

OSCAR WILDE

THE words he once used about himself—"I am a symbolic figure"—remain to this day the most significant thing that can be said of Oscar Wilde.

It is given to very few men of talent, this peculiar privilege—this privilege of being greater in what might be called the *shadow of their personality* than in any actual literary or artistic achievement—and Wilde possesses it in a degree second to none.

"My genius is in my life," he said on another occasion, and the words are literally and most fatally true.

In the confused controversies of the present age it is difficult to disentangle the main issues; but it seems certain that side by side with political and economic divisions, there is a gulf growing wider and wider every day between the adherents of what might be called the Hellenic Renaissance and the inert, suspicious, unintelligent mob; that mob the mud of whose heavy traditions is capable of breeding, at one and the same time, the most crafty hypocrisy and the most stupid brutality.

It would be hardly a true statement to say that the Renaissance referred to—this modern

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Renaissance, not less formidable than the historic revolt which bears that name—is an insurrection of free spirits against Christianity. It is much rather a reversion to a humane and classic reasonableness as opposed to mob-stupidity and middle-class philistinism—things which only the blundering of centuries of popular misapprehension could associate with the sublime and the imaginative figure of Christ.

It is altogether a mistake to assume that in “De Profundis” Wilde retracted his classic protest and bowed his head once more in the house of Rimmon.

What he did was to salute, in the name of the æsthetic freedom he represented, those enduring elements of human loveliness and beauty in that figure which three hundred years of hypocritical puritanism have proved unable to tarnish. What creates the peculiar savagery of hatred which his name has still the power to conjure up among the enemies of civilisation has little to do with the ambiguous causes of his final downfall. These, of course, gave him up, bound hand and foot, into their hands. But these, though the overt excuse of their rancour, are far from being its real motive-force. To reach that we must look to the nature of the formidable weapon which it was his habit, in season and out of season, to use against this mob-rule—I mean his sense of humour.

The stupid middle-class obscurantism, so alien

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to all humane reasonableness; which, in our Anglo-Saxon communities, masquerades under the cloak of a passionate and imaginative religion, is more sensitive to ridicule than to any other form of attack, and Wilde attacked it mercilessly with a ridicule that cut to the bone.

They are not by any means of equal value, these epigrams of his, with which he defended intelligence against stupidity and classical light against Gothic darkness.

They are not as humorous as Voltaire's. They are not as philosophical as Goethe's. Compared with the aphorisms of these masters they are light and frivolous. But for this very reason perhaps, they serve the great cause—the cause of humane and enlightened civilisation—better in our age of vulgar mob-rule than more recondite “logoi.”

They pierce the hide of the thickest and dullest; they startle and bewilder the brains of the most crass and the most insensitive. And it is just because they do this that Wilde is so cordially feared and hated. It was, one cannot help feeling, the presence in him of a shrewd vein of sheer boyish bravado, mingled—one might go even as far as that—with a dash of incorrigible worldliness in his own temper, that made his hits so effective and wounding.

It is interesting, with this in mind, to compare Wilde's witticisms with those of Matthew Arnold or Bernard Shaw. The reason that Wilde's

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lash cuts deeper than either of these other champions of rational humanism, is that he goes, with more classical clearness, straight to the root of the matter.

The author of "Thyrsis" was not himself free from a certain melancholy hankering after "categorical imperatives," and beneath the cap and bells of his theological fooling, Shaw is, of course, as gravely moralistic as any puritan could wish.

Neither of these—neither the ironical schoolmaster nor the farcical clown of our Renaissance of intelligence—could exchange ideas with Pericles, say, or Cæsar, without betraying a puritanical fussiness that would grievously bewilder the lucid minds of those great men.

The philosophy of Wilde's æsthetic revolt against our degraded mob-ridden conscience was borrowed from Walter Pater, but whereas that shy and subtle spirit moved darkly and mysteriously aside from all contact with the vulgar herd, Wilde, full of gay and wanton pride in his sacred mission, lost no opportunity of flaunting his classic orthodoxy in the face of the heretical mob.

