

# OSCAR WILDE

## A MEDICAL APPRECIATION\*

BY

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*It is only within the last few years that I have moved, on occasion, in what might be called 'the Wilde circle' of today, that is, in the company of those who are specialists in Wilde, who write about him, and collect his letters and manuscripts and first editions. It is emphatically not a homosexual circle; its members are attached to Wilde—absorbed by him, I might say of some of them—because of his personality and his writings, not because of any sympathy with his sexual vocation. . . .*

LOUIS MARLOW

FEW writers have attracted as much attention as Oscar Wilde. After a short period of relative neglect—when his name was held as shameful—he has afforded copy to a host of professional biographers, social historians and commentators. An objective and wholly detached study of his life and writings is still unwritten, for few figures have engendered greater heat and passion where there should have been an aloof appraisal. Even among the brilliant and unorthodox personalities whom we associate with the European *fin-de-siècle*, Oscar Wilde was conspicuous. It is also surprising that there should be so few attempts at assessment written from a purely medical angle. His intriguing personality would surely today have interested anyone with neurological or psychiatric experience, and yet, except for a solitary rather unconvincing psychoanalytic study, nothing has been printed upon the purely medical aspects of Oscar Wilde. Then, too, there is the mysterious and ill-documented problem of his last illness which, still unexplained as to its nature, continues to constitute an interesting case for commentary.

That Oscar Wilde was an active and practising homosexual there can be no dispute. Despite his marriage to an attractive woman who bore him two sons, inversion dominated his sexual life. After his wife had left him, and he had been released from gaol, some friends attempted to cure Wilde of his aberrations in the crucible of a Normandy brothel. Wilde came away disheartened and unconvinced, grumbling that his experience reminded him of cold mutton.

Of Wilde's superior intellectual capacity there can be no doubt. His

\* The Convocational Address delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American College of Physicians, held at Los Angeles on 18 April 1956.

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academic career was outstanding. Entering Trinity College, Dublin, at the age of sixteen years, he later won a scholarship to Oxford, and came down with a double first. This unusual achievement was accomplished without recourse to serious book work. Furthermore he gained the coveted Newdigate prize for his poem 'Ravenna'. Thereafter, his poetry, his plays, and above all his scintillating conversation afford sure evidence of his superlative gifts. If we define wit as the deliberate and yet instantaneous replacement of orthodox and trite verbal associations by others which are arresting, unexpected and even impudent, then we cannot but admit that wit is an uncanny intellectual attainment. As if it were not enough to be a lord of language in his native medium, he set out to surpass his own record by writing his play *Salomé* in French; and few scholars, reading the text today, can detect any trace of the uncertain touch of a foreigner.

To assert that Oscar Wilde was a psychopath is not going far enough. It does not altogether explain his eccentric behaviour, and above all his periodic lapses into blind folly. Some qualification of the diagnostic epithet is needed.

A few essayists, not themselves medically accomplished, have tried to depict Wilde as an example of endocrinopathy. Certainly Wilde was unusual in his physical habitus. His stature was big-boned, tall and broad. He was of powerful muscular development and proof is not lacking of his ability to take good care of himself when occasion demanded. All the same, he was a lazy man physically. In early middle life he became stout, flabby and coarsened in appearance. His bloated features with fleshy lips, his fruity, unctuous voice, made more than one biographer think in terms of a decadent Roman—a Heliogabalus or a Vitellius. But to go further, and to try and put Wilde into this or that endocrinological docket, and thereby to explain his social conduct in psychosomatic terminology, is to go much too far.

In assessing Wilde's character, it is important to recall the details of his parentage. His father was a gifted oddity, an oculist and laryngologist, but at the same time cultured, grubby and sexually promiscuous. He could certainly be rated as an eccentric psychopath. Oscar Wilde's mother was even crazier. In her adolescence she became notorious as a revolutionary poetess. After her marriage her political violence abated but she became more and more unbalanced, and as a widow she was a remarkable social figure in Chelsea, unorthodox in dress and manners. Wilde's elder brother, William—known widely as 'Wuffalo Will'—grew up to be a genial but intemperate ne'er-do-well.

