

THE UNKNOWN OSCAR

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In *The Importance of Being Earnest* the satirical imagination plays delightedly around notions of identity. But what are we to say of the importance of being Oscar? Wilde's is a mixed inheritance of Celtic fantasy and ironic sophistication. The search for individuality was a life-time preoccupation ("I am more of an individualist than I ever was", he wrote from prison). It is easily equated with "self-realization" (Wilde's "philosopher's stone", according to his life-long friend from Magdalen days, Ward). But truly to know the self (in obedience to the often quoted Delphic pronouncement, *Gnothi seauton*) is to know many selves; and it was for another, but more truly, Irish writer, W.B. Yeats, to assert that it is out of the quarrel with ourselves that the real work of creation springs. Wilde's understanding of his Celtic inheritance is imperfect. "Is not he who made misery greater than thou art?" says the Bishop to the kneeling boy. Wilde came to see this as more than the "phrase" it seemed when first he wrote it. But the continuing pursuit of an imperious egotism could make no more of it, beyond revealing that "note of doom" which Wilde perceived running, as in *Dorian Gray*, "like a purple thread" through the texture of the whole. So, in this sense, we may freshly perceive that "Each man kills the thing he loves". It is the crowning paradox that Wilde's triumph as a dramatic artist is at odds with the self knowledge which so-called "individualism" must suppress or set aside.

