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Quarrels and Coteries in the 1890s

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Seldom, in recent history, have the social 'upper crust' and the cultural elite been the same. This is especially so in England, which has never really taken to the salon tradition of French culture. The 'Holland House Circle' and the Seamore Place elite of Lady Blessington (the Irish-born Margaret Gardiner née Power) in the early part of the nineteenth century were exceptional. Casting around for a culturally militant circle in the late nineteenth century, one would not look to Wilfred Scawen Blunt's Crabtree Club, which foundered on rumbustiousness, nor to Taplow Court in Buckinghamshire and the high-born 'Souls' of Lady Dedborough (Ettie Grenfell), who appear to have been more interested in tennis than in who should succeed Tennyson. Lady Wilde's attempt to relocate her salon from Dublin to a small house in London in the late 1880s and early 1890s fell flat. George Bernard Shaw described her gatherings as 'desperate affairs'.¹ Speranza's *grande dame* manner, along with her flounced dress and risqué repartee, had become an embarrassing anachronism. By then, Gladstone's 'Home Rule' for Ireland had hardened political divisions within English society and made social gatherings a risky business.

From mid-century, literary and artistic avant-gardism had in any case shifted towards what Ian Fletcher has called 'the privilegedly unprivileged circle' and the 'mythology of the group personality'.² Its 'voice' was usually the little magazine. *The Germ* (1850), the voice of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (the 'P.R.B.'), was to inspire Herbert Horne and Arthur Mackmurdo's *The Century Guild Hobby Horse* later in the century (1884–92), and Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon's *The Dial* (1889–97). The emergence of guilds, brotherhoods, and coteries was of course evident all over Europe from mid-century. The failure of the revolutions of 1848 coincided with the rise of creative revolution, and the quest for an authentic style and direction that resisted middle-class identity and conformity. Famously, the dominance of the Paris Salon, the official annual exhibition of the works of living artists, was challenged by an exhibition of rejected pictures (the Salon des Refusés) in 1863, and after the first Impressionist exhibition of 1873, by independent artists who declined to send their pictures to the official Salon. In England, in 1848, it was a dislike of the Academy, England's equivalent of the Paris Salon, that gave birth to the romantically independent 'P.R.B.'. Collective action in the larger political

¹ Quoted in Terence De Vere White, *The Parents of Oscar Wilde: Sir William and Lady Wilde* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967), p. 126.

² Ian Fletcher, 'Decadence and the Little Magazines', in *Decadence in the 1890s*, ed. by Ian Fletcher, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, 17 (London: Arnold, 1979) p. 173.

arena was matched by collective creative revolution, in which the coterie was central.

There is, arguably, an important difference between the Pre-Raphaelites and later artistic groupings. Whereas the Pre-Raphaelites took on the literary and artistic Establishment, later coteries in England had to assert their identity in a rapidly expanding literary and artistic marketplace, while fending off the usual threats to group identity caused by factionalism and individualism from within. As Kelsey Thornton has indicated, the traditional reading of the 1890s in terms of a clash between the decadents and the anti-decadents provides a somewhat simplistic outline of the motivations behind the complexity of quarrels, feuds, and heartfelt hatreds that characterize the period.³

In defining the mood of the decade, the men of Wilde's generation might have taken their cue from William Hazlitt, who in his essay 'On the Pleasures of Hating' declared hatred to be one of the primal, driving forces in nature:

Nature seems (the more we look at it) made up of antipathies: without something to hate, we should lose the very spring of thought and action. Life would turn to a stagnant pool, were it not ruffled by jarring nature.⁴

One, in fact, did. In an *Academy* review of Alexander Ireland's memoir and selections from Hazlitt's writings in September 1889, the Scottish poet John Davidson attributes the general neglect of Hazlitt to two things. First of all, he argues that in criticism we generally prefer to know what our contemporaries are thinking; and secondly, he argues that people pitied Hazlitt, mistakenly, for having been more miserable and hating than happy and loving.⁵ Davidson, as an admirer of Hazlitt, was himself a fervent hater, whose lines 'To My Enemy' announce his own manifesto to the hating nineties:

Unwilling friend, let not your spite abate,
Help me with scorn and strengthen me with hate.⁶

Davidson's private and public feuds with Yeats and the Rhymers, with publishers and reviewers, and later with George Bernard Shaw, have already been documented. Shaw was not to know that his dealings and correspondence with Davidson, which began in a joshing, good-humoured way as an exchange between 'Aristophanes' (Shaw) and 'Euripides' (Davidson), would quickly deteriorate into a potential real-life, modern-day counterpart to the mythical ancient-world quarrel.⁷

Literary feuds have of course flourished in all ages. They are after all part of the western tradition of *disputatio*—fighting words. For Pope and

³ R. K. R. Thornton, 'Introduction to the First Edition', in *Poetry of the 1890s*, ed. by R. K. R. Thornton and Marion Thain, 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 1997), pp. xxvii–xli.

⁴ William Hazlitt, *The Plain Speaker*, in *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. by Duncan Wu, 9 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), VIII, 118.

