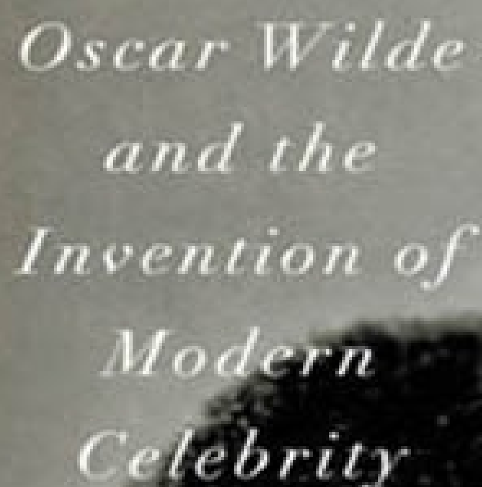

Wilde in America

DAVID M. FRIEDMAN

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Oscar Wilde and the Invention of Modern Celebrity

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FOR MARION ETTLINGER

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Wilde in America

PROLOGUE

Take Your Show on the Road

On January 3, 1882, a federal customs agent, standing near the Hudson River dock where a British ocean liner had just moored, told an arriving passenger from that ship to present his luggage for inspection.

"Have you anything to declare?" the agent asked, trying not to gawk at the traveler's lavender pants, his puffy white shirt, his green wool coat trimmed at the collar and cuffs in seal fur, and what appeared to be a small turban atop a head of brown hair that fell to the man's shoulders.

"Nothing," Oscar Wilde answered.

Then a pause.

"Nothing but my genius."

THAT THIS STORY is still told, more than a hundred years later, is evidence of Wilde's enduring reputation as the most sardonic wit in the history of the English language. What makes the famous quip all the more comical is how little there was to justify it. For the man reputed to have said those words—and there's debate whether he actually did—was (in either case) not the legendary Irish dramatist, novelist, poet, and essayist we recognize today. Not yet, anyway. Wilde was twenty-seven when he arrived in New York. It would be years before he would write *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *An Ideal Husband*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *De Profundis*, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, *Intentions*, or any of the works for which we now honor and remember him. Yet in the ten months tha followed his passage through customs, Wilde—without writing anything much longer than a letter—did demonstrate a special genius, a genius that made his literary career possible, maybe even inevitable. And Wilde didn't merely fashion his image as a world-class wit after walking onto American soil in 1882. He created an enduring part of the world we live in today.

That part isn't a geographical entity. It is a constellation of values, attitudes, and poses. It is a mind-set where everyone thinks they could be famous and, even more to the point, should be. It is a belief system in which *celebrity*, a word that once referred exclusively to persons of achievement—artists, athletes, politicians, and so on, even criminals, who left their mark on history through their deeds—has expanded its meaning to include persons famous merely for being famous, a status won b manipulating the media. It is a worldview where fame isn't the end product of a career but the beginning of one. It is the part of modern life we call celebrity culture.

Oscar Wilde called it into existence after leaving the New York waterfront. He did so in a nearly yearlong speaking tour across America, a tour de force of showmanship—and, more often than not, show*boat*manship—that touched down in thirty states, covered approximately fifteen thousand miles generated more than five hundred newspaper and magazine articles, earned him more money than he had ever earned in his life, and, when it was over, made him the second-most-famous Briton in America, behind only Queen Victoria. (Not bad for a writer who hadn't really written anything.) This "product launch," as we would call it today, was all the more remarkable because Wilde had no training in business and only a little more in public speaking. In an era populated by several of the greatest product marketers in America's history—a list that includes H. J. Heinz, Milton Hershey, an

Levi Strauss—Oscar Wilde, whose only product was a self-adoring dandy named Oscar Wilde, may have been the best of them all.

Other Europeans—Dickens and Tocqueville, to name but two—had toured our country before Wilde. But they came to learn about America; Wilde came so America could learn about *him*. Meetin his audiences in an impossible-to-ignore ensemble—satin breeches, black silk stockings, silver-buckled pumps, and a snug velvet coat with lace trim—Wilde sold himself to the American public as "Professor of Aesthetics," a title for which he had no authentic certification, in roughly one hundred fifty lectures (most of them on interior decorating) that brought him face to face with farmers, poets, socialites, preachers, factory workers, prospectors, prostitutes, southern belles, Harvard intellectuals, and, if a newspaper account is accurate, a detachment of Texas Rangers who bestowed upon him the rank of colonel.

Traveling by rail, ferry, and horse-drawn carriage, Wilde spoke before crowds ranging from twenty-five to twenty-five hundred, often embellishing his home-design advice with excerpts from h favorite poems. Maybe it's not surprising some American reporters mocked him as an "ass-thete" an when other insults failed, as "she." But those rude hacks underestimated their target. Beneath Wilde' delicate persona—the rouge-wearing dandy languidly flinging his hand to his brow as he sang the praises of sconces and embroidered pillows—was a man on a serious mission: to make himself a star no matter how little he had done (so far) to deserve it.

A stranger in a strange land, Wilde crisscrossed the country from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, at times joined by a valet, business manager, and, according to letters written to friends in London, two secretaries. He sold autographed photos of himself in theater lobbies, at women's clubs, and, on at least one occasion, at an amusement park. He was the featured guest at nearly two hundred parties, where he often heard an orchestra play "Oscar Dear!" ("Oscar dear, Oscar dear, How utterly, flutterly utter you are; Oscar dear, Oscar dear, I think you are awfully wild!"), "The Oscar Wilde Forget Me Not Waltz," and similar ditties composed in his honor. And lik most stars, he made a point of socializing with other stars, breakfasting with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in Cambridge, Massachusetts, drinking homemade wine with Walt Whitman in Camden, New Jersey, and dining with Louisa May Alcott, Henry Ward Beecher, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henr James, and (one wonders how many people could say this in 1882) both Ulysses S. Grant and Jefferso Davis—though not, in this final instance, it should be noted, at the same time.

No matter whom he drank toasts with, Wilde was clearheaded about his goal, devising a groundbreaking formula for manufacturing fame—one that is still used by many aspiring celebrities today, whether they know it or not. Decades before Norman Mailer, Wilde knew the value of "advertisements for myself." Decades before Andy Warhol, he saw the beauty in commerce and the importance of image in marketing. Decades before Kim Kardashian, he grasped that fame could be fabricated in the media. Decades before *Gawker* or *Us Weekly*, Oscar Wilde created the value system we now call celebrity culture. This is how he did it.

CHAPTER ONE

Build Your Brand

*A*t his parties he was both conductor and soloist; Oscar Wilde saw no conflict in that. He began hosting soirees not long after arriving at Oxford's Magdalen College from Dublin in 1874, holding them on Sunday nights in his rooms overlooking the River Cherwell. His guests, all of them male students (Magdalen wouldn't admit females until 1979), would find their way to a punch bowl of whiskey and gin, alongside a humidor of imported tobacco, next to a rack of long-stemmed clay pipe The scent of lilies, standing white and exuberant in blue china vases, would drape the air. There was piano to be played, and it usually was, with spirited vocals from those in attendance, their zeal, if not their skill, enhanced by the grog. Gorgeous etchings of nudes, each one more alluring than the next, populated the walls. But most of all, there was Oscar.

He would dart about the rooms, flipping his hair off his face as he introduced new friends to old with flattery almost as dizzying as the punch. Display was encouraged at his parties, and, if there was hesitation from his guests, Wilde took the lead. To those studying classics (as he was), he would quo long passages from Euripides—in Greek, of course. For literature students, he'd recite Swinburne or Keats, his favorite poets, other than himself. (He would invariably get around to quoting him, too.) Those reading philosophy were challenged with absurdly stated propositions, nearly always of a paradoxical bent. If his voice began to tire, he would mimic the physical quirks of Oxford's most famous dons. And if circumstances demanded, he'd place his six-foot-three-inch frame between guests whose friendly disagreement was about to turn unfriendly, especially if that tension threatened the integrity of his blue china. Few who attended one of Wilde's parties ever forgot the experience, o the host who had invited him. Which was the whole point.

