

THE OSCAR WINNERS



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AUBREY BEARDSLEY AND OSCAR WILDE

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AUBREY BEARDSLEY AND OSCAR WILDE

By Matthew Sturgis

The title of this article is misleading. It should really read 'Aubrey Beardsley and Oscar Wildes'. For Beardsley knew two Oscar Wildes. This is not a poetic allusion to the protean personality of the author of *Lady Windermere's Fan* but a sober fact. There were two people called Oscar Wilde living in London during the 1890s, and Aubrey Beardsley happened to know them both. The first, less celebrated of the two, was the Revd Oscar Wade Wilde. He was one of the assistant clergy at the Church of St Barnabas, Pimlico, - the High Anglican establishment attended by the Beardsley family in the late eighties and early nineties.

I cannot pretend that very much is known of Father Wilde beyond the fact that he left London in 1893 to serve as a rural dean at Ely. And he lived on in East Anglia until 1945. He had been at Oxford during the mid-1870s and so was briefly a contemporary of his more famous namesake. But there is no record that they ever met - either at Oxford or in London. Nor can it be claimed that he had any very great influence on the young Beardsley; he was only one of a large team of curates gathered around the wealthy and charismatic vicar, Alfred Gurney, at St. Barnabas.

Aubrey's relations with the other Oscar Wilde - our Oscar Wilde - ran deeper and lasted longer. They became friends. They were seen often together in public. They alluded to each other in their work. To the contemporary press and its public they came to represent the twin heads of *fin de siècle* decadence. But this apparent closeness was deceptive. Those who knew both men well, and understood their work properly, recognised how very different - even opposed - they were in their approaches to life and to art.

Oscar Wills Wilde was already a ubiquitous artistic figure by the time the sixteen-year-old Aubrey Beardsley left school at the end of 1888 to start work at the offices of the District Surveyor of Clerkenwell. And Aubrey - as he sat at his high desk doodling in the margins of his ledger and dreaming of a career in art - certainly hastened to acquaint himself with Wilde's ideas on the subject.

He had ample opportunity. In the first half of 1891 Wilde published two important books - *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Intentions* which together offered a daring new philosophy of art.

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Borrowing from the ideas of Théophile Gautier and his disciples, Wilde extended the notion of the autonomy and amorality of art into something darker. Art, he suggested, was not merely separate from nature but opposed and superior to it - and so too was the artist. It was a decadent aesthetic creed which sanctioned all subjects and every experience: the perverse and the grotesque should be sought because, being anti-natural, they were necessarily artistic.

Beardsley appreciated the ideas and admired the style in which they were couched. In the almost weekly letters that he wrote to his old school-fellow, G.F. Scotson-Clark, he began to mimic elements of Wilde's epigrammatic and paradoxical wit: where Wilde had likened Holbein to Balzac as an artist who 'created life' rather than copying it, Beardsley described the 'naturalistic' Neapolitan painter, Jusepe de Ribera, as 'a regular Zola in art'.

Certainly he seems to have been eager to ally himself with Wilde, Wilde's views and Wilde's pose. For Beardsley one of the highlights of the summer of 1891 was a Sunday afternoon trip he made with his sister Mabel to the studio of Edward Burne-Jones. Beardsley carried with him some examples of his own work, hoping to show them to the master. The visit was a great success. Burne-Jones was impressed with Beardsley's portfolio, and urged him to persevere in his desire to become an artist. It was the first significant sanction of Aubrey's talent.

After the verdict had been delivered and the tour of the studio completed, Burne-Jones led Aubrey and Mabel out on to the lawn, where his wife was giving tea to a select party of guests. Constance Wilde was there, together with her two young sons, Cyril and Vyvyan. And she joined in the congratulations being heaped on the young Aubrey. When it was time to leave, she offered the Beardsleys a ride home.

When Aubrey recounted the events of the great day to his friends, he casually elided Constance and the children into 'the Oscar Wildes'. The phrase was technically correct but wilfully misleading. It suggested that Oscar himself - the Aesthetic *arbiter elegantium* - had been present, adding his own voice to the chorus of approval. The irony of Aubrey seeking this connection with Wilde where none existed would return to haunt him later.