⁵ *Academy*, 36 (7 September 1889), 146.

⁶ *Selected Poems and Prose of John Davidson*, ed. by John Sloan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 61.

⁷ Their correspondence in 1906 on the subject of Shaw's commissioning of Davidson to write a play is held at the British Library.

the Scriblerians the war on cliques and factions meant decidedly not being mealy-mouthed. In the early nineteenth century Keats and his associates famously endured the stinging attacks in the pages of *Blackwood's Magazine* on the mockingly labelled 'Cockney School of Poetry'. The Victorian age itself was not lacking in quarrels of all kinds. There was Henry Newman's bitter confrontation with Charles Kingsley in the 1860s on the question of integrity and truth, and Thomas Carlyle's showering of insults on John Stuart Mill's *London and Westminster Review*—a biting, so to speak, of the hand that feeds. Carlyle, Mill, Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, all had a rancorous side, particularly on the subject of the popular press. Dickens's quarrel with Thackeray was known mainly to inner circles, and might be described as more of a tiff than a feud. But much more public and prolonged was Robert Buchanan's attempt to make a name for himself by attacking Swinburne, Rossetti, and 'The Fleshly School' in the 1860s and early 1870s. However, even here confrontation was followed by retraction, with Buchanan penitentially dedicating to his 'Old Enemy' *God and Man*, a historical romance teaching the 'vanity and folly' of hatred. The Victorians on the whole were demonstrably committed to Shaftesburian values of civility and tolerance.

The generation which came to maturity in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, by contrast, was more inclined to disputation, raillery, and irreverence, and seem to have quarrelled with greater malice and enjoyment of hatred as a creative force. The influence of Baudelaire and the French symbolists had made 'spleen' trendy among the younger generation. Victorian burlesque of the 'Thackeray club' sort gave way to the spirit of *blague*—a kind of cynical mockery and disdain for everything—that James MacNeill Whistler and George du Maurier, with their first-hand experience of the Parisian artists' studios and café society, brought from Paris to London. According to Graham Hough, it was Whistler who 'more than anyone else' turned the English 'aesthetes of the *fin-de-siècle* into a *côterie*, a closed corporation, contemptuous of outside values'.⁸ But significantly, it was Whistler who also showed the way in the art of quarrelling. His vituperative *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, published in 1890, was not only an unrepentant revisiting of his disastrous libel suit against Ruskin in 1877, but a renewed declaration of war against all enemies, outsiders, and would-be apostates. Indeed, one encounters here an underlying irony. For although the co-operative communal spirit of artistic fraternities and coteries in the late nineteenth century appeared on one level to oppose the Spencerian idea of ruthless competitiveness and survival, they were also themselves breeding-grounds of competitiveness, factionalism, and struggle, both within and without. Anti-authoritarianism bred its own authority, while the persistent coupling of art with Romantic individualism continued to threaten the image of an alternative and collective creative life.

We can see this contradiction in the widespread attachment among the young to the spirit of 'anarchy' in its general as well as specific philosophical sense,

⁸ *The Last Romantics* (London: Duckworth, 1949), p. 177.

as that spirit of freedom that comes from the rejection of leadership. In defecting en masse from the magisterial Henry Hyndman's Social Democratic League in 1884, William Morris and his anarchist supporters saw themselves as defenders of openness and genuine fraternal co-operation over absolutism and arbitrary rule. Declaring that he was 'by no means quarrelsome', Morris nevertheless attacked Hyndman as 'so overbearing that he has driven useful men into opposition to him, and then has attacked them as his enemies; it would seem as if he would take no place in an organization save that of master'.⁹ That contradiction is also at work in the 1890s in the raillery against the cosy warmth and fraternal pretences of the literary coterie itself. Davidson, for example, who played the rough Carlylean Scot among the Celtic Rhymers, was not prepared to sacrifice debate, argument, and contrariness to the Rhymers' mutual-admiration society, suspecting that it served Yeats's personal ambitions, concealing self-interest in a common cause. Indeed, in literature, the dreamy emotionalism of Yeats and the Rhymers seemed old-fashioned to many in comparison with the bleak realism of Gissing and Hardy, the Nietzschean irony and individualism of Davidson, and the heartlessness of Wilde's and Shaw's plays.

One can in fact trace several motives and undercurrents running beneath the quarrels and rivalries of the 1890s, irrespective of the artistic convictions and competing world-views of those involved. The source of many collisions was the widespread contempt for the parochial and provincial, ironically so, in view of the growing number of provincials who swelled the colonies of artists and literati in London in the 1880s and 1890s. Some quarrels were about leadership, often motivated by vanity, egoism, and the need for recognition. Finally there were monetary motives. Even for those independent artists who saw themselves as a class apart from a philistine, moneymaking society, to be of value in the expanding marketplace meant being worth something.

