

## OSCAR WILDE'S TWIN CITY APPEARANCES

When Oscar Wilde arrived in New York Harbor on January 2, 1882, ready to begin an American lecturing tour which was to occupy nearly twelve months and which was to include appearances in cities as far separated as Chicago, Denver, and San Francisco, he was a young man of twenty-seven, striking in appearance, somewhat eccentric in dress, and famous rather for his aesthetic doctrines than for any tangible achievements in art. To be sure, he had to his credit a book of poems, published the year before but in the main consisting of verse which had already seen print in obscure periodicals. Perhaps the best known of these fugitive bits were two sonnets which he had dedicated to Ellen Terry. But Wilde's career as playwright and novelist was still in the future, and America accepted the young Irish aesthete more as an emissary of a peculiar cult than as a distinguished man of letters. Nevertheless, American audiences were eager to hear at first hand what all this pother about aestheticism actually was, and curiosity if nothing else impelled them to see what Oscar Wilde had to say.

Originally planning to spend only a few months in the United States, Wilde was induced by the popularity of his first lectures to remain for a longer time. His initial appearance at Chickering Hall, New York, on January 9, 1882, was followed by readings in Baltimore, Washington, and Boston.<sup>1</sup> His Boston lecture, the fourth of the series, was attended by a demonstration on the part of Harvard students which had reverberations throughout the country.

<sup>1</sup> See an account of Wilde's "American Lectures" by the manager of his tour, W. F. Morse, in Oscar Wilde, *Writings*, 1: 75, 79 (London and New York, 1907). There is some doubt about the sequence of these lectures, but Morse is obviously the best authority.

Stimulated by the unconventional dress which Wilde usually wore on the platform and no doubt incited by some rather insolent newspaper notices of the speaker, sixty collegians trooped in to their allotted seats with absurd clothes and even more absurd demeanor. To quote one of Wilde's biographers: ". . . all were dressed in swallow-tail coats, knee-breeches, flowing wigs and green ties. They all wore large lilies in their buttonholes, and each man carried a huge sunflower as he limped along."<sup>2</sup> But the point of the jest was lost, since Wilde had been warned of the imminent demonstration and turned the tables on his hecklers by appearing in ordinary evening clothes. The story of this lecture, however, did not lose in the newspaper retelling, and to its perpetuation Wilde no doubt owed some of the curious audiences which paid to hear their own artistic accomplishments belittled and their pretensions vilified.

From Boston Wilde went to Philadelphia, thence to Albany, Rochester, and Buffalo, and finally, striking definitely westward, to Chicago, where he spoke twice to rather small audiences. The next leg of his journey brought him to the Twin Cities, where he delivered addresses in Minneapolis on March 15 and in St. Paul on March 16. But before discussing his Minnesota reception it will be of interest to notice the first repercussions of the new cult of aestheticism as revealed in the local press.

The day after Wilde's arrival in New York the St. Paul and Minneapolis *Pioneer Press* carried an announcement of the newcomer's landing, with a subhead as follows: "The Distinguished Lily-Consumer of England, Oscar Wilde, Reached New York — An Interview With the Utterly Utter Young Man." Copying the report of one of the eastern papers, the *Pioneer Press* declared that "Mr. Wilde appeared like a good natured, tall, well dressed, somewhat enthusiastic young man who was not at all averse to the

<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Sherard, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 202 (New York, 1928).

American process of interviewing." Following this description appeared a detailed account of Wilde's life and forebears.

On January 4 the Emma Abbott Grand Opera Company was to give a production in St. Paul of the Gilbert and Sullivan work *Patience*. The *Pioneer Press* had already advertised this performance in a notice which described *Patience* as "the intensely utter." Now it will be remembered that this particular operetta had as the butt of its innocuous satire the very cult of aestheticism which Wilde represented; and, further, that the character of Reginald Bunthorne was popularly conceived to be drawn directly from Wilde himself. As a consequence, the first real contact that Minnesota audiences had with the new gospel was one hardly calculated to inspire respect for it. As the *Pioneer Press* aptly remarked:

Although the aesthetic craze has not yet reached St. Paul, everybody is familiar with the manifestations of it through the columns of descriptions of the actions and utterances of the aesthetes which have appeared in the newspapers, and consequently there will be no lack of appreciation of the delicate satire as well as of the palpable hits of the amusing burlesque.<sup>3</sup>

During the weeks following the St. Paul production of *Patience*, reports of Wilde's eastern lectures or remarks about the personality of the new celebrity were constantly filtering into the local papers. Thus on January 8 the *Pioneer Press* contained a detailed account of Wilde's arrival, together with comments from New York and Chicago journals. A week later the same paper printed two columns of extracts from the *Boston Herald* and from Wilde's own lectures. As a whole the tone of these excerpts was laudatory; Wilde's personal mannerisms and affectations were discounted and his technical ability praised. On January 16 the *Pioneer Press* quoted the *Chicago Tribune's* account of the lecturer and on January 22 it referred editorially to

<sup>3</sup> *Pioneer Press* (St. Paul and Minneapolis), January 2, 4, 1882.

