' and 'perversions'. Symons judges Wilde to be suffering from

one of those sexual inversions which turned him into a kind of Hermaphroditus ... As he grew older the womanish side of him grew more and more evident. Lautrec saw him in Paris, and in the appalling portrait of him he shows Wilde, swollen, puffed out, bloated and sinister. The form of the mouth which he gave him is more than any thing exceptional; no such mouth ought ever to have existed: it is a woman's that no man who is normal could ever have had.¹⁰

Symons's revulsion at the prospect of androgyny testifies to a deep discomfort with the unsettling of boundaries; the commingling of elements that convention prefers kept separate. In a fascinating re-evaluation, Bristow has argued that the image of the effeminate homosexual man to which Wilde contributed, if not himself formed, was 'firmly established in the public imagination' only after Wilde was sent to Reading Gaol.¹¹ Through Wilde one can see that gender and sexuality exhibit changes in shape and identity akin to the larger social changes outlined above and within previous chapters of the present study.

The unthreatening image of the butterfly and the condemnation of the beastly ape as abnormal and corrupt indicate the polarity of responses to Wilde and the uncertainty about where to place him. As Jackson shows, Wilde cultivated artificiality and valued it above nature; but that society should be so bothered by this is surely a sign of its own confusion about the real and the false, nature and the unnatural. To a large extent, this must be due to social structures and conventions having themselves been increasingly exposed as artificial. Class movements, as well as gender and sexuality, contributed to this. Symons' attribution of bestiality seems quite opposed to the comparison with a butterfly. Where the latter denotes a light prettiness, suggesting effeminacy,¹² the former indicates a heavy masculinity. The choice of such very different creatures to describe Wilde signals ambivalence about him and his audience. These diverse perceptions are rooted in the economic environment. Wilde's enduring wit has made him seem transcendent, while his status

as iconic persecuted homosexual has focused attention on the sexual body. The material elements of the world that Wilde inhabited are often overlooked, even though they are intertwined with those more celebrated aspects. 'Neither to myself nor others', wrote Wilde to his publisher Leonard Smithers in 1897 after being freed from jail,

am I any longer a joy. I am now simply an ordinary pauper of a rather low order: the fact that I am also a pathological problem in the eyes of German scientists is only interesting to German scientists: and even in their works I am tabulated, and come under the laws of *averages*! *Quantum mutatus*!¹³

Bristow starkly summarises Wilde's predicament: 'his drastic transformation from a dandified art critic whose plays entertained thousands of theatre-goers to a debased pervert gathered such momentum in the late 1890s that there seemed no way of reversing the process'.¹⁴ As if to demonstrate how unstable the connection was between circumstance and personal image, Jackson follows Robert H. Sherard's view of Wilde, in late 1894, as declining in spiritual beauty and 'oozing with material prosperity'. He writes that Wilde's friends observed, alongside his successes as a playwright, 'a coarsening of his appearance and character'.¹⁵ Sherard and Jackson's is the more romantic view in that it perpetuates the idea of wealth causing corruption. Whether what helped destroy Wilde was his becoming ostentatiously prosperous or a pauper, the importance of the economic situation is unarguable.

Bristow underlines Wilde's 'acute awareness that the dandified man of letters is likely to be defeated by the puritanical attitudes of late Victorian England that sought to transmogrify many a forbidden pleasure into a form of monstrosity'.¹⁶ He sees Wilde as compromised with those forces and warns against assuming that Wilde was, by virtue of his socialist politics, his Irish nationality, and his homosexuality, an entirely oppositional figure.¹⁷ He believes Wilde's stance to be tactical and labels him an 'insider dissident: a figure who provoked the commonsensical mentality of bourgeois England by entertaining it from within its ranks'.¹⁸ The tussle over position, meaning, and value will form the focus of the discussion of Wilde's selected writings in various genres that takes up the remainder of this chapter.

Two tales

i) Bulls, bears, and the butterfly

Many of Wilde's short tales are characterised by a morality that often involves images of animals and insects and turns upon episodes of transformation. They may be aimed at children, but that ought not to blind us to their economic references. Several of the tales are relevant to our discussion. One of them reveals this in its very title. In 'The Model Millionaire', a young man, Hughie Erskine, visits the studio of his painter friend, Alan Trevor. Erskine had every accomplishment except that of making money and lives on

two hundred a year that an old aunt allowed him. He had tried everything. He had gone on the Stock Exchange for six months; but what was a butterfly to do among bulls and bears?¹⁹

This butterfly has no vocation. It possesses looks, but no substance. In addition to these six months on the Stock Exchange, Erskine had spent a little longer as a tea-merchant before getting bored, as he did subsequently with selling dry sherry: 'Ultimately he became nothing, a delightful, ineffectual young man with a perfect profile and no profession' (*MM*, p.77).

Wilde's portrait of Erskine finely draws the predicament of the young man whose demeanour is out of step with his material circumstances. The picture is emblematic of a type that belongs to the period: the man who experiences a disparity between his accustomed or anticipated social status and his actual financial standing. Erskine has been left little by his father apart from his 'cavalry sword and a *History of the Peninsular War* in fifteen volumes'. He is in love with Laura Merton, the daughter of a retired Colonel who had served in India: 'They were the handsomest couple in London, and had not a penny-piece between them' (*MM*, p.77). Erskine's prospective father-in-law has ruled out any talk of engagement until Hughie has 10,000 pounds of his own. Erskine's worth is in his looks – a showy but insubstantial wealth.

When Erskine visits Trevor he discovers him painting the portrait of a wizened old beggar, whose apparel and piteous appearance excite his sympathy. His feelings towards the itinerant are heightened when he is told that the artist will earn 2000 guineas for the painting while his model is paid only a shilling an hour. Erskine is moved by this injustice to present a sovereign to the old man while Trevor is absent from the

room. Apart from a few coppers, the money is all that he has on him. The gesture means that Erskine will be unable to afford to ride in hansoms for a fortnight, but he feels that the 'forlorn and wretched' old man needs the money more than he himself does (*MM*, p.79).

Through Erskine's generosity, Wilde criticises the exploitation of the poor by the rich and asks awkward questions about their treatment in art. Later that night, Trevor tells Erskine in the Palette Club that: 'What you call rags I call romance. What seems poverty to you is picturesqueness to me' (*MM*, p.80). This is a discomfiting remark from which one may infer that even in politically sympathetic representations of poverty an aesthetic response is what matters. At this point the tale seems to be self-conscious: it, too, appears to include the poor in its larger frame. But the story at once grows more difficult. When accused by Hughie of heartlessness, Trevor insists that '[a]n artist's heart is his head ... and besides, our business is to realize the world as we see it, not to reform it as we know it' (*MM*, p.80). A serious point is thus made about the role of the artist. Before this can be pondered, however, Wilde makes ostentatious play with the plot, having Trevor reveal to the now-embarrassed Erskine that the beggar was in fact his (Trevor's) great friend Baron Hausberg, who

is one of the richest men in Europe. He could buy all London tomorrow without overdrawing his account. He has a house in every capital, dines off gold plate, and can prevent Russia going to war when he chooses. (*MM*, p.80)

Hausberg had commissioned Trevor to paint him as a beggar and seemed greatly amused by Hughie's present. When told of this gift by Hughie, Trevor bursts into laughter and predicts: 'you'll never see it again. *Son affaire c'est l'argent des autres.*' At best, he thinks, '[h]e'll invest your sovereign for you ... pay you the interest every six months, and have a capital story to tell after dinner' (*MM*, p.81). But Trevor (though not, I think, the reader, for the twist seems quite predictable) is to be surprised. He had told the Baron about Erskine's frustrated love and the Baron sends Hughie a cheque for 10,000 pounds allowing the wedding, at which the Baron makes a speech and Trevor is best man, to take place. Trevor concludes that '[m]illionaire models ... are rare enough; but, by Jove, model millionaires are rarer still' (*MM*, p.82).

