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Why Wilde? From Oxford to Trinity: Collecting and Recollecting

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I should like to set the scene for my chapter by referring to the introduction to my friend Thomas Wright's monograph on Oscar Wilde, *Oscar's Books*, published in 2008¹, which pioneers a unique form of biography through the prism of Wilde's formative reading and later library.

As Thomas Wright states while Oscar Wilde was in Holloway prison all his belongings that were in his house in Tite Street Chelsea were sold by auction. This was done on the demand of his creditors among whom was Marquis of Queensberry. Wilde's belongings were sold by auction on the premises. Perhaps among the most valuable of his possessions such as various portraits, china and furniture were

¹ The original edition published by Chatto and Windus, the references appearing in this chapter are from the American edition *Built of Books, How Reading Defined the Life of Oscar Wilde*. New York: Henry Holt and Co, 2009. The Turkish translation is to be published by İthaki Yayınları in 2016.

his collection of books (Wright 2). He had collected these books from his very early ages. The auction turned into a plunder as “curiosity hunters” were after the belongings of Wilde who had become a notorious figure. Wright narrates in detail the lengths to these crowds went and how peace could only be established by the police (3). The public not only bought the books but were also after any private letter or memento which would relate to his private life. As Wright points out, antique dealers and second hand book dealers flocked to the auction and although the public sale of private letters and manuscripts were forbidden all such possessions of Wilde were sold (4). As Wright states “Extremely personal items were auctioned off, such as first editions of Wilde’s works that he had inscribed to his wife and two sons. Wilde especially lamented the loss of his sumptuous ‘*editions de luxe*’, and the ‘collection of presentation volumes’ that had been presented to him by ‘almost every poet of my time’. He also regretted the dispersal of his ‘beautifully bound editions of’ his ‘father’s and mother’s works’, and the ‘wonderful array’ of ‘book prizes’ that had been awarded to him as a schoolboy.” Wilde’s library which was estimated to contain over 2000 volumes and various other periodicals, and magazines were sold at very low prices and were bought by different members of the public which dispersed them perhaps never to be put together again (4-5). Only very few of these could be bought back by Wilde’s friends and be returned to him. Wilde, as Wright emphasises was inconsolable on learning the fate of his library and as he describes the situation “Like many Nineteenth century gentlemen, he regarded books as his ‘friends’, and his collection as both as a record of his life and as an emblem of his personality. Books were extremely personal objects to him, and he delighted in making them uniquely his own. He inscribed his name on their title-pages in his elegant hand; he also habitually marked and annotated them”(50). Wilde’s library was a rich collection bringing together books from classics, medieval to modern and from French, Italian and German literatures. His collection reflected his wide interests and included volumes on diverse subjects such as folklore, Japanese art, science, philosophy, art history, mythology and archaeology. Books meant a lot to Wilde and as Wright further argues “Books were the greatest single influence on Wilde’s life and writing... he was a man who built himself out of books”(6). Wright also draws attention to how Wilde also used his favourite books as ‘prompt books’ for various roles he assumed in the different stages of his life and points to the fact that he began using Sebastian Melmoth as his name with reference to the hero in Charles Maturin’s novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* after his release from prison (7). His life was imbued with books, he resembled his friends and acquaintances to characters from books. His reading

was a very important source for his inspiration and he alluded to his wide reading in his works. Moreover he made a habit of surrounding himself or posing with his books in interviews and when posing for photographs (Wright 8). Again as Wright puts it “Books appear at every stage on Wilde’s life’s way from his boyhood, in which he ‘loved literature to excess’, to the his death, surrounded by books in a cheap Parisian hotel. For Wilde, books were a life-long Romance”(8).

In the Spring of 1895, my maternal grandfather, Wilde’s namesake Oscar Levy, then aged 28, who had turned his back on the fetid air of nascent nationalism and militarism in his native Germany three years before, found himself in London during the trials, which he recorded in his unpublished autobiography half a century later:

During this time (1895) the Oscar Wilde “Affair”. Convicted by prostitutes (male). Sir Edward Carson, the counsel of the opposite side, is said to have regretted the condemnation all his life. The indignant judge. The indignant public. Hosiers had to stop selling certain collars which Oscar Wilde wore. As the public objects! The saturnalia of the *moral canaille*. England at her “best”. Lack of psychology. Pride in Empire - the consequence of a Puritan Valuation that has no other outlets.