Since the death of Wilde, the brunt of the battle for the spiritual liberties of the race has been borne by the sterner and more formidable figure of Nietzsche; but the vein of high and terrible imagination in this great poet of the Superman sets him much closer to the company of the saints

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and mystics than to that of the instinctive children of the pagan ideal.

Oscar Wilde's name has become a sort of rallying cry to all those writers and artists who suffer, in one degree or another, from the persecution of the mob—of the mob goaded on to blind brutality by the crafty incentives of those conspirators of reaction whose interest lies in keeping the people enslaved. This has come about, in a large measure, as much by the renown of his defects as by reason of his fine quality.

The majority of men of talent lack the spirit and the gall to defy the enemy on equal terms. But Wilde while possessing nobler faculties had an undeniable vein in him of sheer youthful insolence. To the impertinence of society he could oppose the impertinence of the artist, and to the effrontery of the world he could offer the effrontery of genius.

The power of personality, transcending any actual literary achievement, is what remains in the mind when one has done reading him, and this very faculty—of communicating to us, who never saw him or heard him speak, the vivid impact of his overbearing presence—is itself evidence of a rare kind of genius. It is even a little ironical that he, above all men the punctilious and precious literary craftsman, should ultimately dominate us not so much by the magic of his art as by the spell of his wilful and wanton individuality, and the situation is heightened still

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further by the extraordinary variety of his works and their amazing perfection in their different spheres.

One might easily conceive an artist capable of producing so clean-cut and crystalline a comedy as "The Importance of Being Earnest," and so finished and flawless a tragedy as "Salome," disappearing quite out of sight, in the manner so commended by Flaubert, behind the shining objectivity of his flawless creations. But so far from disappearing, Oscar Wilde manages to emphasise himself and his imposing presence only the more startlingly and flagrantly, the more the gem-like images he projects harden and glitter.

Astoundingly versatile as he was—capable of producing in "Reading Gaol" the best tragic ballad since "The Ancient Mariner," and in "Intentions" one of the best critical expositions of the open secret of art ever written at all—he never permits us for a second to lose touch with the wayward and resplendent figure, so full, for all its bravado, of a certain disarming childishness, of his own defiant personality.

And the fact remains that, perfect in their various kinds though these works of his are, they would never appeal to us as they do, and Oscar Wilde would never be to us what he is, if it were not for the predominance of this personal touch.

I sometimes catch myself wondering what my own feeling would be as to the value of these

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things—of the “Soul of Man,” for instance, or “Intentions,” or the Comedies, or the Poems—if the unthinkable thing could be done, and the emergence of this irresistible figure from behind it all could be drastically eliminated. I find myself conscious, at these times, of a faint disturbing doubt; as though after all, in spite of their jewel-like perfection, these wonderful and varied achievements were not quite the real thing, were not altogether in the “supreme manner.” There seems to me—at the moments when this doubt arises—something too self-consciously (how shall I put it?) *artistic* about these performances, something strained and forced and far-fetched, which separates them from the large inevitable utterances of classic genius.

I am ready to confess that I am not sure that this feeling is a matter of personal predilection or whether it has the larger and graver weight behind it of the traditional instincts of humanity, instincts out of which spring our only permanent judgments. What I feel at any rate is this: that there is an absence in Wilde’s writings of that large cool spaciousness, produced by the magical influence of earth and sky and sea, of which one is always conscious in the greater masters.

“No gentleman,” he is said to have remarked once, “ever looks out of the window”; and it is precisely this “never looking out of the window” that produces his most serious limitations.

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In one respect I must acknowledge myself grateful to Wilde, even for this very avoidance of what might be called the "magical" element in things. His clear-cut palpable images, carved, as one so often feels, in ebony or ivory or gold, offer an admirable relief, like the laying of one's hand upon pieces of Hellenic statuary, after wandering among the vague mists and "beachéd margents."

