

*Averil Gardner*

## OSCAR WILDE'S SWANSONG

In the May of 1895, at the height of his career as a playwright, Oscar Wilde was convicted of homosexual practices and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. He served the first six months of his sentence in the London prisons of Pentonville and Wandsworth, but was transferred in November to H.M. Prison, Reading. Here he remained, serving without benefit of remission the full two years exacted by the law, until his release in May, 1897. Wilde's period in prison has been fully documented by H. Montgomery Hyde,<sup>1</sup> and will be referred to here only as it relates to the long poem which resulted from it and which is the subject of this essay, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898).

Wilde's experiences in prison affected him too rawly for him to be able initially to think of them as material for poetry. A month before his release he passed to Thomas Martin, a young warder who had been particularly kind to him, a surreptitious note in which he said: "I hope to write about prison life and try and change it for others, but it is too terrible and ugly to make a work of art of."<sup>2</sup> Soon after this, Martin was dismissed from the prison service for an act of unauthorised kindness to a hungry child, and the first public shape in which Wilde's 'hope' issued was a long letter to the *Daily Chronicle* in which he not only defended Martin's conduct but also took the opportunity to draw attention to the inhumane treatment meted out in prison both to children and to mentally-disturbed convicts.<sup>3</sup> He followed this up in March 1898 with another long letter to the same newspaper, in which he put forward such sensitive and moving criticisms of prison conditions and the prison system that these were changed somewhat for the better.<sup>4</sup>

Knowledge of these and similar actions reinforces one's sense of the strength of the feelings from which the *Ballad* sprang. Its emotional power is due both to the simplicity and force of its language and to the fact that Wilde is writing of matters painfully close to his own experience. The poignancy of such a stanza as the following is twofold: the images concisely embody man's inhumanity to man and are also true, brutal and particular incidents:

For they starve the little frightened child  
Till it weeps both night and day:  
And they scourge the weak, and flog the fool,  
And gibe the old and grey,  
And some grow mad, and all grow bad,  
And none a word may say. (V, stanza 6)

Such directness of utterance was a new departure for Wilde's poetry, previously decorative and largely self-absorbed, but his prison experiences not only gave him a subject—the sufferings of others—but also developed in him, despite the harshness of his own sentence, an ability to respond to those sufferings. He was very aware himself of a change in his own nature. In a letter to Mrs. Bernard Beere shortly after his release he spoke of the possible positive effect of imprisonment: "Suffering is a terrible fire; it either purifies or destroys; perhaps I may be a better fellow after it all."<sup>5</sup> What form improvement had in fact taken is indicated by a letter to Michael Davitt, a Member of Parliament who had himself been frequently imprisoned and was interested in prison reform: "I have learnt pity: and that is worth learning, if one has to tramp a yard for two years to learn it."<sup>6</sup> Prison had deepened and extended Wilde's feelings: it had increased his sense of kinship with other people, making him aware of himself not as an aloof aesthete capable of creating his own fantasy world by the manipulation of language, but as a man exposed like his fellow-convicts to evils which he could as a prisoner do nothing about. This change of heart, together perhaps with the physical starkness of prison life, gave him a very different view of language from the one demonstrated by his earlier poems. He expressed this new attitude in a letter to Frank Harris one month after his release: "Words, *now*, to me signify things, actualities, real emotions, realised thoughts. ... I must say that I no longer make *roulades* of phrases about the deep things I feel. When I write directly to you I speak directly. Violin-variations don't interest me."<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the composition of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was not such a straightforward matter as this statement suggests. Though most of the poem is admirably simple and direct—and moving, partly because of this simplicity and directness—its production cost Wilde considerable effort, an effort necessitated by a developing tension in his mind between the new ideal of directness and older practices of verbal decorativeness and cool objectivity. Wilde's earlier views on the place of strong feelings in art had been expressed unequivocally in a review of 1887: "the personal expression of joy or sorrow is not poetry, though it may afford excellent material for a sentimental diary."<sup>8</sup> Wilde's prison experiences caused him to modify this idea, but did not entirely erase it. One receives from the many letters Wilde wrote during the composition of the *Ballad* the impression that he was never able entirely to reconcile himself to its direct and occasionally personal manner of statement, and a letter to Frank Harris written at the time of the poem's publication shows Wilde's mixed feelings about it: "I, of course, feel that the poem is too autobiographical, and that *real* experiences are alien things that should never influence one, but it was wrung out of me, a cry of pain, the cry of Marsyas, not the song of Apollo. Still, there are some good things in it. I feel as if I had made a sonnet out of skilly! And that is something."<sup>9</sup>