Levy, a medical doctor, poet, essayist and translator, had his attention drawn to the works of Friedrich Nietzsche by a patient, and devoted his whole life, most intensely between 1908 and 1913, as the editor and financier of the complete authorised English edition of the philosopher’s works in eighteen volumes, to promoting his ideology and disentangling this from the skein of falsehoods woven around it ever since - stating in an article in *The Scotsman* by Walter Shaw, dating to August 1914, entitled “The Philosophical Basis of German Militarism.” Levy received a copy, enhanced with a personal dedication: “You have brought this poison to England.”

In the autumn of 1921, Levy underwent a trial of his own at the hands of the British Government, when he was expelled from England under the Enemy Aliens Restriction Act, repealed the following year, a cause célèbre vociferously condemned by such writers as Conan Doyle, Galsworthy, Shaw, H.G. Wells, Virginia Woolf and many others. Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde’s nemesis, who knew Levy well through their contact on the journal *Plain English*, vouched for him too, personally, at Bow Street Court. Levy’s debt to him, not least for establishment boat rocking and publishing Levy’s

own - notably a letter on Antisemitism, which contributed to the expulsion in the same year, is warmly recollected in *Mein Kampf um Nietzsche* (My Fight for Nietzsche) (1925). Levy also took Douglas's side in the aftermath of the Wilde affair and regarded him as a scapegoat for the calumnies and falsifications that were common currency at the time.

In 1940, the year that Bernard Shaw penned the blurb to Levy's last published work, *The Idiocy of Idealism*, characterising him as a "well-known and thoroughly tactless Nietzschean [sic] Jew", his future son-in-law, my father, Albi, found *himself* behind the barbed wire at Lingfield racecourse - interned as a half Italian German Jewish émigré (he was not to be granted British citizenship until 1947) - and consoling himself playing Leclair violin sonatas to transcend the camp's confines. Born in Munich in 1914, from the age of ten Albi had longed to become an Englishman, seeing in Heinrich Heine's "Land of Liberty" all the freedoms fast dwindling away in their homeland, and he settled in London in 1933 aged 18, in Croydon, lodging with the distinguished Irish scholar, Robin Flower, then Deputy Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum, whom he always referred to as "Daddy". When the policeman came for him early that summer morning in 1940, the redoubtable concierge at his Mayfair flat stated: "You can't do that! He is practically an Englishman!" Nevertheless, his letters from Lingfield were soon to be "Opened by the Censor". It is not surprising that Levy's only child, my mother Maud, his faithful daughter-secretary born five years before her parents married, a student of literature and history of art at five universities in four countries, inscribed the following Wilde aphorism from *The Critic as Artist* in her quotation book: "What is termed Sin, is an essential element of progress. In its rejections of the current notions about morality it is one with the higher ethics." As Wilde's magisterial biographer, Richard Ellmann, put it: "Along with Blake and Nietzsche, he was proposing that good and evil are not what they seem, that moral tabs cannot cope with the complexity of behaviour"(xiv). As to Wilde's own, his earliest apologist in print, Dal Young, summed up these thoughts as early as June 1895 at the height of his disgrace: "As regards sin, even if we know, or think we know what a man has done, we know nothing about the motive or the manner; and under these circumstances, any outside judgement is a mere impertinence"(np).

With this peripatetic background, in 1968, aged fourteen, I was cast as Miss Prism in our fifth form production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at Oxford High School. In February, I had attended my first Wilde play, a performance of *Earnest* at the

Theatre Royal, Haymarket, with Dame Flora Robson as Prism, whom I ambushed backstage afterwards, seeking advice (First performance 8 February 1986). In May, when our slightly older counterparts were on the barricades, rioting in Paris, we were coming to terms with the delicious paradoxes of Wilde's comic masterpiece, relishing, in our highly competitive academic environment, such lines as "Fortunately, in England at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square." As well as falling totally in love with Wilde's verbal brilliance, I grew very fond of my character - the prim pedagogue with a passionate heart under the high-necked, beribboned blouse, and my first - and only- encounter with a fictional bluestocking, whose conviction depended on me! It is a tribute to Wilde's linguistic hegemony that I still remember my part almost verbatim, 46 years later. The very talented classmate who played my charge, Cecily Cardew, "disappeared" from school shortly afterwards and there was a collection for her wedding present - fair exchange for a "passionate celibacy" perhaps, but surreal nonetheless.

