

Books and Things

IN imagination I stand, some fine morning of next June, upon a platform slightly raised, where teachers are sitting, and even a few trustees. Ingratiatingly I look down upon a roomful of school-children who actually wish to listen. I see fifty or sixty expectant faces, washed and upturned, visibly waiting for the words that are to set them free. Not in vain are they eager. The words come. In accents of unfeigned sincerity I begin my lecture upon rhetoric, or the art, as in my own youth we were incited to call it, of efficient communication by language.

Let us start, I tell my little hearers, with paragraphs. Years ago a revered teacher taught me that the first sentence of a well-made paragraph should discover a subject and that the last sentence should drive a conclusion home. For months I struggled to satisfy this idea of paragraph structure, without ever getting even so far as to learn with what material one should fill the space between these liminary sentences, the announcer and the summer-up. Many paragraphs by many masters did I pull to pieces, finding about ten that did not conform to this ideal pattern for every one that did. So I banished the ideal, renounced the teacher, forgot his advice until only the other day, when I read in the editor's prefatory note to *The Middle Years* that Henry James usually put off the markings of his paragraphs until the final revision of a book. Why should he have done otherwise? The paragraph was invented for the convenience of readers, as an *ex post facto* sign that one of the writer's impulses had spent itself, or was about to change cars. To most men dreams do not come in paragraphs, nor day-dreamt hallucinations, nor confessions of faith, nor declarations of love. If you keep consciously aiming to write paragraphs you risk contracting the habit of trying to see the world in paragraphs, a sad preventive of the better habit of trying to see. Paragraph structure, so I end this part of my lecture, isn't anything to worry about.

Transition, or the art of getting from this paragraph to that, is another thing that the writer must put clean out of his head. If he does not, if he remains a slave of transition, he will pester his reader with obtruded connectives, with at the same times, with on the other hands, with thens flanked by commas and academically sticking out. At its worst transition is a long way round from something you have been saying—to something you mean to say—through something better left unsaid. Poem, essay, chapter, argument—too much attention to transition will make any one of these resemble John Florian's dinners, at which the last mouthful of every course except coffee tasted a little like the first mouthful of the next.

About clearness, force and ease I make only two remarks, both striking. I invite my audience to inquire whether *The Faery Queen* would have been better, in any sense that any sane person could give the word, if Spenser had tried for force; whether by trying for ease Browning would have bettered Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came; whether *The Listeners* could have kept its charm if Mr. de la Mare had made it as clear as *What Does Little Birdie Say*. No writer, I add, nobody whom anybody would think of calling a writer, ever bothers his head about ease or force when he is performing that one of the many acts of composition which consists in putting words together into a sentence. Clearness is in a different category. But not even clearness need be the conscious concern of any one while he is writing. A writer almost never tells himself he must be clear. What he says to himself is "That isn't

what I mean"—"That's not what I'm after"—"I can't let it go like that." The impulse which he acts on when he rewrites an obscure sentence is very like the impulse which takes you out of your chair and across the room in order to straighten a picture that hangs crooked.

The act of composition, as some people still call it, is neither single nor distinct. It is all the acts of experiencing and remembering and inventing and translating into words. Learning to translate into words is the act of adding both unconsciously and also consciously to the number of things you can unconsciously do. It is like learning to play a game, except that no learner of any game has ever to be on his guard against excess of either conscious or unconscious imitation. But even in writing, if you have a voice of your own, your fear of imitating too closely is controlled by your certitude that you cannot imitate successfully, and that through imitation you become free. *Qui apicem gessisti, mors perfecit tua ut essent omnia brevia, honos fama virtusque, gloria atque ingenium.* Try to copy into English not the total effect of this inscription on a Roman tomb, but the effect of its m's and n's, the salience of its three ia's, its vowel sounds in their order, the funeral march of its clauses. By consciously trying to imitate you learn unconsciously to do, when the right matter and the right mood come together and join hands, something you would have written differently but for the imitative exercises you have forgotten.