Certainly if all that one saw when one "looked out of the window" were Irish fairies with dim hair drifting down pallid rivers, there would be some reason for drawing the curtains close and toying in the lamp-light with cameo-carved profiles of Antinous and Cleopatra!

But nature has more to give us than the elfish fantasies, charming as these may be, of Celtic legend—more to give us than those "brown fauns" and "hoofed Centaurs" and milk-white peacocks, which Wilde loves to paint with his Tiepolo-like brush. The dew of the morning does not fall less lightly because real autumns bring it, nor does the "wide aerial landscape" of our human wayfaring show less fair, or its ancient antagonist the "salt estranging sea" less terrible, because these require no legendary art to endow them with mystery.

Plausible and full of significance as these honeyed arguments in "Intentions" are—and fruitful as they are in affording us weapons wherewith to defend ourselves from the mob—

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it is still well, it is still necessary, to place against them the great Da Vinci saying, "Nature is the Mistress of the higher intelligences."

Wilde must be held responsible—along with others of his epoch—for the encouragement of that deplorable modern heresy which finds in bric-a-brac and what are called "objets d'art" a disproportionate monopoly of the beauty and wonder of the world. One turns a little wearily at last from the silver mirrors and purple masks. One turns to the great winds that issue forth out of the caverns of the night. One turns to the sun and to the rain, which fall upon the common grass.

However! It is not a wise procedure to demand from a writer virtues and qualities completely out of his rôle. In our particular race there is far more danger of the beauty and significance of art—together with all its subtler and less normal symbols—perishing under crude and sentimental Nature-worship, than of their being granted too large a place in our crowded house of thought.

After all, the art which Wilde assures us adds so richly to Nature, "is an art which Nature makes." They are not lovers of what is rarest and finest in our human civilisation who would suppress everything which deviates from the common track.

Who has given these people—these middle-class minds with their dull intelligences—the

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right to decide what is natural or unnatural in the presence of the vast tumultuous forces, wonderful and terrible, of the life-stream which surrounds us?

The mad smouldering lust which gives a sort of under-song of surging passion to the sophisticated sensuality of "Salome" is as much an evocation of Nature as the sad sweet wisdom of that sentence in "De Profundis"—"Behind joy and laughter there may be a temperament, coarse, hard and callous. But behind sorrow there is always sorrow."

What, beneath all his bravado and his paradoxes, Wilde really sought, was the enjoyment of passionate and absorbing emotion, and no one who hungers and thirsts after this—be he "as sensual as the brutish sting itself"—can fail in the end to touch, if only fleetingly with his lips, the waters of that river of passion which, by a miracle of faith if not by a supreme creation of art, Humanity has caused to issue forth from the wounded flesh of the ideal.

It is in his "Soul of Man"—perhaps the wisest and most eloquent revolutionary tract ever written—that Wilde frees himself most completely from the superficial eccentricities of his æsthetic pose, and indicates his recognition of a beauty in life, far transcending Tyrian dyes and carved cameos and frankincense and satin-wood and moon-stones and "Silks from Samarcand."

It is impossible to read this noble defence of

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the natural distinction and high dignity of our human days when freed from the slavery of what is called "working for a living," without feeling that the boyish bravado of his insolent wit is based upon a deep and universal emotion. What we note here is an affiliation in revolt between the artist and the masses. And this affiliation indicates that the hideousness of our industrial system is far more offensive than any ancient despotism or slave-owning tyranny to the natural passion for light and air and leisure and freedom in the heart of man.

That Oscar Wilde, the most extreme of individualists, the most unscrupulous of self-asserters, the pampered darling of every kind of sophisticated luxury, should thus lift up his voice on behalf of the wage-earners, is an indication that a state of society which seems proper and inevitable to dull and narrow minds is, when confronted, not with any mere abstract theory of Justice or Political rights, but with the natural human craving for life and beauty, found to be an outrage and an insult.

Oscar Wilde by pointing his derisive finger at what the gross intelligence of our commercial mob calls the "honourableness of work" has done more to clear our minds of cant than many revolutionary speeches.