Some writers have found significance in Oscar Wilde's earliest mode of upbringing. His parents are said to have desired a daughter, and when Oscar came they compromised by dressing him for an inordinate length

of time in girl's clothes. The authenticity of this statement is open to question, and even were this a strict account of events, it would be unconvincing to lay the blame for Wilde's active homosexuality upon the parental shoulders.

In seeking to explain Oscar Wilde's conduct and language, it is tempting to invoke the hypothesis of a constitutional hysterical personality—or hysterical psychopathy, in the German psychiatric sense of the term. This diagnosis would go a long way towards accounting for Wilde's exhibitionism, his histrionic style and behaviour, his flippancy, his shallow emotivity and his lack of awareness of the gravity of a situation. Over and over again we find Wilde showing off with an incongruous quip or quiddity in times of the direst personal plight. To regard this trait as evidence of courage or bravado is not convincing. It is better explained upon the basis of a wholly inadequate insight.

A number of examples can be quoted. The first derives from a relatively unimportant occasion. As an undergraduate Wilde had to take divinity as a subsidiary but compulsory subject. He arrived at his viva voce very late, and when chided by the invigilator, explained that he had had very little experience of 'Pass examinations'. Somewhat nettled, the examiner went on to ask what he had been reading in Divinity. 'The 49 Articles,' Wilde replied. 'The 39, you mean, Mr Wilde.' . . . 'Oh! is it really?' Wilde replied vaguely. At this, the examiner set him to translate and copy out Chapter 27 of the Acts of the Apostles—a notoriously difficult part of the Greek Testament. Wilde diligently complied and after thirty minutes the examiner relented and told him he could stop. But Wilde continued scribbling until the examiner said, 'Did you not hear me say that you could stop?' 'Oh, yes, I heard you,' was Wilde's reply, 'but I was *so* interested in what I was copying that I simply could not leave off. It was all about a man named Paul, who went on a voyage and was caught in a terrible storm, and I was afraid he would be drowned; but do you know, Mr. Spooner, he was saved! And when I found that he was saved, I thought of coming to tell you.'\*

Here, then, was flippancy amounting to impudence in circumstances which warranted a responsible and serious attitude. Even more striking is his conversation with his would-be blackmailer into whose hand had come some intimate letters he had written to Lord Alfred Douglas. 'What will you give me for them?' 'One cannot estimate their value in money. The price of beauty is above rubies.' 'Well, you can have them for £30.' 'Why do you want £30?' 'I want to go to America and make a fresh start.' 'A strange design, but *not*—if you will pardon the reflection—not original. Columbus

\* This incident, among others, is taken from Hesketh Pearson, who has certainly written the most satisfactory biography of Wilde available today.

thought of it before you. I hope you will be more fortunate than he, and miss the continent on your way.'

Again we have a poseur's sacrifice of common sense to a *bon mot*. When Wilde's grim fate was determined by the receipt of the Marquess of Queensberry's challenging accusation, Wilde immediately resorted to artificiality. Writing to his friend, Robert Ross, he said: 'Since I saw you something has happened—Bosie's father has left a card at my Club with hideous words on it. I don't see anything now but a criminal prosecution—my whole life seems ruined by this man. The tower of ivory is assailed by the foul thing. On the sand is my life spilt. I don't know what to do. . . .'

These words are surely the shallow utterances of a man who, cornered though he was, could not resist the opportunity for verbal display.

Between his trials, at a time when his future was obviously imperilled, Wilde was refused accommodation at one hotel after another. Finally he sought sanctuary at his mother's house, with the words: 'Let me lie on the floor, or I shall die in the streets.' From his brother he inquired dramatically, 'Why have you brought me no poison from Paris?' Finding the alliteration satisfying, he continued to repeat . . . 'poison from Paris . . . poison from Paris. . . .'

