

Selected Prose of Oscar Wilde

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DEDICATION

This anthology is dedicated to Michael Lykiardopulos as a little token of his services to English Literature in the great Russian Empire.

PREFACE

With the possible exceptions of the Greek Anthology, the "Golden Treasury" and those which bear the name of E. V. Lucas, no selections of poetry or prose have ever given complete satisfaction to anyone except the compiler. But critics derive great satisfaction from pointing out errors of omission and inclusion on the part of the anthologist, and all of us have putatively re-arranged and re-edited even the "Golden Treasury" in our leisure moments. In an age when "Art for Art's sake" is an exploded doctrine, anthologies, like everything else, must have a purpose. The purpose or object of the present volume is to afford admirers of Wilde's work the same innocent pleasure obtainable from similar compilations, namely that of reconstructing a selection of their own in their mind's eye--for copyright considerations would interfere with the materialisation of their dream.

A stray observation in an esteemed weekly periodical determined the plan of this anthology and the choice of particular passages. The writer, whose name has escaped me, opined that the reason the works of Pater and Wilde were no longer read was owing to both authors having treated English as a dead language. By a singular coincidence I had purchased simultaneously with the newspaper a shilling copy of Pater's "Renaissance," published by Messrs. Macmillan; and a few days afterwards Messrs. Methuen issued at a shilling the twenty-eighth edition of "De Profundis." Obviously either Messrs. Macmillan and Messrs. Methuen or

the authority on dead languages must have been suffering from hallucinations. It occurred to me that a selection of Wilde's prose might at least rehabilitate the notorious reputation for common sense enjoyed by all publishers, who rarely issue shilling editions of deceased authors for mere aesthetic considerations. And I confess to a hope that this volume may reach the eye or ear of those who have not read Wilde's books, or of those, such as Mr. Sydney Grundy, who are irritated by the revival of his plays and the praise accorded to his works throughout the Continent.

Wilde's prose is distinguished by its extraordinary ease and clarity, and by the absence--very singular in his case--of the preciousness which he admired too much in other writers, and advocated with over-emphasis. Perhaps that is why many of his stories and essays and plays are used as English text-books in Russian and Scandinavian and Hungarian schools. Artifice and affectation, often assumed to be recurrent defects in his writings by those unacquainted with them, are comparatively rare. Wilde once boasted in an interview that only Flaubert, Pater, Keats, and Maeterlinck had influenced him, and then added in a characteristic way: "But I had already gone more than half-way to meet them." Anyone curious as to the origin of Wilde's style and development should consult the learned treatise {1} of Dr. Ernst Bendz, whose comprehensive treatment of the subject renders any elucidation of mine superfluous; while nothing can be added to Mr. Holbrook Jackson's masterly criticism {2} of Wilde and his position in literature.

In making this selection, with the valuable assistance of Mr. Stuart Mason, I have endeavoured to illustrate and to justify the critical appreciations of both Dr. Bendz and Mr. Holbrook Jackson, as well as to afford the general reader a fair idea of Wilde's variety as a prose writer. He is more various than almost any author of the last century, though the act of writing was always a burden to him. Some critic acutely pointed out that poetry and prose were almost side-issues for him. The resulting faults and weakness of what he left are obvious. Except in the plays he has no sustained scheme of thought. Even "De Profundis" is too desultory.

For the purpose of convenient reference I have exercised the prerogative of a literary executor and editor by endowing with special titles some of the pieces quoted in these pages. Though unlike one of Wilde's other friends I cannot claim to have collaborated with him or to have assisted him in any of his plays, I was sometimes permitted, as Wilde acknowledges in different letters, to act in the capacity of godfather by suggesting the actual titles by which some of his books are known to the world. I mention the circumstance only as a precedent for my present temerity. To compensate those who disapprove of my choice, I have included two unpublished letters. The examples of Wilde's epistolary style, published since his death, have been generally associated with disagreeable subjects. Those included here will, I hope, prove a pleasant contrast.

ROBERT ROSS