The ending seems an evasion: the serious glance at poverty that the tale offered is averted by the humorous failure of recognition. Indeed, it might be deduced from the twist that the moral of the story is that charity should not be given, because it can so easily be misdirected. Even

a more sympathetic interpretation might be that charitable gestures are worth making, because they may benefit the donor. More than this, the tale provokes questions that it leaves unanswered: we do not really know why the Baron wants to dress as a beggar; we are ignorant of his nationality and where he lives. We are aware that he is an aristocrat who is still very rich, though both the scale and the preservation of his wealth are unusual.

Ultimately, the tale is like the butterfly itself: decorous and flighty. All the same, through its protagonist's momentary anger and discomfort it encourages in its readers a consciousness of poverty and reflection on the relationship between art and its subject. If the moral seems confused, the archness of the ending supplies an uneasy closure which, in its contrivance, draws attention to the tale's unresolved problems.

ii) The swallow

A tale similar to 'The Model Millionaire' is 'The Happy Prince' (1888). Here, instead of the butterfly, the narrative is piloted by a bird. In an unnamed city stands a statue of the Happy Prince, covered in fine gold leaf, with two sapphires for eyes, and a ruby on his sword-hilt. The Prince is encountered by a swallow whose migration to Egypt has been delayed by a now-broken courtship of a Reed. The swallow discovers the Prince weeping and is told by the statue that: 'When I was alive and had a human heart ... I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter.' The Prince never bothered to inquire what lay beyond the walled garden in which he played since 'everything about me was so beautiful'. But after he died he was 'set up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of the city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep'.²⁰ Once again this tale rests on the discovery of poverty and gains its effects from the juxtaposition of wealth and deprivation. The Prince detains the swallow by persuading him to perform a series of charitable deeds on his behalf, distributing his jewels to the poor. One of his sapphires is bestowed on a little match-girl whose matches are spoiled through having fallen into the gutter and who faces a beating from her father. (The year of the story's first publication, 1888, was the year of the match-girls' strike.) Giving away his sapphire eyes has left the Prince blind. The swallow, feeling a warm glow from his charitable missions, tells the Prince he will stay with him always, though the Prince's moral

detention of him has meant that winter has now set in. Pronouncing that '[t]here is no Mystery so great as Misery', the blind Prince asks the swallow to fly over the city and to tell him what he sees.

So the swallow flew over the great city, and saw the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates. He flew into dark lanes, and saw the white faces of starving children looking out listlessly at the black streets. (*HP*, p.143)

The swallow's journey enacts what nineteenth-century writers and campaigners from the late 1840s onwards, and with renewed determination in the 1880s and 1890s, saw and showed to others: the unequal ownership and distribution of wealth.

The swallow tells the Prince of two little boys lying in each other's arms under a bridge for warmth. They have been told by a watchman that they cannot lie there and have had to move out into the rain. In a move that symbolises what might happen if the monarchy were divested of its wealth, the Prince instructs the bird to take off, 'leaf by leaf', the fine gold with which he is covered and to 'give it to my poor; the living always think that gold can make them happy' (*HP*, p.144). When the swallow brings the gold to the children, they become happy and cry that they now have bread. But as the snow and then the frost bite, the swallow dies. As he does so, the Prince's leaden heart breaks in two, an event that the narrator flatly and unconvincingly attributes to the 'dreadfully hard frost' (*HP*, p.144). The next morning the Mayor sees the now-unadorned statue of the Prince and decides, as do the Town Councillors, who always follow his lead, that it should be pulled down because it looks so shabby. The sight of the dead swallow at the statue's feet causes the officials to issue a proclamation forbidding birds to die there (meaning, one assumes, in the city, rather than just around the statue). The Mayor and all the Town Councillors then quarrel among themselves over the wish of each to have a statue of himself erected to replace the one of the Prince. That has now been melted down in the furnace – except for the leaden heart, which will not melt and is discarded on the dust-heap where the swallow's body also lies. The tale ends with God ordering one of his angels: 'Bring me the two most precious things in the city.' The angel returns with the leaden heart and the dead bird:

'You have rightly chosen,' said God, 'for in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me.' (*HP*, p.145)

It is a complex ending. God's words subvert worldly notions of wealth. The golden city over which He rules is one in which the gold is transmuted: it is not at all the same substance that is worshipped in the mundane world, but instead constitutes a kind of spiritual richness. It offers an alternative set of values to the life that the Prince and his subjects previously lived. Characteristically, Wilde realises this other world by keeping to the theme word 'gold' but changing its meaning. However, two complications emerge from the construction of this divine alterity. The first has to do with its separation from the material world and the second concerns its ambivalent moralism.

First, from the beginning of the tale, Wilde has already clearly introduced the question of the relationship between aesthetics and materialism. The second paragraph of the tale (all of whose paragraphs are short), further describing the statue of the Happy Prince, reads thus:

He was very much admired indeed. 'He is as beautiful as a weather-cock,' remarked one of the Town Councillors who wished to gain a reputation for having artistic tastes; 'only not quite so useful,' he added, fearing lest people should think him impractical, which he really was not. (*HP*, p.137)

The implied narrative disdain of those who confuse art with usefulness is reinforced near the end of the tale, when the denuded statue is pulled down and the University's Professor of Art remarks: "As he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful ..."*(HP*, p.145). By this stage the narrator has had the Prince exhibit a quite different kind and standard of beauty, one that exposes the superficiality of views such as the Professor's. In showing the poverty of those, Wilde risks succumbing to a conventional morality, one that he confuses with a more radical challenge to the social order. Again, though, as with 'The Model Millionaire', the conclusion seems ambiguous. On the one hand, the moral might be that those who give selflessly to people in need will find an eternal reward. On the other hand, if we do take this to be the moral, then such acts of charity cease to be altruistic because they are motivated by the promise of a spiritually richer life. From a socialist perspective, these acts achieve nothing: they do not affect the structure of social arrangements and they lead to the self-destruction of the do-gooder, who is survived by the uncompassionate pragmatist. In John Stokes's words: 'Wilde's parabolic fantasies [are] simultaneously liberating and repressive.'²¹

Stokes outlines the transformation and progression that take place in Wilde's fairy tales. Mentioning 'The Young King' and 'The Happy Prince', after a short consideration of 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.', he notes that in these stories, 'Wilde outlines two realms of beauty: the

transient and the permanent, the meretricious and the meritorious'. Stokes observes that Wilde gives no sign that charitable (or 'noble') acts will gather any reward other than the *de facto* achievement of a higher aesthetic ideal:

The progression is rather from an innate capacity to appreciate beautiful things to an awareness of what the creation of that beauty involves in human terms, to a final point, reached only after suffering and sacrifice, when a transcendent beauty is attained. The fairy-tales tell of the refinement of the Aesthetic principle; the beauties of the moral life, which in themselves compensate for nothing, are only discovered when Aesthetic indulgence has been transformed.²²

According to Stokes, Wilde's '[a]esthete-martyrs achieve their transcendence only after partial confrontation with repressed knowledge – the knowledge of "cost"'.²³ This process is exemplified by the Happy Prince's discovery of the poverty and misery in his city. Stokes neatly traces a dialectic in the tales:

If satisfaction is at first unwittingly at the expense of others – their labour and their suffering – in its later moral phase it is at the expense of the Aesthete himself – the renunciation of beauty; finally, in the dream of art and sympathy reconciled, transcendence becomes collaborative, since the Aesthete's charity is rewarded by admiring love, and the quality of beauty is attributed to his personality.²⁴

That, of course, is what happens at the end of 'The Happy Prince' and also at the end of 'The Young King'. But I am not sure that the synthesis or even the thesis and antithesis are quite as ordered as Stokes would have it. The journey of the swallow is very complicated – its migration to the land of sensuality and riches in Egypt is interrupted by its shorter but more revealing journeys within the city, which repeat the Prince's own intellectual and perceptual journey outside his walled garden. The resolution Stokes detects is highly plausible: the Prince and the bird are rewarded with God's love for their sacrificial charity, endowing them with beautiful personalities. Yet if this is Wilde's conclusion, it is hardly sufficient to tie up the loose threads that remain. For those readers who are not ready to accept God's love (or who do not accept that there is a God to love), the collaboration looks a party too short. For those who do believe in God's love, the matter of worldly reform may still call for something more structural than individual charity. If Stokes is implying that Wilde has found an answer to his own continuing exploration of the relationship between

Art and Life, aesthetics and materialism, it can only be a balance that fits Wilde's personal interests and views.