The phrase "wrung out of me" is significant. To no other poem by Wilde could it be applied, and it suggests a vital difference between the *Ballad* and his earlier work. For the only time in his poetic career, Wilde was writing poetry forced out of him by a strong inner pressure that he could not withstand, was pushed by the demands of new feelings beyond his normal preconceptions about poetry and forced almost against his will to extend his range. The *Ballad* involved him in a degree of hard work not previously required of him, and his conscious effort to find suitable expression for material he had had no practice with had a beneficial effect on his poetic style. In his earlier poetry he was responsible only to his own fancy; in the *Ballad* he had to measure himself against common human feelings and against a situation which existed outside himself. With one possible exception, *The Sphinx* (1894), the *Ballad* is the only poem of Wilde's to possess the basic element expected by Matthew Arnold in any poem of stature: that intrinsic "high seriousness" of subject which might summon the deepest human and technical resources of the poet.

On his release from Reading, Wilde immediately crossed to France and settled in the village of Berneval-sur-Mer near Dieppe. In July Wilde began to write the *Ballad*, mentioning "my poem" in a letter that month to Ross,<sup>10</sup> and describing it more fully in a letter to W.R. Paton the following month as "a long poem" in "a new style for me, full of actuality and life in its directness of message and meaning."<sup>11</sup> When he left Reading, he had received from A.E. Housman a copy of *A Shropshire Lad* (1895),<sup>12</sup> and it may well be that Housman's successful use of simple language to render such subjects as young men being hanged spurred Wilde to apply his new view of language to a similar purpose. In mid-August he was still at work, and apparently pleased with his progress, informing Ernest Dowson that "I wrote four splendid stanzas yesterday."<sup>13</sup> On August 24th the poem, still unfinished, was sent to Wilde's publisher Leonard Smithers to be typed. Wilde continued to add passages to it during the late August and early September, and on September 15th he left Berneval and established himself at Posilipo near Naples.

Wilde's letters from Posilipo reveal a tension in his mind between a wish for direct utterance and his former theories of a kind of poetry more remote from actual experience. This tension Wilde was unable to resolve, and the view of the poem which he expressed in a letter to Ross at this time sums up his ambivalent attitude: "The poem suffers under the difficulty of a divided aim in style. Some is realistic, some is romantic; some poetry, some propaganda. I feel it keenly, but as a whole I think the production interesting: that it is interesting from more points of view than one is artistically to be regretted."<sup>14</sup> It would seem that the further Wilde moved away in time from his prison experiences and the direct utterance they at first demanded, the more his earlier "artistic" conscience reasserted itself; yet the social conscience which prison had nurtured in him was still strong enough both to inspire the final sections of the poem, and to urge Wilde to their defence. A letter written to Ross ten days later than the one quoted above speaks of the "propaganda" as something which Wilde "desired to make."<sup>15</sup> What Wilde hoped to bring about was a "balance" between "the romantic vein" and the vein of "banging the tins"<sup>16</sup> and in fact one may regard the juxtaposition of the two veins in the *Ballad* as a fruitful tension rather than a harmful stylistic imbalance.

After much polishing, which Wilde felt could continue indefinitely if he did not deliberately put a stop to it,<sup>17</sup> the *Ballad* was finally published by Smithers in February 1898, Wilde adopting for the occasion the rather transparent pseudonym "C.3.3." (his prison number). Six editions, each of about 1000 copies, followed in the space of three months, Wilde's name first appearing on the title-page of the seventh, published in 1899.