One of those devoted artists who rejected both the world and the deluded emotions of high Victorian culture was the painter and book designer Charles Ricketts, who declared irreverently that 'the lump in the throat' of the previous generation was really lower down, 'in the trousers'.¹⁰ In spite of Ricketts's social exclusivity and aversion to society, 'The Vale', the small regency semi in Chelsea that he and his live-in partner and fellow artist Charles Shannon took over from Whistler in 1888, became improbably one of the most inspirational 'jawing' places in literary and artistic bohemia in the early 1890s. Austere, unworldly, with little on offer but fresh eggs and salad, gatherings at the Vale were more confrontational than comfortable. Ricketts, who according to Shaw 'always dealt *en grand seigneur*',¹¹ was a touchy domineering personality who behaved childishly when anyone questioned his artistic views. Wickedly, the

⁹ *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. by Norman Kelvin, 4 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984-96), II: 1881-4 (1987), 363.

¹⁰ Charles Ricketts, *Self-Portrait: Taken from the Letters and Journals of Charles Ricketts, R.A.*, collected and compiled by T. Sturge Moore, ed. by Cecil Lewis (London: Constable, 1939), p. 30.

¹¹ Ricketts, *Self-Portrait*, p. 18.

sociable Wilde brought along many of the younger artists and writers to 'Friday evenings' at the Vale to provoke him. Like Dickens at the time of his marital breakdown in the 1860s, Ricketts classified people into 'true friends' or 'enemies'—'us' and 'them'. 'Us' in the end became the tiny coterie that produced *The Dial*—Ricketts, Shannon, and their close friends Reginald Savage and John Gray.¹²

Whistler would appear on the face of it to be Ricketts's natural rival. Although Ricketts had abandoned the minute realism of John Millais and William Holman Hunt, Pre-Raphaelitism lived on in his Morris-inspired book designs and classically inspired paintings. The two came into confrontation over Whistler's proposal to elect two loyal followers, Joseph Pennell and Albert Ludovici, both Ricketts's 'enemies', to the newly formed International Society in 1898.¹³ The 'Valistes' (Wilde's term for them) had also differed from Whistler in their support for the supremacy of Philip Wilson Steer over Walter Sickert among the younger 'London Impressionists' of the New English Art Club, formed in 1886 in opposition to the restrictive selection policies of the Royal Academy. That these conflicts did not erupt into public quarrels may be due in part to Ricketts's horror of public rowing, and in part to Whistler's recognition that Ricketts's French symbolist borrowings posed no real threat to the long-term domination of the Impressionist school. Whistler chose instead to look for 'scalps' among his disciples and followers. Of the 'Whistlerian' clique led by Sickert which eventually gained control of the factional New English Art Club by the end of the 1880s, Sickert himself infuriated Whistler by dropping the designation 'Pupil of Whistler'. There was a rift not only with Sickert, but also with the good-natured Australian-born pupil Mortimer Menpes, whom Whistler accused of stealing his ideas, describing him with stinging cruelty in the press as a robber 'who, like the kangaroo of his country, is born with a pocket and puts everything into it'.¹⁴ However, Whistler's bitterest and most sustained attack was on Oscar Wilde.

The history of the Whistler–Wilde feud has been recounted many times, and requires no repeating. It provided lively material for the journalists and satirists of the day, and was received by the general public with amusement. In the age of mass culture and the popular press, public rowing was regarded as a favourite device for the attention-seekers whose wish was to astonish and arrive. To many at the time, Whistler's verbal duels with Wilde were little more than chaff. The impression of the English *fin de siècle* as a period of frivolity and affectation was to some extent promoted by some of the leading participants themselves. On one level, it can be seen from early on to reflect the anxiety in England about being seen to take oneself too seriously. The Pre-Raphaelite circle surrounding Rossetti was notorious for its horseplay and pranks; and Max Beerbohm's writings and drawings were exercises not only in mockery but also self-mockery. Although Beerbohm deeply admired Rossetti, his caricature of 'Rossetti in his Worldlier days' shows his idol leaving the bohemian Arundel Club in company

¹² J. G. P. Delaney, *Charles Ricketts: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); see also John Rothenstein, *The Artists of the 1890s* (London: Routledge, 1928), pp. 178–90.

¹³ Delaney, *Charles Ricketts*, p. 124.

¹⁴ Stanley Weintraub, *Whistler: A Biography* (London: Collins, 1974), pp. 287–88.

with the notoriously hard-drinking journalist George Augustus Sala. Such images helped promote the view of the English aesthetic movement as lacking the seriousness of its European counterpart. But though there was often collusion between *fin-de-siècle* personalities and the popular press, between caricaturists and caricatured, the emphasis on eccentricity and self-advertisement has tended to divert attention from the real hatreds, insecurities, and deadly seriousness underlying the combats and caricatures of the period. For example, in the verse satire 'Dined and Whined', on the Whistler–Wilde quarrel, which appeared in Augustus Moore's scurrilous sheet *The Hawk* in May 1889, 'puff' is declared mockingly to be 'the principal end' of Whistler's quarrel with 'his earliest friend'. Yet 'Dined and Whined' also contains a knowing account of a tête-à-tête between the peeved Whistler and the scandalmongering journalist Edmund Yates:

And on Wednesday he dined and he whined at the Cri,
Edmund Yates, with a manner parental,
Kindly patted his head, and extolled him on high,
And Jemmy grew quite sentimental.¹⁵

Whistler's wounded pride and craving for adulation belies the pretence that his quarrels were not to be taken seriously. His stinging cruelties and persecutions were anything but a joke.

