

## *Introduction*

### A CONTEXT

Oscar Wilde's remains lie in a monumental tomb in Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, a tomb whose contours have been gradually eroded by the lipid deposits of hundreds of lipstick kisses.<sup>1</sup> In his lifetime Wilde felt, upon his imprisonment, that he had entered the tomb prematurely, conceiving himself on his release as a revenant, one who had died in cell C3.3.<sup>2</sup> But before the tomb became for Wilde a fitting metaphor for the enforced immobility of prison life, it had quite another significance for him: tombs were portals into other worlds, chambers of the imagination. As a boy he had accompanied his father, Sir William Wilde, on excavations of ancient burial sites all over Ireland, and from his father he would have learned that ancient tombs were treasure chambers not only on account of the gold or bronze they might contain, but because they preserved, in the bones of their occupants, the records of human heredity.

From his undergraduate reading of Herbert Spencer and W.K. Clifford Wilde derived his understanding of the imagination as the product of millions of years of heredity, of the transmission from generation to generation of the accumulated experience of all the ancestors of humanity, back to the first self-replicating molecule.<sup>3</sup> Through art – specifically, through literature – one might practise an archaeology of the self, a self conceived as a honeycomb of tombs, the tombs of ancient sensibilities. Wilde's fatalism and his cult of the surface derive directly from his understanding of the terrible power of heredity. Whether one was going to commit a murder, like Lord Arthur Savile, or become the image of the father one hated, like Lord Alfred Douglas, or become a poet, or a convict, had been determined long in advance by one's ancestry; what colour necktie one was going to wear, whether one should sport a carnation or a gardenia in one's buttonhole, these at least were matters one could decide for oneself. In the realm of action, freedom was possible only in the most trivial sphere, which thereby

acquired an ironic dignity. In the realm of thought, one could range as freely as one pleased through the myriad selves that heredity bestowed.

Some selves were more valuable than others. For Wilde his Irishness was less important than his identity as a Celt, through which he could claim kinship with both the French and the ancient Greeks, whose literatures formed the poles of his imagination. Both German and English Romanticism had bequeathed to the Victorians – who set to work institutionalising it – an ancient Greece that was an ideal realm of imagination and individuality, a corrective to the eighteenth-century elevation of Roman *virtus* and civic responsibility. This was a Greece encountered through texts, through poetry and philosophy, above all through Homer, and Greek itself became the vernacular of vernaculars, disputing the universalising empire of Latin.<sup>4</sup>

By the 1870s, when Wilde was studying classics at first Trinity College Dublin, then Magdalen College, Oxford, the nascent discipline of archaeology threatened the integrity of this Greece of poetry and reverie. The kind of archaeology practised by Sir William Wilde, local, amateur, nationalist, was giving way to the professional, scientific, internationally competitive excavations exemplified by the dig at Olympia begun by the historian Ernst Curtius in 1875, sponsored by the German government. The celebrated contemporaneous exploits of the self-funded amateur Heinrich Schliemann at Troy and Mykenai were already anomalous. But the excavation of Olympia, a triumph from the scientific perspective, failed to impress a public that had grown used to valuing archaeology in terms of popular spectacle, disseminated through the illustrated press, which avidly chronicled each new acquisition for the British Museum, and through such remarkable attractions as the Greek, Roman and Egyptian Courts at the Crystal Palace. Romantic Hellenism was under assault on two fronts: popularisation and professionalisation. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the challenge facing products of a traditional humanist classical education, such as Wilde's, was to reconcile a Hellenism that had formerly depended on the cultivation of personal responses to Greek literature and art with a Hellenism that seemed increasingly dominated by the consumption of spectacle and the science of objects.<sup>5</sup>

Wilde ended his essay 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' (1891) with the gnomic pronouncement: 'The new Individualism is the new Hellenism.'<sup>6</sup> To determine what 'the new Hellenism' meant to him, and how and if it differed from the old, is the purpose of this book, although in one sense an answer can be given straightaway. Wilde derived his understanding of Hellenism's modern role from three foundational texts: Matthew Arnold's