The incident upon which Wilde's reactions to prison life crystallised was the execution on July 7th, 1896, of Charles Wooldridge, a young trooper in the Royal Horse Guards, for the "very determined" murder of his wife, who had "excited his jealousy".<sup>18</sup> Though the *Ballad* is dedicated to Wooldridge's memory, and though it is clear that Wilde felt his fate deeply, his execution is less the theme of the poem than its central focus, serving to organise the whole of Wilde's feelings about prison. The execution—in terms of what it physically effects rather than in terms of the Justice it represents—is the most dramatic epitome possible of man's inhumanity to man, around which cluster the many smaller inhumanities that Wilde describes as the poem proceeds. Wooldridge's story provides a narrative that helps to bind together Wilde's various pictures of, and reflections on, prison life. Whether, without the execution, Wilde could have stated his views in some other way is an unanswerable question, but his opinion in 1887 that "the personal expression of joy or sorrow is not poetry" does seem to explain why he chose to present them primarily by means of a story told about someone else rather than by directly autobiographical expression. The simplifications inherent in the rendering of Wooldridge's action as a murder of "the thing he loved" (line 35) create a distancing effect in the poem, as does the universalising of his action by the implication that he is being punished for what everyone does, in one way or another:

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,  
 By each let this be heard,  
 Some do it with a bitter look,  
 Some with a flattering word,  
 The coward does it with a kiss,  
 The brave man with a sword. (I, stanza 7)

Further artistic detachment is provided by Wilde's calling the poem a "Ballad", and by his employment of a stanza form, involving frequent internal rhyme and the flexible introduction of extra unstressed syllables, that had previously been used by Coleridge in parts of "The Ancient Mariner" and by Thomas Hood for "The Dream of Eugene Aram" (1829).<sup>19</sup> The ballad form gives licence (because of the oral tradition out of which it springs) to direct and simple language, but also, by virtue of its seniority as a mode of expression, confers on this language a sort of immediate literary respectability. Wilde's story of hanging and imprisonment becomes a folk-tale, and Wooldridge a folk-hero, without the story and the man losing their contemporary immediacy. The actual words Wilde uses are simple, but his patterning of them shows some sophistication, as the very first stanza illustrates:

He did not wear his scarlet coat,  
 For blood and wine are red,  
 And blood and wine were on his hands  
 When they found him with the dead,  
 The poor dead woman whom he loved,  
 And murdered in her bed.

The logic of some of this is dubious, but the dovetailing of the lines by repetition of phrases is skilfully done. All through the poem Wilde's artistry in the use of pattern, repetition and variation is apparent, the most obvious examples being the repetition of I, stanza Three ("I never saw a man who looked/ With such a wistful eye") in altered form as II, stanza Two and as IV, stanza Four; and the circular effect given to the poem by having its final stanza echo I, stanza Seven ("Yet each man kills the thing he loves").

Coleridge and Thomas Hood, in addition to having already employed the stanza form chosen by Wilde, seem to have contributed some other elements to the poem. Guilt, remorse and repentance are key themes in "The Ancient Mariner" and "The Dream of Eugene Aram", as they are in the *Ballad*, though Wilde presents these feelings not as they are experienced by Wooldridge but as they are experienced by himself and his fellow-convicts. There are also a few verbal echoes worth pointing out. I, stanza Five has four of them:

Dear Christ! the very prison walls  
 Suddenly seemed to reel,  
 And the sky above my head became  
 Like a casque of scorching steel. ...

Coleridge uses "O Christ!" twice in "The Ancient Mariner" with just this horrified inflection, and Wilde's juxtaposition of his own "Dear Christ!" with the word "very" with little doubt derives from Coleridge's line "The very deeps did rot: O Christ!" (line 119). The metallic imagery of Coleridge's "All in a hot and copper sky/ The bloody sun at noon, ..." may have prompted Wilde's "casque of scorching steel", and the particular adjective "scorching" occurs in "Eugene Aram": "For every clot, a burning spot/ Was scorching in my brain!". Hood uses personified abstractions like "Guilt", "Sin" and "Sleep"; the last of these appears also in the *Ballad* (V, stanza Eight). In the dream-sequence which makes up the larger part of Section III Wilde echoes Coleridge's "About, about, in reel and rout" ("The Ancient Mariner", line 123) with only slight disguise as "About, about, in ghostly rout."