In gaol he fared badly at first, and friends unsuccessfully petitioned the Home Secretary for his release. The news was duly delivered to the prisoner that there were no grounds for any mitigation of his sentence. Wilde wrote in one of the few letters allowed him that this verdict was . . . 'a blow from a leaden sword. I am dazed with a dull sense of pain'.

The latter half of Wilde's imprisonment was less rigorous, for the new Governor was a kindly humanist. He was in the habit of periodically sending for Wilde and giving him news of the outside world—newspapers being forbidden. On one occasion the bulletin included news that his aunt had just died. The Governor went on to tell him that the artist Poynter had been elected President of the Royal Academy. Wilde solemnly thanked the Governor for his kindness in telling him about his poor aunt, but after a grave pause he went on to proclaim that he might perhaps have broken the news about Poynter more gently.

These well-known incidents are recalled in order to stress their essential incongruity. Most wits, it is true, tend to betray a curious obtusiveness as to the timing of their quips, and they often abandon all sensitivity, discretion and kindness when a wisecrack or funniosity lies ready on the tongue. We find this trend referred to explicitly by Wilkes—his rival Edmund Burke in mind—when he said, 'Amidst all the brilliance of his imagination, and the exuberance of his wit, there is a strange want of *taste*. His oratory would sometimes make one suspect that he eats potatoes and drinks whisky.'

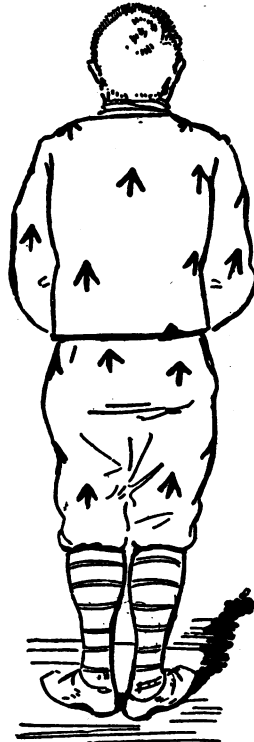
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But in the case of Oscar Wilde we find him indulging his verbal extravaganza not so much at the expense of his audience as to his own detriment. One would imagine an emotional crisis to be an occasion for restraint rather than verbal ostentation. There is, of course, a type of gallows humour which provokes admiration, but Wilde's inappropriate exhibitionisms do not belong here. They give evidence—it is submitted—of his innate theatricality, his hysterical personality.

It has been asserted, in criticism, that Wilde's sense of humour argues against the diagnosis of a hysterical personality. That may or may not be true, but it raises the doubt as to whether Oscar Wilde really did possess a keen sense of humour. There is not much written evidence available to indicate that his wit was ever tempered with humour, and the impression remains that Wilde conformed to the usual pattern of the incorrigible wit by being poorly endowed with the ability to laugh at himself.

During the first half of his imprisonment, Oscar Wilde physically and mentally sickened. The numbing shock of his abrupt translation from a pampered self-indulgent existence as a socialite lead as might be expected to sleeplessness, depression, dyspepsia, anorexia and loss of weight. The reaction seems, however, to have been even greater than usual and we have some reason to believe that Wilde became a victim of a mild prison-psychosis, or 'barbed-wire disease' as it was called during the First World War. In addition to his debility there are hints of his having had nocturnal delusions and hallucinations. The harsh and unsympathetic governor, Colonel Isaacson, was much to blame. There is also good grounds for suspecting that both the chaplain and the medical officer—whose names are not revealed to us—were callous, even hostile. When Ross went to the prison and interviewed the Governor, he described the doctor as . . . 'snuffling and shuffling about, making impatient gestures'. Wilde eventually reported sick, and the prison doctor threatened to charge him with malingering. Matters came to a head when Wilde fainted in chapel and seriously damaged his ear. Thereafter the acuity of his hearing was impaired and from time to time the ear would bleed. This collapse, however, changed matters, and he was transferred to the Infirmary, where he spent the remainder of his sentence. Conditions were now far easier, especially when Isaacson was replaced by Major Nelson. The rations improved in quality and surreptitious titbits were passed to him by friendly warders. In Wilde's characteristic words: 'They brought me curious things to eat—Scotch scones, meat-pies and sausage rolls.'