An age which breeds a world of uninteresting people whose only purpose in life is working for their living is condemned on the face of it. And

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it is just here that the association between your artist and your "labouring man" becomes physiologically evident. The labourer shows quite clearly that he regards his labour as a degradation, a burden, an interruption to life, a necessary evil.

The rôle of the capitalist-hired preacher is to condemn him for this and to regret the departure from the scene of that imaginary and extremely ridiculous figure, the worker who "took pleasure in his work." If there ever have been such people, they ought, as Wilde says, to be thoroughly ashamed of themselves. Any person who enjoys being turned into a machine for the best part of his days and regards it with pride, is no better than a blackleg or a scab—not a "scab" in regard to a little company of strikers, but a "scab" in regard to the human race; for he is one who denies that life in itself, life with all its emotional, intellectual and imaginative possibilities, can be endured without the gross, coarsening, dulling "anæsthetic" of money-making toil.

This is the word that the social revolution wanted—the word so much more to the point than discourses upon justice and equality and charity. And it is precisely here that the wage-earners of our present system are in harmony with the "intellectuals."

The "wage-earners," or those among them who have in them something more than the souls of

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scabs, despise and loathe their enforced labour. The artist also despises the second-rate tasks set him by the stupidity and bad taste of his middle-class masters.

The only persons in the community who are really happy in their life's work, as they fantastically call it, are those commercial *ruffians* whose brutal, self-righteous, puritanical countenances one is swamped by—as if by a flood of suffocating mediocrity—in the streets of all our modern cities.

Oscar Wilde is perfectly right. We are living in an age when the world for the first time in its history is literally under the rule of the stupidest, dullest, least intelligent and least admirable of all the classes in the community. Wilde's "Soul of Man" is the condemnation—let us hope the effective condemnation—of this epoch in the journey of the race.

The odium which France—always the protector of civilisation—has stamped upon the word "bourgeois" is no mere passing levity of an irresponsible Latin Quarter. It is the judgment of classic taste—the taste of the great artists and poets of all ages—upon the worst type of person, the type most pernicious to true human happiness, that has ever yet appeared upon the planet. And it is this type, the commercial type, the type that loves the money-making toil it is engaged upon, which rules over us now with an absolute authority, and creates our religion, our morality,

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our pleasures, our pastimes, our literature and our art.

Oscar Wilde must be forgiven everything in his gay impertinence which may jar upon our more sensitive moments, when one considers what he has done in dragging this great issue into the light and making it clear. He shows that what we have against us is not so much a system of society or a set of laws, as a definite and contemptible type of human character.

Democracy may well appear the most hopeless and lamentable failure in the government of men that history has ever known—but this is only due to the fact that the working classes have until now meekly and mildly received from the commercial classes their notions as to what democracy means.

No one could suppose for a moment that such a thing as the puritanical censorship of art and letters which now hangs, like a leaden weight, round the neck of every writer of original power, would be thrust upon us by the victims of sweatshops and factories. It is thrust upon us, like everything else which is degrading and uncivilised in our present system, by the obstinate stupidity and silly sentiment of the self-righteous middle class, the opponents of everything that is joyous and interesting and subtle and imaginative. It is devoutly to be hoped that, when the revolution arrives, the human persons who force their way to the top and guide the volcanic erup-

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tion will be such persons as are absolutely free from every kind of middle-class scruple.

There are among us to-day vigorous and indignant minds who find in the ugliness and moral squalor of our situation, the unhappy influence of Christ and his saints. They are wrong. The history of Oscar Wilde's writings shows that they are wrong.

It is the self-satisfied moralist who stands in the way, not the mystic or the visionary. They spoil everything they touch, these people. They turn religion into a set of sentimental inhibitions that would make Marcus Aurelius blush. They turn faith into pietism, sanctity into morality, and righteousness into a reeking prurience.