It is significant that these few verbal echoes generally occur in the more "romantic" parts of the *Ballad*. Elsewhere the nature of Wilde's subject matter—his first-hand experience of prison—is almost enough by itself to guarantee him originality of expression, and it is the direct and realistic passages that dominate the poem and dictate its over-all tone. Wilde certainly does not lapse into the melodrama, bathos and unintentional touches of comedy which punctuate "Eugene Aram". Hesketh Pearson sums up the unimportance of Wilde's literary borrowings to a total judgement of the poem when he says that "the general effect is fine enough to cancel all debts to others".<sup>20</sup>

The poem's first four sections move forward through the short life of the trooper from his appearance at Reading among the prisoners on remand—the "Trial Men" (I, stanza Two)—to his execution nine weeks later. In order, however, to bring into immediate prominence the nature of the difference between him and the other prisoners Wilde anticipates his execution in Section IV in a sequence of seven powerful stanzas (I, stanzas Ten to Sixteen) which show immediately the intensity of Wilde's reaction to the trooper's fate and the technical resources which

he brought to the task of communicating its horror. The heavy alliterations, combined with the repeated syntactical patterns at the beginnings of lines, emphasise the relentlessness of the trooper's approaching death and fix firmly in the mind the direction in which the next three sections are inexorably travelling:

He does not die a death of shame  
 On a day of dark disgrace,  
 Nor have a noose about his neck,  
 Nor a cloth about his face,  
 Nor drop feet foremost through the floor  
 Into an empty space.

He does not sit with silent men  
 Who watch him night and day;  
 Who watch him when he tries to weep,  
 And when he tries to pray;  
 Who watch him lest himself should rob  
 The prison of its prey.

Particularly effective use is made of the contrast between the inner horror of the condemned man and small, apparently harmless details: the "little roof of glass" belonging to the execution shed, and the hangman, incongruously dressed for his task in "gardener's gloves" which only emphasise the macabre, nightmarish quality of the situation:

He does not know that sickening thirst  
 That sands one's throat, before  
 The hangman with his gardener's gloves  
 Slips through the padded door,  
 And binds one with three leathern thongs,  
 That the throat may thirst no more.

The pathos of the trooper's fate is, similarly, only thrown into sharper relief by such closely-observed details as the "cricket cap" which he wears at exercise and the "wistful" way in which he looks up at the sky.

At the end of Section II the trooper goes for trial, and the latter part of the narrative suggests his feelings through the agency of Wilde's own and those of the other prisoners, while they wait for the day of execution to arrive. All the emotions of the convicts are centred on the



idea of the trooper who, like them, is an "outcast"; on the one hand, his fate dwarfs theirs into insignificance, but on the other he symbolises for them a state into which any of them might at some point be driven :

So with curious eyes and sick surmise  
 We watched him day by day,  
 And wondered if each one of us  
 Would end the self-same way,  
 For none can tell to what red Hell  
 His sightless soul may stray.

In Section III the prisoners' outward behaviour—the day-to-day routine of prison life—is described, ironically, as a "merry masquerade", in which what can be observed by an outsider is almost ludicrously different from what the prisoners themselves feel. The verbs are harshly monosyllabic, and suggest mindless activity in which men are reduced to beasts or to automata; but the noisiness of "clattered", "banged" and "bawled" is precisely calculated by Wilde to transmit the idea of men hiding something fearful from themselves, and both the alliteration and the increase in the number of internal rhymes convey a mounting hysteria as the list of tasks is reeled off with ever-increasing speed:

We tore the tarry rope to shreds  
 With blunt and bleeding nails;  
 We rubbed the doors, and scrubbed the floors,  
 And cleaned the shining rails:  
 And, rank by rank, we soaped the plank,  
 And clattered with the pails.

We sewed the sacks, we broke the stones,  
 We turned the dusty drill:  
 We banged the tins, we bawled the hymns,  
 And sweated on the mill:  
 But in the heart of every man  
 Terror was lying still.

This contrast between outward appearance and inner reality was for Wilde the essence of the peculiar horror of prison life. It is emphasised in another way by his terse account of the senior officials of the

prison—the description of their public behaviour sardonically suggesting the inadequacy of their human feelings, compared with those of the convicts:

The Governor was strong upon  
 The Regulations Act:  
 The Doctor said that Death was but  
 A scientific fact:  
 And every day the Chaplain called,  
 And left a little tract.

