

EDINBURGH STUDIES IN
TRANSATLANTIC LITERATURES

Series Editors: SUSAN MANNING AND ANDREW TAYLOR



HENRY JAMES, OSCAR WILDE AND
AESTHETIC CULTURE

Michèle Mendelssohn

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With the end of the Cold War and the burgeoning of a global culture, the premises upon which Area Studies were based have come into question. Starting from the assumption that the study of American literatures can no longer operate on a nation-based or exceptionalist paradigm, the books in this new series work within a comparative framework to interrogate place-based identities and monocular visions. The authors attempt instead to develop new paradigms for literary criticism in historical and contemporary contexts of exchange, circulation and transformation. Edinburgh Studies in Transatlantic Literatures seeks uniquely to further the critical, theoretical and ideational work of the developing field of transatlantic literary studies.

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OSCAR WILDE AND
AESTHETIC CULTURE



MICHÈLE MENDELSSOHN

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Full details of all works cited are given in the bibliography. The following abbreviations of frequently cited works are used within the text and throughout the endnotes:

Works by Oscar Wilde

- LW *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis. London: Fourth Estate, 2000.
- PW *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, ed. Peter Raby. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995.
- RW *Aristotle at Afternoon Tea: The Rare Oscar Wilde*, ed. John Wyse Jackson. London: Fourth Estate, 1991.
- SJW *Selected Journalism*, ed. Anya Clayworth. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004.
- W *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1999.

Works by Henry James

- CS1 *Complete Stories, 1864–1874*, ed. Jean Strouse, vol. 1. New York: Library of America, 1999.
- CS2 *Complete Stories, 1874–1884*, ed. William Vance, vol. 2. New York: Library of America, 1999.

- CS₃ *Complete Stories, 1884–1891*, ed. Edward Said, vol. 3. New York: Library of America, 1999.
- CS₄ *Complete Stories, 1892–1898*, ed. John Hollander, David Bromwich and Denis Donoghue, vol. 4. New York: Library of America, 1996.
- CS₅ *Complete Stories, 1898–1910*, ed. John Hollander, David Bromwich and Denis Donoghue, vol. 5. New York: Library of America, 1996.
- LI, 2, 3, 4 *Letters, 1843–1875*, ed. Leon Edel, vol. 1. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1974.
Letters, 1875–1883, ed. Leon Edel, vol. 2. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1975.
Letters, 1883–1895, ed. Leon Edel, vol. 3. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980.
Letters, 1895–1916, ed. Leon Edel, vol. 4. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984.
- LC₁ *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson, vol. 1. New York: Library of America, 1984.
- LC₂ *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, the Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson, vol. 2. New York: Library of America, 1984.
- LL *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Philip Horne. London: Allen Lane, 1999.
- N₁ *Novels, 1871–1880: Watch and Ward, Roderick Hudson, The American, The Europeans, Confidence*, ed. William T. Stafford, vol. 1. New York: Library of America, 1983.
- N₂ *Novels, 1881–1886: Washington Square, The Portrait of a Lady, The Bostonians*, ed. William T. Stafford, vol. 2. New York: Library of America, 1985.
- N₃ *Novels, 1886–1890: The Princess Casamassima, The Reverberator, The Tragic Muse*, ed. Daniel

- Mark Fogel, vol. 3. New York: Library of America, 1989.
- N₄ *Novels, 1896–1899: The Other House, The Spoils of Poynton, What Maisie Knew, The Awkward Age*, ed. Myra Jehlen, vol. 4. New York: Library of America, 2003.
- Notebooks* *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.
- Plays* *The Complete Plays of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1949.

Works by Other Authors

- Edel 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 Edel, Leon. *Henry James*, 5 vols. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1953–72.
- Whistler Whistler, James McNeill. *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, introduction by Alfred Werner. New York: Dover, 1967.

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- 1.11 George Du Maurier, “‘My dear good girl!’ he exclaimed, looking down at his prize. And then he looked up again, rather vaguely’, *Washington Square*, 154. 68
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We were too far apart to call to each other, but there was a moment at which, at shorter range, some challenge between us, breaking the hush, would have been the right result of our straight mutual stare.