Whistler's strategy, like that of a monarch, was to leave it to his followers and hangers-on to take up arms on his behalf.¹⁶ His attack on Wilde in 1890 as the 'all-pervading plagiarist' unleashed a torrent of abusive verses and lampoons in the popular press. One of those who leapt into the fracas on Whistler's behalf was James Runciman, a deft hand at extracting capital from quarrels, who had been one of William Henley's 'Shepherd's Bush Gang' in the late 1870s. Runciman was a Northumbrian-born schoolmaster turned warring journalist and writer. He was much admired for his Carlylean ardour and his profound sympathy for the real poor,¹⁷ but he was also regarded warily by his fellow writers as malicious, intemperate, and vain to the point of madness. 'He dreams fervidly of horsewhips & the manly fist', Henley wrote in 1877 to Robert Louis Stevenson, at that time Henley's closest friend and a rising star in the literary world.¹⁸ Stevenson himself, the following year, had to warn off Runciman from physically threatening Thomas Gibson Bowles, founder and editor of *Vanity Fair*, for having written an unfavourable, but not unkind, review of Stevenson's *An Inland Voyage* (1878). 'Shall telegraph to Runciman, asking him not to play the fool', Stevenson informed Henley: 'My friends are only too kind; they cannot recognise a decent enemy.'¹⁹

¹⁵ *Hawk*, 3 (7 May 1889), 483.

¹⁶ Rothenstein, *The Artists of the 1890s*, p. 115.

¹⁷ W. T. Stead, 'An Introductory Word', in James Runciman, *Side Lights* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1893), pp. xxi–xxix (p. xxviii).

¹⁸ *The Selected Letters of W. E. Henley*, ed. by Damian Atkinson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 43–44.

¹⁹ *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew, 8 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994–95), II (1994), 254.

Over a decade later, Runciman was offering his services to Whistler in his quarrel with Wilde. His letters, now in the Whistler Collection at Glasgow University Library, contain a venomous cocktail of personal and racist abuse. They provide evidence of the social and literary vendetta that Ricketts and others believed had helped bring about the Wilde trial:

Men like Wilde, Haggard, Anstey, Gordon, and the rest. They steal when they think it safe and put on a top-lofty air when you catch them. [. . .] My oldest friend W. E. Henley is only a bag for the beggars to dip in, and the game is always the same, 'What are you doing up that damned ladder, Sambo?' 'Does you daht my annah, Sah?' [. . .] I must say that, of the bloody duffers that I have ever measured, Wilde is just the bloodiest. There is not an idea in that fat head: glib impudence of glorying [?] Paddy and no more.²⁰

His claim to friendship with Henley is disingenuous, as the two were estranged, and Runciman had attacked his former chief and friend anonymously that month in *The Hawk*, prompting Henley to write, 'Runciman is at it again [. . .]. I do wish somebody would kill him.'²¹

In this pervasive atmosphere of raillery and glorying spite, one faction in particular was fated never to carry the triumphant literary gene—the Catholic circle surrounding the Meynells, first at Phillimore Place, and in the 1890s at their Dutch-designed house at 47 Palace Court, off the Bayswater Road. *Merry England*, the shilling magazine founded by Alice and Wilfred Meynell in 1883, began as 'a call to brotherhood' based on their belief that 'the liberation of compassion was the central force of Catholic Christianity'. The Meynells followed Matthey Arnold's injunction to 'be of the centre', not of 'the province'.²² Their careful guardedness against the charge of sectarianism and segregation, understandable in Catholics inhabiting a Protestant country, made them uneasy allies of the rabidly nationalistic Henley, and united the medieval enthusiasm of Benjamin Disraeli and William Morris with the emergent 'Modernism' of liberal Catholic theology, which sought to reconcile traditional belief with the discoveries of history and science. The Meynells' hope for the future of English literature rested upon the frail shoulders of the Preston-born Catholic and opium addict Francis Thompson.

Thompson's appearance at the *Merry England* office in Essex Street in his tramp's overcoat coincided closely with the death of Browning, and calls for a new poet as prophet. The publication in 1890 of J. B. Ayroles's *La Vraie Jeanne d'Arc: la Pucelle devant L'Église de son temps* ('The Real Joan of Arc: the maiden-saint before the Church in her day') stirred much interest in the question of prophecy. That summer, Sarah Bernhardt thrilled audiences at Her Majesty's Theatre with a 'wonderfully real' representation of 'the inspired *Pucelle*'.²³ The decade was also to see Yeats's edition of William Blake as the precursor symbolist and mystic bard. The Meynells, for their part, united a Catholic view of Browning as a valuable counter-voice to the ma-

²⁰ Letter from James Runciman to James MacNeill Whistler, 19 January 1890, Glasgow University Library, R233.

