**\* *Ruskin and I* \***

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***The Storm Cloud***

***of the Nineteenth Century***

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***Oxford***

O thou idyllic Oxford! Pater!

Ruskin! Max-Müller’s giant *Indo-*

*Europäisch* treasure, ah, window

Opening after window! Later

What attitudes would become mine! Ah,

The unfinished watercolour on

 Its easel! Dandyish clothes to don,

*Must* show a worship of blue china.

In my rooms, punch, tobacco, and, far

Into the night, philosophy

And undergraduate foolery

On equal footing… For such are

The amusements of a young Oxonian.

My friends ‘log-roll’ me down a hill

Till all hit bottom in a spill

Exhilaratingly Johnsonian!

\*

Now this is growing repetitious!

A group of hardies climb the stair

To give the aesthete a good scare:

Down they precipitate. Delicious,

The wine I serve his fellows, (‘game’

They are now!) from the ‘cellar’ of

The inciter whom, with little love,

I have sent tumbling to his shame.

\*

Pater’s my mentor and Socrates.

This don who longed to sport with Pan

Once kissed my hand (dear, homely man!),

Semi-recumbent, on his knees.

\*



I venerate the eloquence of

John Ruskin and his high ideals,

And pity him the grief he feels

For an unconsummated love.

We help him turn a swampy, narrow

Lane into a paved, proper road

To Ferry Hinksey. (I bear my load

In his *especial* wheelbarrow.)

\*

To Italy and Greece I go,

With Dunskie in Rome seducing me *(An Oxford chum, David Hunter Blair.)*

To Mother Church, with Mahaffy *(John Pentland Mahaffy, my mentor at*

Among the ruins in a sunset glow. *Trinity. It was he who uttered, ‘In*

*Ireland the inevitable never happens*

\* *and the unexpected constantly occurs’.)*

Sometimes, when I am serious,

Prescience I do not understand

Makes me say, ‘I’ll be famous and,

If not famous, notorious’.

\*

*Either satirically or as a serious warning,*

*Now Scaurus was the man of the hour, in view of my reputation in Oxford, my*

*Famed for quick repartee, though his examiner in Latin asks me to translate a*

*Nature inclined to laziness. passage concerning M. Aemilius Scaurus.*

*His speeches had a fiery power*

*(Though hastily written) to arouse.*

 *But some of these were deemed to be*

*So scandalous, they were publicly*

*Burnt on the orders of the House.*

*His greatest foe was his own pride.*

*Rather than bear the humiliation*

*Of his judicial condemnation*

*The man committed suicide.*

\*

My strangest pose is that I *am*

A *poseur*—which, true, I may be.

My Double-First’s a *jeu d’esprit*

Mystical as a Pentagram.

I am proud of my Newdigate,

Dantèan laurels that I won

With my ‘Ravenna’. And Byron

Is in it, too! It is quite great.

\*

Fortified am I by deep study

Of the Forty-Nine Articles

(Or is it Thirty-Nine?), and Paul’s

Safe from the storm, though soaked and muddy, *The storm that ‘catches him in the Acts’. I*

*was once punished for arriving late for a viva*

‘Tis to be feared. I am so glad *voce* *by being made to copy out this passage.*

He didn’t drown! It all turned out

Quite well, and this relieved my doubt:

I resolved *never* to be bad.

And yet, and yet! I was seduced

By the gods Money and Ambition

And the Madonna of Contrition.

I’m not the holiest man produced

By Oxford, Dears, but I’ve learned oh-

So many things!—And now, go down,

Moses, go down to London Town

To teach the Law Aesthetick. Go!



***Through the Cracked Looking Glass***

***A Talk with Ruskin and a Friend of His***

*I dream I am in the ageing Ruskin’s house in Brantwood, in the Lake*

*District. He is muttering to himself in his study overlooking Coniston*

*Water, whilst poring over old drawings and photographs of girls. I*

*hesitate to interrupt, but how I long to speak with the poor mad genius!*

1.