Most of the too few painters I know talk easily enough, but when one of them is talking to another I notice how he often hesitates, not for a word but for a memory. His eye is waiting until it sees with the needed degree of distinctness the color or the form of the thing he is talking about. So a writer will often stop, hesitate, hang back until memory has brought his subject into the field of vision, where he will hold this subject until his remembering eye has seen what he was looking for, concretely, in its haecceity, and the words he was after come of themselves to his pen. They will not be the words that would have come if he had not made this effort to remember. To the good memory, the memory that can command things seen, heard, felt or understood, comes the phrase that nobody ever thought of before, in its fresh exactness.

Out of memory, by a hand whose sensitiveness experiment has refined, whose strength experiment has made stronger—such is the pedigree of much good writing. To say this, however, is to refer to those two only of the acts composing the act of composition in which self-improvement is a possible thing. A rich experience to remember, that power to remake remembered experience which we call invention, are at no one's command. They depend, I suppose, upon a writer's physiological equipment. But anybody may choose to write about what he remembers most sharply. Anybody may increase the faithfulness of his words to remembered things.

With these words of temperate hope I bring my lecture to a close. Its effect is not quite what I anticipated. No teacher threatens to assault me in reprisal for my derogatory remarks about clearness, force and ease. The children do not crowd about the platform saying things which lead me to exclaim, with a well-rehearsed involuntary air, "I am glad you asked me that question." Well, it doesn't matter. Better luck next time. And, anyway, I have made my train without having had to tell anybody that I stole my Latin inscription from Mr. Mackail's wise and beautiful introduction to his *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology*.

P. L.

Harris's Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde, his life and confessions, by Frank Harris. With a chapter by Bernard Shaw. Two volumes. New York: Frank Harris, 29 Waverley Place. \$5.00.

A MAN'S disciples may not be his fault but they are clearly his worst misfortune. It does not matter who they are, if it flashed into their minds that they have a vested interest in a hero they arrive at once at a virulent determination to exclude all admirers except on their own terms. Whether Christ is the man they exalt, or Shakespeare or Nietzsche or Freud or Oscar Wilde, the first act of disciples is to become possessive, to take it on themselves to permit no freedom of mind in regard to their idol. This may begin as the natural snappishness of the vulnerable and insecure, it soon settles into a more confident ownership and it ends by the disciples insisting on making the idol in their own image. To break that image then becomes the first necessity of all real perception or worship. The preliminary of true faith is iconoclasm.

It is because this iconoclasm is so badly needed in the case of Oscar Wilde that one hesitates to open any new book about him. The philistines did so much to destroy him that the slightest attack on him seems brutal, yet his disciples have shamelessly availed themselves of his disgrace to make criticism of him seem the cousin of cowardice. It is easier to avoid the subject altogether, a less conspicuous cowardice, a more comfortable evasion.

That kind of evasion, however, is needless in the face of Frank Harris's volumes. He has written neither for the disciples nor for the philistines. He has taken the subject in his own way, bent on a fair-and-square presentation of a complete complex personality, neither omitting nor extenuating in the interest of friend or foe. The great danger in Mr. Harris's case was a chivalry compounded partly of anger on Wilde's account and partly of anger on his own—because Frank Harris's ardor against the philistines is not all disinterested, he has scores of his own to settle. But though the pangs of unrequited merit are never completely absent from Mr. Harris his story is fascinating and only a man of courage could have written it. No one can doubt that it keeps imperishable for human and literary history the chief figure of an English epoch. Not only that. In lavishing his vitality on a life of Oscar Wilde, Frank Harris has dramatized the England of that group and moment in which Wilde reached his consummation and met his doom. The doom of Wilde is seized by Mr. Harris as a theme of common humanity, pitiful humanity, and it is the great distinction of his work that he does not allow the pathological aspect of Wilde to estrange the reader.