Although I had started to collect autographs of eminent personalities at the age of nine -not that unusual, coming from a dynasty, now in its fifth generation on my father's side, of antiquarian book and manuscript dealers - Wilde was in a different, unique category from the outset. I was convinced, perhaps even genetically predisposed to believe, though unaware of it at the time and equally ignorant of the sexual side, that English society had done him a great wrong and I began the collection with a clear wish, in my small way, to treat him well to atone for this.

My friendship with Richard Ellmann, from 1970-1984 Goldsmith's Professor of English Literature at Oxford, the first American to occupy the chair, was a key component in the development of my collection. We must have met in his early days amongst the dreaming spires, at his home, 39 St. Giles', or in New College, through school. His ferociously bright daughter, another Maud, was in my A-level English class - her donnish perspicacity, aided and abetted by the hooded romantic cloak she always wore, bestrode the class of lesser mortals. She went on to edit Ezra Pound - even the dust-jacket left me out of my depth! Dick was deeply proud of his post-structuralist daughter. One of our most memorable conversations centred around Flaubert's use of the imperfect tense - especially in *Madame Bovary*, a novel I adore, where the accumulation of the incantatory 'ait' and 'aient' endings is such a contributory factor to the "sinless master's" depiction of the

monochrome of provincial, rain-lashed boredom. Far removed from Maud's modernism, who regarded such structures as a bourgeois tyranny, but very close to Wilde, who wrote in a letter to W.E. Henley, dating to the end of 1888: "Flaubert is my master, and when I get on with my translation of the *Tentation* (The Temptation of St. Antony), I shall be Flaubert II, Roi par grâce de Dieu, and I hope something else beyond" (Hart-Davis 76). In exile ten years later, he spent evenings re-reading this text, which he had proudly plagiarized. James Joyce, too, had a tense relationship with Flaubert, challenging his use of the past historic instead of the imperfect in *Trois Contes*, which turned out to be incorrect, a great disappointment to Anthony Burgess: "The pedants, including the lexicographers, say that Flaubert was right, which is a pity. I do not like Joyce's linguistic competence to be thus diminished" he quipped.

As early as 1970, when Ellmann gave up his chair at Yale to come to Oxford, which he thought a suitable venue, he had been engaged on his Wilde biography, in parallel with the revision of his 1959 magnum opus on James Joyce - "the first writer to show us in England what literature really is" Dick claimed, published in 1982 and heralded as the greatest literary biography of the twentieth century by Anthony Burgess and, according to the Trinity College Dublin scholar, David Norris, ranking alongside Boswell's life of Johnson (qtd in Scaduto). Ellmann's earliest monograph, one of two on Yeats, *The Man and The Mask*, came out in 1948 after Dick obtained his first degree at Trinity.

After I had completed my BA in French and German at Durham and worked in an art reference bookshop in London from late 1976 - 1979, I returned to Oxford to run the family antiquarian book business in Broad Street, a venue for bibliophiles in the nineteenth century too, including Wilde. Our premises were perfectly situated at the mid-point between New College and Dick's home. In 1981, a year before the Joyce biography was reissued, Ellmann published *The Consciousness of Joyce*, which included as an appendix a listing of his library in June 1920, some 600 titles, comprising nearly all the books left behind in Trieste, when he moved to Paris - an unsurprisingly wide-ranging collection, in six languages, with editions of Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*, *Intentions*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Salomé*, *Selected Poems*, *The Soul of Man under Socialism* and *A Woman of No Importance* as well as Sherard's monograph on Wilde, published in 1908. Three of Nietzsche's works in my grandfather's edition were also present, and, of course *Madame Bovary*, albeit in English translation. This group also bore witness that Joyce knew the

writings of Freud, Jung and Ernest Jones several years earlier than had been supposed. Dick wanted to reassemble as many works as possible in the same editions Joyce read them in and asked me to help. We managed to bring together 75-odd titles, which did not include volumes he already had or did not need (Ellmann 97-134). It was a thrilling project, which, hand in hand with Wilde meant we met increasingly frequently. I had acquired my first autograph letter, to Lady Randolph Churchill (Winston's mother), in 1976, with probably the earliest written reference to *An Ideal Husband* and with a quotation from Act III of *A Woman of No Importance*: "The only difference between the Saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future!" A *sans-pareil* paradox of my very own!