*I can no longer see the gleam! See the ‘Intimations Ode’.* [Mr V]

*This photograph disturbs me. She,*

*My young Turk, says too much to me.*

*Nature is having a bad dream…*

*Decomposition rules. No help*

*For anything from anything*

*Save Siren-tunes the bank-notes sing*

*Whilst the stock-market devils yelp!*

*A cat torments me, and a white*

*Peacock, whose cries are long and loud!*

*I live beneath a black storm cloud Rose La Touche*

*And I lie sleepless through the night! on her deathbed.*

*Drawing by Ruskin.*

Teacher I honour, will you talk

With one whom you must surely loathe?

*A morbid love destroyed us both.*

*We both have failed… Many a walk*

*We took together, you and I,*

*O’er many a silver-misted quad*

*Talking much nonsense about God*

*And Tintoretto… Can love die?*

Love that can kill can surely die.

You drew her hauntingly on her

Deathbed, your Rose. *Ah, do not stir*

*Those visions in an old man’s eye!*

Those little girls of yours, your ‘flirts’:

You never, of course…? *The very thought!*

Which perish! Still, the matter’s fraught

With ambiguity that hurts

Your reputation. As for *mine,*

It is past hurting: it is dead.

What I did cannot be unsaid

And all I am is as a sign.

But Child Cults, Cults of Innocence!

What could be more perverse? Come, come! *Charles Dodgson alias Lewis Carroll, co-founder*

You and Charles Dodgson are a rum *of the Society for Psychical Research, appears*

Old pair… *Yes, Oscar, we’re old f-f-friends*.  *in his astral body as the aura of a migraine.*

My dear Dodgson, let me ask you:

Those photographs you took of nude

Young girls: how, without seeming rude,

Did you persuade the parents to

Allow you to *do* such a thing?

*It was all innocent, sir, d-d-dirty*

* Only to dirty eyes.* Quite ‘flirty,’

Those girls? Inclined to worshipping?

*We are not given to your s-s-sport,*

*Oscar. You’ve fallen among Tories,*

*Violent Tories… But* your *story’s*

*Easy to tell. It is a sort*

*Of Tarot’s Progress mystery*

*Wherein the Fool becomes the Foul**Dodgson plays his ‘Word-*

*And in the Foul finds his Soul. Ladder’ or ‘Doublet’ game.*

*In doublets you seek unity.*

*But isn’t it a bit expensive,*

*The expense of spirit, wasting time*

*And money on a sordid crime,*

*Inflicting damage so extensive*

*On loved ones for so mean a cause?*

*It is a waste of shame, good shame.*

*(For having smirched your parents’ name,*

*Let’s say—noble, for all their flaws.)*

*What on earth made you sacrifice*

*Your fame and social standing for*

*So vicious a perversion, or,*

*Vice versa, so perverse a vice?*

2.

*You should have thought before you spoke, A Transformation Scene: we are now*

*Measured the sense and weighed the sounds. in a wood in Looking-Glass Land.*

*For language costs a thousand pounds Charles scolds me mildly like the Red Queen.*

