

OX FORD IN 1939

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Oscar Wilde 'as

Gide Remembers And Evalued Him

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"Oscar Wilde" by Andre Gide. Translated from the French by Bernard Frechtman. Published by the Philosophical Library, New York. \$2.75.

IN the days of his triumph when he was wealthy and handsome and famous. Oscar Wilde, the Irish poet, thought of himself as "the king of life." His countenance was radiant; his talk consisting chiefly of apologies, was brilliant; his conduct seemed designed "to astonish, amuse, or, at times, exasperate."

This was the Wilde of 1891, the tall, well-dressed writer of books and plays, who walked about the streets of Paris with a sunflower in his hand.

Andre Gide in some personal sketches written in 1901, a year after Wilde's death, and now appearing in the first authorized translation, remembers this Wilde well.

He saw him and talked with him often in 1891 and 1892 and "listened to him most eagerly." (Wilde himself never listened). What a "prodigious being" Wilde was to his admirers in this time of glory! Why then did he throw himself to the wolves? Why did he have to scandalize his public by "flaunting strange practices" as rumor had it? Did he feel himself exempt, as artists sometimes do, from society's dictates of behaviour? Or was he, as Gide thinks, acting under some kind of compulsion and in conformance with a pattern? "A fatality was leading him on," Gide wrote. "He could not and would not elude it."

GIDE saw Wilde again in Algeria in 1895. Could this be the same man he had known and esteemed in Paris?

"One felt less softness in his look, something raucous in his laughter and something frenzied in his joy. He seemed both more sure of pleasing and less ambitious to succeed in doing so; he was bolder, stronger, bigger."

Yet underneath Wilde was disturbed. Even then he was being condemned by his detractors. Even then there was a thing he had to do, namely to go to London and face his critics. In a footnote, Gide alluding to the sensational trial which followed when Wilde was transformed from accuser to accused, expresses the hope that "perhaps in some far-off time it will be well to lift this frightful trial out of its abominable filth."

THOSE glimpses of Wilde in North Africa did not end the contact between the two men. There was yet another Wilde to observe and to hear and to judge. Actually this individual fresh from a harrowing experience in prison resembled more the earlier figure in his gentleness of manner, in his voice and in his laugh. Physically, however, he had coarsened, deteriorated.

In his conversation Wilde likened himself to St. Francis of Assisi whose path he was now following. In prison he had discovered pity; pity had buoyed him up, he said; pity had saved him from suicide.

At the time of this meeting Wilde was living in a tiny village in the neighborhood of Dieppe where he had taken the name of Sebastian Melmoth. But he talked about writing again and about going back to Paris where he would again be "a



Andre Gide

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