Essaying beasts

It is not only in his short fiction that Wilde expresses his meaning through or against animals. The bestial is evident in his critical writing also and contributes to a similar oscillation between radicalism and conservatism. In 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' (1891), Wilde espouses an individualism that is to be arrived at through Socialism. His argument manages to combine an urge to help the working classes with a loathing of their uncultured lives. Wilde was not alone in this. Among other writers, his contemporaries H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, and George Gissing conjoined a radical politics with a personal distaste for the objects of their political cause. Although Wilde's theories of art and society seem more idiosyncratic, some of his beastly images belong to a familiar menagerie. For example, he writes of the mob as a monster, hardly a novel description, but one that communicates a particular anxiety throughout the 1880s and 1890s as a result of the growing unease about the unemployed and striking workers, whose presence was noted in the introduction to the present book.²⁵ However, apart from that image, Wilde strikes an individual note. True, when he writes about those 'great many people' who 'do the work of beasts of burden' and amongst whom 'there is no grace of manner, or charm of speech, or civilization, or culture, or refinement in pleasures, or joy of life' (*SM*, p.3), he sounds as if he is voicing the disdain felt by any number of the middle and upper classes, but he departs from this point to make two statements that are more radical. The first is that the work that the poor are '*compelled* to do ... is quite uncongenial to them', and the second is that they are 'forced' to it 'by the peremptory, unreasonable, degrading Tyranny of want' (*SM*, p.3, my emphasis). Wilde insists that the poor *are* exploited – they *have* to perform these brute labours, because they have 'no private property of their own' (*SM*, p.3). It is not that these people are suited only to the performance of such deadening tasks; it is that they are given no choice by those who do possess private property. They are brutes not by nature, but by social organisation:

From their collective force Humanity gains much in material prosperity. But it is only the material result that it gains, and the man who is poor is in himself absolutely of no importance. He is merely the infinitesimal atom

of a force that, so far from regarding him, crushes him: indeed, prefers him crushed, as in that case he is far more obedient. (*SM*, p.3)

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Wilde distinguishes between the character and situation of the poor: he does not assume that the poor are inherently or innately degraded because they live lives of degradation. Nor does he have any truck with the idea of the deserving poor as conventionally laid down by Henry Mayhew and subsequent commentators. Although his comments look predictable at first, they take a subversive turn:

the best amongst the poor are never grateful. They are ungrateful, discontented, disobedient, and rebellious. They are quite right to be so. Charity they feel to be a ridiculously inadequate mode of partial restitution, or a sentimental dole, usually accompanied by some impertinent attempt on the part of the sentimentalist to tyrannize over their private lives. Why should they be grateful for the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table? They should be seated at the board, and are beginning to know it. (*SM*, p.4)

Wilde goes beyond criticising acts of charity: he recommends that the poor take exactly the kind of action that their social superiors so dreaded. Claiming that it 'is both grotesque and insulting' to say that the poor should practise thrift, he declares:

Man should not be ready to show that he can live like a badly fed animal. He should decline to live like that, and should either steal or go on the rates, which is considered by many to be a form of stealing. As for begging, it is safer to beg than to take, but it is finer to take than to beg. No: a poor man who is ungrateful, unthrift, discontented, and rebellious, is probably a real personality, and has much in him. He is at any rate a healthy protest. As for the virtuous poor, one can pity them, of course, but one cannot possibly admire them. They have made private terms with the enemy, and sold their birthright for very bad pottage. (*SM*, pp.4–5)

In Wilde's view, if the poor are bestial it is not because they are essentially animal-like or because their environment makes them unavoidably so; rather, they should fight to assert their humanity. For Wilde, in 'The Soul of Man', animality does not signify the working classes and the unemployed so much as it signifies a rotten social order. It is *that* which is beastly. Of course, it may be argued that Wilde is simply posturing; that his argument is typically designed both to cause moral shock and display his wit. Some of his carefully structured phrases (for example, the chiasmus of 'it is safer to beg than to take, but it is finer to take than to beg') resemble the kind of aphorism to be found in his plays.

Yet even if his sincerity is doubted, it is better to adopt the posture than not. Such is Wilde's conviction (or posture) that he declares 'agitators are so absolutely necessary' *because* they 'are a set of interfering, meddling people, who come down to some perfectly contented class of the community, and sow the seeds of discontent amongst them' (*SM*, p.5).

Wilde argues that 'Individualism ... is what through Socialism we are to attain to. As a result the State must give up all idea of government.' It must, he says, leave people alone. He disparages democracy as 'simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people'. His justification for his corruption of Lincoln's dictum is that 'all authority is quite degrading. It degrades those who exercise it, and degrades those over whom it is exercised.' Abuses of authority create a 'good effect', because they induce the 'spirit of revolt and Individualism that is to kill it', but

[w]hen it [authority] is used with a certain amount of kindness, and accompanied by prizes and rewards, it is dreadfully demoralizing. People, in that case, are less conscious of the horrible pressure that is being put on them, and so go through their lives in a sort of coarse comfort, like *petted animals*, without ever realizing that they are probably thinking other people's thoughts, living by other people's standards, wearing practically what one may call other people's second-hand clothes, and never being themselves for a single moment. (*SM*, p.13, my emphasis)

Wilde's criticism of democracy for pampering its subjects into unoriginality marks his own originality. There may be a suspicion that in much of his writing this is bound up with a kind of intellectual posturing; a cerebral dandyism; but in his prison and post-prison writings, one cannot doubt that his experience has given his imagery a deep sincerity. When, in 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', he describes the prisoners as apes, he is one of them: 'Like ape or clown, in monstrous garb/With crooked arrows starred,/Silently we went round and round,/The slippery asphalte yard ...'²⁶ This is by no means the privileged labelling of the Other by the more fortunate that we see in naturalistic writing or sociological commentaries. And when the subject and dedicatee of the poem, Charles Thomas Wooldridge, who had premeditatedly killed his wife, meets his punishment, '[t]hey hanged him as a beast is hanged'.²⁷ Wilde's remarks earlier in the poem force a sympathetic identification of himself with Wooldridge:

A prison wall was round us both,
Two outcast men we were:
The world had thrust us from its heart,
And God from out His care:

And the iron gin that waits for Sin
Had caught us in its snare.²⁸

John Stokes points to a troubling aspect of this identification: 'In his efforts to place himself in some appropriate relationship to a condemned man Wilde suppresses the knowledge that the man's crime – murder – is of a radically different kind from his own alleged offences.'²⁹ Yet Wilde's purpose is surely to expose conditions that are hidden both from human and divine eye:

This too I know – and wise it were
If each could know the same –
That every prison that men build
Is built with bricks of shame,
And bound with bars lest Christ should see
How men their brothers maim.³⁰

There, where 'lean Hunger and green Thirst/Like asp with adder fight',³¹ the 'vilest deeds' flourish and the good wastes away.³²

It is evident from Wilde's letters to the press after his release from prison that he has seen and felt jail to be a brutalising, bestial place. And it is clear from his having already written in 'The Soul of Man' that 'a community is infinitely more brutalized by the habitual employment of punishment, than it is by the occasional occurrence of crime' (*SM*, p.13), that his critical eye is on the society that makes victims of its criminals.

In his post-prison letters, Wilde again subverts the usual animal imagery. Instead of regarding the inmates as essentially brutish, as many observers and commentators of the time would have done, he believed them dehumanised by their treatment:

Deprived of books, of all human intercourse, isolated from every humane and humanising influence, condemned to eternal silence, robbed of all intercourse with the external world, treated like an unintelligent animal, brutalised below the level of any of the brute-creation, the wretched man who is confined in an English prison can hardly escape becoming insane.³³

In his first post-prison letter, Wilde narrated the case of a man who had indeed been driven to lunacy by the conditions of his punishment. Wilde writes that a few days previously he (Wilde) had been

startled by the prison silence being broken by the most horrible and revolting shrieks, or rather howls, for at first I thought some animal like a bull or a cow was being unskilfully slaughtered outside the prison walls. I soon realised, however, that the howls proceeded from the basement of the prison, and I

knew that some wretched man was being flogged. I need not say how hideous and terrible it was for me ...