He admitted as much late one Sunday night to two of his closest friends at Oxford, William (Bouncer) Ward and David (Dunskie) Hunter Blair, who had remained at Wilde's after the other guests left. The three students were talking about the future, a pressing personal matter for Ward and Blair, upperclassmen who were approaching graduation. In truth, the future for both men, because of family obligations, looked settled: Ward would join his father's law firm in Bristol, England; Blair, a member of the Lowlands aristocracy, would inherit his father's baronetcy in Scotland.

"Oscar, you have twice as much brains in that ridiculous head of yours as both of us put together," Ward said. "What are you going to do with them? What is your real ambition in life?" It took only a moment for Wilde to respond. Becoming a creaky Oxford don was out of the question, he said. He would probably try his luck as a writer. But there was one thing he was sure of:

"Somehow or other I'll be famous, and if not famous, I'll be notorious."

TO READ THOSE words today, knowing how Wilde made good on them—first as the wittiest talker of h age (and maybe of any age); then as the author of peerless stage comedies and serious criticism (not t forget a novel that is still read 125 years after its publication); and finally as the first gay martyr of a sexual revolution that hadn't yet begun (an anomaly that led to his conviction for "gross indecency," sentence of two years at hard labor, and his death at age forty-six)—it's hard not to shudder at their eerie portentousness. One senses that shudder from the source of the quotation, Blair, who wrote in h

memoir *In Victorian Days* of Wilde's answer: "Surely a prophecy, this, of evil omen."

~~Blair's words remind us that any student of history must bear in mind that events in the past~~ were once in the future, which is to say, unknown (and unknowable) to those who would participate in ther Despite Blair's anxiety, there was nothing preternatural about Wilde's remark. Oscar didn't know his destiny; he only knew what he hoped it would look like. Even so, the words Wilde spoke that night do seem weirdly prophetic on a point that is crucial to understanding his rise and fall—and their lasting impact on our culture. His answer didn't merely show how serious he was about becoming a public figure; it suggests that he grasped, in a precociously modern sense, that the line between fame and notoriety could be blurry. Maybe even nonexistent.

His words also hint that he understood the significance of that fuzziness. In the Victorian world Wilde was born in, fame accrued from one's deeds, notoriety from one's persona. The former was bestowed by others as a response to real-world accomplishments. The latter was usually accomplishe by oneself, using an identity—or pose—created in one's imagination. Wilde's answer suggests he ha intuited something new about the ways one might seek the intoxicating immortality of renown: he suspected notoriety could give birth to fame, or replace it with a flashy new category incorporating th best and worst of notoriety *and* fame. This is the status we now call celebrity. The first step to achieving it, Wilde suspected, was to become known for being well known.

It's likely this idea first occurred to him in the city of his birth, Dublin, where his parents were very well known. Oscar's father, Dr. William Wilde, had built a stellar career as an eye and ear surgeon, establishing the first hospital in Ireland to focus on diseases of those organs; and, as a member of the Irish Census Commission, he had overseen the first statistical analysis of the public health consequences of the Irish Famine. He was also the author of several well-regarded surgical textbooks, the founding editor of the *Dublin Journal of Medical Science*, and, in his spare time, a prolific compiler of Irish folklore, legends, and superstitions, which he also published. (He spoke Iris fluently.)

Far less impressive was Dr. Wilde's commitment to sobriety. When he was a child, he had been given ale to "cure" a fever. His recovery convinced him alcohol had health-giving properties, a belief he put into daily practice as an adult with a heavy regimen of imbibing. Perhaps it's not surprising, then, that some questioned his skills as a surgeon, no matter how glowing his reputation. According t George Bernard Shaw, who grew up in Dublin, Dr. Wilde operated on Shaw's father to correct a wandering eye that made him look cross-eyed. The surgeon "overdid the correction so much," Shaw later wrote, that his father's eye wandered in the opposite direction for the rest of his life. Even more alarming, Dr. Wilde was said to be a sexual predator or, at the very least, a man unlikely to check his carnal appetites. While unmarried, he fathered three children, for whom he accepted responsibility, and rumor had it there were others out there, unacknowledged. (This despite the fact that he was a short, scrawny man with a disregard for personal hygiene so noticeable it led some Dubliners to joke "Why are Dr. Wilde's nails so black? Because he scratched himself.")

Even so, Dr. Wilde was one of the most sought-after bachelors in Ireland until November 12, 185 when, at thirty-six, he married Jane Francesca Agnes Elgee, a Dubliner thirty years of age (though sh claimed to be twenty-five) and a woman who in some circles was even more famous than he. Elgee had won that fame contributing fiery, anti-British verse to *The Nation*, the chief organ of the Irish independence movement. Elgee wrote her poetry under the pen name Speranza, but she wasn't one to hide her identity for long. When the editor of *The Nation* was tried in a British court for sedition for publishing a poem of hers containing the line "O! For a hundred thousand muskets glimmering rightl in the light of Heaven!"—muskets held by Irish revolutionaries—Elgee rose from the courtroom gallery and said: "I, and I alone, am the culprit, if culprit there be." After that splendid act of courage Speranza/Elgee was often recognized on Dublin's streets, where she was usually greeted with cheers.

Dr. Wilde shared his wife's nationalist views, albeit less theatrically. The fact that both were Protestants, a religious affiliation typically associated in Ireland with pro-British, pro-Unionist views, made them an unusual but politically well-matched couple. They were hardly a matched set, however: Jane, who was six feet tall, towered over her husband; she also appeared to outweigh him. In spite of those differences, the Wildes' first child, William Robert Kingsbury Wills Wilde, was born in Dublin on September 26, 1852, in the first home the Wildes occupied as a couple, 21 Westland Row. So was their second, Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, on October 16, 1854. Their third, Isola Francesca Emily Wilde, was born on April 2, 1857, at 1 Merrion Square, a much larger house and more fashionable address, where the Wildes had moved shortly after Oscar's birth. This home was staffed by six servants, including a French housekeeper and a German governess whose duties included teaching the Wilde children their native tongues. Mrs. Wilde was proud of her family, even of her somewhat notorious husband, especially after he was knighted, in January 1864, for his work on the Irish census.

Dr. and Mrs. Wilde were now Sir William and Lady Jane Wilde, so an invitation to dine at their home, sent to members of the city's intellectual elite, was a mark of having arrived in Irish society. The Wildes allowed their young sons to sit at the table at those dinner parties—where the liquor and conversation flowed freely—as long as Oscar and Willie kept silent. Years later, when Oscar was the most popular dinner guest in London, he said it was because he had been forced to hold his tongue as a child that he was so successful in wagging it as an adult. He was joking, of course, but there's no denying that the house on Merrion Square was an important school for Oscar. This education didn't begin in earnest, however, until he won a scholarship to attend Trinity College, Dublin, after graduating from the Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, in what is now Northern Ireland. (His brother, who had also attended Portora, was already at Trinity.)