²¹ John Connell, *W. E. Henley* (London: Constable, 1949), p. 169.

²² Anne Kimball Tuell, *Mrs Meynell and her Literary Generation* (New York: Dutton, 1925), pp. 66–68.

²³ *Whirlwind*, 1.3 (12 July 1890), 38.

terialistic and pessimistic tendencies of the age with a call for the return to the poet as prophet. Following fourteen months' rehabilitation at the Praemonstratensian Priory at Storrington in Sussex, Thompson obliged, confiding in his notebook: 'After the Return to Nature, the Return to God. Wordsworth was the poet of one, I would be the poet of the other.'²⁴ It was a reputation that would eventually enable the Meynells to buy a seventeenth-century Sussex farmhouse, but may have restricted Thompson's development and direction as a poet. Thompson's best-known poem, 'The Hound of Heaven', ends on a note less of mystical affirmation than of cautious optimism:²⁵

Halts by me that footfall:
Is my gloom after all,
Shade of his hand, outstretched caressingly?

Thompson was impatient with the preciousness of Yeats and the Celtic fringe in the early 1890s, and viewed Yeats's private, recondite use of symbolism with scepticism.²⁶ For all his conviction about the link between religion and creativity, Thompson dismissed as laughable the notion of the poet as prophet with the disclaimer: 'You shall no more persuade a poet that his kind are prophets, than a woman that hers are angels.'²⁷ He resisted Coventry Patmore's and the Capuchin Franciscans' too-ready identification of the natural and the spiritual. For Thompson, there remained a conflict between the spiritual and material worlds, between his poetic instincts and the principles of his religious background.

Thompson's reputation was to be a casualty in the end of the factionalism within the Catholic Church itself. In 1907, the year of Thompson's death, Pope Pius X issued the repressive, fiercely anti-Modernist encyclical *Pacendi*, outlawing the liberal Catholicism with which Thompson had become associated. The Meynells and their American Jesuit friend Terence L. Connolly were to market a posthumous Thompson as a poet in whose verse Catholic theology might be reconstructed. Their editorial practices included the suppression of 'any hint of unorthodoxy in his life and writings',²⁸ including the omission of his attacks on the limitation of religious writing, and the deletion of the sharp edge of social indignation from a poet who knew both the sordid truth about living rough on the streets and who felt keenly the self-congratulation of

The rich, who with intention pure
Amuse themselves to help the poor.²⁹

To the Cornish Protestant Arthur Quiller-Couch, editor of the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, the chalices and monstrosities of the Meynells' poet-prophet

²⁴ Brigid M. Boardman, *Between Heaven and Charing Cross: The Life of Francis Thompson* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 143.

²⁵ A point suggested by Boardman, *Between Heaven and Charing Cross*, p. 139.

²⁶ 'Mr. Yeats's Poems' (1899), in Francis Thompson, *The Real Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. by Revd Terence L. Connolly (New York: University Publishers, 1959), pp. 203-09 (p. 207).

²⁷ 'A Renegade Poet on the Poet', *Merry England*, 19 (July 1892), 164-74 (p. 169).

²⁸ Boardman, *Between Heaven and Charing Cross*, p. xiii.

²⁹ Quoted in Boardman, *Between Heaven and Charing Cross*, p. 301.

appeared as recondite as Yeats's private mythologies had been to Thompson.³⁰ But the grander ambitions of the Catholic revival were perhaps more decisively demolished earlier on by Max Beerbohm's laughter. In an ironically titled review, 'Ex Cathedra: Mrs Meynell's Cowslip-Wine', which appeared in J. T. Grein's sixpenny monthly *To-Morrow* in 1896, Beerbohm affected to dread the future, when 'Mrs Meynell shall have become a sort of substitute for the English Sabbath.'³¹

Mrs Meynell occupied a position of centrality and influence at Palace Court that few women appear to have enjoyed in *fin-de-siècle* literary and artistic circles. More commonly guilds and coteries were dominated by men, with women as 'hangers-on'. The notion of brotherhood, with its origins in monasticism and the Gothic revival, tended to reinforce contemporary notions of male and female separateness and segregation. Even in guilds in which men and women worked together, the rigid formula governing social intercourse between the sexes made equality and independence difficult. Single women who worked in the Arts and Crafts guilds were often the focus of gossip and hostility from anxious and jealous wives.³²

One interesting and logical form of resistance to male-dominated relations was the social phenomenon of partnerships between women, so-called 'Boston marriages'. A notable example among the last generation of the English Aesthetic Movement was the merged poetic personality of 'Michael Field' (in reality Katherine Bradley and her niece and lover, Edith Cooper). Significantly, the two protested when introduced in female company as Michael Field, demanding to be addressed by their Christian names.³³ But in male-dominated London literary circles and communities of artists, they were happy to play the 'Michael Fields'. Such aesthetic duality suspended and subverted the usual formula of social intercourse between the sexes. It also provided an image of collective creative life in harmony with the fraternal spirit of the Aesthetic Movement—one that challenged the persistent coupling of art and individualism. During the 1890s the Fields formed close ties with the art historian Bernard Berenson and his unconventional family group, with the artistic male community of the Century Guild Hobby Horse in Fitzroy Street, and most creatively of all with Ricketts and Shannon, whose private Vale Press published four of their tragedies in beautifully bound editions. Their friendship and collaboration with Ricketts and Shannon was not an equal partnership, however. Ricketts was domineering, as he was towards all his fellow artists, and eventually lost patience and quarrelled with the Fields over their mystical attachment to their dead pet chow.