Under this more humanitarian régime, Oscar Wilde's health improved. Indeed when he was released from prison his physical condition was better than it had been for years. He had lost the excessive fat and flabbiness which had resulted from his earlier over-indulgence, and he looked tougher and fitter.



*Frightful foreshadowing of  
Oscar's future should he  
continue to cut his hair and  
resume the knee breeches*

Fig. 1

This sketch of Oscar Wilde appeared in the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, for 21 July 1883; that is, twelve years before Oscar Wilde was actually committed to prison.

Following his release and his self-ordained exile, Wilde deteriorated. His literary skill had waned. Not only had he lost much of his power of sustained work but the flame of his inspiration burned lower. In the four and a half years between his release and his death, his output comprised *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*—a singularly over-rated jingle—and alterations upon 'A Florentine Tragedy'. This creative sterility continued in spite of every encouragement, for friends and publishers offered inducements for him to devote himself to literature. Wilde instead went to seed and the onlooker finds it difficult to identify among the marks of his decadence the subtle beginnings of his final illness.

There are two often quoted incidents which are said to concern Wilde in

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this period of exile. Dame Nellie Melba tells us that she was accosted by a tall, shabby man with upturned collar, a haunted look in his eyes, who without preamble announced himself as Oscar Wilde and begged for money. The other account is that Carson, his legal adversary (and fellow alumnus) accidentally collided with Wilde in Paris, knocking him into the gutter where he lay 'with haggard, painted features'. These two occurrences are dismissed by Hesketh Pearson as being utterly incredible.

We find him wandering here and there upon the Continent, finally making Paris his headquarters. Living on remittances, cash advances and borrowings, he became something of a cadger. In his prime he had been a steady and rather heavy drinker—though well able to hold his liquor—and now he drank more and more as funds diminished.

The beginnings of his last illness are to be gleaned partly from his biographers, partly from his own letters. For some months he had become a victim of what he regarded as 'mussel poisoning'. The only symptom of this affection available to us is an obstinate dermatitis for which he received treatment at the hands of a Jewish doctor—whose name we do not know. The skin rash remained intractable for months, and then abruptly improved. This betterment coincided with—or followed shortly—a visit to the Vatican. In Wilde's words:

When I saw the old white Pontiff, successor of the Apostles and Father of Christendom pass, carried high above the throng, and in passing turn and bless me where I knelt, I felt my sickness of body and soul fall from me like a worn garment, and I was made whole.

Again, in a letter to Robert Ross:

By the way, did I tell you that on Easter Sunday I was completely cured of my mussel-poisoning? It is true, and I always knew I would be: five months under a Jewish physician not merely did not heal me, but made me worse: the blessing of the Vicar of Christ made me whole.

This observation carries us to the Easter of 1900, that is, about seven months before the end.

Incidentally it is perhaps needful to point out that Wilde's conception of his own malady is wide of the truth. There are, of course, three distinct varieties of mussel poisoning. One is the so-called 'musselling', a simple allergic illness with transient urticaria coupled with diarrhoea and vomiting. Then there is an enteritis due to bacterial contamination of the shell fish. Thirdly comes that rare and serious form of paralysis described as mytilism. Each of these is essentially an acute and short-lived ailment, and not one accords with the picture of a chronic dermatitis.

About this same time, too, there occurs a mention of gout, though the diagnosis rests entirely upon Wilde's assertion. In a letter to Ross, dated

25 February 1899, we find . . . ‘Champagne has been ordered [by my host], though the Nice doctor now absolutely forbids me to take any—on account of gout.’ (How credible is this diagnosis remains open to doubt. We recall Wilde’s facetious remark during his first trial, that is, during April 1895. The opposing counsel put to him, ‘Are you in the habit of drinking champagne?’ ‘Yes,’ replied Wilde, ‘quite against my doctor’s orders.’ To the irritable rejoinder, ‘Never mind your doctor’s orders,’ Wilde blandly replied, ‘I never do.’