It was not until the following year that Beardsley began to move slowly towards Wilde's orbit. At the beginning of 1892 he was taken up by a young art-journalist and designer called Aymer Vallance. Vallance introduced him to Robbie Ross, More Adey, Count Stenbock

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and others on the fringes of Wilde's circle. From this group he received both encouragement and commissions, and it is probable that Wilde at least heard of Beardsley's precocious talent at this stage. Although Beardsley was still working as a City clerk his artwork was developing rapidly in assurance and originality, blending elements of the Pre-Raphaelite tradition with Japanese and Classical Greek influences. He was certainly worthy of notice,

In the autumn of 1892 Beardsley's prospects took a great leap forward; he secured a commission from J.M Dent to illustrate a part-work of Malory's *Morte Darthur*; he was taken up by the editorial team behind a new art periodical, *The Studio*, and he began contributing weekly caricatures to the *Pall Mall Budget*. Most of his PMB work - theatrical sketches, or news-related cartoons - was not very good, but in February 1893 he was presented with a subject worthy of his pen and his imagination,

On the twenty-second of the month the original French text of Wilde's *Salomé* was published. It was the event of the hour. The play had been banned the previous June by the Lord Chamberlain. And although the current edition was issued from Paris, John Lane at the Bodley Head had agreed to take part of the print run. Lewis Hind, the editor of the *Pall Mall Budget* determined to make a feature of the event. He tried to commission a critique of the play from Wilde himself. But for once the great self-publicist demurred, sending a telegram explaining that he could not 'criticise perfection. You must hire somebody to do that.' Hind also asked Beardsley to make a picture of the play or its author. Beardsley responded with enthusiasm. He went straight to the climax of the play, and produced a picture of Salomé, thick-lipped and sulphurous eyed, kissing the mouth of John the Baptist's severed head.

The picture - stylised, vivid and grotesque - was all rather too much for Hind and the PMB. But Gleeson White, the editor of *The Studio*, agreed to use it in the first number of that periodical. And Robbie Ross hastened to make Wilde aware of the pictorial tribute that had been paid to his work. An introduction was effected between the artist and the poet. A copy of the play exists inscribed: 'March '93 for Aubrey: for the only artist, who, besides myself, knows what the dance of the seven veils is, and can see that invisible dance. Oscar.'

The *Salomé* picture duly appeared in April, amongst the pictures that introduced Beardsley's talent to the artistic public in the first number of *The Studio*. Beardsley also submitted

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the original for the New English Art Club's spring exhibition. In both places it did not fail to command attention. And it ensured that Beardsley, on his first appearance before the public, was directly associated with Wilde.

It was a connection of which Beardsley was proud. And Wilde - always a lover of youth - was delighted with his new admirer. They evidently spent much time together, probably under the tutelage of Ross, who was perhaps anxious to distract Wilde from the exclusive claims of Lord Alfred Douglas's friendship. Beardsley himself does not appear to have been homosexual, at least in practice; nevertheless he undoubtedly had a fascination with the camp affectations which were the common currency of Wilde's circle. He learnt too the dandy's pose and the dandy's wit at Oscar's café table.

There was even a plan that Aubrey and Oscar might travel together to the Paris Salons that May. In the event Wilde went up to Oxford to stay with Bosie, and Beardsley travelled over to France with Mabel and the Pennells. Another joint scheme, however, was more enduring. Lane, pleased with the success of the French edition of *Salomé*, planned to bring out an English version of the play - with illustrations. Although Charles Ricketts had illustrated most of Wilde's work up till then, a combination of Ross's advocacy, Beardsley's flattering enthusiasm, and Lane's shrewd appreciation of the next New Thing, secured the commission for Beardsley. Beardsley had clearly learnt much from Wilde already, his contract insists that (like Wilde) he be paid in guineas; as the mark of a gentleman.