Now that both the surviving Wilde children were home—Isola had died in 1867 of a lingering fever—Lady Wilde began hosting a weekly party at Merrion Square where, as she put it, she "agglomerated together all the thinking minds of Dublin" and introduced them (or *re*introduced them) to her sons. These "thinking minds" were invited by a card that read: "At Home, Saturday, 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. *Conversazione*." Lady Wilde's use of Italian was no surprise to her friends. She had long claimed (without evidence) that her maiden name, Elgee, was a corruption of the Italian name Alighieri. (What she was really claiming, then, was that she was descended from Dante.) Despite that preposterous assertion, her invitations were well received, so it was not uncommon for Oscar to find his home occupied every Saturday by more than a hundred people. The guest list for these parties reflected Lady Jane's interest in the arts rather than her husband's in the sciences. In truth, Dr. Wilde was not a regular participant in the *conversazioni*. After a patient of his, Mary Travers, accused him of making unwanted sexual advances on her in his medical office, he spent less time in Dublin and more on Lough Fee, in the west of Ireland, where he had built a summer home.*

Those who did attend the parties were a bohemian bunch, a mix of poets, actors, political radicals, musicians, journalists, professors, and students. These guests entered rooms lined with Greco-Roman busts intended to recreate the atmosphere of a Platonic symposium—if they could see them: the windows at Merrion Square were curtained, and the only source of light was a series of candles and gas lamps shielded by pink shades. In this artsy ambience poetry was read aloud and music was performed, while other guests argued about politics. There were platters of snacks, bottles of French wine, and bowls of punch refilled by servants forced to push their way through the boisterous throng.

No matter how crowded or dark it got, it was hard to miss Lady Wilde. The Irish writer Henriette Corkran once watched her make an entrance in a long crimson gown that hung over several layers of crinolines. As Lady Wilde walked among her guests, "there was a swaying, swelling movement, like that of a vessel at sea, with the sails filled with wind," Corkran wrote. "Her long, massive face was

plastered with white powder; over her blue-black glossy hair was a gilt crown of laurels. She wore white kid gloves, held a scent bottle and a fan. On her broad chest was fastened a series of large brooches, evidently family portraits. . . . This gave her the appearance of a perambulating family mausoleum.”

The *Irish Times* liked what it saw. “No. 1 Merrion Square is where one meets all the Dublin celebrities in literature, art and the drama,” one article noted. “The affable and courteous hostess is Lady Wilde; the charm in the society to be met in her salons is that it is wholly devoid of snobbism.” The last words in that sentence probably referred to the fact that Catholics were as welcome as Protestants, which was rarely true in the milieu the Wildes moved in. Even so, she *was* a snob. Once, when a friend asked permission to bring a “respectable” woman to her next party, Lady Wilde couldn’t contain her horror: “You must never employ that description in this house. Only tradespeople,” she trilled, “are respectable!” When not making absurd pronouncements or parading among her guests, Speranza was an avid conversationalist, especially about poetry and politics. She had well-defined ideas about how to become a talker worth listening to. “Epigrams are always better than argument in conversation,” she said. And “paradox is the very essence of social wit.”

Was anyone listening (or watching) more closely than her second son? It hardly seems possible. We have no photographs of Lady Wilde’s parties to examine, but it is easy to imagine Oscar standing in a corner of his living room, sipping punch and holding a cigarette, affecting a worldliness way beyond his years, as he observed his unforgettably costumed (and cosmeticated) mother as she took a star turn in her own home, charming and cajoling the most accomplished, the most admired, and, in some cases, the most gossiped-about people in Dublin. We know he was so awed by her success as a party host that he tried to take some credit for it himself. “I want to introduce you to my mother,” he told a friend from Trinity College, whom he was inviting to Merrion Square. “She and I have founded a Society for the Suppression of Virtue.”

That was quite an exaggeration by Oscar, who knew perfectly well that the defining personality at his mother’s parties was hers. Not that Lady Wilde would have minded his fib. Self-promotion, she understood, had its own code, one with little connection to truth-telling—and this was a truth she had made sure to pass on to her son. Indeed, it would be difficult to overstate the influence of Lady Wilde on the teenager who would become the famous and notorious Oscar Wilde. It was from Lady Wilde that Oscar learned that identity is a kind of fiction, and that being oneself is a form of playacting. It was from her that Oscar learned that appearances have their own reality. It was from her that Oscar learned that the most important act of creativity is the creation of one’s image. And it was from her, the woman who rose to her feet in a packed courtroom to unmask herself as the “seditious” poet Speranza, that Oscar learned it was not enough to stand up; one had to stand out.

That Oscar would choose conversation as his means of standing out was, to be sure, the result of observing his mother. But he had a second teacher in this as well, a regular guest at Lady Wilde’s salons, a person he knew intimately. This was his classics tutor at Trinity College, Rev. John Pentland Mahaffy, a man that many in Dublin called the greatest raconteur in Ireland. (Mahaffy certainly thought so.) And like Lady Wilde, he had rules for excelling at conversation that he passed on to anyone who would listen.

Oscar listened. Some said it was impossible not to. “Until you heard Mahaffy,” one Dubliner said, “you hadn’t realized how language could be used to hypnotize.” The true master of conversation, taught Mahaffy (who would later author a book on the subject), is the one who leavens seriousness with humor: “For if a person is to require others to listen to him, it must be by presenting human life under a fresh and piquant aspect—in fact, as a little comedy.” This law, Mahaffy declared, was especially useful in arguments. Once, while debating an Irish feminist, he was challenged by this question: “Sir, you are a man. I am a woman. What is the essential difference between us?” It took

only a second for Mahaffy to answer: “Madam, I cannot conceive.”

~~Along with puns, Mahaffy (like Speranza) championed the epigram. “Poets are born, not paid~~,” h liked to say. And “It is the spectator and not life that art mirrors.” Oscar would later appropriate man of these for himself. Equally influential on the future party wit and playwright was Mahaffy’s insistence that “a liar is a better ingredient in company than a scrupulously truthful man,” and that details are the enemy of good talk. The goal of any good conversationalist, Mahaffy said, “is not to instruct but to divert, and to ask him, ‘Is that really true?’ shows that the objector is a blockhead.” Once, while speaking to the provost of Trinity College, Mahaffy bragged, “I was only once caned in my life, and that was for telling the truth,” to which the provost replied, “It certainly cured you, Mahaffy.” Years later Wilde would write that “the telling of beautiful untrue things is the proper aim of Art,” and he would have Lord Henry Wotton, the aristocrat who tantalizes Dorian Gray with his ta in Wilde’s novel, tell his protégé: “One should absorb the colour of life, but one should never remember its details. Details are always vulgar.” Some have guessed Mahaffy was a model for Wotton. What’s certain is that he was a model for Oscar Wilde.

Perhaps the tutor’s greatest impact came in early 1874, when, as Wilde was in his third year at Trinity (where he had just won a prize for Greek translation), Mahaffy urged his nineteen-year-old pupil to continue his studies in England. Mahaffy’s motivation is hard to pin down. Perhaps he was a alpha male banishing a young rival from his turf. We know he thought Trinity’s classics program the equal of any in Europe but, like many Irish Protestants, he was awed by the older English universitie Lady Wilde liked the idea; Willie Wilde was already in England, studying law in London. Dr. Wilde gave his approval, so now it was up to Oscar. In March 1874 he learned that Oxford’s Magdalen College was awarding Demyships—scholarships worth £95 per year—in classics to the two top scorers in an examination given on June 23. Wilde took the test and finished first. “You’re not quite clever enough for us here, Oscar,” Mahaffy told his pupil. “Better run off to Oxford.”

So he did, matriculating on October 17, 1874. Wilde had absorbed a great deal from his eccentric tutor, as he had from his even more eccentric mother. He saw how diligently both had worked to fashion their public identities, using spectacle and wit to leave their marks on the world. At Oxford, the medieval birthplace of English academia, Oscar Wilde would begin to leave his own mark.

THE MOST IMPORTANT thing Wilde learned in Dublin was a truth about himself: he wanted to be famou Such an urge requires a substantial ego and, in Wilde’s case, that was virtually a genetic inheritance. Both his parents were driven by high self-regard to achieve fame—Lady Wilde as a published poet and essayist on Irish independence, Sir William as a published scientist and folklorist. The “published” part was important. Neither was content to have his or her work unacknowledged by the community. But his parents’ success, Wilde came to see as a teenager, had been achieved in a provincial capital. That would not be enough for him. Wilde’s own ego, though still forming, was already of such substance that he was determined to surpass his parents.