Wilde's experiences in New York. Also scattered through the various issues of the same paper about this time were personal items of the following tenor: "Oscar Wilde, the aesthetic apostle, is making money by his alleged lectures." And "A Washington paper sizes up Oscar Wide as 'an emasculator of ideas.'" <sup>4</sup> It is not hard to trace a growing contempt in the allusions to the Irish aesthete as his ideas and his peccadilloes became more familiar. Thus on January 31 the *Pioneer Press* remarked: "The wild aesthete exhibited his thin legs and ample locks to an aggravating [*sic*] array of empty benches in Baltimore, which would indicate an elevated social scale in the Monumental city." And a few weeks later, in the Washington's birthday issue: "Oscar Wilde says the American newspapers are comic without being amusing. Fact is they have been treating a comical subject, and it isn't singular that the subject isn't amused." The *Duluth Tribune* joined the chorus of criticism too. The issue of February 17 commented on Wilde's Chicago appearance and pointed out that "the aesthetic Chicagoans forgot their pork-sticking and grain-gambling to go hear him." If the spectators were not pleased, they were at least attentive.

Oscar's knee-breeches and flowing hair were novel sights, and the audience feasted their eyes upon them, but the lecturer didn't seem to "take" half as well as vaccination. Oscar, of course, spoke of the "beautiful in art," and the "joy in art," and it was all Greek to the men and women who listened to him. Had he spoken of the "beautiful in grain" or the "joy in pork" he would have been understood and appreciated, but Chicago knows only one art—that of making money. The Apostle of the Utter evidently has not learned how to suit himself to his audience.

Obviously, then, the more publicity that Wilde received, the more satirical became the allusions to him. Rarely were his ideas seriously analyzed or considered; the whole attention was focused on his eccentric deportment and his freakish dress. No modern press agent or propagandist

<sup>4</sup> *Pioneer Press*, January 25, 29, 1882.

could have done a better job of inciting popular disfavor toward an individual or a movement than the press of the eighties did toward Oscar Wilde. As a result, when the lecturer himself stepped off the train in Minneapolis on the afternoon of March 15, 1882, and went directly to the Nicollet House, the general reaction of the public toward him was one of curiosity and not always too polite contempt.

The advance notice of Wilde's lecture in the *Minneapolis Tribune* of March 14, 1882, was hardly of the most complimentary nature:

This "boss English sunflower" will appear Wednesday evening in the Academy of Music "in full bloom," and tell his audience—should he be fortunate enough to have one—what he knows about "The English Renaissance."

But much more forthright was the comment of the *St. Paul Globe*, which had appeared the previous Sunday, March 12:

Oscar is the best advertised menagerie this country has ever enjoyed. . . . This utterly, all but and entirely if, concentrated too too young man has secured more gratuitous notoriety than any Wilde animal which has heretofore landed on these hospitable shores.

Following an official announcement of Wilde's lecture, the *Globe* critic vented his contempt in verse of a sort:

He's happy as a big sunflower,  
He rides upon a lily,  
Feeds on daffadowndilly  
And rakes in the ducats—by jimminy.

The *Pioneer Press*, too, seized the opportunity and editorialized in the issue of March 15 on the "Apostle of the Utter," a tart discussion in which the true aestheticism of Ruskin, as revealed in *Fors Clavigera*, was upheld and praised, whereas the pseudo aestheticism of Wilde was ridiculed. "It becomes a hodge-podge of oddities in gesture and expression, and loses all squeamishness as to the scrap bag from which they are drawn." The *Pioneer Press* even denied Wilde ability in his own field, opining that his poetry "has no more gleams of the genuine aestheticism than has

that of Bunthorne whom he, or his manager rather, chooses to send before him as an advertising agent. It is all a farce; and since nobody can be deceived, everybody is happy while the receipts come in handsomely."