The next day, Wilde's last Sunday in prison, he sees the victim of the flogging 'at exercise, his weak, ugly, wretched face bloated by tears and hysteria almost beyond recognition'. Wilde observes the man 'grinning like an ape, and making with his hands the most fantastic gestures'.³⁴ The man 'was a living grotesque'.³⁵ This is neither the patronising classification of the middle-class observer nor the shocked self-disgust of the discoverer of the ape within. It is instead and emphatically the political protest against society of one who has witnessed and suffered its operations.³⁶ Degeneration is externally forced on people by the society that has marginalised them. Wilde's animal imagery, like his aphorisms, employs commonly used terms, but undermines their usual meanings. This can be illustrated with another simian simile. In his second post-prison letter, Wilde complains that prisoners are allowed to see their friends only four times a year for twenty minutes each visit:

Under the present system the prisoner is either locked up in a large iron cage or in a large wooden box, with a small aperture, covered with wire netting, through which he is allowed to peer. His friends are placed in a similar cage, some three or four feet distant, and two warders stand between, to listen to, and, if they wish, stop or interrupt the conversation such as it may be ... To be exhibited, like an ape in a cage, to people who are fond of one, and of whom one is fond, is a needless and horrible degradation.³⁷

In a departure from the way that contemporary criminologists, social commentators, and novelists wrote of such people, Wilde is saying that it is society that makes apes of its outcasts. 'And outcasts always mourn', he wrote in the 'Ballad of Reading Gaol'.³⁸ After this realisation his lighter wit may have been displaced, but his radical overturning of beastly referents as they were normally employed shows greater continuity of method than has sometimes been supposed. What links his pre- and post-prison writings, besides the manner of his wit, is his gaze at the backcloth of society against which people stand. His focus is on the social context of his characters, not on their behaviour and attitudes separate from it. 'Authority is as destructive to those who exercise it as it is to those on whom it is exercised', he writes.³⁹

Each bestial sense

Since Wilde acted his own life as though it were an artistic production, it is appropriate that the beastly epithets used by and about him correspond to the changes in his situation. On 24 April 1882, Wilde visited the Lincoln penitentiary in Nebraska. Viewing photographs of the inmates, he said of one prisoner: 'here's a beast, an animal ... nothing of the man left'. Reinforcing this conventional view of criminal appearance, Wilde wrote to Helena Sickert: 'They were all mean looking, which consoled me, for I should hate to see a criminal with a noble face' (*E*, p.191). It would not be until his incarceration that such straightforward acceptances of criminal physiognomy and conduct would be complicated. Henry James, who met Wilde in North America early in 1882, described him as 'an unclean beast' (*E*, p.171).⁴⁰ On its front page, the *Washington Post*, again during Wilde's North American tour, juxtaposed a drawing of Wilde holding a sunflower with one of a 'citizen of Borneo' holding a coconut (*E*, p.168). Whistler drew a caricature of Wilde as a pig.⁴¹ Wilde's homosexuality was, of course, at the heart of the transformation in his circumstances, but it would be quite wrong to overlook the role played by material (economic and political) conditions. After all, it was society that criminalised him. Again, his own usage reflects his moral ambivalence. Ellmann quotes Wilde as telling Robert Sherard the day after he, Wilde, picked up a (female) prostitute: "What animals we all are, Robert". It is a highly conventional utterance of the commonplace view that the excitement and gratification by women of males' sexual urges brings out the beast in men. The impression is reinforced when Ellmann quotes, straight afterwards, from Wilde's poem 'The Sphinx': 'You wake in me each bestial sense, you make me what I would not be' (*E*, p.206). Yet if we compare this with Ellmann's summary of Wilde's view – 'Wilde had always held that the true "beasts" were not those who expressed their desires, but those who tried to suppress other people's' (*E*, p.406) – we get back to the idea of Wilde taking conventional imagery and overturning it. When Wilde was ill during the last few months of his life and suffering from '[t]he mussel poisoning – as he persisted in calling it – which had begun in the summer of 1899 [and which] had brought great red splotches on is arms, chest, and back', causing irresistible itchiness, he said to Robert Ross, 'I am more like a great ape than ever' (*E*, p.544). Of course, the self-applied label is generated by the humorous image of Wilde scratching himself as an ape does, but the

humour is uncomfortable and describes a wholly different creature from the butterfly of Wilde's younger days.

Wilde's antagonist, the Marquis of Queensberry, wrote to his son, Lord Alfred Douglas, calling him, Douglas, a 'reptile' (*E*, p.423); he sent to his daughter-in-law (the wife of his son Percy) an illustration from a popular weekly of an iguanodon, commenting: '[p]erhaps an ancestor of Oscar Wilde' (*E*, p.446); and he threatened to shoot Wilde like a dog (*E*, p.428). None of this is to suggest for a moment that Wilde is unique in being compared to an animal or in comparing others to animals. But the variety of animal similes and metaphors employed by and about him is unusual and indicates the difficulty of pinning him down. Ellmann writes that 'Wilde prided himself on living a life not double but multiple'. Ellmann elaborates thus: 'He could be with Parnell and Gladstone one night, with Wilson Barrett and Ellen Terry the next, with young men the next. And Constance, with his children, was always there to neglect or not' (*E*, p.267). The brief list concisely indicates the range of Wilde's social movement, and this is important. It would work against him in court during his suit against Queensberry for libel when cross-examined by Queensberry's barrister, Edward Carson, who questioned Wilde about his liaisons with

Charley Parker and his brother, one a valet, the other a groom, whom Wilde had met through Taylor. Asked if he knew their occupations, Wilde replied, 'I did not know it, but if I had I should not have cared. I didn't care twopence what they were. I liked them. I have a passion to civilise the community.' This was the opposite of his condemnation of the general reading public, and Carson was quick to fasten upon 'the valet and the groom' as strange companions for an artist ...

...

... He vividly contrasted Wilde's artistic élitism with his democratic taste for common boys. (*E*, pp.424-425)

It is possible that had Wilde restricted his choice of sexual partners to members of his own class he would have caused less of a scandal and escaped punishment, though Queensberry's rabid behaviour makes that unlikely. What does seem true is that Wilde's cross-class relationships aroused greater disapproval than would otherwise have been the case. In addition to Wilde's multiple sex lives, however, were the multiple aspects of his social position and character. Transformation is central to these, and in many of them money is crucial.

Ignoring for present purposes Wilde's move from Dublin to Oxford and his relationship to Catholicism, his first major transformation came

with his marriage and becoming homosexually active, and the second with his imprisonment. In both, money played a part: in the first, because his own and his brother's relative impoverishment led their mother to encourage them to find marriage partners of means; in the second, because the laws of the time encouraged blackmail.

Ellmann writes that after Wilde's seduction in 1886 by Robert Ross, which both men represented as Wilde's first homosexual encounter, Wilde was changed:

For Wilde homosexual love roused him from pasteboard conformity to the expression of latent desires. After 1886 he was able to think of himself as a criminal, moving guiltily among the innocent ... Up to that time Wilde could think of himself as misunderstood; now he had to promote misunderstanding. (*E*, pp.261–262)

According to Ellmann, '[h]omosexuality fired his [Wilde's] mind. It was the major stage in his discovery of himself' and it gave him a 'changed outlook' (*E*, p.265). His journalistic writings of these years (Ellmann speaks of '1886 on, but especially in 1887 and 1888') constituted

a way of organizing his attitudes towards literature, art, nature, and life; they exhibit a freshness not often present in his earlier work, as if to suggest that running foul of the law in his sexual life was a stimulus to thought on every subject. At last he knew where he stood. His new sexual direction liberated his art. It also liberated his critical faculty. (*E*, p.270)