So he arrived at Oxford with a goal—one he soon realized would not be so easy to achieve. He wa hardly a typical first-year student, and not merely because he had already spent three years at college in Dublin. What really separated him was class. His father’s knighthood may have counted for much in Ireland, as did Wilde’s degree from Portora. But at Oxford nearly everyone came from Eton, Harrow, or Winchester, the most prestigious schools in Britain, and half of his classmates seemed to belong to families with titles dating back to the Magna Carta. (The youngest son of Queen Victoria, Prince Leopold, was there.) Embarrassed by his own middle-class origins, Wilde decided some shedding was in order. He shaved off the sideburns that marked him as a provincial. He lost his Irish accent. He shipped many of his clothes back to Dublin, replacing them with the tweed jackets and blu

neckties favored at Magdalen. He purchased formalwear. It took little time for him to go native. “If I were alone on a desert island and had my things,” he told a new friend, “I would dress for dinner every night.” Wilde was desperate to fit in, but he also wanted to stand out. He was confident the skills he had learned in Dublin would make that second goal possible, for if Mahaffy had convinced him of anything, it was the power of good talk. “Many men,” his Trinity tutor often said, “owe the whole of great success in life to this and nothing else.” All he needed to harness that force at Oxford, Wilde wa certain, was the right conversation topic. He found what he was looking for at classes taught by John Ruskin, the university’s Slade Professor of Fine Art.

Wilde was awestruck by Ruskin’s talks on the power and meaning of beauty, lectures that seemed more like public ecstasies than podium presentations. The professor’s commitment to his subject was the stuff of legend at Oxford. He was once seen staggering across Magdalen Bridge, seemingly drunk in reality, so the story went, he was walking with his eyes closed because he had seen a sunset of such loveliness that he hoped, by keeping his eyes shut, to retain the image in his mind until he got home t write about it. Myth or not, Wilde was soon attending Ruskin’s art lectures—sometimes instead of hi assigned Greek or Latin classes—to hear Ruskin describe beauty as evidence of God’s presence on Earth (and not just in nature). Indeed, much of the aesthetic movement inspired by Ruskin had earthly goals. In opposition to the Industrial Revolution, it championed handmade goods and decorative ornamentation in the making of furniture, ceramics, metalwork, stained glass, textiles, wallpapers, books, and so on. One must “get rid at once of any idea of Decorative art being a degraded or a separate kind of art,” Ruskin wrote in *The Two Paths*. Wilde found in Ruskin not just his new mentor and friend (they took long walks together through Oxfordshire), but his new conversation topic—*and* his new identity: he would become the self-anointed leader of Oxford’s student aesthetes, preaching t his classmates the Divine Gospel of Beauty and the superiority of decorative handmade goods to ugly manufactured ones. And while doing so, he would make him*self* the most talked-about student talker on campus.

His usual venue was the dining hall. He would gush at length about the loveliness of Pre-Raphaelite painting—work championed by Ruskin—and the overriding importance of color in art. (“Of all God’s gifts to the sight of man, colour is the holiest, the most divine, the most solemn,” Ruskin taught. Years later Wilde wrote: “Mere colour, unspoiled by meaning, and unallied with definite form, can speak to the soul in a thousand different ways.”) He repeated Ruskin’s lesson that “the most beautiful things in the world are the most useless: peacocks and lilies, for instance.” He declared that, were he given godlike powers, he would order all the factories in Britain banished to an island off the mainland and give the city of Manchester back to the shepherds. It wasn’t easy for anyone else to get a word in during these soliloquies, but complaints were few. There was something irresistible, one classmate said, about Wilde’s “sureness of himself.”

Confident talk was just part of it. Wilde had learned from his mother the importance of scenery, costume, and appearance in creating a persona. Soon an unfinished oil painting appeared on an easel his rooms. He said he was working on it, but no one ever saw him holding a brush. Reproductions of works by (the real painters) Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Everett Millais found space on his walls His purchase of blue china vases was similarly inspired by his wish to “exist beautifully.” When a quip of his—“I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china”—was repeated around campus, an unexpected consequence thrilled him: he was condemned in a sermon at a nearby church. Wilde’s remark was “a form of heathenism,” Rev. John W. Burgon told his flock, “which it is our bounden duty to fight against and to crush out.” That Rev. Burgon had condemned Darwin from the same pulpit only made Wilde prouder. When the “scandal” was covered in the *Oxford and Cambridge Undergraduate’s Journal*, he was euphoric. It was getting harder and harder for him to leave his rooms without being recognized.

That was partly because he no longer looked like everyone else. He began to leave his formalwea in his closet, instead wearing an aesthetic "uniform": baggy trousers and a blousy white shirt under a dark frock coat that hung "like drapery," wrote Horace G. Hutchinson, an Oxford classmate, in his memoir. Wilde let his hair grow; some said he altered his posture to match the languid sensibility prized by aesthetes. He couldn't—or wouldn't—keep his head upright, Hutchinson wrote: "It fell sideways, like a lily bloom too heavy for its stalk." Wilde was seeking a reaction, even outrage, from his fellow students, and he got it. The Oxford elites, he knew, revered swaggering hussars, burly spor heroes, and brave explorers. Not aesthetes with droopy posture.

Hutchinson's comments were probably a coded criticism of Wilde as—to use the modern usage— a homosexual, a word that wouldn't appear in English until 1892 (as an adjective) and not until 1912 as a noun. Hutchinson made his remarks in 1920, long after Wilde's downfall for "gross indecency," so it's likely he assumed that at Oxford Wilde had already been "indecent." In truth, there's no conclusive evidence Wilde lived as a homosexual, secretly or not, at Magdalen. Most experts believe he didn't have his first homosexual experience until 1886 or 1887—in either case, several years after graduating from Oxford—with Robert (Robbie) Ross, later to become his literary executor.†

We know that in 1875 Wilde met a young woman from Dublin named Florence Balcombe. A mutual attraction ensued; gifts were exchanged, and they even talked of marrying one day. (In the en Balcombe wed a different Irishman, Bram Stoker, later to become immortal as the author of *Dracula* But we also know that at Oxford Wilde was in close contact with at least two men who loved men, though neither was enrolled at the university: the artist Frank Miles, a man described by the gay author Rupert Croft-Cooke as "one of those sophisticated queers who tell women what they should wear, have rather exaggerated good manners and camp outrageously, preferably among titled people" and the titled person Lord Ronald Gower, the pleasure-seeking youngest son of the Duke of Sutherlar —and a man often put forth, along with John Mahaffy, as the model for Lord Henry Wotton in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. That Wilde was aware he had classmates at Oxford who were drawn to same sex relationships is also clear. This is from a letter he sent to William (Bouncer) Ward, in August 1876: "Last night I strolled into the theatre . . . and to my surprise saw Todd and young Ward the quir boy in a private box. . . . I believe Todd only mentally spoons the boy, but . . . he looked awfully nervous and uncomfortable" when he knew Wilde had seen him.

If Hutchinson's snickering about Wilde's posture was meant to hint that Wilde had something to be nervous about at Oxford, it's impossible to know with certainty if he was correct. But Hutchinson was right when he credited Wilde with inventing a new type of poseur there. "The ordinary poseur tries to conceal his pose. But Wilde," he wrote, "knew himself to be a poseur and made no effort to conceal it. He posed as a poseur."

Here Hutchinson was spot on. Wilde's persona at Oxford *was* a pose—in fact, a series of poses: sometimes bait and switch (the serious scholar who pretended to be too enamored of lilies and sunflowers to open a book), sometimes shape-shifting (the Irishman who played the Englishman), an sometimes pure make-believe (Wilde the "painter"). He could strike those poses without embarrassment because, long before academics invented the field of performance studies, he graspec that the line between "staged" and "lived" behavior was faint. The actor playing Hamlet and the student playing the aesthete, Wilde was convinced, were doing the same thing: inhabiting a character and performing for an audience—often for fun, but always for a reason.