On a more down-to-earth level, the bitterest feuds were often over money. In the competitive world of the literary marketplace authors organized themselves in the battle for better contracts. The Society of Authors was founded in 1884.

³⁰ David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 19.

³¹ *To-Morrow*, 2 (September 1896), 162.

³² Anthea Callen, *Angel in the Studio: Women in the Arts and Crafts Movement 1870-1914* (London: Astragal, 1979), p. 218.

³³ *Works and Days: From the Journal of Michael Field*, ed. by T. and D. C. Sturge Moore (London: Murray, 1933), p. 134.

Two years later publishers responded by founding the Publishers' Association. The trade press in the 1890s was noisy with their opposing declarations of rights and property. Whistler made no bones of the fact that his protectionist attitude towards his style and subject-matter was intended to guard his property. And behind the vanity and wounded feelings of Runciman's intemperate letters to Whistler, the financial pressures and resentments of the literary life stand revealed. 'How is it', he asked Whistler,

that two chaps like the Wildes who could not earn £200 a year by fair production of work are put up as personages [. . .] yet those men, whose English I used to correct amid agonies untold are regarded, I believe, as good journalists, while I am supposed to be a brutal bludgeoner. Can you explain this?³⁴

Runciman died in poverty the following year. The close literary friendship of Robert Louis Stevenson and William Henley had fallen apart in bitter acrimony in 1888 over the alleged theft of a storyline by Stevenson's wife, Fanny. Their negotiations for setting up a fund for Runciman's widow had to be carried out through an intermediary, and the rupture was not to be healed this side of the grave. Henley ended his days embittered and in financial difficulties, having lost his editorship of the *Scots* (retitled the *National Observer* in 1894). One of his last literary outbursts was a character assassination of Stevenson, who had died prematurely at the height of his powers in 1895.³⁵ In life, Stevenson had considered Henley to have 'the tact of an elephant', and at the time of their quarrel commented with some bitterness of his Shepherd's Bush Gang, 'When they get together round a bowl, they brew for themselves hot heads and ugly feelings.'³⁶ Wilde was similarly to remark, 'The basis of literary friendship is mixing the poisoned bowl', on first meeting and befriending Henley in September 1888, shortly after the latter's quarrel with Stevenson.³⁷ Wilde's words were clearly intended to console Henley over the rift, but without knowing it, his remark was a prediction of the turn his own relationship with Henley would soon take.

In the battle for column space, influence, commissions, and magazine sales, partisanship and financial self-interest competed with friendship and principled human action. In 1890 the crusade against Wilde in Henley's *National Observer* and in the London Tory press over the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* paraded under the banner of genuine social and moral outrage, but the reality was that controversy sold magazines, particularly when a name as famous as Wilde could be provoked into a rejoinder. In the prelude to the Wilde imbroglio Henley had violently attacked the Shakespearean scholar and controversial socialist sympathizer, F. J. Furnivall, as the 'prince of literary rag-pickers', and obligingly printed his angry response which requested that Henley be exhibited at Barnum and Bailey's freak show as 'the champion skunk of Scotland'.³⁸ We can also see this mercenary streak at work in Herbert Vivian's use of his correspondence with Wilde for his controversial and unflattering re-

³⁴ James Runciman to Whistler, 19 June 1890, Glasgow University Library, R235.

³⁵ Atkinson, 'Introduction', in *The Selected Letters of W. E. Henley*, p. xvi.

³⁶ Connell, *W. E. Henley*, p. 119.

³⁷ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 283.

³⁸ Connell, *Henley*, p. 169.

miniscences which appeared in the *Sun* in 1889, and again in a revised version in the first issue of his own penny weekly flagship of Tory Individualism, *The Whirlwind*, in June 1890.