The next symptom which comes to our notice is persistent headache. At this point he came under the care of Dr. Tucker, of the Rue des Capucines and the Faubourg St. Honoré. This is certainly not the medical man referred to as the physician who failed to cure the rash. Dr. Maurice Edmund a’Court Tucker was a general practitioner whose practice was largely among the English colony and foreign visitors. Born in Paris in 1868, the son of an English corsetier who settled in that city, Tucker entered the *Faculté de Médecine* and qualified in 1896. Tucker married three times and died, it is thought, in the late forties. His widow retired to St. Raphael in the south of France, where she was certainly living a few years ago. It is unfortunate that no records pertaining to the case of Oscar Wilde are available in the family possession.

According to Robert Ross, Dr. Tucker was a ‘silly, kind, excellent man’. He had been—it was said—‘most kind and attentive, although I think he entirely misunderstood Oscar’s case’.

Tucker continued to visit Wilde at his hotel in the Rue des Beaux-Arts, although cash payment was not forthcoming. Sixty-eight visits in all were paid. We next hear that Oscar Wilde’s ear, injured at the time of his fall in prison, was giving trouble, but in what way we do not know precisely. Giddiness was mentioned once. On 10 October 1900, an aural operation was performed by a certain Dr. Klein (described as Dr. Kleiss by some biographers, probably as the result of misinterpretation of illegible handwriting). We are quite in the dark as to what surgical measure was carried out: we do not even know the identity of Dr. Klein (or Kleiss), though we may suspect that he must have been an Alsatian otologist. There is some reason to believe that a second specialist was summoned and that the three doctors could not agree as to the diagnosis. There is no information as to where the operation was performed, and it seems likely that the intervention was a relatively minor one, carried out in the hotel bedroom. This is unfortunate historically, for it means that no hospital records are available.

Following the operation a Dr. Hennion paid daily visits to dress the wound. He realized that Wilde’s general condition was serious, and that the otological trouble was not of much importance in itself. Ross was warned by him that Wilde could not live more than three or four months unless he



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altered his way of life, referring to his over-indulgence in absinthe and other strong liquors.

With persistent headaches came a return of the skin eruption.

. . . I see that you, like myself, have become a *neurasthenic*. I have been so for four months, quite unable to get out of bed till the afternoon, quite unable to write letters of any kind. My doctor has been trying to cure me with arsenic and strychnine, but without much success as I became poisoned through eating mussels. So you see what an exacting and tragic life I have been leading. Poisoning by mussels is very painful and when one has one's bath, one looks like a leopard. Pray never eat mussels. . . .

This was dated November 1900, and it was actually Wilde's last letter.

An earlier letter—sent to Frank Harris—narrates that:

. . . twice a day a surgeon comes to dress my wounds, which are not yet healed. My bill at the chemists is £35 and debts amount to about £200 . . . I rarely sleep, I have taken so much morphine that it has no more effect on me than water. Chloral and opium are the only things the doctor can think of, as the surgeon declines to allow any subcutaneous injections . . . I owe about £180 . . . It is due to doctors, surgeons, chemists . . . you owe me £125. . . .

One or two other letters written about this time are of interest:

He (i.e. Mellor\*) is almost as neurasthenic as I am; but there was the automobile. I had to consult a specialist before I left Paris, I was so ill: it seems that not 'mussels' but neurasthenia was the cause of my illness, which had returned with renewed violence. (Letter to Robert Ross, 1900.)

And later:

I am very ill, and the doctor is making all kinds of experiments. My throat is like a lime kiln, my brain a furnace and my nerves a coil of angry adders.