Wilde felt that his language alone was able to express the inner reality of prison, and the contrast between the *Ballad* and earlier poems like *The Sphinx* and “Fantaisies Decoratives” (1887), whose subjects had been enhanced by pictorial illustration, is nowhere more apparent than in Wilde’s reaction to a suggestion that the *Ballad* also be accompanied by illustrations: “[Miss Marbury’s] suggestion of *illustration* is of course out of the question. Pray tell her from me that I feel it would entirely spoil any beauty the poem has, and not add anything to its psychological revelations. The horror of prison life is the contrast between the grotesqueness of one’s aspect, and the tragedy in one’s soul. Illustrations would emphasise the former, and conceal the latter.”<sup>21</sup>

To transmit “the tragedy in one’s soul” Wilde had to rely more than he would have wished on emotive adjectives which had become blunted by too frequent use in contexts where their application was exaggerated. But as there were no external aspects of prison whose description would in itself have communicated what he wanted to express, Wilde felt that he had no option but to employ phrases like “the black dock’s dreadful pen”, “this wretched man”, “the hideous prison wall”, “the hideous shed” and “piteous haste”. He explained his predicament in a letter to Robert Ross: “I admit there are far too many ‘dreadfuls’ and ‘fearfuls’. The difficulty is that objects in prison have no shape or form... A cell... may be described *psychologically*, with reference to its effect on the soul: in itself it can only be described as ‘white-washed’ or ‘dimly-lit’. It has no shape, no contents... the horror of prison is that everything is so simple and commonplace in itself, and so degrading, and hideous, and revolting in its effect.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, the

banal adjectives which Wilde was obliged to use do convey strong feelings: the real context which produced them renders them appropriate, and their appropriateness rubs off a great deal of their rust.

Certain objections can be raised, however, to the "romantic" passages which Wilde put into the poem presumably to give it greater dignity. It would be an exaggeration to call them bad, but they add an unnecessarily "literary" quality to the poem. The three stanzas which open Part Two of Section II, which Wilde added at Posilipo, reduce the reality of the situation: phrases like "gallows tree" and "hempen band" are poetic verbiage. The third of these stanzas is in itself a neatly-turned piece of writing, but the play on the word "dance", used to contrast the two activities described, is rather cheap:

It is sweet to dance to violins  
 When Life and Love are fair:  
 To dance to flutes, to dance to lutes  
 Is delicate and rare:  
 But it is not sweet with nimble feet  
 To dance upon the air.

The dream-sequence which in the final part of Section III leads up to the execution is a useful structural device for suggesting the length and tension of the night, but it goes on a trifle too long (this part consists of nineteen stanzas, and is the longest in the poem), and recalls too obviously parts of "The Ancient Mariner" and Wilde's own earlier poem "The Harlot's House" (1885):

Around, around, they waltzed and wound;  
 Some wheeled in smirking pairs;  
 With the mincing step of a demirep  
 Some sidled up the stairs;  
 And with subtle sneer, and fawning leer,  
 Each helped us at our prayer. (III, stanza 25)

The poem is not seriously damaged, however, by this stylistic harking-back; indeed, the "romantic" passages sharpen one's appreciation of the "realistic" ones. The colloquial phrase "his grave has got no name" (VI, stanza 1) is certainly more acceptable to a modern reader than the affectedly poetic one "it eats the heart away" (IV, stanza 12).

The moment of execution sharply releases the tension built up, however artificially, by the dream-sequence, and even the unlikely simile passes hardly noticed at this climactic point:

With sudden shock the prison clock  
 Smote on the shivering air,  
 And from all the gaol rose up a wail  
 Of impotent despair,  
 Like the sound that frightened marshes hear  
 From some leper in his lair. ((III, stanza 35)

Section IV is mainly occupied with the mixed indignation and pity which Wilde feels for the ignominious burial in "a heap of burning lime" which is reserved for the murderer. His feelings are further affronted by the refusal of the prison authorities to plant any kind of "root or seedling" on his grave: this particular denial of humanity is only one example of what Wilde sees as the deliberate policy of treating prisoners as a "herd of brutes" who must be deprived of any form of pity:

But neither milk-white rose nor red  
 May bloom in prison-air;  
 The shard, the pebble, and the flint  
 Are what they give us there:  
 For flowers have been known to heal  
 A common man's despair.