Wilde's first Twin City lecture was given Wednesday evening, March 15, at the Academy of Music in Minneapolis. To a small but curious audience numbering about two hundred and fifty the lecturer spoke on "The English Renaissance," a subject which he again discussed the following night at the St. Paul Opera House.<sup>5</sup> Journalistic comment on this lecture was almost embarrassingly candid. The *Globe* curtly said that "Wilde Oscar amused the young Minneapolitan aesthetes at the Academy of Music last evening," but the other local papers were both more splenetic and more loquacious. The *Tribune* of March 16 printed a long review entitled in part "An 'Ass-Thete,'" which was at once an account of an interview with Wilde and a report of his lecture. Thus the writer began by sneering at the aesthete's dress and physique. In his hotel room Wilde had arisen languidly to greet the reporter and had extended a "lily white hand." Wilde's appearance was also made somewhat less leonine, according to the *Tribune*, by the fact that he was pigeon-toed. As for the lecture itself, it was flat and insipid.

From the time the speaker commenced to his closing sentence, he kept up the same unvarying endless drawl, without modulating his voice or making a single gesture, giving one the impression that he was a prize monkey wound up, and warranted to talk for an hour and a half without stopping.

Wilde's reception, the *Tribune* noted, was cold and apathetic. Indeed, his English was hard to understand. In regard to the substance of the talk the review did not go into great detail. Wilde said, briefly, that the truths of art cannot be taught; they must be revealed. He thought

<sup>5</sup> Since Wilde's fee was two hundred and fifty dollars and the admission prices ranged from seventy-five cents to a dollar, it is obvious that the sponsor of the lecture lost money.

that beauty must be introduced into common life and a love of art be inculcated among the peasantry. As beauty is the one thing worth living for, the beautiful and the useful must be combined. These scattered impressions the *Tribune* reported succinctly, and without further comment.

The digest of the same lecture in the *Pioneer Press* was somewhat more detailed and stressed even more the personal peculiarities of the speaker. The account began by stating that "The audience was bright and appreciative, but they were cultured enough to know that the lecture would be a series of artistic platitudes without the slightest trace of artistic revolution." Then the reviewer criticized the plainness of the stage setting, which, with its bad drops, its two lonely looking chairs, and its heavy table on which reposed the inevitable glass of water, must have been dingy indeed. But the lecturer himself furnished the necessary color, for Wilde did not choose to abandon in the West the eccentric evening garb which had brought him so much notoriety in the East.

His long and bushy hair crowded in front of his ears and nearly to his eyes, but it was brushed well off his forehead. He wore a low-necked shirt with a turned-down collar and large white necktie, a black velvet cut-away coat, and vest of the same material, knee breeches, long, black stockings and low shoes with bows, a heavy gold seal hung to a watch guard from a fob pocket. The poet had no flower in the lappel [*sic*] of his coat.

In addition Wilde flaunted white kid gloves, and spoke monotonously with a strongly English pronunciation. According to the *Pioneer Press*, the difficulty of understanding him kept the audience from being lulled to sleep.

Nevertheless, the report intimated that Wilde's ideas were worth serious consideration, since it went to some length to recount the more striking suggestions. Wilde, the *Pioneer Press* declared, urged bright and simple dress for both sexes, pleaded for soft and harmonious color schemes, and spoke in favor of a distinctive but simple na-

tive architecture. Great art is local, the lecturer insisted, and should be autochthonous as well. He advised Americans desirous of improving their artistic life to go to the meadows or the docks of a great city for subjects, and to use the buffalo and the wild deer as judiciously and as effectively as the Japanese had used the stork. Finally, Wilde opined, America should use liberally and with taste the quantities of native marble which were free to the taker and which excelled even the Greek stone in variety of color; or America should go back to the painful red brick of the Puritan fathers.

Wilde's final Minnesota appearance was at the St. Paul Opera House on Thursday evening, March 16. He did not change his subject but apparently he did allow certain small variations to creep into his discourse, and he certainly "refined" his costume. According to the report which appeared in the *Globe* the following day, Wilde "was dressed in purple silk velvet, wide sleeves, cut away coat and knee breeches. One hand was encased in a white kid glove and the other sported a lace handkerchief. A long lace neck tie, with bow in front, encircled his neck." Such extravagance of dress, one may be sure, was not lost on the audience and unquestionably did much to vitiate whatever truths Wilde could bring across the Atlantic. Nor did it help matters much to remember, as one of Wilde's biographers apologetically suggests, that the lecturer's garb had much in common with the court dress of the English gentleman.<sup>6</sup>