Beardsley began work on his return from Paris. He developed a new style for the new task: a 'mystico-oriental' mode, as he termed it, founded upon stylised Japanese restraint and the blank backgrounds of Greek vase-painting. In the early stages of the commission it seems that Beardsley remained susceptible to Wilde's input: it was Wilde, we are told, who suggested that *Salomé* should have a different face in each picture, to emphasise her universal nature,

The balance of Beardsley's relationship with Wilde, however, was beginning to shift. In Paris Beardsley had met up with William Rothenstein - a bustling young painter, confident of his abilities and his future success. They had become friends in London. And Rothenstein had introduced Beardsley to another youthful genius - Max Beerbohm - then an undergraduate at Oxford. Together they forged a merry and subversive trio. And although the main thrust of their subversion was Victorian propriety, they also delighted in

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subverting the authority of their elders and masters - most notably Wilde.

For private consumption Beardsley made a drawing mocking at Wilde's pretensions to learning and originality. It showed the author of *Salomé* 'at work', surrounded by such useful volumes as Flaubert's *Trois Contes*, a *Family Bible*, a French dictionary and a book on irregular French verbs. And not content with private jests, Beardsley soon began to introduce facetious details into the *Salomé* illustrations themselves. The concealed obscenities Wilde found merely trying - like the doodles of a precocious schoolboy; more vexing were the caricatures. Wilde appeared unmistakably as a showman announcing the action in 'Enter Herodias' - and as the Moon in two other drawings. The lunar allusion was scarcely flattering: the moon spends much of the play being compared to a 'mad', drunken woman 'seeking everywhere for lovers'.

Beardsley also caricatured Wilde in his other commissions of the time. Wilde is to be seen, robed as Bacchus, in the frontispiece for the plays of John Davidson and, as a vine-wreathed putto, in a *Morte Darthur* chapter-heading. Both pictures were sly allusions to Wilde's heavy drinking at this period. Beerbohm recorded seeing Beardsley with Oscar at the last night of *A Woman of No Importance*, sober, while the rest of the company - Wilde, Bosie and Ross - had 'vine leaves in their hair.'

Wilde's irritation with these pranks should not, however, be overstated. When Wilde rejected Bosie's translation of *Salomé* at the end of the summer, and Beardsley offered to undertake the task, claiming that he could make an excellent job of it, Wilde seems to have agreed readily to the proposal. In the event, however, his version was deemed even less satisfactory, and a rapprochement in the fraught relationship between Bosie and Oscar ensured that Douglas was reinstated.

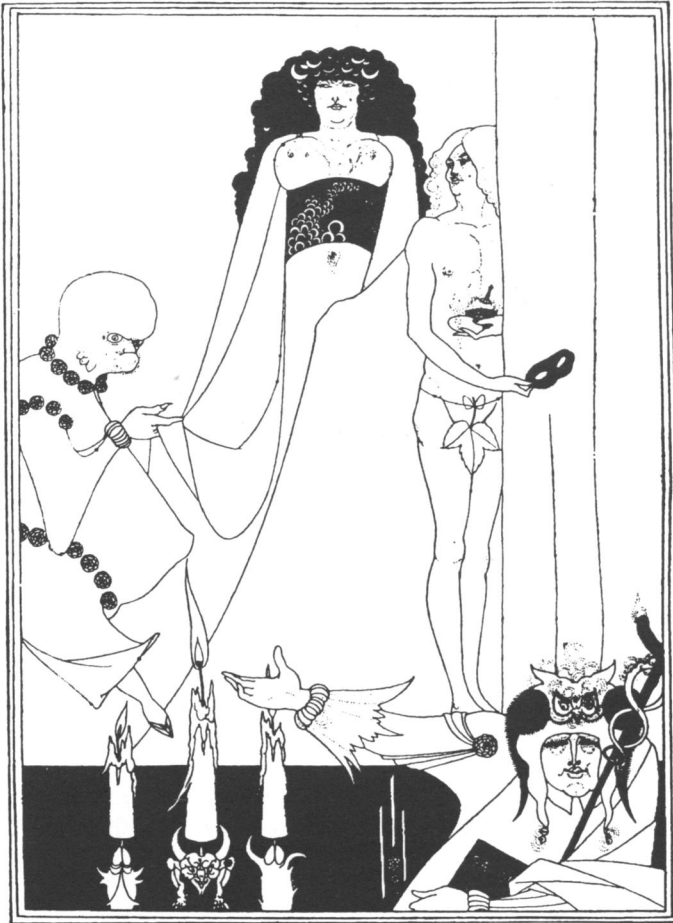
Wilde's rejection of the translation was a blow to Beardsley's pride. And it came at a time when he was also having to defend his illustrations against John Lane's cautious demands for propriety - demands which Wilde (and others) seem to have endorsed. There was much to-ing and fro-ing; drawings were rejected, compromises were reached. Beardsley, writing to Ross remarked archly that 'for one week the number of telegraph and messenger boys who came to the door was simply scandalous'; he described Oscar and Bosie as 'really very dreadful people.'