In the mid 1980s, Dick took on the Woodruff Professorship at Emory University in Atlanta. He confided in me that he was "feeling less immortal than he used to" and was soon to be diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, a cruel terminal degeneration of the nervous system. Although increasingly incapacitated, Dick was determined to complete the Wilde biography, which meant delegating much of the final editing. When he penned the acknowledgements in March 1987, their date, "The Ides of March", referred also to his own; he died in mid-May with the proofs at his bedside (Ellmann *Oscar Wilde* xii). He was 69. Like so many others, I was totally stricken at the loss of such a dear friend and mentor, and consoled myself that his immortality as a biographer, at least, was assured and with Joyce's message that death is no more than a mask - Ellmann's subjects remaining more alive than ever in the amber of his prose, as he does himself. I was delighted to be able to acquire James Edward Kelly's etched portrait of Wilde, commissioned by him in New York in 1882 at the beginning of his American tour, signed in pencil, from Dick's estate, which is reproduced in the biography (210-211). Since its universally acclaimed publication - it won the Pulitzer Prize in 1989 - much, mainly teutonic, ink has been spilt over the myriad inaccuracies and it has started a school of *Besserwissenschaft* (editorial oneupmanship) all of its own. Let us set Ellmann's conclusion against the wielders of blue pencil:

'There is something vulgar in all success' Wilde told O'Sullivan. 'The greatest men fail, or seem to have failed.' He was speaking of Parnell, but what was true of Parnell is in another way true of Wilde. His work survived as he had claimed it would. We inherit his struggle to achieve supreme fictions in art, to associate art with social change, to bring together individual and

social impulse, to save what is eccentric and singular from being sanitized and standardized, to replace a morality of severity by one of sympathy. He belongs to our world more than to Victoria's. Now, beyond the reach of scandal, his best writings validated by time, he comes before us still, a towering figure, laughing and weeping, with parables and paradoxes, so generous, so amusing, so right. (*Oscar Wilde Dustjacket*)

This echoes Dick's remark on his Joyce revision: "I have followed Joyce's own prescription of total candor, with the knowledge that his life, like Rousseau's, can bear others' scrutiny as it bore his own. In working over these pages, I have felt all my affection for him renewed" (Epilogue 533-4). "All men have their disciples, and it is usually Judas who writes the biography" according to Wilde. How fortunate he, Yeats and Joyce were in their elective affinity with Richard Ellmann. John Murray's newly commissioned Wilde biography by Matthew Sturgis, doyen of decadence and of the lives of Aubrey Beardsley and Walter Sickert, is due for publication in the autumn of 2016, and will doubtless throw down the gauntlet for the twenty-first century evaluation.

One other friendship, with a nonagenarian neighbour, Sybil Jackson, brought me very close to Wilde. She used to attend my school, riding on horseback from Boars Hill on the outskirts of Oxford and tethering her horse at The Roebuck Inn, where she changed into her uniform. She had proudly entertained Rasputin's murderer, Prince Yusupov to tea, then a handsome young undergraduate at Christ Church. She recalled an afternoon party which Wilde attended. Gesturing expansively, he sent a loaded tray flying across the room out of the hands of the hapless butler - and carried on talking as if nothing had happened. What panache! My father's colleague in the Music Faculty, Bernard Rose, a member of Magdalen College, got hold of the original wooden toilet seat from Oscar's rooms at the time of their refurbishment, and reinstalled it in his home, a relic that, Trinity were glad to know, passed me by! My mother was also close to Wilde's circle through her acquaintance with Reggie Turner during her studies in Florence and his letter to her is in the collection. Turner and Robbie Ross, his most loyal longterm friends, were present when Oscar died in Paris in 1900.