With the skill of a fine novelist Mr. Harris sets about the difficult task of depicting the brilliant eminence from which Oscar Wilde was to be flung down. The fact that Wilde's appearance filled him with distaste ("there was something oily and fat about him that repelled me") makes Mr. Harris's capitulation to his charm all the more interesting. "There was an extraordinary physical vivacity and geniality in the man, an extraordinary charm in his gaiety, and lightning-quick intelligence." The worth of this personal radiance to Mr. Harris was so great that we are enabled to see Wilde through his eyes from the witty beginnings of 1884 up to the dazzling success of 1891. Mr. Harris notes that Wilde's early plays and poems were as unimportant as his lectures. He shows the weak and the meretricious side of Wilde during those

awkward years. But the man that attracted the attention of all London by 1891, winning admiration and discipleship as well as disapproval and malevolence, was a man whom Mr. Harris had completely accepted, and that acceptance was destined to survive the disclosures of the English criminal court and the ebbing of the fluid multitude which sways with the moon. It was in 1891 that Wilde met Lord Alfred Douglas. "Oscar was drawn by the lad's personal beauty, and enormously affected besides by Lord Alfred Douglas' name and position: he was a snob as only an English artist can be a snob." Douglas, 21 years old to Oscar's 36, adored Oscar as man and man of letters. The tragedy turned on their interplay of character. "Oscar was as yielding and amiable in character as the boy was self-willed, reckless, obstinate and imperious." Dominated by the youth, it was only three years before he quenched Wilde in squalor.

The truculence of Douglas's father, Queensberry, was notorious and Queensberry set out to separate Wilde from Alfred Douglas. The father found his match in the venomous son; but when Wilde, prompted by Douglas, carried the war into Queensberry's camp, the result was ruin. Frank Harris narrates in marvelous detail the efforts he himself made to dissuade Wilde from an unequal battle. He knew that Queensberry and fatherhood were bound to win. Wilde, paralyzed by actualities, could not obey his adviser. He allowed Douglas to urge him forward to fight Queensberry. The trials that sprang out of the original libel case were a blood sacrifice of Wilde to the graven images of England. His chance of "justice," as Mr. Harris shows, did not exist. He was doomed.

Wilde's imprisonment revealed to Mr. Harris some of the horrors of punitive justice, and his efforts in regard to his friend are as honorable to record as friendship can show. The drama subsequent to prison, however, exceeds the beginning in interest. For a time it looked as if Wilde had really come to simplicity and directness, but the forces against him were stronger than he was, and he slipped back to Lord Alfred Douglas and destruction. "I was born to sing the joy and pride of life," he pleaded to Mr. Harris, "the pleasure of living, the delight in everything beautiful in this most beautiful world, and they took me and tortured me till I learned pity and sorrow. Now I cannot sing the joy, heartily, because I know the suffering, and I was never made to sing of suffering." "It never seemed to occur to him," says Mr. Harris, mournfully, "that he could reach a faith which should include both self-indulgence and renunciation in a larger acceptance of life."

Mr. Harris's subject is somewhat stifling. "One can scarcely fail," to borrow a phrase of W. Trotter's, "on coming into it from the bracing atmosphere of the biological sciences, to be oppressed by the odor of humanity with which it is pervaded." Still, the story as a whole raises the theme far above disciples and philistines alike, sets it on a tragic height and calls for pity as well as horror. As between George Meredith and Frank Harris, one feels it was Meredith who acted superficially and even anti-socially when he refused to sign the petition for shortening Wilde's imprisonment. The choice unfortunately seemed to lie between supporting the authorities and palliating Wilde's offense. Meredith could not palliate the offense so he stood by the authorities. Imprisonment, however, could do little or nothing to meet the condition that horrified Meredith, and his horror kept him from seeing, as Harris saw, the brutality of the experience that Wilde was undergoing. Bernard Shaw