A particularly interesting letter, which was written from Rome on 16 April 1900, reads:

. . . an equally curious thing is that whenever I pass the Hotel, which I do constantly, I see the same man. Scientists call that phenomenon an obsession of the visual nerve. You and I know better. . . .

These intriguing sentences may, of course, be nothing more than a romantic product of a poet's fantasy, written at a time when he was obviously spiritually excited. It was Easter-time in Rome and a number of glimpses of the Pope had moved and impressed him. Indeed, in the same letter he had quaintly expressed the belief that his walking-stick was showing signs of budding. Here too he mentioned the 'miracle' whereby he procured a

\* Harold Mellor had become acquainted with Wilde in Nice in December 1899, and invited him to stay at his villa at Gland, on the shores of the Lake of Geneva. Wilde stayed some weeks, but took an increasing dislike to his host, accusing him in his correspondence of being stingy, taciturn and dull. Wilde's antipathy became projected into Switzerland and everything Swiss.

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ticket for the papal audience; the hotel porter's 'supernatural' ugliness was commented upon, as well as the significance of the price of the ticket . . . 'thirty pieces of silver'. On the other hand, Wilde's paragraph recalls to the mind of a neurologist that rare phenomenon of visual perseveration, visual repetition or palinopsia, such as occasionally crops up in the course of parieto-occipital affections, or perhaps in states of mild delirium.

Oscar Wilde died on 30 November 1900, in the presence of one or two devoted friends who have afforded accounts of the death-bed scenes. Thus, according to Robert Ross:

About 5.30 in the morning a complete change came over him, the lines of his face altered, and I believe what is called the death-rattle began; it sounded like the horrible turning of a crank, and it never ceased until the end. His eyes did not respond to the light test any longer. Foam and blood came continually from his mouth . . . the painful noise from the throat became louder and louder. . . . At 1.45 the time of his breathing altered. . . . His pulse began to flutter. He heaved a deep sigh, the only natural one I had heard since I arrived; the limbs seemed to stretch involuntarily, the breathing became fainter; he passed at ten minutes to two exactly.

Writing on another occasion to Louis Marlow, Ross said:

. . . though the circumstances of his death were very painful in many ways, he did not actually suffer during the last two days of his life, being quite unconscious. . . . The end was quite expected, although he had been ill for some weeks.

The Comtesse de Brémont wrote:

The immediate cause of his death was a cerebral inflammation brought on by an attack of influenza, but the remote cause was due to privation, grief and all the excesses misfortune brings in its train.

As one might expect, Frank Harris's account was more colourful:

. . . Ross tells how he came one morning to Oscar's death-bed, and found him practically insensible; he describes the dreadful loud death-rattle of his breath, and says 'terrible offices had to be carried out'. The truth is still more appalling. Oscar had eaten too much and drunk too much almost habitually since the catastrophe in Naples. The dreadful disease from which he was suffering weakens all the tissues of the body, and this weakness is aggravated by drinking wine and still more by drinking spirits. Suddenly, as the two friends sat by the bedside in sorrowful anxiety, there was a loud explosion: mucus poured out of Oscar's mouth and nose, and . . . even the bedding had to be burned.

Early putrefaction necessitated burial without delay, as emphasized by one of his biographers (Ingleby\*).

\*There dwells in New York today an antiquarian bookseller who assisted at Wilde's funeral and who subscribed to defray the expenses. He too has told me of the premature onset of post-mortem changes which made it necessary to dispose of the body as rapidly as possible.—M.C.

Fig. 2

The account for 1,360 francs submitted by Dr. Tucker to the Executors, for attendance during Oscar Wilde's last illness. The account is dated 5 December 1900, that is, six days after Wilde's death. The attendance comprised sixty-eight visits to the patient.