The second major transformation of Wilde's life came with his imprisonment. Ellmann reports many of his visitors commenting on the drastic change in his appearance and quotes his sister-in-law Lily, who visited him on 22 October 1895, as writing: 'He is very altered in *every* way' (*E*, p.462). Wilde's wife, Constance, wrote to her brother that her husband 'is an absolute wreck compared with what he was' and told Edward Burne-Jones, who recorded her remark in his diary entry for 22 February 1896, that 'he was changed beyond recognition' (*E*, p.468). The physical signs of these changes were observed by Wilde's few visitors: he grew thinner, his graying hair had been cut shorter (a particular cause of his low morale), and he would often cry. Robert Ross wrote to Oscar Browning on 12 November 1895, after seeing Wilde for the first time since his arrest, and describes the prisoner thus:

Mentally his condition is much better than I had dared to hope though his mind is considerably impaired. Physically he was much worse than anyone had led me to believe. Indeed I really should not have known him at all. This I know is an ordinary figure of speech, but it exactly described what I

experienced. His clothes hung about him in loose folds and his hands are like those of a skeleton. The colour of his face is completely changed, but this cannot be altogether attributed to his slight beard. The latter only hides the appalling sunken cheeks. A friend who was in court would not believe it was Oscar when he first came in.⁴²

The occasion of Ross's visit was the proceedings against Wilde for bankruptcy, the second and final stage of the hearing for which occurred on 12 November 1895. Then, Wilde's friends having failed to raise the sum required to pay off his debts, 'he was officially declared bankrupt and his affairs put in the hands of a receiver' (*E*, p.462). There can be no doubt that the possession or lack of money both accompanied and helped bring about the changes in Wilde's fortunes. In an essay on Wilde, Regenia Gagnier quotes Karl Marx's dictum that 'capital [was] not a thing, but a social relation between persons'.⁴³ Money was an important currency in Wilde's relationships with people. This was especially so after his release from prison when he was constantly having to borrow from friends (and to beg from strangers). It is also a theme of Ellmann's biography that, prior to Wilde's imprisonment, Douglas drained Wilde, both emotionally and financially.

Additionally and crucially, Wilde feared greatly for his sanity.⁴⁴ Later, Wilde himself would say that '[p]rison has completely changed me' (*E*, p.508). And on another occasion he is reported to have declared: 'I died in prison' (*E*, p.474).

A changed Wilde would lead to a changed art. He affirmed after his prison sentence the attitude he had displayed in the years before it, that '[m]y life is like a work of art' (*E*, p.508). Appropriately, for one who was so completely altered by his incarceration, his post-prison writing would also be drastically affected. In his last year in jail he wrote (from January to March 1897) *De Profundis*. In July 1897, two months after his release, he began 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', which he completed in October. It was published in February the following year. Apart from these, his post-prison letters to *The Daily Chronicle* in May 1897 and March 1898 are his only significant prison and post-prison works. All are characterised by an explicit concern with the experience and effects of prison life. The frivolous side of his wit had been killed off.

De Profundis, Wilde's extraordinary autobiographical letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, is a critical document in Wilde's life and thought. In it he advises Douglas to 'let the reading of this terrible letter – for such I know it is – prove to you as important a crisis and turning-point of your life as the writing of it is to me'.⁴⁵ Near the beginning of this long

communication, Wilde writes: 'You did not realise that an artist, and especially such an artist as I am ...' (p.40). But in his manuscript Wilde had originally written 'was' instead (p.206). This switch of tense attests to his struggle to cling to his primary identity. Part of the fascination of *De Profundis* is that it shows Wilde coming to terms with the changes in his life. Transformation becomes a major theme of the letter; transformation in both life and art, a linkage that is unsurprising given Wilde's long-standing connection of the two. Moreover, Wilde roots change in its material context: a sad refrain throughout the document is his having been brought to bankruptcy by Douglas's bleeding of his money. He calculates that 'between the autumn of 1892 and the date of my imprisonment I spent with you and on you more than £5000 in actual money, irrespective of the bills I incurred' (p.43).⁴⁶

In *De Profundis* Wilde insists on the transformative powers of art. He does so to such an extent that the work performs what it observes: the alteration, through art, of one's environment. In the progress of the letter, Wilde makes of his immediate surroundings a base for a new beginning in his life. In place of the ostentatious display of wealth and aesthetic objects is an almost austere attention to the soul. The letter, then, contains the elements that are the focus of the present book: the journey (at least as metaphor), transformation, and images of bestiality. Wilde refers to Queensberry's 'bestial and half-witted grin' and his 'apelike face' (p.131) and calls him an 'ape' (p.81). In that first description, class is also involved since he writes of Queensberry thus: 'the stableman's gait and dress, the bowed legs, the twitching hands, and the hanging lower lip' (p.131). The latter image has racial connotations, too: Africans and other 'savages' were often labelled as possessing the same feature. Wilde's class-based sneer at Queensberry is unpleasantly difficult to reconcile with his own cross-class liaisons, which he himself described as 'feasting with panthers'. Mixing the metaphor, he represented himself as a 'snake-charmer', luring the 'brightest of gilded snakes' whose 'poison was part of their perfection' (p.132). But his intention seems to be to open a gap between the Marquis' and society's sense of his (Queensberry's) status and his actual level. The designation of Queensberry as an ape is meant similarly to undermine society's view of itself. 'I who appealed to all the ages', writes Wilde, 'have had to accept my verdict from one who is an ape and a buffoon' (p.81). Thus Wilde reverses the charges: he indicts society for allowing the genius of his art to be crushed by the ape Queensberry. The simian epithet scorns society for permitting degeneration to occur: instead of having evolved from the ape, Wilde's

contemporaries are in thrall to it. Because of the close identification of his life with his art, Wilde was able to present an attack on one as an attack on the other.

In a much-quoted passage, Wilde announces: 'I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age.' There follows what might appear an immodest, but is probably an accurate account of his genius and accomplishments, including his statement that: 'I altered the minds of men and the colours of things: there was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder' (p.95). He therefore claims to effect change in others. Wilde's near two years in prison have led him to 'find hidden away in my nature' humility – 'the ultimate discovery at which I have arrived; the starting point for a fresh development' (p.96). His new-found humility 'is the one thing that has in it the elements of life, of a new life, a *Vita Nuova* for me' (p.97). If this new birth sounds like a resurrection, the affinity with Christ does not stop there. The sense of humility supplies another link, but so, too, do the emphases on spiritual richness within material poverty and on the poetry of suffering. Although Wilde insists that he has found religion of no consolation, his self-identification with Christ grows stronger as the letter goes on. 'Sorrow ... and all that it teaches one, is my new world', he keens, as he reminds us: 'I used to live entirely for pleasure' (p.104). Part of Wilde's transformation is an emotional one, but it affects his understanding of art, also: 'sorrow, being the supreme emotion of which man is capable, is at once the type and test of all great Art'. There might appear to be continuity with Wilde's former views. He writes that: 'What the artist is always looking for is that mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible: in which the outward is expressive of the inward: in which Form reveals' (p.105). In fact, there has been a fundamental alteration in Wilde's thinking on art. Where before he had delighted in disjunction, masks, and lying, he now insists on wholeness:

behind Sorrow there is always Sorrow. Pain, unlike Pleasure, wears no mask ... Truth in Art is the unity of a thing with itself: the outward rendered expressive of the inward: the soul made incarnate: the body instinct with spirit. For this reason there is no truth comparable to Sorrow. (pp.105–106)

No more can there be for Wilde a joyful, teasing display of difference between what is said, how it is said, and what is meant. If he is adopting a mask, he wears it consistently.