In 1986, at the sale of papers belonging to Carlos Blacker, the dedicatee of *The Happy Prince*, through whom Wilde met Zola, I acquired a visiting card printed in the name of Sebastian Melmoth, Wilde's pseudonym in exile, printed with his location in May 1897,

Bernevalsur- Mer, near Dieppe. In 1991 I was able to add the silver card case, which fitted it exactly, similarly engraved, given by his “Sphinx” and dear friend, Ada Levenson². This marks the beginning of the collection’s focus on exile and the dénouement of Oscar’s life from 1895 -1900. It was preceded by the receipt in the sum of £ 25 from More Adey, dated on the day of his release from prison in the same month, my earliest acquisition in the late 1960s. On May 28th, Wilde’s influential letter on prison reform appeared in the *Daily Chronicle* and its publication as a pamphlet the following year *Children in Prison and Other Cruelties of Prison Life*, movingly describing painful episodes Wilde witnessed in Reading, is in the collection.

Thomas Wright again, this time from his introduction to it:

Wilde had always been a self-consciously European intellectual. In being ‘exiled’ to France, it could be said that he was going home. Wilde famously described himself as ‘French by culture, Irish by race’, before adding ‘and the English have condemned me to speak the language of Shakespeare.’ Wilde made that Anglo-Saxon curse rebound against its authors by turning the English language upside down, and inside out, in his paradoxical, topsy-turvy writings, while at the same time demonstrating that an Irishman could enhance its beauty and range. Wilde also succeeded in evading the ‘English’ curse by writing his symbolist drama, *Salomé*, in French (‘I wanted’, he commented, ‘once to touch this instrument.. to which I had listened all my life ... to see if I could make a beautiful thing out of it.’)(np)

I was able to purchase a copy of the first French edition of *Salomé* (1893), inscribed to the symbolist poet José-Maria de Hérédia, whose oeuvre was an inspiration for the play, mentioned first on Wilde’s monument in Père Lachaise cemetery. On 24 May 1897, the letter inviting the actor, Lugné Poë, who played Herod in the first production of *Salomé* the previous year, to lunch, known only from a typescript when the *Collected Letters* were published in 2000, together with the original Toulouse Lautrec lithographed programme are also present. In a letter in French to the writer Paul Bonnefon, acknowledging the receipt of a book, most likely his monograph on Montaigne, published in 1893, also in the collection, Wilde explains

² Blacker Sale: Sotheby’s London, 10 July 1986, lot 125; card case: Christie’s London 16 December 1991, lot 329.

some of the reasons for his Francophilia, paraphrased as follows: "... in Paris", he writes, "one reveals everything: here [in London] one conceals everything, even wit: that is the difference between France and England." He goes on to praise French conversation: "if the French ceased coming to London, the English would forget what graceful conversation is."

Wright continues:

The seeds of Wilde's francophilia were planted during his Dublin childhood: it is indeed inextricably bound up with his Irishness. Having been taught French at home by a native governess, Wilde became, he later recalled 'particularly fond of French writings' as a youth because he felt they were 'pervaded by an enthusiasm having some kinship with that peculiar to the Irish.' His passion was heightened by the belief, imbibed from his parents, that the French were descended from the Celts. In their ancestry, as well as in their intellectual sophistication, and keen sensitivity to art and to the beautiful surfaces of life the French were for the Wildes, far closer to the Irish than the stolid, plodding, philistine English. Wilde would find solace and tranquility at Berneval, largely because the French continued to regard him as an artist, rather than as a notorious ex-convict and pervert, which was his reputation in England.

Henry Davray, the translator of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, mostly written at Berneval and later Naples, (a presentation copy of the work, which was overseen by its author - his "swansong of Marsyas" [*Selected Letters* 333]- with many other early, illustrated and foreign editions are in the collection), sent Wilde a number of volumes of contemporary French literature inscribed to him by their authors. In an unpublished acknowledgement, dating to mid-December 1898, Wilde professes himself "greatly touched by the sympathy and attention shown to me by you and other French writers." Elsewhere, he refers to France as "the modern mother of all artists", who has "many wilful sons whom she always consoles and often heals."

