

readers. Only a few homosexuals in England and some readers in Germany caught what is now obvious to any reader who can admit what he sees on the page. The second and third sections of "Song of Myself" are homosexual in their imagery, as is the subsequent discussion of the body and soul, which climaxes in the intercourse between body and soul in the fifth section. One might also cite the tremendous sweep of eroticism from section 24 to the climax of fulfillment in male intercourse in section 29. Another 1855 poem of interest is "The Sleepers," with its surrealistic imagery.

In contrast to the philosophical and psychological passages of "Song of Myself" and the passionate sexuality without a referent in "Children of Adam," "Calamus" reveals not only Whitman's mastery of the short lyric as against the longer ode or rhapsody (an underappreciated aspect of his art after 1860), but also differ in their obviously personal nature. The object has never been identified, and the poems lack the physicality of the passages referred to above, yet they convey poignantly many of the experiences of being a lover. In "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" (also 1860), the loss of a lover is imaged through the disappearance of the female of a pair of nesting mocking birds. Again one suspects a personal involvement.

Whitman's poetry changed after the Civil War. He himself considered the 1860 edition to be final and expected that later poems would form a new, more spiritual, book. For various reasons Whitman did not attempt a new book, but wove his new poems into a loose autobiographical cycle centering on the Civil War. Homosexuality appears (actually as early as 1856) as "adhesiveness," a term taken from phrenology and meaning for Whitman not only friendship but the capacity for "manly love" as a governing principle of society. He was not merely the poet of an idealized Jacksonian democracy nor of a new political structure, but of a culture bound to-

gether by love and religious faith in which each person could fulfill his or her own sexual nature. Representative statements are in "I hear it was charged against me" (1860), "Democratic Vistas" (1871), and in the Preface to "Two Rivulets" (1876).

Whitman, who was disappointed at his contemporary reception, would have been gratified by his reputation in the twentieth century, which is too widespread to more than mention. He is *the* democratic poet and a progenitor of the development of poetry beyond traditional metrical practice in the United States and foreign countries. A remarkable number of modern poets have paid him tribute in prose or verse, among the most notable being Ezra Pound, Pablo Neruda, Federico García Lorca, Fernando Pessoa, and Allen Ginsberg.

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## WILDE, OSCAR F. O. W. (1856-1900)

Irish wit, poet, dramatist, novelist, writer of fairy tales, and convicted criminal. His wealthy and eminent parents sent him to Trinity College and to Oxford, where he began to be notorious for his effeminate pose as an aesthete under the influence of Walter Pater. This pose culminated in his trip to America and his identification with the effeminate poet in

Gilbert and Sullivan's 1881 operetta *Patience*. However, it appears that he was not yet homosexual, and he married Constance Lloyd, by whom he had two sons, one of whom died in World War I and the other of whom became a writer under the pseudonym of Vyvyan Holland.

Introduced to homosexual practices by Robert Ross, Wilde was soon sneaking out of the house to have relations with male prostitutes, usually ephemic teenagers. He fell in love with a young Scottish aristocrat, Lord Alfred Douglas, known as "Bosie," who was beautiful but full of character faults.

Meanwhile, Wilde had been dazzling the literary world with one masterpiece after another, such as *The Happy Prince*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He had become wealthy and famous, and everybody from the Prince of Wales on down went to see his plays.

Success went to his head and he provoked scandal with the overtones of vice in *Dorian Gray* and by consorting openly with Lord Alfred Douglas, who was also patronizing young male prostitutes. Wilde and Douglas introduced André Gide to pederasty in Algeria.

The ax finally fell in 1895 when the Marquess of Queensberry, Douglas's father, accused Wilde publicly of being homosexual (or more precisely: "posing as a sodomite [sic]"). Although the aspersion was well founded, Wilde was pushed by Douglas into a suit for libel, which backfired. There were three trials in all. The lawyers quoted passages from *Dorian Gray*, from Douglas' poems in *The Chameleon*, and from some love-letters that Wilde had sent to Douglas, which had been stolen. *The Chameleon* was a literary review that also included a short story attributed to Wilde, "The Priest and the Acolyte," with a pederastic theme. Wilde held out against all of this damaging material until he finally blundered into saying that he had never kissed a certain boy because he was ugly. This was the turning

point, and Wilde was convicted of having sexual relations with several male prostitutes and sentenced to two years at hard labor. His marriage fell apart, his sons were removed from him, his house and belongings were auctioned off, many of his friends deserted him, and he contracted an ear infection in prison that eventually killed him three years after he was released.