Wilde's only resource, confronted by the lack of forgiveness exhibited by men in authority and particularly by the professedly Christian chaplain, lies in the sympathy he and his fellow-prisoners can extend, and he expresses this in the eloquent words which were later engraved on his own tombstone:

Yet all is well; he has but passed  
 To life's appointed bourne:  
 And alien tears will fill for him  
 Pity's long-broken urn,  
 For his mourners will be outcast men,  
 And outcast always mourn.

Wilde said in a letter to Robert Ross that he agreed that "the poem should end" after this stanza, but he wished to add some "propaganda" to it.<sup>23</sup> This is contained in Section V, but in fact not all this section is propaganda. The phrase "All is well" (considering the Christian attitude implied earlier in the poem) suggests that there is forgiveness for the trooper from God, if not from earthly authority, and he is clearly described as having repented. In fact, his punishment is now seen, in Section V, as less important than the repentance which its prospect has brought about:

Ah: happy they whose hearts can break  
 And peace of pardon win!  
 How else may man make straight his plan  
 And cleanse his soul from Sin?  
 How else but through a broken heart  
 May Lord Christ enter in?

A certain amount of propaganda is straightforward attack on the inhumanity of the Victorian prison system:

With bars they blur the gracious moon  
 And blind the goodly sun:  
 And they do well to hide their Hell;  
 For in it things are done  
 That Son of God nor son of Man  
 Ever should look upon!

The poem can also, however, be more oblique in its aim, evoking not indignation but pity, and suggesting the possibility that prisons could be made more bearable if greater human sympathy were brought to their administration:

And never a human voice comes near  
 To speak a gentle word:  
 And the eye that watches through the door  
 Is pitiless and hard:  
 And by all forgot, we rot and rot,  
 With souls and body marred.

Section VI rounds out the poem with an appearance of neatness by returning to the statement of the beginning that "all men kill the thing they love", but its last stanza is not intellectually satisfying:

And all men kill the thing they love,  
 By all let this be heard,  
 Some do it with a bitter look,  
 Some with a flattering word,  
 The coward does it with a kiss,  
 The brave man with a sword!

If this means that, like Wooldridge, everyone should repent of his "crimes", it makes a trite ending; if it means rather that our remaining unpunished for our "murders" makes the hanging of Wooldridge unfair, then it seems simply to involve a sentimental distortion of the word "kill". But it is unlikely that the stanza was written with such scrutiny in mind; the impression it gives is that Wilde could not say anything more and found its repetition a convenient device for concluding the poem. Though prisons could perhaps be improved, the abstract Justice which they served was a mystery. As Wilde says at the beginning of Section V:

I know not whether Laws be right,  
 Or whether Laws be wrong;  
 All that we know who lie in gaol  
 Is that the wall is strong;  
 And that each day is like a year,  
 A year whose days are long.

Death by execution was similarly a mystery: the fact that the trooper "had such a debt to pay" was "strange". Read as a tract on capital punishment, the *Ballad* is far from conclusive: the moving depiction of Trooper Wooldridge's fate reveals views which fluctuate between "For only blood can wipe out blood" (V, stanza 17) and "For each man kills the thing he loves,/Yet each man does not die" (I, stanza 9). But to read the *Ballad* as a tract would be perverse. Wilde is concerned with feelings rather than with an abstract reduction of them, and even what he called "propaganda" is better described as emotionally-charged presentation of an actual situation, in which he was unable to reconcile "the majesty of the Law" with the way in which, from day to day, that

Law was enforced. What the *Ballad* very powerfully conveys, in language which sticks closely to actual experience and observed facts, is the emotional revulsion likely to be experienced by any man when he is faced with the translation of a sentence of death into the actual killing of a fellow human being.

In the last stanza of Section III, Wilde indirectly laid claim to that greater degree of sensitivity which belongs to the creative artist:

And all the woe that moved him so  
 That he gave his bitter cry,  
 And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats,  
 None knew so well as I:  
 For he who lives more lives than one  
 More deaths than one must die.