Twentieth century French critics go even further. In the mid-1970s, Jacques de Langlade calls Wilde a French writer who, ahead of his time, brought answers to questions that had not yet been posed; in this respect, writers as diverse as Maurice Barrès, Proust and Gide recognised themselves in the theory of fin-de-siècle art that Wilde

proposed to them. If the author of *De Profundis* is close to men of today, it is not because he is the incarnation of the period around 1900, but because he knew how to free himself from it (Preface). And, in the words of Kever Hartley in 1935, Wilde was the first French author of English race since Anthony Hamilton and Beckford (np).

Since the early 1990s, I have travelled yearly to Berneval, where the first international exhibition of the collection was held in June 1995, to mark the centenary of Wilde's arrest and incarceration, with a catalogue in both French and English (*L'Homme de Londres*); a small group of items was also taken to Paris exactly two years earlier when the Oscar Wilde Society visited. In 1994, I compiled a major exhibition, "Oscar in Carcere," at Reading Remand Centre as it then was, to mark the 150th anniversary of the founding of Reading Gaol in 1844. There were two further Berneval exhibitions in 1997, to mark the centenary of the release and, in 2000, that of Wilde's death. That anniversary saw exhibitions at Schloss Wernigerode in the Harz mountains, Germany, at the Barbican and British Library, the latter without the catalogue which the vast contents, many from private collections, notably that of Mary Hyde Eccles, called, if not cried out for, as well as the publication of the monumental *Complete Letters*, edited by the late Rupert Hart Davis and Merlin Holland, Wilde's grandson, with and from whom, by then I had enjoyed much contact, support and advice (*Complete Letters*). In the spring of 1997, Merlin, his late wife and I visited Berneval and were transported in horse-drawn carriages through the glorious countryside. There was an event with local schoolchildren - Oscar had befriended their ancestors in 1897 when he gave a memorable party to mark Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee - and a lecture given by Merlin in Dieppe. The British Library exhibition, in reduced form, was also shown at the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, in the late summer of 2001. As some of my collection was included, I had the privilege of accompanying Sally Brown, the British Library literary curator, with the original manuscript of *De Profundis* on the flight, Wilde's *Epistola in Carcere et Vinculis* (Letter in Prison and in Chains), which, writing to Robert Ross, he described as "the only document that really gives any explanation of my extraordinary behaviour with regard to Queensberry and Alfred Douglas." Before arriving in New York in 1882 and wary of critics, he wrote of the "cloud of misrepresentation" that must have preceded him. 120 years later, the manuscript's arrival was met by the actual acrid cloud of the smouldering ruins of the World Trade Centre, glinting enticingly in the evening sun when we arrived and destroyed the next morning. Thanks to Oscar, who put me in the thick of it in Manhattan that week, I was able to witness the aftermath at first

hand. What annoyed me most, I have to admit, was that the official exhibition opening, scheduled for the next day, was cancelled; it was deemed inappropriate to hold a party, and my mutterings about the Blitz did not always fall on receptive ears. Sally had also forgotten the keys to the manuscript's case in London, so she found herself, on the morning of 9/11, frantically trying to find a locksmith to break into it to release Oscar's prison letter. I am sure he would have delighted in the irony. My own contretemps with the text took place in 1995, around the time of the inauguration of the Wilde window in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey, also attended by Merlin Holland and his mother, Thelma, Wilde's daughter-in-law. During Simon Callow's reading from the work, my mobile rang de profundis of my handbag - the thickest pillar offered scant protection as the noise, and Callow's fury, reached their crescendo. In January 2002 I returned to New York to collect my exhibits and flew home with another British Library colleague, Hugh Cobbe, and accompanied the manuscript once again, this time without incident but with the appropriate class distinction of business for *De Profundis* and coach for me.

In early 2004, I was able to add a handful of significant items to the collection from the estate of the American bibliophile, Halsted B. Vander Poel, dispersed at Christie's (3 March 2004); like William Andrews Clark in the 1920s and John B. Stetson before that, a pioneer Wilde collector, active from around 1940, far earlier than their European counterparts: two long autograph letters to Wilde's publisher, Leonard Smithers, from Naples, dating to late 1897 and spring 1898, containing detailed instructions for the final corrections to the *Ballad* and its publicity - a proposal for a cheap edition was not realised - the publication of *An Ideal Husband*, requesting a copy of a Beardsley drawing for "a young Russian here ... a great collector, and rich ... his name is Serge de Diaghilew [sic], and two others to Henry Davray," the first already quoted. Wilde's copy of volume two of *The Iliad*, dating from the period of his degree at Trinity in August 1873 and signed as such, with his extensive annotations, was another fascinating addition from the same source. These purchases were made with the support and to the delight of both my parents, though we were keenly aware that the capital needed to expand further at this level would severely limit top end purchases in the future. In July 2004, we attended the opening of the Oscar Levy room in the Nietzsche House, Sils-Maria, Switzerland, where the philosopher penned all his major works in the 1880s, since 1960 a museum and research centre and now housing my grandfather's library and archive, as well as my parents' Nietzsche collection, acquired with relatively modest means in the decades after the war when German libraries were forbidden to bid on letters in the hand of "Hitler's

