

*Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece* by Iain Ross. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013. xv, 274 pp. + 4 b/w illus. ISBN 978-1-107-02032-0. \$99.00.

Was Oscar Wilde's life a Greek tragedy, experienced as the working-out of the implacable curse laid on his line by some ancient god? That is the immediate question that springs to mind upon beginning Iain Ross's sparkling new book. "Wilde's fatalism and his cult of the surface derive directly from his understanding of the terrible power of heredity. Whether one was going to commit a murder, like Lord Arthur Savile, or become the image of the father one hated, like Lord Alfred Douglas, or become a poet, or a convict, had been determined long in advance by one's ancestry; what colour necktie one was going to wear, whether one should sport a carnation or a gardenia in one's buttonhole, these at least were matters one could decide for oneself."

This self-consciously Wildean criticism, suave and insolently poised, almost seems too clever for its own good. Fortunately, Ross has the wherewithal to make good on the large majority of his provocations. An unusually brief Introduction, evocatively allusive of Romanticism (its subheadings are "A context" and "A method" – one half-expects "A fragment"), sets the scene with bold concision and bolder simplicity, boiling Wilde's sense of Hellenism down to the formative influence of just three important essays by the 1860s-'70s trifecta of Arnold, Pater, and (above all) Symonds, whose *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873-76) was his constant companion and intellectual sounding-board in his time at Oxford. This outline makes strong intuitive sense, and lends conviction to Ross's giveaway summation of the story that his book will uncover: that Wilde in the late 1880s and under the banner of Oxonian Hellenism reoriented himself from archaeological positivism (a legacy of his tomb-crazed father) to literary humanism, from commercial prolixity to earnest engagement, though "whether the turn from popular journalism to serious if not solemn criticism was cause or consequence is moot. Probably each was implicated in the other." By the end of the Introduction – a mere eight pages long – we are well set up to see just how central the Greek texts, read in the original, were to Wilde's sense of himself and his map of the universe.

Ross's nuanced awareness of paradox honours Wilde's own, and makes the archival *Bildungsroman* of chapters 1-3 an engrossing read. He is sensibly cautious of exactly what should, can, or might be read into the often gnomic marginal annotations to Wilde's personal copies of the key texts, but his impulse is to push hard, and the book is all the better for it. Already in the Introduction the key problematic is spelled out: the canonical Greek texts were rooted so deeply in Wilde that it is frequently impossible to tell where intentional allusion ended and habit of thought began – but this is also what makes the hunt such *fun*.