*Le Docteur Tucker,*  
*présente ses compliments à*  
*M<sup>r</sup> Oscar Wilde*  
*et a l'honneur de lui faire*  
*savoir que le montant de*  
*ses honoraires, s'élève à 68 francs*  
*et condamnations depuis 27/12/99*  
*soit mille trois cents*  
*soixante francs.*

*Paris, le 5 Dec. 1900*  
*J. P. L. Honoré.*

**HOTEL D'ALSACE**  
**J. DUPOIRIER**  
13, rue des Beaux-Arts, 13

DÉJEUNERS & DINERS - SERVICE A VOLONTÉ  
APPARTEMENTS ET CHAMBRES MEUBLÉES  
SONNERIE ÉLECTRIQUE

*M* Paris, le 190 *Doit*  
Baudouin 20, rue St-Hippolyte

reçu de M<sup>r</sup> Ross de la part  
de M<sup>r</sup> George Alexander  
pour le compte d'Oscar Wilde  
la somme de 250.  
en espèces

from [Stamp] [Signature]

Fig. 3

Receipt for part payment of Oscar Wilde's hotel bill. Robert Ross and Sir George Alexander were associated in paying off Wilde's debts.

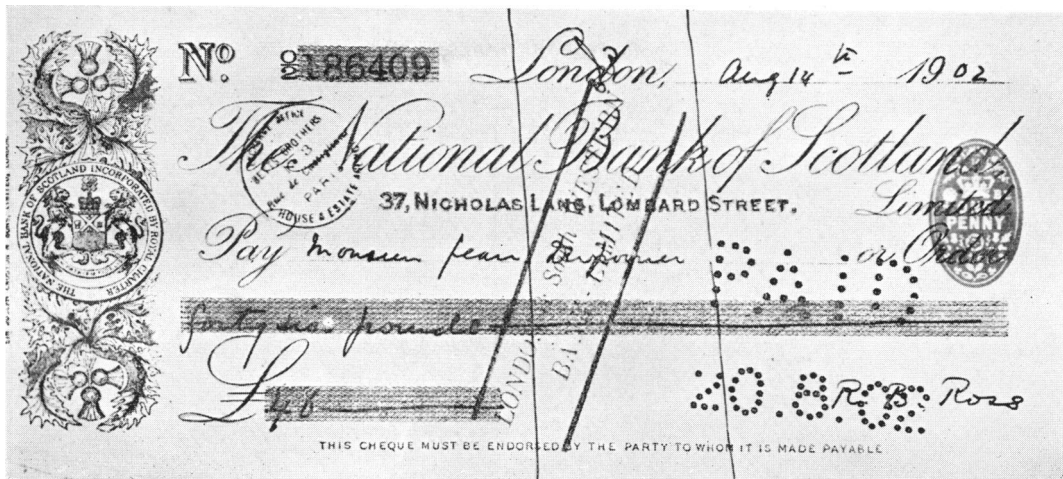


Fig. 4

The actual cheque made out by Robert Ross to M. Dupoirier, the proprietor of the hotel in which Oscar Wilde died.

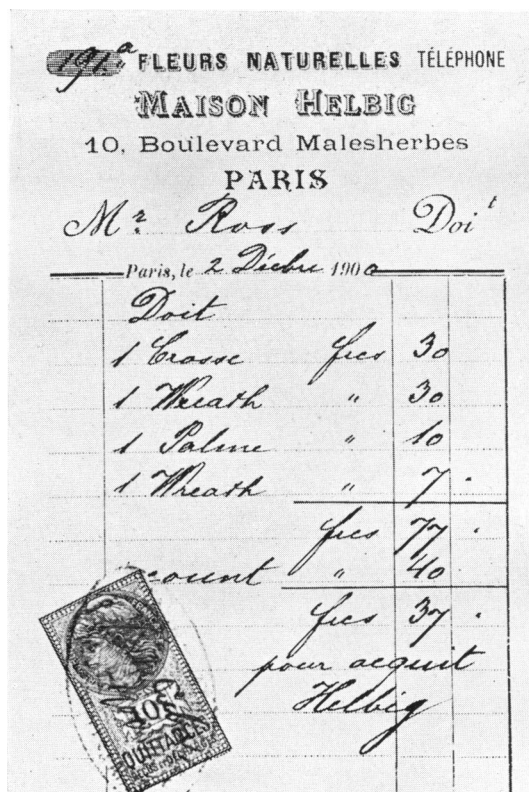


Fig. 5

Receipt for the wreaths sent by Robert Ross and others at the time of Oscar Wilde's funeral.