The substance of this address was again mainly art. According to the *Globe*, Wilde "was shocked by our buildings, by the mud in the streets, and especially by the rooms and furniture in the hotels." The lecture was described in general as well worded, melodious, and without annoying mental stimulation. The "smooth sentences of a languid poet" were pleasing aurally, and certainly must have been profit-

<sup>6</sup> Morse, in Wilde, *Writings*, 1:77.

able. This view was echoed by the *Pioneer Press* in a short squib which appeared on March 17, the paper apparently disdaining to allot any more of its valuable space to the foibles of Wilde:

Oscar Wilde claimed the usual privilege of the peripatetic foreigner, and made several slighting references to American institutions. We are used to that sort of thing, however, and the only time he really trod on St. Paul toes was when he asserted that our streets were dirty. That is a sensitive point with all St. Paul people, except the city authorities, whose business it is to keep the streets clean.

From such reviews it is not impossible to conclude that whatever Wilde's visit did mean to the Twin Cities, it certainly had no lasting effect, and it obviously did nothing to put into more favorable light the gospel of aestheticism. The *Globe* did end its report of the lecture with the apathetic admission that America could stand more art in its daily life, but implied very strongly that Wilde was not the man to bring about that consummation. Indeed, one feels that when Wilde donned his famous fur-collared, green overcoat and boarded the train for Omaha to spread his cult of the new art across the Missouri, his final impression on Minnesotans was that of a personable charlatan, amused and amusing.

Several factors tend toward this conclusion. In the first place, the newspaper publicity that Wilde received almost as soon as he landed in the United States was not calculated to impress favorably the people who were to hear him. Almost invariably the press notices emphasized his witticisms and his personal appearance rather than his ideas. Such a remark as he made upon disembarking in New York, to the effect that he was disappointed in the Atlantic Ocean, received more attention than his really keen appraisal of art in daily life. His affectations of dress (for no one apparently ever thought that a sane man might wear knee breeches and silk stockings because he sincerely believed in them), his "languid" airs, his condemnation of American taste—

all these made juicy copy; and the journalists were not slow in taking advantage of the fact.

Secondly, Wilde's own attitude was hardly conducive to effective proselyting. Originally he had planned to give only one lecture, "The English Renaissance," but soon he compromised and alternated that with "The Decorative Arts."<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, by the time Wilde had gone half way across the country, both lectures had been so quoted and commented on that their substance must have been reasonably familiar to a majority of every audience that he faced. The fact that this familiarity did not decrease appreciably the numbers of people who thronged to hear him must be interpreted to mean that curiosity and not a genuine interest in his doctrine impelled his hearers. Furthermore, although he must have known that his words were already a subject for comment, he made no effort to win his audiences by either gesture or vocal charm. All the Minnesota reports of his lectures agree that the speaker was monotonous and stiff in delivery; yet at Oxford Wilde had been known for his "golden voice."<sup>8</sup> Obviously a man who would not take the trouble to be either original or pleasing and who seemed to glory in eccentricity was fair game.

Yet the Minnesota press did not make the mistake of undervaluing Wilde's intellectual ability. As the *Pioneer Press* for March 14 stated: "Whoever argues that Mr. Wilde lacks intelligence is most decidedly mistaken. He is a thoroughly educated and very bright man and has made an impression wonderful in one so young." Indeed the *Pioneer Press* was fairer in its digest of Wilde's artistic ideas than the eastern papers often had been. But even though Minnesota journalists were frank to admit that Wilde's message was worth taking to heart, they found it almost impossible to divorce that message from the man

<sup>7</sup> Morse, in Wilde, *Writings*, 1:95.

<sup>8</sup> G. J. Renier, *Oscar Wilde*, 7 (Edinburgh, 1933).

himself.<sup>9</sup> On his American tour Wilde revealed himself as clever and tactless, amusing but simpering, half poseur and half iconoclast. It is no wonder that Twin City audiences dismissed him as a harmless gentleman, not so far removed from the level of Barnum's freaks.

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<sup>9</sup>A provincial reverberation of Wilde's visit appears in the *Dodge Center Index* of December 30, 1882, which carries an account of a Christmas masquerade that had been given in the community and had been attended by dancers in motley dress. "The best impersonation costume present," reads the account, "was that representing Oscar Wilde, worn by Cordy Severance, of Mantorville. He was dressed a la Wild[e], knee breeches, big buckled shoes, low collar, sunflower and all, and got around with the esthetic, languid air of the champion of lah dadahism in a style that was button-bursting to see."



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