Wilde's playacting at Oxford was done intentionally and in public, with goals that were clear to him, if not to everyone else: to become well known as the aesthete's aesthete, then to translate that renown into a career. This was the reverse of the vocational path usually taken by young men of promise in Victorian England. Fame would *launch* Wilde's career, not cap it. On a spring night in 1877, he pushed that process forward with the most eye-catching performance of his life so far.

THE OCCASION WAS the opening of the new Grosvenor Gallery, in London. Its proprietor, Sir Coutts Lindsay, had committed his gallery to exhibiting new work, especially by Pre-Raphaelite painters suc as Edward Burne-Jones and John Everett Millais, that was at times overlooked by the Royal Academy The invitation to a private viewing on May 1, 1877, could not have come at a better time for Wilde. Despite an excellent academic record—he had won a “first” the previous semester in Honour Moderations, a part of Oxford’s rigorous classics curriculum—he had been suspended for missing th first three weeks of the current term, tardiness caused by a trip he took through Greece with John Mahaffy. “I was sent down from Oxford,” Wilde wrote, “for being the first undergraduate to visit Olympia.” It was no joke at the time, however. Suspension meant he lost his room privileges on campus. So, temporarily homeless, Wilde went to London, where he stayed with Frank Miles, whose career as a portraitist of society beauties was just taking off. Oxford’s loss, Wilde vowed, would be London’s gain. He wouldn’t just show up at the Grosvenor. He would make sure the entire city heard about it.

That wouldn’t be easy. Baronet Lindsay, whose wife was a Rothschild, had spent £150,000 (the equivalent of £14 million today) to make his gallery the talk of the town. A Palladian doorway, salvaged from a crumbling church in Italy, was installed at the entrance, and James McNeill Whistle was hired to paint a frieze on the coved ceiling of the main exhibition hall, which visitors reached by ascending a fifteen-foot marble stairway. Gilded Ionic pilasters, purchased from a defunct opera hous in Paris, appeared at intervals along the gallery walls, which were lined with red silk. The floor was covered with Oriental rugs, and the corners of each exhibition room were inhabited by plush Italian chairs and potted plants on consoles, making the Grosvenor appear less a gallery than the interior of a Venetian palace. The effect, both inside and out, was spectacular.

This setting only encouraged Wilde to make a spectacle of *himself*. Aware this was his London debut, he made his guiding principle the truism that one never gets a second chance to make a first impression.‡ So in an exquisite space occupied by the Prince of Wales, the statesman William Gladstone, the scholar John Ruskin, and other notables, Oscar Wilde—a twenty-two-year-old undergraduate (and a suspended one, at that)—outshone them all. He did so with an unforgettable act of peacockery, strutting about the Grosvenor in an evening jacket specially tailored, shaped, decorated, and tinted so that, when viewed from the rear, it transformed its wearer into a walking, talking musical instrument: a cello. In a room lined with works of art, Wilde stole the show by wearing one.

He introduced himself to nearly everyone in sight (except, as prohibited by protocol, His Royal Highness), then commented on the paintings, using his exuberance to hold the attention he’d grabbed with his jacket. The whole point of going to the Grosvenor, Wilde understood, was to be seen. He was thrilled by the splash he had made—even more so when *Punch*, the popular English humor magazine committed to lampooning the follies of the fashionable, took notice of him. *Punch* used verse to express its “admiration” for the Oxford student’s performance at the Grosvenor:

The haunt of the very aesthetic,
Here comes the supremely intense,
The long-haired and hyper-poetic,
Whose sound is mistaken for sense.
And many a maid will mutter,
When Oscar looms large in her sight,
“He’s quite too consummately utter,
As well as too utterly quite.”

Wilde got an assignment to review the Grosvenor opening for *Dublin University Magazine*, a jour~~nal that had published some poems of his and several essays on Irish folklore written by his~~ fathe That Oscar envisioned this commission as an act of self-advertisement is made clear from a letter he sent to Keningale Cook, the magazine's editor, after turning in his first draft. Apparently Cook had questioned his decision to write the piece in the first person. "I always say I and not 'we,' " wrote Wilde. "We belongs to the days of anonymous articles, not to signed articles like mine." Cook wasn' Wilde's only important correspondent after the opening. He mailed a letter to William Gladstone in which he included a poem he had written titled "On the Massacre of the Christians in Bulgaria," a real-life event Gladstone had forcefully condemned in Parliament. Unlike the tone he took with Cook Wilde's tone with Gladstone was sycophantic and disingenuous. But it had the same goal: promoting Oscar Wilde.

"I am little more than a boy and have no literary interest in London," the twenty-three-year-old wrote, "but perhaps if you saw any good stuff in the lines I send you, some editor (of the *Nineteenth Century* perhaps or the *Spectator*) might publish them: and I feel sure that you can appreciate the ver great longing that one has when young to have words of one's own published for men to read." Read today, the words "no literary interest in London," and Wilde's calling himself "little more than a boy are risible. Gladstone told Wilde to send his poem to the *Spectator* himself, where it was rejected. Wilde's search for glory was far from over, however. When his review of the Grosvenor show was published, Wilde, his suspension now complete, sent a copy to Walter Pater, Oxford's second-most-famous professor of art history. Wilde had never taken a course from Pater. But he had read his book *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, which he later described to William Butler Yeats as "my golden book; I never travel anywhere without it." There were parts of *Studies*, Wilde's friends at Magdalen knew, that he had committed to memory. "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itsel is the end," Pater wrote, and Wilde often repeated aloud:

> A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How can we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy? To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.

Pater was hardly living that fiery life himself. To borrow the author Hesketh Pearson's line, he w "one of those timid, old-maidish scholarly recluses who, fearing even the uncertainties of marriage, preach the gospel of living dangerously." Even so, Pater overcame his shyness to invite Wilde to tea, meeting that took place in October 1877. "Why do you always write poetry?" Pater asked his guest. "Why do you not write prose? Prose is much more difficult." The two men, so unlike, became close, often lunching together in Wilde's rooms. That an undergraduate could form a bond with not one (Ruskin) but two (Ruskin and Pater) of Oxford's most famous dons did not go unnoticed. Wilde's status among students as the aesthete's aesthete was now indisputable.

This stature reached even greater heights the following year, when Wilde submitted an entry for the Newdigate Prize, the award given annually to the poem written by an Oxford undergraduate judge to be the "best composition in English verse" on a subject chosen by the university's professor of poetry. The subject selected in 1878, as luck would have it, was Ravenna, a city in Italy Wilde had visited the previous year with John Mahaffy when they were on their way to Greece. On June 10 Wil was notified that he had won the prize, the first Magdalen man to do so in fifty years, and an accomplishment that put him in extremely distinguished company. Past honorees included Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, John Addington Symonds, and—this name particularly tickled Wilde—John W Burgon, the Oxford cleric who had famously decried Oscar's "blue china" lament. Wilde's delight at the honor was exceeded only by that of his mother, then dealing in Dublin with complications arising

from the settling of her husband’s estate. (Sir William had died in 1876.) “Oh, Gloria, Gloria! Thank
you a million times for the telegram,” she began:

> It is the first pleasant throb of joy I have had this year. How I long to read the poem. We, after all, we have *Genius*—that is something attorneys can’t take away. Oh, I do hope you will now have some joy in your heart. You have got *honour* and *recognition*—and this at only 22 is a grand thing.

(Wilde was actually twenty-three.)