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OSCAR WILDE AT WORK

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ENTER HERODIAS from *Salomé*

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Chapter-heading for *Morte Darthur*
(Book XI, ch.4)

The tone was camp and exaggerated but it perhaps reflected Beardsley's realisation of the great artistic gulf that lay between him and Wilde. Wilde was a sentimental romantic, Beardsley a clear-eyed cynic. Wilde recognized the artistic element in this division when he remarked of Beardsley's *Salomé* illustrations that they were too 'Japanese' for a play which was essentially 'Byzantine'. And their mutual friend Ada Leveson set it in a broader context when she remarked that Oscar saw everything in purple and gold, while Aubrey set it down in black and white.

Beneath the banter - and the assumed cordiality - there was a strain of tension. Frank Harris who spent time together with the two men, thought that Wilde was even a little afraid of his young illustrator. Certainly Wilde's wit, usually so generous and free of malice, took on an unwonted sharpness when addressing Beardsley. He countered each of Beardsley's sly presumptions with a counter-thrust of his own.

Where Beardsley alluded to Wilde's homosexual proclivities, Wilde remarked upon Beardsley's freakish asexuality; 'Don't sit on

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the same chair as Aubrey,' he once queenishly declared; 'it's not compromising'. If Wilde looked like the Moon, Beardsley had a face like 'a silver hatchet, and grass green hair'. Beardsley's cosmopolitan pose was disparaged with the lordly put-down, 'Dear Aubrey is too Parisian, he cannot forget that he has been to Dieppe - once.' Beardsley's presumptuous love of literature in general and Pope in particular, was scorched by the assertion that 'There are two ways of disliking literature: one is to dislike it, the other is to like Pope.'

Aubrey affected to repay these mots. He mocked Wilde's reputation as a cultural prophet, telling Frank Harris - 'At noon Oscar will know the sun is risen.' And he soon came to realise - and to proclaim - that Wilde for all his general culture, had no real understanding of the visual arts.

Relations between poet and artist, however, were put under an additional strain with the publication of *Salomé*, in February. Although some critics (most notably Theodore Wratilaw in *The Artist*) tried to suggest that the illustrator and author were 'singularly well fitted' - each being an embodiment of the contemporary enthusiasm for the 'decadent', the strange and the fantastic, most of the reviews registered an imbalance in the equation. They considered that Beardsley had stolen the show, or was mocking Wilde in his illustrations. There can be no doubt, concluded the *Saturday Review*, 'that the author of *Salomé* is on the rack. Mr Beardsley laughs at Mr Wilde.

Although Wilde's existing misgivings were confirmed by the reviews, he had the sense to realise that any complaint on his part would be useless and self-defeating. His public verdict was that the drawings were 'quite wonderful'.

Nevertheless the growing sense of difference - both artistic and temperamental - was accelerated by the closing stages of the *Salomé* project. It was probably this sense - together with an awareness of Wilde's tendency to dominate any gathering of which he was a part - which prompted Beardsley to insist on Wilde's exclusion from *The Yellow Book* which he began planning with Henry Harland and Lane at the beginning of 1894. It was a slight which Oscar felt but affected to ignore.

The friendship survived. Although Wilde attempted to patronise Beardsley on occasion, they continued to see something of each other. In March they went together to the theatre to see Mrs Patrick Campbell in *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*. Wilde introduced Beardsley

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to the actress, so that he might draw her for the first number of *The Yellow Book*.

The picture caused a great furore when it was published that April. But while the critics howled Wilde bought the drawing and hung it in his Tite Street drawing-room. (Beardsley, it should be noted, had a photograph of Wilde on his own mantelpiece.)