Alone among Wilde's poems, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* fully justifies this claim: one critic of nineteenth-century literature, A. E. Rodway, has described it not only as "a magnificent and unpretentious whole" but also as "the one great poem of a popular kind in 'the last phase'" of the century.<sup>24</sup> Hesketh Pearson quotes Wilde himself as saying of the poem: "I am not sure that I like it myself. But catastrophes in life bring about catastrophes in art."<sup>25</sup> Far from being a "catastrophe", the *Ballad* represents the extension of Wilde's poetic powers, by deeply-felt experience, to a pitch he never elsewhere reached. In this poem, in all senses of the phrase, Wilde exceeded himself. With minor modifications, what he once said of Wilfred Scawen Blunt may be said of himself: "Prison has had an admirable effect on Mr. Blunt as a poet. . . . It must be admitted that by sending Mr. Blunt to gaol [Mr. Balfour] has converted a clever rhymer into an earnest and deep-thinking poet."<sup>26</sup>

Whether Wilde would have been able to transfer to other subjects (had he written any more poems between 1898 and his death in 1900) the strong simple language of the *Ballad* is open to question. A letter written late in the process of its composition carries disturbing implications: "I find it difficult to recapture the mood and manner of its inception. It seems alien to me now—real passions so soon become unreal—and the actual facts of one's life take different shape and remould themselves strangely."<sup>27</sup> The latter phrase may simply refer to a slight distortion of his experiences, of which he was aware, brought about by the use of a "romantic vein". On the other hand, the passage

as a whole certainly indicates a slackening involvement with the reality which those experiences once represented, and one may interpret the latter phrase as implying serious reservations about the "realistic" style in which he had first presented those experiences. If this interpretation of Wilde's rather ambiguous expression is correct,<sup>28</sup> it is perhaps as well that *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was, as he once termed it, his "chant de cygne".<sup>29</sup>

## NOTES

1. H. Montgomery Hyde, *Oscar Wilde: The Aftermath* (1963).
2. *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (1962), 523.
3. *Ibid.*, 568-74.
4. *Ibid.*, 722-26.
5. *Ibid.*, 567.
6. *Ibid.*, 587.
7. *Ibid.*, 607 (13 June 1897).
8. 'The Poets' Corner', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 30 May 1887. Reprinted in *The Reviews of Oscar Wilde* (1908), 170.
9. *Letters*, 708.
10. *Ibid.*, 626 (22 July 1897).
11. *Ibid.*, 630.
12. *Ibid.*, 713, note 1.
13. *Ibid.*, 632 (18 Aug., 1897).
14. *Ibid.*, 654 (8 Oct. 1897).
15. *Ibid.*, 661 (19 Oct. 1897).
16. *Ibid.*, 653 (to Robert Ross, ? 3 Oct. 1897).
17. *Ibid.*, 696 (11 Dec. 1897).
18. For a detailed account, see Stuart Mason, *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde* (1914), 1967 edn., 426-27.
19. The same stanza form is used by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 'The Blessed Damozel', but the effect is quite different (and more 'literary') because Rossetti employs neither internal rhymes nor extra unstressed syllables.
20. Hesketh Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (1946), Penguin Edn, (1960), 343.
21. *Letters*, 691 (to Leonard Smithers, 6 Dec. 1897).
22. *Ibid.*, 654-55 (8 Oct. 1897).
23. *Ibid.*
24. A. E. Rodway, 'The Last Phase', *Pelican Guide to English Literature*, VI (1966 edn.) 398.
25. Pearson, 343.
26. 'Poetry and Prison', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 3 Jan. 1899. Reprinted in *Reviews* (1908), 393-96.
27. *Letters*, 647 (to Stanley V. Makower, 22 Sept. 1897).
28. That it may be is suggested by Wilde's apparent attempts at Posilipo to complete *A Florentine Tragedy* and by the titles of his two projected but unwritten plays, *Pharaoh* and *Ahab*. (*Letters*, 649 and note 3).
29. *Letters*, 715 (to Carlos Blacker, 9 March 1898).