Not everyone was thrilled. W. S. Gilbert, the librettist who had just made a splash in London with his operetta *H.M.S Pinafore*, had been watching the aesthetic movement, and Wilde, with consternation for some time. It’s possible he had seen Wilde in his cello coat at the Grosvenor galler if not, he surely heard about it. When told that Wilde had won the Newdigate, Gilbert harrumphed: “I understand that some young man wins this prize every year.” Aided by his partner Arthur Sullivan, h would have more to say about aesthetes in the future. In the meantime, Wilde had more good news: i July he earned a second first, this one in “Greats,” another part of the classics curriculum. “The dons are ‘astonied’ [*sic*] beyond words—the Bad Boy doing so well in the end!” he wrote to Bouncer Warc By the time Wilde graduated from Oxford in November 1878, he was one of the most honored members of his class. But not all the news was happy. It was around this time that Wilde learned Florence Balcombe had accepted Bram Stoker’s marriage proposal. He reacted peevishly, asking her to return some jewelry he had given her. “Worthless though the trinket be, to me it serves as a memory of two sweet years—the sweetest of all the years of my youth,” he wrote. There were also financial matters to be dealt with. Properties had to be sold in Ireland, including the house on Merrio Square, if Oscar, his mother, and his brother, who had rejected a career in law for one in journalism, were to have sufficient incomes.

Despite such issues, Wilde’s time at Oxford had clearly been a great triumph. He won fame, firsts friends (as well as a few enemies), and one of the most glittering prizes the university had to offer. But the work he had started there, Wilde knew, wasn’t finished. He’d had a successful out-of-town tryout. It was time to move his show to a larger stage.

IN JANUARY 1879, Wilde and Frank Miles moved into a three-story house in London, the largest city in the world (population: nearly five million), where the first electric streetlights had just gone up. The building on Salisbury Street had a river view, so Wilde christened it “Thames House,” but the name promised a grandeur the structure didn’t deliver. It was really just three apartments, linked by a creal staircase. Miles lived and worked in a studio at the top, where the light was best; Wilde lived on the floor beneath him; the ground floor was leased to a student neither man knew. In a letter to a friend a Oxford, Wilde described his new home as “untidy” but “romantic.”

The most romantic thing about it was the shrine he had built to Lillie Langtry, the society beauty who owed her fame to her status as the mistress of the Prince of Wales. Upon entering Wilde’s home one’s attention was irresistibly drawn to the end of his living room, where Edward Poynter’s oil portrait of Langtry sat on an easel, next to two blue vases, each filled with lilies and peacock feathers Langtry reclined in a sensuous pose in the portrait, wearing a low-cut golden bodice and clutching a yellow rose—a symbol of adultery in Victorian times—to her bosom. The painting had debuted in 1878 at the Royal Academy, making Mrs. Langtry (she was married to an Irish yachtsman) even mor notorious than she already was. That only deepened Wilde’s fascination with her, so much so that he used part of his inheritance from his father’s estate to buy the portrait.

He had met Langtry at a previous studio used by Miles. “I want to introduce you to the most beautiful woman in the world,” Miles said that day. According to Lord Ronald Gower, Miles and

Wilde soon hatched a plan. “I with my pencil,” Miles said, “and Oscar with his pen will make her the Joconde and the Laura of this century.” (Joconde was da Vinci’s *La Giaconda*, better known as *Mona Lisa*; Laura was the poet Petrarch’s inspiration.) We don’t know if Langtry was immediately conscious of the “conspiracy,” but we do know her first impressions of Wilde. “His face was large, and so colourless that a few pale freckles of good size were oddly conspicuous,” she wrote in *The Days I Knew*.

> He had a well-shaped mouth, with somewhat coarse lips and greenish-hued teeth. The plainness of his face, however, was redeemed by the splendour of his great, eager eyes. . . . [His] nails, I regretfully record, did not receive the attention they deserved. . . . To me he was always grotesque in appearance. . . . That he possessed a remarkably fascinating and compelling personality . . . is beyond question, and there was about him an enthusiasm singularly captivating. He had one of the most alluring voices I have ever listened to, round and soft, and full of variety and expression.

Wilde was oblivious to the less flattering of Langtry’s opinions because he had something else on his mind. Langtry’s connection to the prince meant she was invited to the best parties in London—an that was where Wilde wanted to be. He didn’t have the bloodline normally required to enter society, but he knew there were other ways to get in. For Langtry, it had been her beauty; for Wilde, it would take a special performance. He believed any poet worthy of the name needed a public passion; if it was unrequited, that only made it *more* poetic. Lillie Langtry would be his passion.

So he showered her with public adoration that was impossible to ignore, not just by Langtry but b all of London society. What Wilde understood, as no one before him ever had, was that worship coul be a career move. He “always made a point of bringing me flowers,” Langtry wrote in her memoir, “but he [couldn’t] afford great posies, so . . . he would buy me a single gorgeous amaryllis . . . and stroll down Piccadilly, carefully carrying the solitary flower.” It was said that Mr. Langtry returned home late one night after a long night of socializing (without his wife) to find Wilde asleep outside the entrance to the Langtrys’ apartment, snoring as he clutched a solitary blossom to his heaving chest. This story was repeated all over London, though some doubted its veracity. No matter: Wilde knew a higher truth was at work. As he would write in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “There is only on thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is *not* being talked about.”

He invited Mrs. Langtry to parties in his home on Salisbury Street. He gave her advice on fashion and told her what novels to read. He took her to museums and art galleries. He urged her to become a actress and found her an acting coach. He even became her personal classics tutor. When Sir Charles Newton, the man who unearthed the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus—one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World—gave a lecture at King’s College, London, Wilde brought Langtry there in a carriage from which they alighted, waving like royalty to their fellow lecture-goers. After Langtry studied the *Iliad*, Wilde wrote a poem about her titled “The New Helen.”

O Helen! Helen! Helen! Yet a while
Yet for a little while, O tarry here,
Till the dawn cometh and the shadows flee!
For in the gladsome sunlight of thy smile
Of heaven or hell I have no thought or fear,
Seeing that I know no other God but thee.

Wilde the adoring poet began to display in London the same aesthetic languor that had so irritated some of his classmates at Oxford: he would hail a cab to cross a street and ask for physical assistance to cross a room. His visits to the theater became dramas: he would arrive half an hour before curtain, then make a series of highly visible appearances around the auditorium, greeting the rich and titled. “There goes that bloody fool Oscar Wilde,” one playgoer grumbled. When told of the remark, Wilde

actually seemed proud. “It’s extraordinary how soon one gets known in London,” he said. He was right. The *Biograph and Review*, a kind of Who’s Who of Victorian England, ran a profile of him in i
1880 annual edition, just a year after he had arrived in the capital. It began:

> Oscar Wilde, though he may be considered to have his career still before him, has already attained prominence as one of the elect in a certain modern school of which he is held to be not the least of the apostles. He is a believer in the religion of beauty, a marked figure among the newest group of Aesthetics, a dweller in the high places of feeling.

Time, a British weekly with no link to the current journal, published a cartoon in 1880 titled “The Bard of Beauty” in which Wilde, smirking in a top hat, caused lilies to grow wherever his feet touche the ground. It was in *Punch*, however, that the use of cartoons to mock Wilde reached its apogee, especially in a series of drawings that often appeared under the heading “Nincompoopiana.” Most were drawn by George du Maurier, who had studied painting in Paris alongside James Whistler but now used pen and ink to make fun of a certain aesthete’s flowing locks and his fondness for flowers. At first this dandy was identified in the drawings as Maudle or Jellaby Postlethwaite—the first an allusion to Wilde’s alma matter, Magdalen College (pronounced “Maudlin”), the second a reference Wilde’s habit of calling himself the “Apostle of Aestheticism.” It wasn’t long, however, before—lest anyone miss the joke—the character was called Oscuro Wildgoose. Wilde certainly hadn’t missed it. One night at an art opening, Whistler noticed that both Du Maurier and Wilde were in attendance. After bringing them together, Whistler asked, “Which of you two created the other, eh?” Du Maurier wasn’t thrilled, but Wilde was delighted. He understood—ninety years before Roland Barthes made the point in an essay on Albert Einstein—that appearing in a cartoon is “the sign [one] has become a legend.”