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*A context*

3

'Hebraism and Hellenism' in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869, revised 1875); Walter Pater's 'Winckelmann' in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873); and the final chapter of John Addington Symonds's *Studies of the Greek Poets*, 2nd series (1876). All three sought to preserve Greece as an imaginative resource and a model of right conduct amid the encroachments of industrialisation, utilitarianism and mass culture, Arnold identifying the English as a nation too much in thrall to Hebraism, the principle of 'conduct and obedience', 'strictness of conscience', and requiring a corrective realignment with Hellenism, the principle of 'spontaneity of conscience' and the critical faculty of seeing 'things as they really are'.<sup>7</sup>

Dividing Arnold from Pater and Symonds was Hegel. Arnold knew little of Hegel's thought, but Pater and Symonds were Oxford Hegelians to their fingertips. For Arnold history proceeded in repeated cycles of development and decline; for Hegel it unfolded like a hand from a fist, each stage complete and each stage containing within it all past and all future stages, as the bud contains and is contained by the rose. History was the dialectical progress of matter into mind. Pater's study of J.J. Winckelmann, the passionate father of the history of Greek art, is indebted to Hegel's aesthetics, in which Greek art, and specifically Greek sculpture, represented the median point, the perfect fusion of matter and spirit, a perfection unavailable to Christian, romantic art given the inadequacy of material representations of the interiorised Christian Idea.<sup>8</sup> But whereas Hegel thought that the representations of art must finally give way to pure thought, Pater elevated art to the status of a 'mystical absolute'; whereas Hegel saw each dialectical movement of history as containing and absorbing all previous movements, Pater retained Arnold's conception of Hellenism as a periodically dormant corrective power: 'we can hardly imagine how deeply the human mind was moved when at the Renaissance, in the midst of a frozen world, the buried fire of ancient art rose up from under the soil.'<sup>9</sup> He concluded 'Winckelmann' with a call for Hellenism 'to give the spirit at least an equivalent for the sense of freedom' amid the bewildering plenitude of the modern world.<sup>10</sup> To trace the natural law embedded in every manifestation of that plenitude, to uncover form where form seemed most lacking, was the task of the Hellenist.

Above all Wilde's Hellenism was dependent on that of the critic, historian and apologist of Greek love J.A. Symonds, who, in the final chapter of *Studies of the Greek Poets*, 2nd series, followed Pater in pronouncing that 'to face the problems of the world in which we live, with Greek serenity, concerns us at the present time' and developed his emphasis on the 'universality of natural law': 'Greek morality was radically scientific: the

faith on which it eventually leaned was a belief in φύσις, in the order of the universe.<sup>11</sup> The ‘theory of conduct’ whose exposition Symonds awaited he summed up in the Greek tag ζῆν κατὰ φύσιν, ‘to live in accordance with [one’s] nature’, a tag Wilde copied assiduously into the commonplace book he kept at Oxford.<sup>12</sup> In this ideal Symonds saw a potential authorisation of male–male *erôs*, a potential variously feared and welcomed among those working and teaching in late Victorian Oxford.<sup>13</sup>

An aesthetic ideal, a corrective force imparting the critical spirit, bestowing form, tracing rather than imposing laws: this was the Hellenism Wilde received from Arnold, Pater and Symonds and that he believed ran in his veins by way of the ramifications of heredity, from Aryan to Greek to Celt. Two factors complicated his reception of this idealising Hellenism: his close association with archaeology and his need to earn a living. Symonds was independently wealthy; Pater was insulated from the literary marketplace by his fellowship at Brasenose; Arnold chose to support his literary work through the drudgery of school inspection rather than contaminate his pen by writing for the popular press. Wilde, plunging into the heart of the metropolis, supported himself and his family through the later 1880s by ceaseless reviewing for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the very exemplar of the sensationalist New Journalism excoriated by Arnold. That Wilde attempted to gain a school inspectorship for himself must reflect his awareness of the incongruity of his position, a Hellenist on Grub Street.<sup>14</sup> On gaining a Double First from Magdalen College, Oxford, he had tried, like Pater, to secure a college fellowship; thwarted in this ambition, he had sought a career as an entirely different species of classicist, applying for an archaeological studentship in Athens. In this too he failed, but as a founder member of the Hellenic Society, established in 1879 to promote archaeology in the face of academic indifference or hostility, as a self-promoting manipulator of the mass media, as a peripheral member of the London theatrical milieu that in the 1880s was plundering the ancient world for spectacle, as editor in 1888 and 1889 of the *Woman’s World*, whose illustrations, seductive as advertisements, offered antiquity as a realm of desirable objects, Wilde seems to have been thoroughly implicated in the archaeologically inflected popularism that so threatened the romantic, humanist, text-based Hellenism to which he claimed allegiance.