In the contrast between the new 'cultured', university recruits to journalism, and the brash, sensation-mongering 'new journalists' such as W. T. Stead of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, there was no simple dividing-line between the aesthetes and the philistines. In 1895 the Balliol-educated Alfred Spender, 'The Philistine' watchdog at the *Westminster Gazette* and instigator of an earlier campaign against the admirers of Degas's painting *L'Absinthe*,³⁹ launched a rumbustious attack on Richard Le Gallienne for 'puffing' the Bodley Head authors in his weekly column in the *Star*. Lampoons and acrimonious letters filled the pages of the popular press, ironically exposing the philistine motives behind the vogue for sensational subject-matter and limited editions—the spicy 'Bodley bun' of 'The Ballad of a Bun', Owen Seaman's spoof of John Davidson's *Yellow Book* poem of 1894, 'The Ballad of a Nun'. The *Yellow Book* itself, the most famous beacon of 1890s aestheticism, was a blatantly commercial venture that successfully marketed the new aestheticism for a mass audience. The publishers, the go-getting John Lane and the more reserved Charles Elkin Mathews, fell out over it. Mathews's 'unavoidable' absence caused acrimony at the launch dinner. Lane literally carried off the Bodley Head sign above their shop on Vigo Street to new premises across the road, taking half their authors with him. Lane's motives were always first and foremost financial. He sacked Aubrey Beardsley as art editor of the *Yellow Book* at the time of the Wilde trials, fearing that the link in the public mind between Beardsley and Wilde might affect sales. Ironically, without Beardsley's distinctive avant-garde artwork, the *Yellow Book* failed. Among others, the Oxford don W. L. Courtney joked about his 'Jekyll and Hyde existence', combining serious research with his activities as a Grub Street hack.⁴⁰ Wilde also succeeded in having a foot in both camps, editing *Woman's World* and turning out anonymous reviews to order for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, while at the same time radically refashioning the art of criticism in his major essays for the *Fortnightly Review* and the *Nineteenth Century*.

Given the emphasis here on material motives, it might seem contrary to quarrel with Josephine Guy and Ian Small, who rightly contest the distinction between Wilde's life as a journalist and his work as an artist. However, such a move leaves the way open for those who would strip Wilde of his avant-garde credentials on the grounds that he tailored his publications to the competitive and commercial requirements of the literary marketplace. Their picture is of a writer who is 'more the conformist than the rebel [. . .] struggling to come to terms with modernity, rather than defining it'.⁴¹ Wilde, it might be said, did not quarrel enough. Such an argument sets the fence so high that

³⁹ For an account of this, see John Stokes, *In the Nineties* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1989), pp. 33–41.

⁴⁰ [Janet Elizabeth Courtney (Hogarth)], *W. L. Courtney: The Making of an Editor, 1850–1928* (London: Macmillan, 1930), p. 33.

⁴¹ Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession: Writing and the Culture Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 12–13.

one wonders who could hope to leap into the rebel fold. While this is not the place for a formal argument for literary progressivism as the 'creative annexing' of traditional concepts and forms, the ironic inscription of the artist as enemy or parasite within the categorical supports the avant-gardism of Wilde and other late Victorians who do not obviously conform to prevailing theories of aesthetic radicalism and innovation.⁴² More important, in the present context, is the recognition that the writers and artists of revolt attempted, in appearances at least, to be in but not of the world. In devising a strategy of artistic and intellectual dependence, they devised a field of resistance, not only in relation to existing forms and expectations, but also in their fight to maintain the primacy of their own circles and milieu. John Goode has referred, in this context, to a restricted, but nevertheless very real, 'break' in the English *fin de siècle* with totalizing, spiritualizing notions of art and culture, and a resulting engagement with the processes and phases of production.⁴³

Predictably, Wilde's record as an avant-gardist and quarreller is ambivalent. As Richard Ellmann has remarked, given a choice of alternatives, Wilde always managed to choose both.⁴⁴ A lover of secret languages cultivated within cliques and coteries, who was drawn irresistibly to Masonic and homosexual circles, Wilde also held the complacency and delusions of closed circles in contempt. His response to the social and artistic exclusivity of the Valistes was that of an amused wrecker, while his venomous review of *Greek Life and Thought* by John Pentland Mahaffy, 'his first and best teacher', as 'Tipperary writ large' is unsparing towards the Anglo-Irish smugness and provincialism of Trinity College Dublin.⁴⁵ Yet Wilde's energies and loyalties remained on the side of marginal and non-assimilated groups and movements in a period which saw the increasing assimilation of dissident and revolutionary elements in English political and social life. In this he differed fundamentally from Yeats, whose later mythologizing of the 1890s as a period of flawed and failed individuals erases from history the spirit of creative collaboration and group resistance that characterized Wilde and his generation.⁴⁶ The Rhymers' Club, for instance, becomes for Yeats merely an apprentice 'singing school' where he learnt the techniques that would allow him to emerge as the poet-Messiah. As in T. S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', the shift is from the idea of real brotherhood to a transcendent fraternity of great individuals—the 'immortal dead'—beyond and above the struggles and contradictions of history.⁴⁷

In his claims to primacy and authority, Wilde also differed from the rival

⁴² See Josephine Guy, *The British Avant-Garde: The Theory and Politics of Tradition* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1991).

⁴³ John Goode, 'The Decadent Writer as Producer', in *Decadence and the 1890s*, ed. by Ian Fletcher (London: Arnold, 1979), pp. 109–29.

⁴⁴ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde at Oxford* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1984), p. 20.

⁴⁵ 'Mr. Mahaffy's New Book' (1887), in Oscar Wilde, *Selected Journalism*, ed. by Anya Clayworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 23–27 (p. 23).

⁴⁶ W. B. Yeats, 'The Tragic Generation', in id., *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 277–349.