After all, it is not on the strength of his opinions, wise and sound as these may be, that Wilde's reputation rests. It rests on the beauty, in its own way never equalled, of the style in which he wrote. His style, as he himself points out, is one which seems to compel its readers to utter its syllables aloud. Of that deeper and more recon-dite charm which lies, in a sense, outside the sphere of vocal articulation, of that rhythm of the very movements of thought itself which lovers of Walter Pater catch, or dream they catch, in those elaborate delicately modulated sentences, Wilde has little or nothing.

What he achieves is a certain crystalline lucidity, clear and pure as the ring of glass upon glass,

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and with a mellifluous after-tone or echo of vibration, which dies away upon the ear in a lingering fall—melancholy and voluptuous, or light and tender as the hour and the moment lead.

He is at his best, or at any rate his style shows itself at its best, not in the utterances of those golden epigrams, the gold of which, as days pass, comes in certain cases to look lamentably like gilt, but in his use of those far-descended legendary images gathered up into poetry and art again and again till they have acquired the very tone of time itself, and a lovely magic, sudden, swift and arresting, like the odour of “myrrh, aloes, and cassia.”

The style of Wilde is one of the simplest in existence, but its simplicity is the very apex and consummation of the artificial. He uses Biblical language with that self-conscious preciousness—like the movements of a person walking on tip-toe in the presence of the dead—which is so different from the sturdy directness of Bunyan or the restrained rhetoric of the Church of England prayers. There come moments when this premeditated innocence of tone—this lisp in liturgical monosyllables—irritates and annoys one. At such times the delicate unctiousness of his naïveté strikes one, in despite of its gravity, as something a little comic; as though some very sophisticated and experienced person suddenly joined in a children’s game and began singing in a plaintive tenderly pitched voice—

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"This is the way we wash our hands, wash our hands,
wash our hands—
This is the way we wash our hands,
On a cold and frosty morning!"

But it were absurd to press this point too far. Sophisticated though the simplicity of Wilde is, it does actually spring with all its ritualistic tip-toeing straight out of his natural character. He was born artificial, and he was born with more childishness than the great majority of children.

I like to picture him as a great Uranian baby, full of querulousness and peevishness, and eating greedily, with a sort of guileless wonder that anyone should scold him for it, every species of forbidden fruit that grows in the garden of life! How infantile really, when one thinks of it, and how humorously solemn the man's inordinate gravity over the touch of soft fabrics and the odour of rare perfumes! One seems to see him, a languid-limbed "revenant," with heavy-lidded drowsy eyes and voluptuous lips, emerging all swathed and wrapped in costly cerements out of the tomb of some Babylonian king.

After all, it remains a tremendous triumph of personality, the manner in which this portly modern Antinous has taken captive our imagination. His influence is everywhere, like an odour, like an atmosphere, like a diffused flame. We cannot escape from him.

In those ridiculous wit-contests with Whistler, from which he always emerged defeated, how

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much more generous and careless and noble he appears than the wasp-like artist who could rap out so smartly the appropriate retort! He seems like a great lazy king, at such times, caught off his guard by some skipping and clever knave of his spoilt retinue. Perhaps even now no small a portion of the amused and astonished wonder he excites is due to the fact that he really had, what so few of us have, a veritable passion for precious stuffs and woven fabrics and ivory and cedar wood and beads of amber and orchid-petals and pearl-tinted shells and lapis-lazuli and attar of roses.

It is open to doubt whether even among artists, there are many who share Wilde's Hellenic ecstasy in these things. This at any rate was no pose. He posed as a man of the world. He posed as an immoralist. He posed as a paradoxist. He posed in a thousand perverse directions. But when it comes to the colour and texture and odour and shape of beautiful and rare things—there, in his voluptuous delight in these, he was undeniably sincere.

He was of course no learned virtuoso. But what does that matter? The real artist is seldom a patient collector or an encyclopedic authority. That is the rôle of Museum people and of compilers of hand-books. Many thoroughly uninteresting minds know more about Assyrian pottery and Chinese pictures than Oscar Wilde knew about wild flowers.

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Knowledge, as he teaches us himself, and it is one of the profoundest of his doctrines, is nothing. Knowledge is external and incidental. The important thing is that one's senses should be passionately alive and one's imagination fearlessly far-reaching.