Towards the end of the 1880s, perhaps galvanised by the death of Matthew Arnold in 1888, Wilde determined to reinvent himself as a serious critic, placing pieces in weighty periodicals such as the *Nineteenth Century* and the *Fortnightly Review*. At the same time a turn away from archaeology and towards the central texts of the Oxford Greats syllabus may be

identified in his writing; whether the turn from popular journalism to serious if not solemn criticism was cause or consequence is moot. Probably each was implicated in the other. Wilde sought to acquire for his public persona, manifested as it had been for years through social performance in club and gallery and drawing room and restaurant and theatre foyer, the literary clout to present himself as a new type: the dandy-scholar, heir, as one acquaintance put it, to both Ruskin and Beau Brummell.<sup>15</sup> To present to the world the appearance of a dilettante, to clothe his wisdom in the exquisite robe of triviality, was, Wilde acknowledged to one correspondent, a deliberate strategy of dissociation from ‘so vulgar an age as this’, telling another that he hoped to ‘bewilder the masses’ with his critical paradoxes. To both of them he made clear that his intentions were serious.<sup>16</sup>

Wilde’s way of signalling the scholar in the dandy was to appear on easy terms with Plato and Aristotle, easy enough to play with them, among other markers of the high humanist tradition, with Oxonian *esprit*. To whom was he signalling? The proliferation of literary markets in the late nineteenth century meant that such gestures had to address themselves both to the elite who shared Wilde’s literary culture, his Oxonian polish, and to those vulgar masses who might aspire to it, even as or because those gestures appeared to warn them off.<sup>17</sup> Liberated by the financial success of his plays in the first half of the 1890s, Wilde could afford to court a rarefied readership, but even here the paradoxes of the new literary marketplace assert themselves: calls for a return to the orality of Greek literary culture, for a rejection of the printed word in the spirit of Plato’s mistrust of writing, are carefully typeset in books of gorgeous design, expensively bound objects for the connoisseur market.<sup>18</sup>

#### A METHOD

In this book I seek to examine how Wilde’s Hellenism was complicated by the particularities of the institutions, texts and editions through which he encountered ancient Greek literature and material culture. The first three chapters offer an intellectual biography whose sources include unpublished manuscript material and, as far as possible, not only the editions but the copies of the texts Wilde used, often rich in his annotations. Wilde’s notes and annotations present a problem when one attempts to use them to reconstruct his attitudes to the texts in question. An explicit correction of an assertion by Symonds, say, written in the margin, can be fairly taken at face value. But what is one to make of underlinings unaccompanied by any

comment, or marginal lines accompanied or unaccompanied by a question mark or cross? In many of Wilde's books these are the only markings, and they might equally be taken to indicate assent, disagreement, passages to return to later, puzzlement, surprise, or mechanical highlighting of points that might be useful for an essay or exam. There is one book in which we know what such markings mean: the presentation copy of *Aurora Leigh* Wilde gave to his friend William Ward in 1876, accompanied by a letter in which he explained he had marked passages which 'I felt you would well appreciate'.<sup>19</sup> As regards Wilde's own books, all that can be said for certain is that passages marked in the same manner struck Wilde as significant in some way. When they strike me as significant too I have indicated in my notes that a quoted passage was marked by Wilde, but I refrain from insisting upon his attention having been concentric with mine.

Since my focus is trained especially upon Wilde's education and archive materials relating thereto, my understanding of Wilde's Hellenism is dependent to a large extent on fragmentary notes and jottings from his Trinity and Oxford years, the specific contexts of which are now irrecoverable. I have used my imagination to supply those contexts, as scholars and aesthetes of the nineteenth century used their imaginations to give life to the fragmentary remains of ancient Greece.<sup>20</sup> It is not so perilous a procedure as it might seem to read back into Wilde's undergraduate notes the attitudes of his published writings, given the consistency with which the same ideas and phrases recur through his notebooks, his journalism, his criticism and his fiction.<sup>21</sup> Though different contexts impose different emphases, a narrative account must proceed from some such assumption of continuity.