*A word these days, and one is ‘broke’*

*Before one knows it. The bill has*

*A way of falling due when least*

*Expected. The watchword is ‘feast*

*Or famine’. It falls due just as*

*The crowd’s acclaiming you the Lord*

*Of Language. Ah, the wreath of laurel*

*Is snatched from off your head. The moral?*

*‘Say no more than you can afford*

*‘To pay for when the check’s presented’.*

* Or is it rather, ‘Pound-wise, penny*

*Foolish’? (Vice versa?) There are many*

*More: ‘Soonest said, soonest repented’.*

*(A variant—this is quite fun!—*

*On ‘Marry in haste, repent at leisure’.)*

*You never learned to weigh and measure.*

*Now, take two eggs, for instance. One*

*Costs fivepence farthing, two, just twopence.*

*But one of them is bad. And so*

*The moral is—oh, I don’t know,*

*‘One’s sure to meet with one’s comeuppance’.*

*The Ranee [Lady Brooke] thinks that he has*

*fallen and cannot rise… I think his fate is*

*rather like Humpty Dumpty’s, quite as*

*tragic and quite as impossible to put right.*

—Constance Wilde,

letter to her brother Otho

3. *An Acrostic Ode*

*O woe is Oscar, in the snare of*

*Sin vainly struggling, the law takes*

*Charge of his body now, it aches*

*And breaks. Such sins one should beware of!*

*Ruin they spell; down from the high*

*Wall Humpty Dumpty falls and shatters*

*Into his pieces, all in tatters*

*Lies his good name. Farewell, good-bye,*

*Dame Luck, a stranger to him now.*

*England won’t have him back again,*

*Oscar, whose other name is Pain.*

*Wild woe to Oscar, Mr OW!*

*‘Wilde’ is a word. What’s in a word?*

*Words, words, words, words. A Wilde by any*

*Other name would be one too many.*

Charles, you make me seem so absurd!

*Oscar, you are a man of words,*

*Not of your word. Ah, we would not*

*Expect so little of you. What*

*A waste of time, reducing surds!*

5. *Oscar, Man of Letters: a Hyper-Anagram*

*As Oscar rises, so Wilde crawls.*

* Oscar is solid, Wilde is oil.*

*Oscar is rose as Wilde is soil.*

*Oscar sees all, Wilde sees cell walls.*

*Oscar is cordial, Wilde is coarse.*

*Social is Oscar, Wilde is low.*

*Oscar or Wilde, sir? Owl or crow?*

*Oscar’s radical. Wilde’s a corse.*

*Oscar’s desire is Wilde’s disease.*

*Oscar’s so candid. Where Wilde lies,*

*Oscar swears lies are real. Wilde:* Dies

**Irae*! Oscar we will release.*

***Mr V and I***

***Astral Travel***

1.

*Your absence haunts me. It sounds queer,*

*I know, but I feel quite chagrined.*

*You are intangible as the wind!*

*How strange to switch from there to here*

*And then to now so quickly in space*

*And time!* Death has its privileges.

We ghosts can move with startling ease

From age to age and place to place.

We fly, as ‘twere, on conscious wings—

Or drift, or float, if minded to.

Still, hawk-like, I return to you.

*You must have seen some wondrous things.*

2. *My Travels*

*Ah, let me tell you! I have seen*

*The tawny Ceylonese sunrise*

*Through a tea-planting girl’s sloe eyes;*

*Have watched the Nile, swift, emerald-green,*

*Surge past the ruins of the sacred*

 *City that Akhenaten built,*

*Muscling a wealth of fertile silt*

*Down to the shores where the waves break red*

*And purple beneath dying suns.*

*At Alexandria, deep under*

*The harbour waves, I’ve seen the plunder*

*Of time, the great stone blocks that once*

*Composed the wonder of the Pharos.*

*On high Mount Ida I have stood*

*Where Troy’s doom burned in the hot blood*

*And fateful judgment of young Paris,*



*And watched a Geisha girl in Kyoto*

*With exquisite composure pour*

*Tea for her warrior paramour*

*And pluck sad music from a koto.*

*(In a pavilion on the way*

*Down from Mount Fuji I have seen girls*

*Make love to girls. This part unfurls*

*As a print by Hiroshige.)*

*With the Aborigines I trace*

 *Song-lines, I join them as they sing*

*Into existence Everything*

*That IS, and gather it into place.*

**

*I have seen the Dogon dance delirious*

*To honour the completed spin*

*Of its mysterious hidden twin*

*Around the raging Dog Star, Sirius.*

*I’ve watched (as strange as this may seem)*

*From the moon, with these ghostly eyes,*

*A pearl of calmest blue arise*

*From darkness like a solid dream,*

*And only slowly recognised*

*It as our planet, lone and small*

*In the void vastness of it all,*

*A fragile thing ah, to be prized!*

*As fragile as blue china, and*

*As rare—which how shall we live up to,*

*Who drain the tea, and break the cup, too?*

*Leaving our stain on sea and land.*

*And sometimes Ruskin joins me there.*

*Tears fill his eyes, and the earth-light*

*Trembles in them. The rest is night*

*And silence, stars and breathless air.*

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***The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century***

