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SPECIAL ISSUE:

*Aesthetic Scenarios and Revolutions in the British
Fin-de-Siècle Context*

Edited by Laura Giovannelli and Pierpaolo Martino

NEIL SAMMELLS*

Preface

“I was a man,” claimed Oscar Wilde from the dark of his prison cell in *De Profundis*, “who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of his age”. He had realised this, he said, “from the very dawn of my manhood, and had forced my age to realize it afterwards”. The prison-letter *De Profundis* is an extraordinary exercise in self-re-
crimination and self-mythologising. Wilde blames himself for his downfall and for squandering his talents. He also blames Bosie for bringing him down into the dust and for not allowing him to realise his talents. He zigs and zags from self-loathing to self-aggrandisement, from the humility he orders Bosie to learn with him, to performative pride in what he has achieved and has come to signify. He gathers his scant emotional resources about him in order to find the strength to carry on, into what Nicholas Frankel calls his ‘Unrepentant Years’: his parlous, wandering, destitute life in Europe after incarceration.

Now we can see that Wilde was right.

He looms over the *fin de siècle* and any consideration of its aesthetic, cultural, and political significance (Wilde’s political campaigning for prison reform, for instance, is elaborated upon here by Laura Giovannelli). This collection of essays is proof of his seminal importance to his age and – increasingly it seems – to our understanding of our own, as Pierpaolo Martino demonstrates in his discussion of film adaptations of *Salome*. Wildean influences and echoes are traced here in writers who, unlike him, survived the *fin de siècle*. Elisabetta D’Erme argues that Joyce was in a one-sided dialogue with Wilde; Camilla Del Grazia argues for a formative point of contact between *Dorian Gray* and Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, reminding us of the lunch meeting between the two and J.M. Stoddart which led to the publication of Wilde’s only novel and Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of Four*. Henry James called Wilde a “filthy, unclean beast” but the publication of some of his shorter fiction in the *Yellow Book* roots him firmly in an aesthetic milieu over which Wilde was the presiding genius. That milieu was also one in which the ‘Uranian’ poetry of other male writers exploring, like Wilde, same-sex eroticism developed a complex and coded set of imagery for readers and devotees, as detailed here by Paola Di Gennaro.

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The *Yellow Book* has come to be regarded the most important periodical publication of the *fin de siècle* but Gino Scatasta's article makes a compelling case for the *Savoy* as the definitive magazine of 1890s Decadence – largely because Aubrey Beardsley (who founded it with Arthur Symons in 1896 while Wilde was in prison) allowed himself freer rein in his eroticised illustrations and the publication of his unfinished novel *Under the Hill* with its pre-Firbankian sexuality and ornamentation. Beardsley's importance to the *fin-de-siècle* evolution of Aestheticism into Decadence is focused on here by Giuseppe Virelli, who pays particular attention to the way Beardsley drew upon a new artistic language that was emerging in Europe at the time.

That last point is an important and appropriate one. These articles have been developed from presentations given at a conference in Bagni di Lucca in the late summer of 2022, organised by the Italian Oscar Wilde Society and the Fondazione Culturale Michel de Montaigne. I, for one, am immensely grateful for the invitation to speak in such delightful and historic surroundings and my own work has been improved immensely by conversations with those colleagues present. I am sure I am not the only delegate who feels that way and whose article published here benefited from dialogue with others. Wilde now has an international reputation and his work needs to be seen – as Virelli argues of Beardsley's – in an international context. The British *fin de siècle* can only be understood as part of a European movement which sweeps up figures as apparently unlike as Oscar Wilde and Gabriele D'Annunzio. Wilde's Europeanism (he famously declared he would take up French citizenship when *Salome* was banned in England) seems evermore relevant and salutary for a post-brexit Britain.

A final thought. However full of plans and intentions, however unrepentant he was, Wilde was broken by prison. Apart from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, he wrote nothing of consequence after his release. With *The Importance of Being Earnest* he reached his apogee as a writer. Beardsley, however, was dead at 25. What more would he have achieved had he lived? How different would be the history of modern art if he had survived the *fin de siècle*? He too stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of his age, but his brilliance and audacity could have defined the next.

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