Despite these tokens of esteem, the two men saw little of each other during the rest of 1894. They were moving in different orbits of fame. Beardsley, as the artistic face of *The Yellow Book*, was the celebrity of the hour. Wilde was increasingly taken up with playwriting, with Bosie Douglas - and with Douglas's irascible father, the Marquess of Queensberry,

Their two worlds recollided, however, in the spring of 1895, with the irruption of Wilde's libel action against Queensberry and his subsequent arrest and trial. At the outset Beardsley attempted to distance himself from the débâcle; he wrote archly to Ada Leveson, 'I am looking forward eagerly to the first act of Oscar's new Tragedy. But surely the title *Douglas* has been used before.' The pose, however, could not be maintained; his unaffected sympathy came uppermost. He wrote to Wilde on remand in Holloway, and confided to another correspondent: 'Poor dear old Oscar, how horrible it all is. I am really upset about it - more than I think perhaps.'

Beardsley's concern for Wilde was, however, soon submerged in anxiety about himself. Despite his efforts over the previous year to disassociate himself from Wilde professionally, he found himself being dragged into the equation. In the public mind Beardsley and Wilde were inextricably linked. Beardsley had made his debut as the illustrator of *Salomé*; and although they had not collaborated since, the association was blithely assumed to continue,

The connection seemed to be reinforced when Wilde was arrested at the Cadogan Hotel apparently reading a copy of *The Yellow Book*. The volume was in fact a yellow-bound French novel, but the fact (and the irony) were lost upon the crowd and the press.

The nexus between Wilde, Beardsley, and *The Yellow Book* was confirmed in the popular imagination. And, in the puritan backlash which followed in the wake of the Wilde trials, the connection was dangerous. It certainly alarmed the powers at the Bodley Head. John Lane was away in America on business, but his deputy, Frederic Chapman took fright at the situation, and under pressure from several authors on - and off - the Bodley Head list he

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persuaded Lane that it was necessary to abandon Beardsley and remove him from the staff of *The Yellow Book*.

The blow fell. It wounded Beardsley's pride and his purse. Moreover it seemed to confirm that there did indeed exist a real connection between Beardsley's mode of life and Wilde's. Beardsley found himself cast adrift by the Bodley Head and snubbed in at least some quarters of society. Wilde had become a blight upon his life. And although Beardsley expressed no animus against the unwitting agent of his downfall; he did feel the unfairness of the situation.

In his moment of crisis he turned for help and advice to a wealthy, literary acquaintance Marc André Raffalovich. The friendship which he forged with Raffalovich, although it sustained him over the coming years; had a distorting influence on his relationship with Wilde. Raffalovich himself, though he had once courted an intimacy with Wilde, had become his avowed enemy. Wilde's cruel jibes at Raffalovich's hospitality ('poor André; he came to England to found a salon and succeeded only in establishing a saloon'), his harsh comments upon Raffalovich's poetry; his indiscreet remarks about his homosexuality, had all served to estrange them. And the enmity had been lent an added intensity when Raffalovich had become the protector of Wilde's former friend, the poet John Gray.

Raffalovich welcomed Beardsley as another who had suffered from a connection with Wilde. And although his friendship was, in the main, disinterested, it was - at 'a certain stage' - marked by the ultimatum, 'You cannot be Oscar's friend and mine'. With Oscar away in prison for two years; and Raffalovich offering immediate practical assistance, the decision was a *fait accompli*.

Nevertheless; even during the period of Wilde's incarceration, Beardsley continued to flirt with his memory. He became involved with plans for a new periodical to rival *The Yellow Book*, and suggested that it should be called *The Savoy*. The name, amongst its other associations, brought to mind the great hotel on the Strand, where Wilde; according to the court reports, had entertained the rent boys he picked up in Piccadilly. And the same contrary impulse seems to have induced Beardsley to move (in the autumn of 1895) into rooms at Geneux's Private Hotel, 10 & 11 St James's Place. The address, for all its convenience, was notorious; Wilde had lived there from October 1893 to March 1894, and had used the rooms for his assignations. That Beardsley, suffering from the assumed connection between himself and Wilde, should install himself

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in the same suite is curious. The move can perhaps be best understood as a pose: a ploy to explode the association with Wilde by exaggerating it to absurdity.