We can embrace all the treasures of the Herods and all the riches of the Cæsars as we lay our fingers upon a little silver coin, if the divine flame is within us, and, if not, we may excavate a thousand buried cities and return learned and lean and empty. Well, people must make their own choice and go their own way. The world is wide, and Nature has at least this in common with Heaven, that it has many mansions.

The feverish passion for fair things which obsessed Oscar Wilde and carried him so far is not for all the sons of men; nor even, in every hour of their lives, for those who most ardently answer to it. That feverishness burns itself out; that smouldering fire turns to cold ashes. Life flows on, though Salome, daughter of Herodias, lies crushed under the piled-up shields, and though in all the prisons of the world "the damned grotesques make arabesques, like the wind upon the sand."

Life flows on, and the quips and merry jests of Oscar Wilde, his artful artlessness, his insolence, his self-pity, his loyalty and fickleness, his sensuality and tenderness, only fill after all a small space in the heart's chamber of those

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who read him and stare at his plays and let him go.

But there are a few for whom the tragic wantonness of that strange countenance, with the heavy eyelids and pouting mouth, means something not easily forgotten, not easily put by.

To have seen Oscar Wilde and talked with him gives to such persons a strange significance, an almost religious value. One looks long at them, as if to catch some far-off reflection from the wit of the dead man. They do not seem to us quite like the rest. They have seen Oscar Wilde, and "They know what they have seen." For when all has been said against him that can be said it remains that Oscar Wilde, for good and for evil, in innocence and in excess, in orthodoxy and in rebellion, is a "symbolic figure."

It is indeed easy enough, when one is under the spell of the golden gaiety of his wit, to forget the essential and irresistible truth of so many of his utterances.

That profound association between the "Sorrow that endureth forever" and the "Pleasure that abideth for a moment," which he symbolises under the parable of the Image of Bronze, has its place throughout all his work.

It is a mistake to regard *De Profundis* as a recantation. It is a fulfilment, a completion, a rounding off. Like a black and a scarlet thread running through the whole tapestry of his tragic story are the two parallel "motifs," the passion

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of the beauty which leads to destruction and the passion of the beauty which leads to life.

It matters little whether he was or was not received into the Church before he died. In the larger sense he was always within those unexcluding walls, those spacious courts of the Ecclesia of humanity. There was no trace in him, for all his caprices, of that puritanism of denial which breaks the altars and shatters the idols at the bidding of scientific iconoclasm.

What the anonymous instinct of humanity has rendered beautiful by building into it the golden monuments of forlorn hopes and washing it with the salt tears of desperate chances remained beautiful to him. From the narcissus-flowers growing on the marble ledges of Parnassus, where Apollo still weeps for the death of Hyacinth and Pan still mourns the vanishing of Syrinx, to the passion-flowers growing on the slopes of Calvary, he, this lover of eidola and images, worships the white feet of the bearers of dead beauty, and finds in the tears of all the lovers of all the lost a revivifying rain that even in the midst of the dust of our degeneracy makes bloom once more, full of freshness and promise, the mystical red rose of the world's desire.

The wit of his "Golden lads and girls" in those superb comedies may soon fall a little faint and thin upon our ears. To the next generation it may seem as faded and old-fashioned as the wit of Congreve or Sheridan. Fashions of hu-

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mour change more quickly than the fashions of manner or of dress. The only thing that gives immortality to human writing is the "eternal bronze" of a noble and imaginative style. Out of such divine material, with all his petulances and perversities, Oscar Wilde's style was hammered and beaten. For there is only one quarry of this most precious metal, and the same hand that shapes from it the "Sorrow that endureth forever" must shape from it the "Pleasure that abideth for a moment," and the identity of these two with that immortal bronze is the symbol of the mystery of our life.

The senses that are quickened by the knowledge of this mystery are not far from the ultimate secret. As with the thing sculptured, so with the sculptor.

Oscar Wilde is a symbolic figure.