Invoking Pater and Wordsworth, Wilde announces: 'I see a far more intimate and immediate connection between the true life of Christ and the true life of the artist.' He goes on to confess his pleasure that 'long

before Sorrow had made my days her own and bound me to her wheel', he had written in *The Soul of Man* that

he who would lead a Christ-like life must be entirely and absolutely himself, and had taken as my types not merely the shepherd on the hillside and the prisoner in his cell but also the painter to whom the world is a pageant and the poet for whom the world is a song. (p.109)

Mention of his earlier essay underlines what Wilde would have us believe: that his present situation is a development rather than a recasting of his life. Wilde proceeds with his ever closer identification of Christ with art. He writes both of Christ's humility and his own. When he remarks that '[a]bove all, Christ is the most supreme of Individualists' (p.113), the reader cannot but be reminded of his earlier pronouncements on individualism (for example, and especially, in *The Soul of Man*), and his offering himself as an embodiment of it. But when he goes into more detail we can appreciate how the comparison with Christ is made through Wilde's changed circumstances:

It is man's soul that Christ is always looking for. He calls it 'God's Kingdom' ... and finds it in everyone. He compares it to little things, to a tiny seed, to a handful of leaven, to a pearl. That is because one only realises one's soul by getting rid of all alien passions, *all acquired culture*, and *all external possessions* be they good or evil. (p.113, my emphases)

It is not easy to imagine the pre-prison Wilde recommending that we eschew all acquired culture and certainly not all possessions. Wilde's life and work before he was jailed depended on a choosy but conspicuous consumption. There *is* a transformation here, and it coincides – probably consequentially – with destitution. Wilde absorbs his new criminal status into a long-standing preoccupation of his by proffering himself as a kind of martyr.⁴⁷

Just as Wilde's life underwent a transformation, so too did his views on art and his own artistic practice. In 'The Decay of Lying' (published in 1891), he had written of the restrictions of the 'prison-house of realism'.⁴⁸ Now that he had first-hand experience of an actual jail his attitude changed. His few prison and post-prison writings show – even in their lack – the difficulty he now faced in avoiding realism. Suddenly, the 'monstrous worship of facts' seemed not so grotesque.⁴⁹

A monster without a myth

Continuing this examination of beastly imagery, travel metaphor, and transformation we now turn to a brief discussion of Wilde's plays. Their radical edge has been softened by their enduring popularity with theatre audiences. In fact, Wilde's dramas provide a cutting vision of the role of money in society. His subject is largely the effect of wealth on conduct. He wittily exposes the discrepancy between conventional morality and upper- and upper-middle class behaviour. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* the incongruities do not stop there. Wilde takes the familiar form of the comedy of misunderstanding and invests it with complexities so that it operates on a deep economic level, too. Some of the characters lack the money to go with their social standing. Others, who do possess wealth, lack the moral precepts that warrant their position in the social hierarchy. None of them has any moral consistency. When they fall in love they do so playing at romance or following fortunes. Early in the play Algernon announces to Jack: 'I happen to be more than usually hard up.'⁵⁰ But Jack himself is in debt, owing the Savoy nearly 700 pounds. Ironically (one of many ironies), he can afford to pay the bill – he has, in the words of Jack, 'heaps of money' (*I*, p.362) left to him by 'Old Mr. Thomas Cardew' (*I*, p.361) who adopted Jack as a young boy. The reason Jack will not pay the bill (until a solicitor arrives demanding it) is that he has invented a dissolute younger brother in London, whom he has to visit to keep in order. This brother he calls Ernest, and it is Ernest that Algernon has known him: 'my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country' (*I*, p.361). Ernest does not have heaps of money, but 'is one of those chaps who never pays a bill. He gets writted about once a week' (*I*, p.362). The charade is matched by Algernon, who has a fictitious friend in the country, Bunbury. Light-hearted these imagined characters may seem to be, but they testify to a serious question about identity. Algernon remarks to Jack: 'it isn't easy to be anything nowadays. There's such a lot of beastly competition about' (*I*, p.363). Algernon's apparently flippant observation underlines Wilde's own views on the importance of individualism and suggests the difficulty of achieving this. Another beastly image emphasises the point. Of Lady Bracknell, Jack declares: 'Never met such a Gorgon ... [sic] I don't really know what a Gorgon is like, but I am quite sure that Lady Bracknell is one. In any case, she is a monster, without being a myth, which is rather unfair' (*I*, p.370). In other words, Lady Bracknell is a hideous creature without the status of one. Whether because of her character or the age in which she lives, or

both, she does not excite. She is a mundane monster, and this, Wilde seems to imply, is what her flat society has produced.

If Wilde mocks the superficiality of love in modern society through Gwendolen and Cecily – the women suggest they can love Jack and Algernon respectively only so long as they believe each is called Ernest – he exposes through Lady Bracknell the empty materialism of her world. She gives her consent to the marriage between Cecily and Algernon only when she learns from Jack that Cecily has '[a]bout a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in the Funds' (*IV*, p.409). Jack says this with studied casualness, the better to reveal Lady Bracknell's motives. She soon denies that she approves of mercenary marriages, but her words almost immediately on being told of Cecily's fortune are: 'Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her' (*IV*, p.409). Similarly, her assessment of Jack's suitability as Gwendolen's husband depends both on his wealth and his family. On the former count she is satisfied, but on the latter she is not. His disclosure that he was brought up by the late Mr Thomas Cardew, who had found him in a handbag he had mistakenly been given in the cloak-room at Victoria Station, prompts her to forbid any further intercourse between Jack and Gwendolen. As Wilde has her put it: 'You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter ... to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel' (*I*, p.370). Wilde makes Lady Bracknell gloriously pompous, but the laughs he extracts at her expense should not mask the play's seriousness about class. Lady Bracknell exclaims a little earlier in the same speech:

To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary deficiencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to? (*I*, pp.369–370)

Wilde may be poking fun at Lady Bracknell here, but he is identifying a class anxiety that runs through the play. Those who wish to escape from its implications may find refuge in his humour, divorcing it from the circumstances that have generated it; but to do so would be foolishly to ignore the basis of the drama, just as Lady Bracknell herself does '[n]ot approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance' (*I*, p.368). Worry about one's position drives the action and consumes the characters. 'What between the duties expected of one during one's lifetime, and the duties exacted from one after one's death', complains Lady Bracknell, 'land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. It gives one position, and prevents one from keeping it up' (*I*, p.368). This

is why she is satisfied that Jack's income is mainly from investments. He does have a country house with about 15,000 acres, 'but I don't depend on that for my real income. In fact, as far as I can make out, the poachers are the only people making anything out of it' (*I*, p.368). The decreasing profitability of land was a fact of the time and the apprehension that the 'lower' classes were usurping one's rights was commonly held. Speaking to Cecily in defence of his name (which she still believes is Ernest), Algernon comments: 'it is rather an aristocratic name. Half of the chaps who get into the Bankruptcy Court are called Algernon' (*III*, p.396). It may be a joke, but it speaks of the fading fortunes of the upper class. Wilde would follow them into the court. Algernon's declaration that '[n]o gentleman ever has any money' (*II*, p.385) has a double-edged truth to it: gentlemen were losing their money and many of those who had money were losing their gentlemanliness. Later, Gribbsby, the solicitor who serves the writ from the Savoy on Algernon (who is posing as Ernest), talks of the comforts of jail: it is 'fashionable and well-aired; and there are ample opportunities of taking exercise at certain stated hours of the day' (*II*, p.386). The following dialogue then occurs:

ALGERNON: Exercise! Good God! No gentleman ever takes exercise. You don't seem to understand what a gentleman is.

GRIBBSBY: I have met so many of them, sir, that I am afraid I don't. There are the most curious varieties of them. The result of cultivation, no doubt. (*II*, pp.386–387)

In such seemingly light-hearted exchanges we discern the connectedness of Wilde's characters to the society they would prefer existed only with a capital 'S', and the connectedness of his play to the time that Wilde would prefer his art to transcend.

In *Lady Windermere's Fan* wealth (or its lack) and status are likewise to the fore. Early in the first act, when Lady Windermere voices her annoyance with Lord Darlington for having paid her elaborate compliments the previous evening, he smilingly excuses himself thus: 'Ah, nowadays we are all of us so hard up, that the only pleasant things to pay *are* compliments. They're the only things we *can* pay.'⁵¹ They may not *all* be hard up – Lord Windermere's wife discovers that her husband has been making payments totalling at least 1,700 pounds to Mrs Erlynne – but enough of them are for it to be a concern.

