



An Improbable Life

W. H. Auden

When we were young, most of us were taught that it is dishonorable to read other people's letters without their consent, and I do not think we should ever, even if we grow up to be literary scholars, forget this early lesson. The mere fact that a man is famous and dead does not entitle us to read, still less to publish, his private correspondence. We have to ask ourselves two questions – firstly, “Would he mind?”, and, secondly, “Are the contents of such historical importance as to justify publication even if he would?” In the case of the born letter writer to whom letter writing is as natural and “impersonal” a form of literary composition as poetry or fiction, one generally feels that he would be pleased to have his letters read by the public, and in the case of men of action – statesmen, generals, and the like, whose decisions have affected the history of the society in which they lived – we are entitled to know anything about their lives that sheds light upon their public acts. Writers and artists, however, are another matter. Some of them have been born letter writers as well, but the average productive poet or novelist or dramatist is too busy, too self-centered, to spend much time and trouble over his correspondence; if and when he does, the letters are probably love letters and, since knowledge of an artist's private life never throws any significant light upon his work, there is no justification for intruding upon his privacy.

What, then, about the letters of Oscar Wilde? Is their publication justified? Somewhat to my surprise, I find myself saying yes. Yeats said of Wilde that he seemed to be a man of action rather than a writer. What Yeats should have said, I think, is that Wilde was, both by genius and by fate, primarily an “actor”, a performer. Even those of his contemporaries who most admired his writings admitted that they were inferior to his conversation; what inspired his imagination most was a physically present audience and its immediate response. From the beginning Wilde performed his life and continued to do so even after fate had taken the plot out of his hands. Drama is essentially revelation; on the stage no secrets are kept. I feel therefore, that there is nothing Wilde would desire more than that we should know everything about

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him. There remains the question of the recipients of his letters. They could not have been published until many of his most intimate friends were dead, because of the allusions to their homosexuality that they contain. With one exception, the revelation of what was in any case an open secret would not embarrass them in the least, and it is a trivial matter compared with what these letters reveal of their loyalty, compassion, and generosity toward Wilde at a time when to be his friend required great moral courage. The exception is, of course, Lord Alfred Douglas, who emerges from these letters as a vicious, gold-digging, snobbish, anti-Semitic, untalented little horror for whom no good word can be said. One might feel sorry for him if, after the catastrophe, he had kept his mouth shut, but he did not. He not only wrote an account of their relationship that is full of lies but also dared to put on virtuous airs, and it is only just that he should be exposed for what he was.

Wilde's life was a drama, and in reading his letters chronologically there is an excitement similar to that of watching a Greek tragedy in which the audience knows what is going to happen while the hero does not. For many years, both in England and in America, the Wilde scandal had a disastrous influence, not upon writers and artists themselves but upon the attitude of the general public toward the arts, since it allowed the philistine man to identify himself with the decent man. Though the feeling that it is sissy for a boy to take an interest in the arts has probably always existed among the middle class and is not yet extinct, for many years after Wilde's trial it was enormously intensified. In fairness to the middle class, however, one must admit that such a feeling is not totally without justification. The artist and the homosexual are both characterized by a greater-than-normal element of narcissism, though neither has as much as the performing *artiste*; it is only likely that among artists and *artistes* as a class a higher-than-average per cent will also be homosexual, compared with many other professions. Again, while the prudery and self-righteousness of the middle class in the nineteenth century were repellent traits, we must not romanticize either the working class or the aristocracy of the period because of their relative tolerance; the working-class husband beat up his wife when drunk, the aristocrat regarded sexual exploitation of the poor as his natural right. Had Wilde been an aristocrat, his class brothers would have seen to it that there was no public scandal; since he was a person of middle-class origin who had pushed his way into high society, they left him to his

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fate with, perhaps, a certain feeling of satisfaction at the downfall of someone who had risen above his proper station.

In the long run, I think one may say that the effect of what in itself was a horrid business has been beneficial. Today, nearly seventy years later, both the working class and the aristocracy in the nineteenth-century sense have disappeared and we live in a middle-class society, but one which has learned that the problem not of homosexuality only but of sexual life in general cannot be solved by pretending it does not exist. If we have learned to listen to what Freud and others tell us about the complicated role which sexuality plays in our lives and the dubious character of violent moral indignation at the sexual behavior of our neighbor, if, indeed, we are now able to read Wilde's letters without prurient interest as we would read the letters of anybody else who wrote entertaining ones, Wilde has certainly helped us to do so.

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