The legend created by Du Maurier’s cartoons enabled Wilde to achieve the first goal he had set fo himself in London. He was mingling almost nightly at parties with the most celebrated figures of the day, a list that included not just Whistler and Mrs. Langtry, but the novelist and former prime minist Benjamin Disraeli (now Lord Beaconsfield), Disraeli’s longtime rival (and current prime minister) William Gladstone, and the future PMs H. H. Asquith, Arthur Balfour, and Lord Rosebery. Wilde enjoyed socializing with politicians, but he saved his special attention for the actresses Ellen Terry and Sarah Bernhardt. He became close friends with both stars; his relationship with Bernhardt, however, took on a special weight: she became one of his role models. As Henry James had written o her, after Bernhardt’s London debut in 1879, “she is a celebrity because, apparently, she desires it wi an intensity that has rarely been equaled, and because for this end all means are alike to her.” These words were not intended by James as praise, but Wilde took them as career advice.

When Bernhardt returned to England in 1880, after touring America, he showed his fealty to his new mentor by casting an armful of flowers at her feet as she stepped off the ship and onto terra firm The press coverage of this act of adoration was huge and, best of all from Wilde’s standpoint, as muc about him as it was about her. Not that Bernhardt held a grudge. She was a regular guest at parties thrown by Wilde at Thames House, on one occasion leaving her autograph on the paneling in his living room. (Bernhardt’s English was spotty, so she and Wilde conversed in French.) Wilde was euphoric about that autograph, his friendship with “the Divine Sarah,” his rapid rise in society, and, most of all, about the attention he was getting from the press. But he knew the next phase of his project would be even more critical to his future success: from now on, *he*—not Miss Bernhardt or Mrs. Langtry—would have to be the work of art on display.

Sometimes with props. One night he appeared at the artist Louise Jopling’s studio wearing a live snake around his neck. Even without an exotic scarf, Wilde used fashion to present himself as a work of art. His typical uniform was a bespoke black frock coat with a daisy or carnation in his lapel buttonhole, enlivened by a brightly flowered waistcoat over a solid-colored silk shirt, usually cream,

with a white cravat held in place by an antique intaglio amethyst pin, all of it over light-colored ~~trousers and polished black boots. He would hold a walking stick in one hand, leaving the other~~ free t carry pale lavender gloves, items whose primary function was to punctuate, with a well-timed flick, his remarks, which were legion and, before long, legendary.

Despite his excellent fashion sense, Wilde knew he could never be a living work of visual art in the same manner as Mrs. Langtry or Miss Bernhardt, who, after all, were professional beauties. So he would be what he *could* be: a living work of conversational art. He could talk beautifully about beaut and he soon realized this skill was much prized by the blue-blooded women who were the true gatekeepers of London society. So what if much of what he said was lifted from Ruskin's lectures at Oxford or from Pater's writings? His listeners didn't know that, and, even more to the point, Ruskin and Pater were not available to serve as their guides to the art world, and Wilde was. He was so often observed taking his society "students" to exhibitions in London that the artist William Powell Frith immortalized his status in a painting he called *A Private Viewing at the Royal Academy*. The painting has roughly fifty people depicted in it, but one man stands out: Oscar Wilde, in a frock coat and top hat, holding a book in his hand, gesturing toward the art on display, about which he is speaking to a fashionably dressed group that includes Lillie Langtry and the actors Henry Irving and Ellen Terry. (Farther away, too far away to be listening, stand the poet Robert Browning, the biologist Thomas Huxley, and the novelist Anthony Trollope.) Wilde was so visible in London as the Aesthete About Town, and so successful at the attention-getting vocation he had given himself, that the essayist Max Beerbohm would write: "Beauty had existed long before 1880, [but it] was Mr. Oscar Wilde who managed her *début*."

Art wasn't Wilde's only conversation subject, especially not at the parties he was so eager to attend. To ensure he kept getting those invitations, he perfected a verbal trick: replacing a word in a sentence with its unexpected opposite. This sleight of tongue enabled him to take subjects that others deemed serious and treat them irreverently, or take matters that others thought trivial and treat them with great solemnity—producing amusement either way. This made Wilde not just a well-dressed occupant of a seat at a dinner table. It made him a veritable bon mot machine:

"I can resist everything except temptation."

"If one tells the truth, one is sure, sooner or later, to be found out."

"Don't be led astray down the path of virtue."

"Only shallow people do not judge by appearances."

"I can sympathize with everything except suffering."

"True friends stab you in the front."

He seemed to have an endless supply, many of which he would later repeat in his comedies and other writings. But that was far off in the future. It is important that we fully credit the poise it took i 1880 for Wilde, a barely published writer in his early twenties, to command the spotlight before dinner-party audiences that were almost always older and more accomplished than he. Years later, in *A Woman of No Importance*, he would write, "A man who can dominate a London dinner table can dominate the world." He was speaking from experience.

What Wilde's listeners at those tables didn't know was that his remarks weren't always as spontaneous as they seemed. The novelist Coulson Kernahan described in his memoir how Wilde, when the two of them were alone, once asked Kernahan for his views on religion. After Kernahan answered at length, Wilde said, "You are so evidently, so unmistakably sincere and most of all so truthful, that I can't believe a single word you say." Noticing the smug look on Wilde's face, Kernahan asked, "Where are you dining tonight, Wilde?" When Wilde gave the name of a well-know English aristocrat, Kernahan said, "Ah. And who is the guest you have marked down upon whom, when everybody is listening, to work off that carefully prepared impromptu wheeze which you have

just fired off on me?” Wilde’s smile revealed that Kernahan had hit the bull’s-eye.

~~Though he was always ready to perform at dinner parties, Wilde never forced the issue. He would~~ usually start by talking quietly to the person seated next to him, making sure, however, that he was heard by at least one other dinner guest. If his “impromptu wheeze” was on target, the table would fa silent soon enough, and the attention of all would belong to him. He was able to hold it because he ha excellent timing, because his humor was almost never mean-spirited, and because he loved performing. For most people it was irresistible—but not all. W. S. Gilbert was exasperated when he observed Wilde at a party. “I wish I could talk like you,” he said. “I’d keep my mouth shut and claim it as a virtue!” He was made even crankier by Wilde’s response: “Ah, that would be selfish! I could deny myself the pleasure of talking, but not others the pleasure of listening.” The Polish actress Helena Modjeska, in London to make her West End debut as Camille, was also perplexed by Wilde’s social success: “What has he done, this young man, that one meets him everywhere? Oh, yes, he talks well, but what has he done? He has written nothing, he does not sing or paint or act—he does nothing but talk. I do not understand.”

But the Prince of Wales did, or at least wanted to. “I do not know Mr. Wilde,” he said, though he surely knew *of* him, “and not to know Mr. Wilde is not to be known.” This oversight was corrected in the spring of 1881 at the house on Tite Street where Wilde and Miles had moved the previous summe (Wilde christened it “Keats House,” because the previous occupants had been named Skeates.) The occasion was a party cum séance. The account in the society column of the *Ladies’ Treasury* magazin was hardly written with flair. Even so, Wilde was delighted. What better way to show you’ve arrived in society than for the world to learn you’ve held hands around a table in a dark room with a royal, several blue-blooded grandees, and their friends, trying to commune with the dead:

> Mr. W. Irving Bishop, the “thought reader,” recently gave a private *séance* at Keats house, Chelsea. The company consisted of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, Lady Mandeville, Lady Archibald, the Marquisa Santurce, Mrs. Langtry, Lord Donoughmore, Mr. Irving, Mr. Booth, Mr. Whistler, Mr. Frank Miles, Mr. Oscar Wilde, and others.

(Mr. Booth was the American actor Edwin Booth, the brother of John Wilkes Booth.) George Gissing in his novel *New Grub Street*, published in 1891, noted that men no longer “succeed in literature [so] that they may get into society,” but “get into society [so] that they may succeed in literature.” This path to success had been pioneered by Oscar Wilde more than a decade earlier.