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Wilde's last words are memorable. Gazing at the seedy surroundings in his hotel bedroom, he is alleged to have said, 'This wallpaper is killing me: one or other of us must go.'

At this point a medical man may well assemble the fragmentary clinical evidence and so try to arrive at a provisional diagnosis as to the nature of Wilde's fatal illness. One plausible explanation lies in an intracranial suppuration consecutive to a septic otitis media. This suggestion suffices to account for every recorded sign and symptom except the intractable skin affection. If one seeks to include the rash as an integral part of the symptomatology, one finds equal difficulty in maintaining such alternative diagnoses as hypertension, cerebral arteriosclerosis, cirrhosis of the liver, or carcinomatosis. There is one diagnostic possibility, however, which has been mooted by various biographers, and which certainly commends itself to a medical critic, namely cerebral syphilis. This no doubt is the 'dreadful disease' mentioned by Frank Harris.

Several writers have referred darkly to the serious consequences to his health resulting from Wilde's early dissipations. Wiegeler affirmed that Wilde contracted a venereal disease as an Oxford undergraduate. An unpublished letter from Robert Sherard—now in my possession—explicitly puts the blame upon 'old Jess', Oxford's one and only *fille de joie*. A few years ago there came up for sale a newly discovered poem by Wilde, dedicated to this harlot, and hinting at an intimate and disastrous association. Furthermore, Wiegeler asserted that mercurial inunctions had been prescribed and maintained to the point of over-dosage. Mercurial poisoning, it has been claimed, accounted for the state of Wilde's unfortunate teeth, which were black and carious. We are told—though the authority for the statement is obscure—that Wilde submitted to a special examination and had a medical clearance before he proposed to Constance Lloyd. The story goes on that after the birth of his second son, Wilde's syphilis reasserted itself. It was partly on this account that Wilde became estranged from his wife, and turned to—or reverted to—homosexual practices. Furthermore, the recrudescence of this disease determined not only the fact but also the manner of his perverted sexual performances. Wiegeler is in no doubt that Wilde's final disease was a late manifestation of lues.

So the problem must rest. Until further information comes to light, as well it might at any time, we may affirm that there are two diagnoses which in approximately equal measure will explain most if not all of the clinical details of Wilde's fatal illness. Whether neurosyphilis or intracranial otitic sepsis is the more likely must, for the time being, remain an open question.

Let us, in conclusion, quote two comments upon Wilde. The first was made by his contemporary, George Bernard Shaw, who never, it is true, knew Wilde very intimately. Shaw said:

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Please let us hear no more of the tragedy of Oscar Wilde. Oscar was no tragedian. He was the superb comedian of his century. One to whom misfortune, disgrace, imprisonment were external and traumatic. His gaiety of soul was invulnerable; it shines through the blackest pages of his *De Profundis* as clearly as in his funniest epigrams. Even on his death-bed he found in himself no pity for himself, playing for the laugh with his last breath, and getting it with as sure a stroke as in his palmiest prime.

The second is a sonnet composed just after Wilde's death, by one who knew him only too well. I refer to his *böse geist*—Lord Alfred Douglas:

*I dreamed of him last night, I saw his face  
All radiant and unshadowed of distress,  
And as of old, in music measureless,  
I heard his golden voice and marked him trace  
Under the common thing the hidden grace.  
And conjure wonder out of emptiness,  
Till mean things put on beauty like a dress  
And all the world was an enchanted place.*

*And then methought outside a fast locked gate  
I mourned the loss of unrecorded words,  
Forgotten tales and mysteries half said,  
Wonders that might have been articulate,  
And voiceless thoughts like murdered singing birds.  
And so I woke, and knew that he was dead.*

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