favourite philosopher”, with characteristic foresight and sense of purpose. My father died a fortnight later. I was involved in placing many items from his estate and, on a trip to Augsburg to deliver a letter by Mozart’s father in November 2006, bought the notoriously rare Tite Street Catalogue³ - the bailiff’s lamentably lotted listing of the books and household effects from the Wildes home, auctioned during the trials, as Thomas Wright has described, two of the most poignant entries being for the Wilde children’s rabbit hutch and a large quantity of toys, one of only four copies known to have survived. It had been offered for sale, unsuccessfully, two years earlier at Sotheby’s, with a considerably higher estimate, and was then consigned to Christie’s. It was my first and only purchase on my mobile in a taxi abroad during a live auction. I had secured the only extant letter to either of his children, addressed to Cyril from Paris in 1891(*Selected Letters* 4-5), on a public telephone on a west London street, at another Christie’s live auction - this time in Melbourne - in 1995.

In 2005, I had been unable to resist, this time encouraged by my mother in memory of hers, an inscribed copy of *An Ideal Husband*, to Fritz and Alexandra von Thaulow, “the wonderful painter and his beautiful wife: from their friend the author. Oscar Wilde. In Recognition.” Ostracized by much of Dieppe society (especially its English contingent) in the summer of 1897, the Thaulows were notable exceptions, receiving Wilde at their home in the first few weeks after his release. The copy formed a perfect adjunct to the one owned by Ellen Terry already in the collection. In middle age, I became more and more enthralled by the evergreen topicality and harrowing profundity of, to my mind, Wilde’s greatest play - so superficially dismissed by its first critic as “a comedy about a bracelet”. There are Mozartian parallels between the comic perfection of *Earnest* and *The Marriage of Figaro* and the uneasy, raw exposure of *Così fan tutte* and *An Ideal Husband*. With these acquisitions and the final, unpublished letter to Smithers about receiving the first copy of *Husband* and his Irish property, known previously only from a forgery, I felt I had crossed the Rubicon.

I had long wished for the collection to find a permanent home outside England, initially considering France - Berneval or Paris; I remember my excitement when Sarah Bernhardt’s home was for sale and toying also with an approach to the Musée Carnavalet. Authenticity of place was paramount - the blueprint of the Nietzsche House reinforced by the placing of our Norman Douglas collection in

³ The Tite Street Catalogue [16, Tite Street, Chelsea]. By order of The Sherriff, A.D. 1895 (Wednesday, April 24th 1895), No 6907.