While in prison, he wrote two final masterpieces, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" and *De Profundis*, the latter being a long letter addressed to Douglas and blaming him for everything that had gone wrong. Wilde hobnobbed with Douglas in France and Italy after leaving prison, but he died in poverty in Paris at the age of 44.

Once he was safely dead, his writings earned for him the stature of a classic, and the horror evoked by his name gradually faded—though we have an account by Beverley Nichols (a man) of the destruction of a copy of *Dorian Gray* by his outraged father when Nichols, as a teenager, was caught reading it (*Father Figure*, 1972).

By now, thousands of books and articles have been written about Wilde and his sexual life, and he is probably the most famous homosexual in history as a homosexual (rather than as a writer or whatever). Scholars have often tried to deny or overlook the homosexuality of many famous men and women, but Wilde's conviction forever assured him of fame—or infamy—for his sexuality, and his life has overshadowed his writings, as he knew it would ("I put my talent into my writings and my genius into my life."). *De Profundis* was eventually made available in its complete form, and a large volume of Wilde's correspondence was published. To a certain extent, the letters take the place of the autobiography that Wilde never wrote. After Wilde died, Douglas converted to heterosexuality, writing several books about his relationship with Wilde.

Frank Harris produced a memoir about Wilde that is full of errors (or lies),

and this unfortunately has been taken as a source by several biographers. It was Harris who invented the famous episode of the hordes of homosexuals running over to France as soon as Wilde was convicted. The publication of the Wilde letters automatically makes more recent biographies more accurate, and Ellmann's is a tour de force.

Wilde has been claimed as the author of "The Priest and the Acolyte" (a German translation gives his name as author) and of the pornographic novel *Teleny*, but these attributions are wrong. There is little actual homosexuality in Wilde's writings, mostly in *De Profundis* and *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, a novella about Shakespeare. There are some other letters, some poems, and some parts of *Dorian Gray* that reflect Wilde's homosexuality, but not much. It was Douglas rather than Wilde who coined the famous phrase "The Love that dare not speak its name," although Wilde ably defended himself, and was even applauded, when he was asked about this phrase during one of his trials. The one great mystery about him that remains to be solved is why he did not flee to France when he had every chance to do so on the eve of his arrest.

Oscar Wilde was the first famous homosexual to be pilloried by the mass press. On the Continent the ordeal to which he was subjected was widely interpreted as a sign of English hypocrisy and moral backwardness. Yet America tended to follow Britain in its condemnation. In the long run, a certain compensation (though not for Wilde himself) may be detected in the fact that, in the wake of the enormous publicity of the case, in English-speaking countries it became somewhat easier than before to speak of homosexuality, however negatively.

As a thinker Wilde was less subtle than Paul Valéry, less radical than Friedrich Nietzsche, less persevering than his friend André Gide. Yet his books are still read, *The Importance of Being Earnest* often reappears in the theatre, and Wilde

continues to rank as an incomparable wit. Gay people honor him as a martyr.

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## WILLIAM III (1650–1702)

Stadhouder of the Netherlands and king of England. The son of William II, stadhouder of the United Netherlands, and Mary, the oldest daughter of Charles I of England, he was born at the Hague after his father's death. A revolution precipitated by Louis XIV's invasion of the Netherlands (1672) caused to him to be made stadhouder for life. In 1664 William Bentinck (1649–1709) joined the Prince's household as a page and instantly endeared himself to his master. In a year the page became a courtier and a key figure in the household. It was, however, ten years later that Bentinck gave the most striking proof of his devotion to the Prince. On April 3, 1675, William fell ill to smallpox, the disease that had killed his father and mother. For 16 days he hovered between life and death, while Bentinck cared lovingly for him. It was only twenty years later that the Venetian ambassador in London learned the full story. When the Prince of Orange was in danger of dying from smallpox, the doctors believed that the violent progress of the disease could be stopped only if "a young man of the same age, lying in bed with the Prince, exposed himself to the dangerous contagion of his illness." Bentinck volunteered his services at once, and the warmth of his body made the Prince sweat so heavily that the smallpox broke out. The Prince recovered, but Bentinck, after contact with the "dangerous fluids," fell ill himself.