Chapter 1 covers Wilde's education and his only trip to Greece; Chapter 2 considers his early writings, particularly his poetry and translations, in terms of their historical value as documents registering the transition from the old to the new Hellenism; Chapter 3 covers his membership of the Hellenic Society and involvement with various artistic endeavours to use archaeology in reconstructions of the ancient Greek world. Thereafter I identify a rejection of archaeology and the positivism and popularism associated with it, and an adoption of an anachronistic, eclectic, appropriative attitude towards ancient texts, modelled on that of the Renaissance. In the fourth and final chapter, therefore, I offer new readings of Wilde's major works – *Intentions*, *The Soul of Man*, 'The Portrait of Mr W.H.', *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *De Profundis* – that take an intertextual rather than a historicist approach. Here I wish to offer, tentatively, a speculation.

Nearly all Victorian legislators, thinkers, critics and poets took it for granted that the Greek texts the majority of them had studied at Oxford or Cambridge were foundational; that all subsequent creative thought elaborated those originary texts rather than superseded them. Interviewed in Nova Scotia in 1882, Wilde gave typically uncompromising expression to this assumption:

He spoke . . . of Herbert Spencer, whom he had read and admired greatly. He found nothing in his work or in any other work on evolution which differed from Plato and Aristotle.

‘There is nothing in art or philosophy in which we are as wise as the Greeks. Spencer has prosecuted enquiries which have led him to verify the Greek philosopher. No, we should *not go back* to the Greek, we should try to get up to the Greek. All that remains for us anywhere is to corroborate the Greeks in everything.’<sup>22</sup>

The rhetoric may seem extreme, but the sentiment appears so consistently throughout Wilde’s writings, for whatever occasion, that there is no reason not to take it at face value. Aristotle’s priority was not merely chronological. Wilde did not read Aristotle through Spencer; he read Spencer through Aristotle.

I suggest that this widespread sense of the priority of Greek texts owes as much to the nature of the Greek language itself and the schooling of those who learned it as it does to theories of history and the notion of Greek culture as originary. To learn the classical languages at school is to associate them so strongly with one’s childhood that any text read in Latin or Greek in later life will always carry one back to the formative stage of one’s consciousness in a way that the works of Herbert Spencer will not. The Greek language itself – inflected, with a much smaller lexicon than English – demands a more compressed mode of expression, its vocabulary carrying a much wider range of connotations, its many particles adding shades of nuance unavailable to English. To translate Greek into English is to unpack, to elaborate, to set narrow bounds to connotative potential. It may be that to Wilde and those who shared his sense of the unsurpassability of Greek literature and philosophy, the works of those moderns who appeared to elaborate Greek thought bore the same relation to those originary texts as a translation does to its original: that of dependence and inferiority.

Whether this is so or not, the shared sense among Victorian political, literary and philosophical clans of the priority of such texts as Aristotle’s *Nicomacheian Ethics* or Plato’s *Republic* was so profound that, most likely, allusions thereto would pass without any special comment; it would be



taken for granted they formed the grounds of debate, criticism and creation. For this reason I may appear sometimes to trace allusions to Aristotle or Plato in Wilde's writings, sometimes to read those writings through Plato and Aristotle, without always drawing a clear distinction between the two procedures. Wilde's use of Greek sources was both conscious and unconscious, making *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for instance, a richly suggestive text when read through the prism of the Platonic theory of Forms, quite apart from the direct allusions to Plato in the novel. To attempt to fix the points at which conscious allusion shades into unconscious reminiscence, at which Wilde's bringing of Plato into the text meets mine, would be a pedantic and profitless undertaking.