his birthplace, in Voralberg, Austria, a consolation shortly after my mother's death, in the dark days of early 2008, as was the wish to serve scholarship. But an increasing worry was the ineluctable deaccessioning from public collections worldwide, one of the most serious amid numerous examples, being that of some of Earl Spencer's incunabula (early printed books) from the John Rylands library, Manchester, in 1988, with the totally spurious justification of "duplication", to the Senate House Library, London's, scandalous proposal to sell four of its eleven Shakespeare folios in the summer of 2013, thankfully abandoned. It would be a challenge to find a home where long-term, unthreatened preservation, accessibility to the originals, exhibition and research potential could allow the material to remain together; the reason why I resisted the idea of an auction dispersal. Thanks to Samuel Beckett, the perfect solution presented itself. Through a friend of my father's, the daughter of Marion Leigh, Beckett's partner in Paris for the last twenty years of his life, I placed his correspondence with A.J. Leventhal, known as Con, his close friend in Dublin from the 1920s for the next six decades, at the Harry Ransom Center, Texas, in August 1991. In 2008, I was approached again, this time over the Leventhal Beckett Library of presentation copies to Con, his second wife Ethna MacCarthy, the love of Beckett's life - the Trinity trinity - and Marion Leigh. After an initial approach to the National Library, the collection brought me into contact with Dr. Charles Benson, head of special collections at Trinity College Library, for the first time and his swift decision to acquire it - including all duplicates - impressed me sufficiently to make discreet enquiries about Trinity's Wilde holdings. In the 1960s and 1970s, when so much material came onto the market, the college's focus was elsewhere and this was a gap that Charles was anxious to fill. Again, he set great store by wanting *everything*. The college's ownership of Wilde's birth place, the eponymous Centre for Irish Writing in Westland Row, which, on my first visit to Dublin in the late 1990s had already set me thinking, was a potent attraction, and Charles's retirement was looming. So often in my career, it has been the vision, passion and energy of one individual in large institutions that made things happen, and this was no exception, albeit under the radar. The time was ripe. I had become increasingly disenchanted with crazy prices, the unremitting focus on Wilde the gay icon and martyr - the bane of anality had become banality - and history seemed to repeat itself somewhat, when Melissa Knox, one of a coterie of American academics, many, sadly with tenure, published *A Long and Lovely Suicide*, claiming that Oscar had an incestuous relationship with his adored sister, Isola, who died aged nine, immortalised in his poem *Requiescat*, admired by Yeats, just as Oscar Levy had supposedly penned a preface to Samuel Roth's

forgery, *My Sister and I*, with similar content about Nietzsche and his sister, Elisabeth, even though Levy had died five years before its publication in 1951. The text is still being reprinted despite having been refuted for over sixty years. The idea of the collection coming to Trinity was also warmly endorsed by Merlin Holland and Thomas Wright wrote lucidly about the contents, as we have heard, an accompaniment to the updated catalogue listing we compiled. Its acquisition between 2010 and 2013, brought me together with several Trinity colleagues and Simon Williams, to whom I owe the invitation to speak today. I am extremely grateful to them all, not least for breaking new ground in forging links between a collector and an institution and developing ideas for the future - perhaps the greatest advantage of placing a collection in one's lifetime. Another key element is the college's wish to put the writing centre stage first and foremost, as the Oxford collected works edition is doing in print, even allowing me to make additions and judiciously adding their own, notably the second known letter signed by Wilde at Portora School in June 1871 (*Complete Letters* 4-5), through my late friend and colleague at the distinguished London antiquarian booksellers Maggs Bros., Hinda Rose, a Trinity graduate, who passed away suddenly in the week the transaction was concluded two years ago. The focus on exile - "What captivity was to the Jews, exile has been to the Irish" according to Wilde - common to all in this story, brings it full circle. No one has expressed these considerations more movingly than the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, whose staggering collection of autograph manuscripts, many preserved publically in the British Library and Bodmer Foundation in Cologne, near Geneva, he deemed more worthy of survival than his literary work, despite being one of the most prominent and successful writers of his generation. He took his own life in 1942.

He wrote,

When the Hitler era began, "and I had to leave my home, the joy of collecting was extinguished ... eventually I decided to say farewell to a collection to which I could no longer devote my creative efforts. It is obvious that I never considered myself as the proprietor of these objects, but only as their temporary trustee. It was not the feeling of owning that had attracted me, but the pleasure of bringing together, of shaping a collection into a work of art. ... For a time, I left parts of it in safes, or with friends, but then resolved to say FAREWELL to it altogether, following Goethe's exhortation that museums, libraries and galleries tend to wither if they are no longer developed further. If we,

Why Wilde?

the hunted and exiled had in this period hostile to the arts and to every kind of collecting to learn *one* art anew, it was the art of saying farewell to everything that had been our pride and our love. (*Die Welt* np)

And for Wilde, writing to Carlos Blacker in 1898: "Life that I have loved so much - too much, has torn me like a tiger ... you will see the ruin and wreck of what was once wonderful and brilliant. I don't think I shall ever write again: *la joie de vivre* is gone..."(*Selected Letters*, 9 March 1898 -postmark- to Carlos Blacker). In the warm embrace of the Celtic tiger, Oscar has come home.

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