In both plays financial confusion is mirrored by social and personal uncertainty. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* the plot twist is provided by the revelation (to the characters and the audience) that by birth

Jack is Algernon's brother and Lady Bracknell's nephew and his name really is Ernest. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* the secret of the play (known only to Lord Windermere and Mrs Erlynne and quickly deduced by the audience) is that the notorious Mrs Erlynne is mother to Lady Windermere, who believes her mother to have died when she, Lady Windermere, was a child. Wilde was not alone in dealing with orphans and discoveries of birth in his writings, but his treatment of them allows him to focus on the question of worth within and outside society. Dickens (whom Wilde spoke of less than positively) also did as much, but Wilde's unconventional views on morality and individualism mean that in an unsentimental, almost dispassionate way, he can examine the superficiality of character and society: that is to say, the judging of someone's character by their blood relations and material value. Much of the humour arises when Wilde shows just how ridiculous such assessments are. Yet it is an observant, uncommitted humour because it has nothing else to offer in their place. Moral worth counts for little to Wilde, because to him morality is a matter of style.

'[A]ll men are monsters' (*I*, p.427), exclaims the Duchess of Berwick early in the play. She is referring to their unfaithfulness. But Wilde seems more concerned with society's beastliness. In charting Mrs Erlynne's fall and limited rise he examines the effects of materialism and convention on estimations of personal worth apart from these things. He explores the corrupting influence of social and economic factors on individual growth. Since these are debilitating, they also inhibit social development as society is composed of individuals competing for recognition. Wilde's orphaned characters (orphaned in fact or by belief) afford multiple views of who they were, who they might have been, what they have become, and what in future might happen to them. Wilde shows that characters are socially determined.

Perhaps the play that most communicates class anxiety is *A Woman of No Importance* (written during August and September 1892, first produced in April 1893, and published in October 1894). Gender issues are also prominent, evidenced in its very title. The swing of power away from the aristocracy to the middle classes is addressed early in the first Act when Lady Caroline Pontefract, who gets the name of the M. P. Mr Kevlin not quite right, remarks: 'He must be quite respectable. One has never heard his name before in the whole course of one's life, which speaks volumes for a man, nowadays.'⁵² The change in circumstances is underlined shortly afterwards when she comments to Hester Worsley that: 'In my young days ... one never met anyone in society who worked

for their living. It was not considered the thing.' Her addressee, an American, replies simply: 'In America those are the people we respect most' (*I*, p.466). Hester is described by Lady Hunstanton as 'an orphan. Her father was a very wealthy millionaire or philanthropist, or both, I believe, who entertained my son quite hospitably, when he visited Boston. I don't know how he made his money, originally' (*I*, p.470). By contrast, Lord Alfred Rufford has, like his peers, no money.

It was only three years after the writing of this play that Wilde was himself declared bankrupt. (The naming of Lord Alfred might be significant: the play was written within eighteen months of Wilde's meeting Lord Alfred Douglas, who drained Wilde's finances; but I am less interested in such biographical speculation than in the type of person and predicament this character represents.)

The play questions the meaning of importance. It moves towards an inversion of its title. Thus, at the end of Act One, when Lord Illingworth sees Mrs Arbuthnot's handwriting and is reminded of her – though he does not yet know it is her hand – he dismisses her as '[a] woman of no importance' (*I*, p.477). At the end of the play, after Lord Illingworth has unwillingly turned his son against him and been made to realise that his money cannot buy filial affection, he is dismissed by Mrs Arbuthnot as '[a] man of no importance' (*IV*, p.514).⁵³

Although Wilde rightly rejoices in the diminution of Illingworth, his sympathies do not seem to lie altogether with Mrs Arbuthnot, who appears stubborn and over-protective of her grown-up son. Neither parent enjoys complete authorial or audience support. But if, in his survey of upper-class marriage, Wilde cannot provide an answer, he can at least ask pertinent questions. In *A Woman of No Importance* these centre on the effects of money upon marriage. Lady Caroline insists that men should be kept in their 'proper place', which is looking after their wives. If they are not married, they should be compelled to by law. If they are in love with someone else who may be tied to another, they should 'be married off in a week to some plain respectable girl, in order to teach them not to meddle with other people's property'. To this, Mrs Allonby replies:

I don't think that we should ever be spoken of as other people's property. All men are married women's property. That is the only true definition of what married women's property really is. But we don't belong to anyone. (*II*, p.478)

This glance at the debates about married women's property shows that even after the 1882 Married Women's Property Act 'removed most of

the common law disabilities which denied a married woman the right to own property and earnings',⁵⁴ unease still existed.

Marriages in Wilde's plays are often tarnished by money. Many matches were made for financial gain and have been dulled by the pursuit or possession of wealth. This is nicely illustrated in the following from *A Woman of No Importance* when Mrs Allonby tells Lady Hunstanton: 'my husband is a sort of promissory note; I'm tired of meeting him' (*II*, p.479). Wilde understands – and shows his audience – that all human relations are defined by, and conducted through, economic relations. As Terence Brown has noted in a brief but suggestive introduction to the plays, 'Wilde does not flinch in the matter of money'.⁵⁵ Money is as central to the plays as it is to the characters' lives.

A changeful life

Wilde's grandson, Merlin Holland, a frequent commentator on his grandfather, has written of the difficulty in pinning Wilde down. He refers to the latter's fascinating and confusing duality:

the Anglo-Irishman with Nationalist sympathies; the Protestant with life-long Catholic leanings; the married homosexual; the musician of words and painter of language who confessed to André Gide that writing bored him; the artist astride not two but three cultures, an Anglo-Francophile and a Celt at heart.⁵⁶

Holland notes that on top of all this is 'the question of which facets of the Wildean dichotomy were real and involuntary and which were artificial and contrived for effect'.⁵⁷ Yet in addition, Holland observes, there is the unreliability of Wilde's biographies, Ellmann's monumental volume included. Their inaccuracies and lacunae are not helped by Wilde's own deceptions. Holland quotes from a letter in which Wilde exposes his own fib about his circumstances, told in order to extract money from Ross, and he compares different statements by Wilde offering contradictory accounts of time spent with (or without) Frank Harris in Napoule. (Again, it seems the lie is to Ross and is designed to extract money.) Holland invites biographers to consider carefully '[t]his manipulation of the truth for financial advantage'.⁵⁸ Because of our uncertainties about Wilde, many of them fostered by his own pronouncements and behaviour, and because of the fragmentary views we get of him, so that contradiction and confusion seem to abound, Holland remarks that Wilde's duality is now 'more of a plurality'.⁵⁹ The multifarious beastly

labels that were attached to him through the progress and transformation of his life reflect this. Their variability and the fluctuations in his fortunes (both metaphorically and materially) are further evidence that Wilde 'saw that the "self" ... was socially constructed'.⁶⁰ And *this* means that the self was buffeted by the winds of economic and social change. So, therefore, the terms used to describe it had regularly to be revised. In Wilde we see the complicated effort to retain the shape of the self against the prevailing forces. He remarks of Christ that: 'He felt life was changeable, fluid, active, and that to allow it to be stereotyped into any form was death.'⁶¹ That is how Wilde tries to accommodate the changes in his life. It suits the originality of his art and person and it is reflected in the variety of animal imagery applied to and by him.

Notes

- 1 Henry James, quoted in Neil Sammells, *Wilde Style: The Plays and Prose of Oscar Wilde* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), p.55. Sammells repeats the quotation from H. Montgomery Hyde, *Oscar Wilde* [1976].
- 2 For a detailed account of the trials, see H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* [1948, 1962] (New York, NY: Dover, 1973).
- 3 Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p.412. Further page references will be given parenthetically preceded by *E*.
- 4 *Weekly Sun*, 16 June 1895, quoted in Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side: Toward a Genealogy of a Discourse on Male Sexualities* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), p.17.
- 5 *Evening Standard*, 4 April 1895. Quoted in Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side*, p.166.
- 6 Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side*, pp.166–167.
- 7 Joseph Bristow, *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing after 1885* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995), p.37.
- 8 Quoted from *Pearson's Weekly*, 27 May 1893, in Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties* [1913] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1939), p.70.
- 9 This unattributed quotation is to be found in Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties*, p.67.
- 10 Arthur Symons, 'Sex and Aversion', in Karl Beckson, ed., *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons: Life and Art in the 1890s* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), pp.146–147. Quoted in Bristow, *Effeminate England*, p.17.
- 11 Bristow, *Effeminate England*, p.2. Wilde's sentence, as Bristow reminds us, was two years in solitary confinement with hard labour.
- 12 Interestingly, the same image was used to describe Aubrey Beardsley. Jackson quotes H. C. Marillier: "Poor Beardsley! His death has removed a quaint and amiable personality from among us; a butterfly who played at being serious, and yet a busy worker who played at being a butterfly." Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties*, p.88. That two apparently effeminate writers of the period should be so labelled is, I think, more than coincidence. The *OED* includes among its definitions of the word '[a] vain, gaudily attired person ... a light-headed, inconstant person' and 'vain, inconstant, frivolous'.