But to Wilde’s detractors, the séance at Keats House—and all of Wilde’s social climbing—were proof that his true talent was for making an obsequious fool of himself. They were wrong. Wilde had done something far more serious and difficult: he had made a *commodity* of himself. The key step in that process had been transforming his personality, formed in Dublin and polished at Oxford, into a multifaceted brand in London: Wilde the Party Wit, Wilde the Style Guru, Wilde the Art Connoisseu Wilde the Celebrated Friend of the Celebrated, even Wilde the Subject of Gossip and Sarcastic Cartoons. Some of these personae brought him more pleasure than others, but all of them increased h profile. As he had promised his friends at Oxford, Wilde had become famous. Now he was ready to g serious about being a famous writer.

THAT WILDE WAS confident of his imminent literary success, and of his current notoriety, is shown by the letter he sent to the London publisher David Bogue. “I am anxious to publish a volume of poems immediately. . . . Possibly my name requires no introduction.” It appears he was right: by the summe of 1881 Wilde was a published author, though self-published was more accurate. The contract made him responsible for all printing costs, which were considerable. He insisted his book be bound in vellum and printed on handmade paper. Whatever the expense, he was ready to pay. A friend of

Wilde’s would say that Wilde told him: “If you wish for reputation and fame in the world, and succes during your lifetime, you [must] seize every opportunity of advertising yourself. Remember the Latin saying, ‘Fame springs from one’s own house.’ ” If his literary fame had to spring from a vanity publishing house, that was fine with Wilde.

He sent his book to the poets Matthew Arnold, Robert Browning, and Algernon Swinburne; to Prime Minister William Gladstone; and, of course, to Lillie Langtry. (“To Helen,” he wrote in hers, “Formerly of Troy, now of London.”) All replied positively or at least politely. But several critics dic not. “*Poems by Oscar Wilde* is the title of the book, which comes to us arrayed in white vellum and gold,” began the unsigned review in *Punch*. “There is a certain amount of originality in the binding, but that is more than can be said of the inside of the volume. Mr. Wilde may be aesthetic, but he is no original. This is a volume of echoes—it is Swinburne and water.” A cartoon in *Punch* drawn by Edward Linley Sambourne depicted Wilde as a human sunflower. The caption read:

Aesthete of Aesthetes!
What’s in a name?
The poet is WILDE,
But his poetry’s tame.

There was more pain to come, and, worse still, from an unexpected source. The Oxford Union, the university’s debating society, had asked Wilde, a former member, to send a copy of *Poems* for its library. He happily did so, only to be told later that its formal acceptance required a majority vote from its members. To the great embarrassment of the Newdigate Prize winner, the vote went against him. “It is not that these poems are thin—and they *are* thin,” said the leader of the anti-Wilde students, Oliver Elton, later to become a professor of literature at Harvard. “It is not that they are immoral—and they *are* immoral.

> It is that they are for the most part not by their putative father at all, but by a number of better-known and more deservedly reputed authors. They are in fact by William Shakespeare, by Philip Sidney, by John Donne, by Lord Byron, by William Morris, by Algernon Swinburne, and by sixty more. . . . The Union Library already contains better and fuller editions of all these poets: the volume which we are offered is theirs, not Mr. Wilde’s: and I move that it not be accepted.

In truth, the charge that Wilde’s poetry was immoral had already exacted a price. After Frank Miles’s father, a Church of England cleric (and his son’s chief financial patron), read one of Wilde’s poems that referred to sexual acts between a man and a statue, and another that spoke of kissing the mouth of sin, he ordered his son, who was the leaseholder at Tite Street, to expel Wilde from their shared home. “My son must not be contaminated!” Canon Miles wrote.

After Wilde moved in temporarily with his mother, now living in London (where she was again hosting parties), he decided that if Oscar Wilde the Poet found his path to literary glory blocked, perhaps Oscar Wilde the Dramatist would not. Between nights out, he had written his first play. Set i Russia, the plot of *Vera; or, The Nihilists* was based on a real event: the shooting of the St. Petersbur police chief, in 1878, by a young female revolutionary who had been born into the Russian gentry. Along with radical politics, the play offered romance. Vera is torn between her passion for the masse which has led her to plot the assassination of the czar, and her passion for her lover, the czar’s son. It was a serious play for a party wit, but the subject Wilde was most serious about hadn’t changed. He admitted as much in a letter to Edward F. Smyth Pigott, the examiner of plays for the lord chamberlain. “I am working at dramatic art because it’s the democratic art, and I want fame,” he wrote. In the fall of 1881 it was announced that *Vera* would open in London in December, with the title role played by Mrs. Bernard Beere, a name forgotten today but then belonging to an actress of some note. Wilde was thrilled.

But not for long. That year saw two assassinations—of Czar Alexander II in Russia, and of President James A. Garfield in the United States—that affected the political climate in Britain. The subject matter of *Vera*, which had been reported in the press, was now deemed an insult to the queen. Finally it was announced that *Vera* would not debut after all. The British humor magazine *Moonbean* delighted in reporting the news:

> Mr. Oscar Wilde has been induced to withdraw his drama, *Vera; or, The Nihilists*, which was to have been produced at one of our London theatres. We wonder who it was that succeeded in persuading this gentleman to refrain from thus once more courting publicity? As a Scotsman might say, "it must ha' been *vera* deefficult!"

Wilde was crushed; he also began to worry about his finances. His income from his father's estat was dwindling, and it cost money to be a well-dressed party guest. Even so, his confidence in his career plan remained high. Long before psychologists began to teach visualization as a means of achieving one's goals, Wilde's vision of his future was both steadfast and clear: he would translate h personal fame into money and a career as a writer. What he couldn't foresee was the man who would step forward to help him.

W. S. Gilbert was working on a libretto for a show he hoped would match the success of his secor hit, *The Pirates of Penzance*, which opened in 1880. His first idea was to expand upon a comic ballad he had written years earlier about two pastors who compete to "outmeek" each other. Then he got a better idea. Instead of rival curates, his operetta would have rival aesthetes—the equally narcissistic Bunthorne and Grosvenor—who would vie for the hand of a maiden named Patience. The lead male roles envisioned by Gilbert were composites lampooning several well-known aesthetes, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Swinburne, James Whistler, and Oscar Wilde. But the British publi would take a more focused view of what was going on in *Patience; or Bunthorne's Bride*. After its premiere in April 1881, London theatergoers decided the model for Bunthorne was as clear as Wilde' ambition was transparent. It was hard to argue with that conclusion, after hearing these words, sung b Bunthorne in act one:

Though the Philistines may jostle,
You will rank as an apostle,
In the high aesthetic band.
If you walk down Piccadilly
With a poppy or a lily
In your medieval hand.

Wilde had heard he might be the object of some satire from Gilbert, so he sent a letter to the acto George Grossmith, then rehearsing to play Bunthorne: "I should like to go to the first night of your new opera and would be obliged if you would ask the Box Office to reserve a three guinea box for me . . . I am looking forward to being greatly amused." And he was, even before the curtain went up. The critic for *The Era* wrote that there was "a fierce clamour of screams, yells and hisses which descende from the Gallery signaling the arrival of Mr. Oscar Wilde himself" on opening night. "For there, with the sacred flower, stood the exponent of uncut hair, Ajax-like, defying the Gods." Later, when Bunthorne sang of himself as the flower-carrying "apostle in the high aesthetic band," the audience stared into Wilde's box, which only made Wilde happier.

A witness to both commotions was Richard D'Oyly Carte, Gilbert & Sullivan's producer. If *Patience* was a hit, and the eight curtain calls on opening night led him to think it would be, he might finance an American production, as he had for *The Pirates of Penzance* and *H.M.S. Pinafore*. But Carte was nervous: he noticed that several of Gilbert's jokes about aestheticism had passed over the

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