Readers of this book will no doubt expect Plato to figure largely, particularly given the attention paid in recent decades to the use made of Plato, and Hellenism in general, by figures such as Pater, Symonds and Wilde as a means of more or less covertly advancing the cause of homosexual emancipation.<sup>23</sup> Precisely because so much attention has been paid to this topic, I have been more concerned to foreground what I think has been unjustly neglected: Wilde's indebtedness to Aristotle. Aristotle's theory of the good life, a life shaped by the deliberate adoption of certain manners, seems to me to inform Wilde's ideal of life as a work of art, his hieratic elevation of the rituals of social life and the self-fashioning of the dandy. I find particularly suggestive Aristotle's distinction between the *akolastos*, the self-controlled man who deliberately fashions his life in accordance with a set of immoral precepts, and the *akratês*, the man without self-control who falls a prey to his appetites. The one life has form, the other is formless. Lord Henry Wotton is an *akolastos*; Dorian Gray aspires to become one too, but becomes merely an *akratês*, his sequestered portrait recording the repulsive dissolution of his soul's form. Wilde appears to have become increasingly fixated upon the corrosive effect of bodily appetites on the ritualised aesthetic life, increasingly pessimistic in his estimation of Hellenism's power to effect its form-imposing mission amid the plenitude and the temptations of the modern world. Though this book focuses on Greek literature, it should be borne in mind that Wilde read the ancient Greeks alongside his other great love, the modern French. The conjunction of the two languages that he found in Symonds and used over and over again, ἔρως τῶν ἀδυνάτων, *l'amour de l'impossible*, enacts the bringing together of classical and romantic temperaments in a choral acknowledgment of the abyss dividing them. The passions of the insatiable modern soul will always dissolve Hellenising impulses towards form, as the misplaced kisses of Wilde's admirers have dissolved the contours of his tomb.



## CHAPTER I

*Paideia*

## ARCHAEOLOGY AT HOME

[F]rom my boyhood [I] have been accustomed, through my father, to visiting and reporting on ancient sites, taking rubbings and measurements, and all the techniques of ordinary open air archaeologia.

OW to A. H. Sayce, 8 September 1879 (*CL*, 85)

[Sir William Wilde's] love was for the study of archaeology. He possessed a passion for the past, the true antiquarian spirit, which converts a piece of stone into a text for a glowing romance. The world is twice as big for these men – they have the present and they have the past. Sir William wandered about the country looking for archaeological treasures, and took his boy with him; he would linger over a piece of antiquity, filled with the actual delight of building up pictures of the past and its departed glories.

Anon., 'Oscar Wilde', *Biograph, and Review*, 4, August 1880, 131

The earliest surviving letter from the adult Wilde was written to his father, Sir William (1815–76), on 15 June 1875, from Florence. In it he gave detailed descriptions of the sarcophagi, burial urns and goldwork – including 'Swords of the leaf shape' – in the Etruscan Museum, accompanied by his own sketches. 'You would have been much interested in all the Etruscan work,' he concluded.<sup>1</sup>

In his publications Sir William Wilde, professional oculist and amateur archaeologist,<sup>2</sup> often felt the need to apologise for his interest in tombs. Much of his *Narrative of a Voyage to Madeira, Teneriffe and along the Shores of the Mediterranean* (1839, 2nd edn 1844) concerned his explorations of the tombs of Egypt and Asia Minor, and in its closing pages he explained why: 'tombs . . . are all so many chambers in the great treasure-house of time, in which are stored the coinage of successive ages.'<sup>3</sup> This was a reiteration of his previous, more explicitly ethnological assertion that tombs afford 'traces of extinct races of mankind . . . Similarity of modes of sepulture also affords



Figure 1 Illustration of entrance to Newgrange from W. R. Wilde, *Beauties of the Boyne*, 192

proof of identity of origin.’<sup>4</sup> The emphasis on common origin lends point to the observation he first made in the *Voyage* and repeated many times elsewhere: that the so-called Treasury of Atreus at Mykenai resembled the tumulus at Newgrange in co. Meath (see Figure 1) and many other ‘antique remains in our own country’, including those on the islands of Aran, ‘the most stupendous stone forts of Cyclopean unmortared masonry that now remain in Europe . . . with walls eighteen feet thick, and to some of which those of Mycene, the classic city of Agamemnon, bear but a comparative size’. Lady Wilde echoed her husband, writing in 1890 of ‘the sepulchres of the Boyne, and the Cyclopean Temple of New Grange, relics of the same mighty race that dwelt on the Argive plain, and were the Cyclopean builders of Mycenae. Rude in art, but powerful in strength, their tombs stand to this day in all their awful and majestic grandeur in Ireland as in Greece.’<sup>5</sup>

The voyage of which the *Voyage* was the account was undertaken in 1837–8, the 22-year-old William Wilde travelling as surgeon to a consumptive