*Old Ruskin speaks out of the cloud.*

*His hair and beard are made of fire.*

*The Cloud comes creeping from the mills.*

*(We are depraved, we are depraved*

*And never shall our kind be saved!)*

*The Cloud hangs heavy o’er the hills.*

*The wind is weak. The leaves are grey.*

*(*Je ne peut pas toucher la rose!

*The lily never will unclose.)*

*The wind is from the south to-day.*

*The Cloud is black. Dead souls are in it. The souls of the Crimean War dead*

*(Sesame seeds explode in fury, he imagined filling that baleful cloud*

*The End comes, we must hurry, hurry!) when he first noticed it in the 1860’s.*

*The Cloud grows blacker by the minute.*

*The Dragon slays Saint George, he fouls*

*The good green land with blackest gold*

*Smeared on the valley and the wold*

*And slips his coils around our souls!*

*The garden where the coke lies piled*

*Chokes on the plague, and devils make*

*Avernus of the clearest lake—*

*The air, the waters, all defiled!*

*I cannot tell you what it means.*

*The earth is swallowed by the world.*

*Into the future we are hurled*

*By our intelligent machines.*

*The Cloud is Hermes, god perverted.*

*(Erotic drawings, photographs!*

*It’s wicked how she laughs and laughs,*

*The little girl with whom I flirted.)*

*And the wind is the world-wind. Mad*

*Cassandra’s words will reap no profit.*

*Hermes rustles us down to Tophet.*

*Failure! Oh I am sad and bad!*

*History happens only once*

*And we shall rue the end of it.*

*The death-moths through the belfry flit:*

*Mechanised death to our brave sons!*

*The Great War comes! The Great War comes!*

*And after that, the wind, the wind.*

*Who will dig in the dust to find*

*The broken jaw of our kingdoms?*

**

*****Doubts of a Soul on Leaving its Body***

*An Exchange Somewhere Above my Bed,*

*Small Hours of the Morning, 30 November 1900*

*Ruskin seems to swirl around me as, under the influence of morphine, pain, inflammation and delirium, I seem*

*to detach myself from my body for indefinite periods, then return to my physical self utterly unsure of where*

*I am. Swirling with Ruskin is a thickly-mustachioed gentleman, whom I seem to recognise as Nietzsche; both*

*are in dark frock-coats. We three, it seems, are destined to die ‘together’—to die, that is, in the same year of our*

*Lord 1900, and we are circling our deaths, our bodies beached—wrecked—on the shore of a new century.*

If I may play extemporaneously

On Goethe, the Eternally

Effeminate seduces me

Downwards and upwards simultaneously!

**Nietzsche:

*No more to walk the streets and grin*

*At passersby, ‘I am the God*

*Who drew this cartoon, I, the odd*

*Clown God who mixes you all in’!*

*My Will wants deep Eternity!*

*May things eternally return!*

*The old grow young. Again they learn*

*The secret of maturity,*

*The seriousness they have known*

*As children playing. Lifetime is*

*A child, and learning is his bliss.*

*Friend, when will growing be outgrown?*

Indeed. But I am puzzled, sir.

I mean, does not your very presence

Suggest that something of our essence

Survives death? Speak, philosopher

(For atheists have ghosts, I see):

Can a ghost be an atheist?

Do you or do you not exist?

*It seems I am born posthumously.*

\*

*Ruskin, gazing on a picture, giggling:*

*She brings me back my younger days,*

*This pitty girl, the way she poses*

*Without any clotheses on but roses!*

*God wants to be a girl that plays.*