⁴⁷ See Thais E. Morgan, 'Influence, Intertextuality and Translation in Swinburne and Eliot', in *The Whole Music of Passion: New Essays on Swinburne*, ed. by Rikky Rooksby and Nicholas

cultural monarchs of his day, who maintained their predominance by the most atavistic means. Whistler, who styled himself 'the Amazing One', and Henley, the 'Viking Chief' at the office of the *National Observer*, both ruled by bullying, and by the periodic massacre of potential heirs. The subject of massacres was also one to which the touchy, tyrannical Ricketts, after the manner of Delacroix, often returned to in his canvasses, moved by his subjects to tears. Wilde too played 'the King'. A copy of John Davidson's first collection of verses, *In a Music-Hall, and Other Poems*, has survived bearing the author's inscription to 'King Oscar', a nickname matched by Max Beerbohm's joking reference to Wilde as 'the Divinity'.⁴⁸ Yeats also records Wilde as saying: 'I am having my hair curled that I may resemble Nero.'⁴⁹ Like Whistler, Wilde enjoyed the flattery of disciples. In following the inherent patronage relations of 'Greek love', he helped to advance the careers of Richard Le Gallienne, John Gray, Charles Ricketts, and Aubrey Beardsley. The challenge for his disciples, as for the competing factions in Roman times, was to win the king's approbation. There were frequent betrayals and broken hearts. Displaced by Alfred Douglas in Wilde's affections, John Gray suffered a temporary mental breakdown before being rescued by Wilde's minor adversary, the Russian-born Marc-André Rafalovitch. Yet one detects no insecurity in Wilde's sometimes stinging treatment of his disciples. In his London years he was generous towards his followers, allowing them to borrow, adapt, and take ideas from him. In Wilde's eyes, the treachery of disciples towards their benefactors was natural. 'To the sensitive nature, the burden of gratitude must be overwhelming', he told Theodore Wratislaw.⁵⁰

From his state of confident self-sufficiency, Wilde viewed his rival monarchs with amusement. On one occasion he responded to Ricketts's intolerant hatred of a would-be disciple with the admonition: 'You, my dear Ricketts, belong to the older type of deity, who mistakes worshippers for food, and when they see one tear him to pieces.'⁵¹ Although Wilde served Alfred Douglas a poisonous dish in his letter to posterity from Reading Gaol, *De Profundis* is in reality Wilde's quarrel with himself for having fallen in love with a prince of Philistia. It is a conflict in which he finally achieves reconciliation with himself through identification with the suffering, antinomian Christ—the ultimate 'king who is not'.

Quarrels and coteries did not end with the 1890s. They may even be said to have increased in number in the expanded, yet specialized, literary and artistic marketplace which the 1890s saw come into being. But there were significant differences in the decades that followed Wilde's trial and imprisonment. The anarchic, unassimilated, go-as-you-please bohemianism of the 1890s, which

Shrimpton (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), pp. 136–47 (p. 145), which discusses the metaphor of the 'immortal dead' in linking the two poets.

⁴⁸ The inscription is recorded in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 1115. Max Beerbohm's reference to 'the Divinity' is to be found in *Letters to Reggie Turner*, ed. by Rupert Hart-Davis (London: R. Hart-Davis, 1964), p. 41.

⁴⁹ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, pp. 285–86.

⁵⁰ Theodore Wratislaw, *Oscar Wilde: A Memoir* (London: Eighteen Nineties Society, 1979).

⁵¹ Delaney, *Ricketts*, pp. 52–53.

had been viewed with alarm by the literary and social establishment, was replaced by avant-garde elites whose allegiances and antagonisms, schisms and competing 'isms' (Imagism, Vorticism, and the like) went largely unheeded by society as a whole. Literary modernism itself in Yeats and Eliot marked a return to the timeless and universal in art. Alongside these changes, the idea of the artistic life became associated in the public mind with the tamer, sentimental bohemia nostalgically celebrated in Arthur Machen's *Bohemia in England* (1907), and in the novels of W. J. Locke and Somerset Maugham.⁵² The period of the 1890s itself was remembered for its theatricality and eccentricity rather than for its collective creative life, and attempted break with the self-indulgent emotionalism and universalizing traditions of the past. Writing to William Henley in December 1888, shortly after their first meeting, Wilde encouraged him to embrace the diversity and dividedness of contemporary opinion of his work, adding that 'The worst of posterity is that it has but one voice.'⁵³ In the event, posterity has remained divided about the significance and value of the 1890s, in which iconoclasm and conformity, and so-called 'popular' and 'high-brow', appear to compete. Arguably, this very uncertainty of categorization has protected the 1890s from our collective agreement. Indeed, the present threat to Wilde's reputation may well lie in our acceptance of the universal value and significance of his literary career. But that seems unlikely. In the fine art of literary mayhem the leading avant-gardists of the 1890s are proving to be especially resilient.

⁵² See Peter Brooker, *Bohemia in London: The Social Scene of Early Modernism* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 6–7.

⁵³ *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Holland and Hart-Davis, p. 373.