- 13 Oscar Wilde to Leonard Smithers, 11 December 1897. In Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis, eds, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p.1006. A version of this from an earlier edition of Wilde's letters is quoted by Bristow, *Effeminate England*, p.18. Holland and Hart-Davis footnote the Latin thus: '*Quantum mutatus ab illo* (How changed from what he once was). Virgil, *Aeneid*, II, 274.' Wilde applies the Latin to himself to convey his own sense of transformation.
- 14 Bristow, *Effeminate England*, p.18.
- 15 Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties*, p.71. Jackson reports Sherard's description of Wilde as 'bloated' (p.71).
- 16 Bristow, *Effeminate England*, p.20.
- 17 Bristow, *Effeminate England*, p.20.
- 18 Bristow, *Effeminate England*, p.21.
- 19 Oscar Wilde, 'A Model Millionaire. A Note of Admiration', in *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* [1891] (London: Penguin, 1994), p.77. Further page references will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation 'MM'.
- 20 Oscar Wilde, 'The Happy Prince', in *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* [1891] (London: Penguin, 1994), p.139. The tale was first published in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* in 1888. Further page references will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation 'HP'.
- 21 John Stokes, *Oscar Wilde* (Harlow: Longman for the British Council, 1978), p.22.
- 22 Stokes, *Oscar Wilde*, pp.21–22.
- 23 Stokes, *Oscar Wilde*, p.22.
- 24 Stokes, *Oscar Wilde*, p.22.
- 25 Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man', in Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man and Prison Writings*, edited and with an introduction by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.29. Further page references will be given parenthetically as 'SM'. For the application of 'monster' to the French Revolution, see Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), Chapter One.
- 26 Oscar Wilde, 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' (1898), in Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man and Prison Writings*, edited and with an introduction by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.182, lines 433–436. I discuss this poem further in "A Sonnet Out of Skilly": Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol", *Critical Survey* 11, 3 (1999), 40–47.
- 27 Wilde, 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', p.185, line 511. The information on Wooldridge is taken from Murray's endnote in Wilde, *The Soul of Man and Prison Writings*, edited and with an introduction by Isobel Murray, p.220. The poem's inscription begins 'In Memoriam/C.T.W.' (p.169).
- 28 Wilde, 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', p.174, lines 169–174.
- 29 Stokes, *Oscar Wilde*, p.46.
- 30 Wilde, 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', p.186, lines 547–552.
- 31 Wilde, 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', p.187, lines 583–584.
- 32 Wilde, 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', p.186, line 559.
- 33 'Wilde's Second Post-Prison Letter to the *Daily Chronicle*', in *The Soul of Man and Prison Writings*, edited by Isobel Murray, p.191. The letter was published on 24 March 1898.
- 34 'Wilde's First Post-Prison Letter to the *Daily Chronicle*', in *The Soul of Man and*

- Prison Writings*, edited by Isobel Murray, p.166. The letter was published on 28 May 1897.
- 35 Wilde, 'First Post-Prison Letter', p.167.
 - 36 The first post-prison letter was written in defence of a warder who had been 'dismissed by the Prison Commissioners for having given some sweet biscuits to a little hungry child' (p.159). The scope of the letter widens into a protest against the inhumane treatment of children in prison. Their 'terror', writes Wilde, 'was quite limitless' (p.160). They are locked in their solitary, dimly lit cells for twenty-three hours per day, and Wilde recalls 'a child's face ... like a white wedge of sheer terror' that had 'in his eyes the terror of a hunted animal' (p.161). Wilde's attack is fiercely against the society that inflicts such cruelty, not on what many of his contemporaries would presume to be the child's own animality.
 - 37 Wilde, 'Second Post-Prison Letter', pp.193–194.
 - 38 Wilde, 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', p.185, line 534.
 - 39 Wilde, 'First Post-Prison Letter', p.160.
 - 40 Ellmann infers that James saw in Wilde a threat, because 'James's homosexuality was latent, Wilde's was patent', and Wilde's 'flouting and flaunting' made it difficult for society to tolerate it by turning a blind eye to it (p.171).
 - 41 Reproduced in Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, between pp.226 and 227.
 - 42 Quoted in Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p.461, unnumbered footnote.
 - 43 Karl Marx, *Capital*, quoted in Regenia Gagnier, 'Wilde and the Victorians', in Peter Raby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.21.
 - 44 These symptoms were noted by most of Wilde's visitors, but are also concentrated in Ellmann's summary of Robert Ross's impressions of Wilde after a year of his imprisonment. Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, pp.468–469.
 - 45 Oscar Wilde, 'De Profundis', in *The Soul of Man and other Prison Writings*, edited by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.72. Further page references will be given parenthetically.
 - 46 Details of some of this expenditure are given in the letter.
 - 47 On Wilde and martyrdom, see, for example, Karl Beckson and Bobby Fong, 'Wilde as Poet', in Peter Raby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, p.62; and John Stokes, 'Wilde the Journalist', in Raby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, p.76.
 - 48 Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *Intentions* [1891] (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1925), p.27. The essay first appeared in *The Nineteenth Century*, January 1889, and was revised for its publication in book form in *Intentions*.
 - 49 Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p.8.
 - 50 Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), Act One, p.360. Further page references to the play will be given parenthetically, preceded by the Act number, and are to this edition. The edition gives the play in its full four Acts, including the second, which is often omitted from performances and from other texts after having been cut at the behest of Wilde's actor manager (p.352). The play was written in August and September of 1894, produced in January 1895, and published in January 1899.
 - 51 Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, Act One, p.421. Further page references to the play will be given parenthetically, preceded by

- the Act number, and are to this edition. The play was first produced in February 1892 and published in November the following year.
- 52 Oscar Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), p.465. Further page references to the play will be given parenthetically, preceded by the Act number, and are to this edition.
 - 53 The plot has a chance meeting between Lord Illingworth and Mrs Arbuthnot – the mother of their son, Gerald. Illingworth had made her pregnant, but had not kept his promise to marry her. She had left, refusing financial help. Again by chance, Illingworth has offered Gerald a post as his private secretary. Gerald wants to accept because it will boost both his income and social status, as well as broaden his horizons. It will involve geographical as well as social travel. Encouraged by Illingworth, once the latter has discovered – but not revealed to Gerald – the young man's true identity, Gerald grows impatient with his mother for her opposition, which looks like (and in part is) a maternal clinging. However, when Illingworth tries to seduce Hester, whom Gerald loves, Gerald loses all respect for him. At this point, in the near violence of the moment (Gerald has threatened Illingworth), his mother reveals the secret of his paternity. Once he has been told the story of Illingworth's deception of Mrs Arbuthnot, Gerald is more opposed to him.
 - 54 J. F. C. Harrison, *Late Victorian Britain 1875–1901* (n.p.: Fontana Press, 1990), p.170.
 - 55 Terence Brown, 'Introduction to the Plays', in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, p.351.
 - 56 Merlin Holland, 'Biography and the Art of Lying', in Peter Raby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, p.3
 - 57 Holland, 'Biography and the Art of Lying', p.3.
 - 58 Holland, 'Biography and the Art of Lying', p.9.
 - 59 Holland, 'Biography and the Art of Lying', p.16.
 - 60 Regenia Gagnier, 'Wilde and the Victorians', in Peter Raby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, p.20. Gagnier elaborates: 'It was constructed through language ... It was constructed through social institutions ... And it was constructed irrationally, unconsciously ...' I would place its economic construction (which is a part of Gagnier's analysis) above these.
 - 61 Wilde, 'De Profundis', p.121.