On other fronts, however, Beardsley chose to exaggerate his distance from Wilde. It became one of his affectations that Wilde's very books were 'bad luck'; he purged them from his library and refused to allow them near him.

Beardsley's declining health and his increasing dependence on Raffalovich made matters awkward when, in 1897, Wilde was released from prison. By a strange coincidence the summer of that year found both men at Dieppe, Beardsley as an invalid in search of sea air, Wilde as a semi-pariah trying to recover his life.

Although Wilde was staying a little way down the coast at Berneval-sur-Mer, while Beardsley - together with his mother - put up at the Hôtel Sandwich in town, it was inevitable that they should meet. Wilde made frequent visits to Dieppe, and the Sandwich was his forwarding address and base. They met at a dinner party given by the Norwegian painter Fritz Thaulow, and they greeted each other as friends.

Wilde had been putting the final touches to his poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and was looking for a publisher. The obvious choice was Beardsley's publisher, Leonard Smithers, the proprietor of *The Savoy*, and it is likely that Beardsley offered to secure Wilde an introduction. Certainly when Wilde next saw Beardsley, he was accompanied by Smithers. On that occasion Wilde invited Beardsley to dine with him at Berneval the following week, and it is at least possible that he went. The invitation, however, was awkward. On the day that he accepted it, Beardsley received a cheque from Raffalovich - a quarterly allowance of £100 which, as work became harder and harder, would allow him to live without anxiety. There could be no doubt that Raffalovich would disapprove of any renewed friendship with Wilde,

In desperation Beardsley proposed to move to another hotel, telling Raffalovich obliquely, 'Some rather unpleasant people come here'. The plan, however, had to be delayed, and Beardsley languished on at the Sandwich at the mercy of Wilde's peremptory demands. On one occasion, at the beginning of August, the two men went on a spree together. Wilde made Beardsley buy a hat 'more silver than silver' telling him that he looked 'quite wonderful' in it.' Beardsley confided something of his predicament to his friend Vincent O'Sullivan, explaining that he had no 'dislike' of Wilde

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but tried to avoid him because of 'receiving a pension from a man who was an enemy of Wilde's'. Avoiding a great man in a small town is, however, a difficult business; on one unhappy afternoon Beardsley was with the painters Charles Conder and Jacques-Émile Blanche when he saw Wilde in the distance; he steered his companions into a side street. The manoeuvre, unfortunately, was observed. Wilde had received many slights since coming out of prison, but his spirit had not become dulled to the pain. If anything he grew more acutely sensitive with each stab. He felt Aubrey's snub keenly.

His immediate reaction, however, was to ignore it. He even continued to hope that Beardsley might design a frontispiece for his ballad, believing that it would be 'a great thing' to have such an embellishment to the work. And Beardsley, for his part, agreed to the commission. But his health was not such as to allow of concerted work, and he accepted in a way which convinced Smithers that, as with so many other plans, it would never be done.

If Beardsley had managed to produce the frontispiece for Wilde, it would perhaps have set a healing and final seal upon the relationship of this diverse yet twinned pair, allowing them to go their own ways in peace. Instead the memory of Beardsley's side-street snub returned. Wilde, during his last years in Paris, probed the wound repeatedly, seeking an explanation for his own sense of hurt as much as for Beardsley's unkindness.

Recalling the incident to Vincent O'Sullivan, he exclaimed, 'It was *lâche* of Aubrey . . . a boy like that, whom I made. No, it was too *lâche* of Aubrey . . . if it had been one of his own class I might perhaps have understood it.' The snobbery is unconvincing, and was unworthy of Wilde as it was unjust to Beardsley. Wilde perhaps recognised this and subsequently resolved his feelings more satisfactorily as paradox.

Laurence Housman, in *Écho de Paris*, recorded Wilde's claim, 'The worst thing you can do for a person of genius is to help him way lies destruction . . . Once only did I help a man who was also a genius. I have never forgiven myself . . . when we met afterwards he had so greatly changed that, though I recognised him, he failed to recognise me. He became a Roman Catholic, and died at the age of twenty-three, a great artist - with half the critics and all the moralists still hating him. A charming person.'