‘The Turn of the Screw’ (CS4 654)

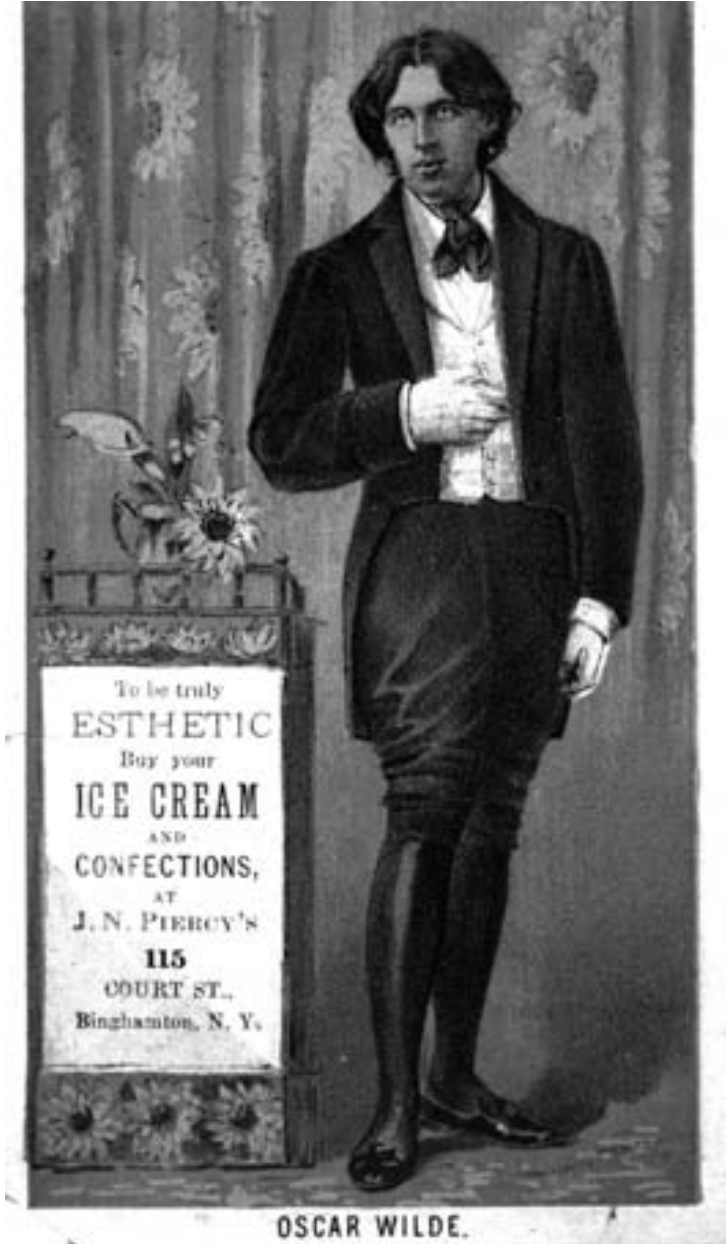
This in fact I have ever found rather terribly the point – that the figures in any picture, the agents in any drama, are interesting only in proportion as they feel their respective situations; since the consciousness, on their part, of the complication exhibited forms for us their link of connexion with it. But there are degrees of feeling – the muffled, the faint, the just sufficient, the barely intelligent, as we may say; and the acute, the intense, the complete, in a word – the power to be finely aware and richly responsible. It is those moved in this latter fashion who ‘get most’ out of all that happens to them and who in so doing enable us, as readers of their record, as participators by a fond attention, also to get most. *Their being finely aware – as Hamlet and Lear, say, are finely aware – makes absolutely the intensity of their adventure, gives the maximum of sense to what befalls them.*

Preface to *The Princess Casamassima* (LC2 1088, emphasis added)

INTRODUCTION

What did it mean ‘to be truly aesthetic’? In 1882, J. N. Piercy’s of Binghamton, NY would have had us believe that ‘being aesthetic’ meant buying ice cream and confections at their store (Figure Intro.1, overleaf). If we look more closely at their advertisement, we might also conclude that in the nineteenth century ‘being aesthetic’ entailed wearing velvet knee breeches, having a predilection for lilies and sunflowers and, most importantly, being Oscar Wilde. What would the citizens of Binghamton have found appealing about Wilde, a young man with exactly one volume of poetry and one play to his name? And what would Wilde, the self-proclaimed apostle of Aestheticism, have found to attract him in rural New York State? Situated nearly 200 miles northwest of Manhattan, at the junction of the Susquehanna and Chenango rivers, late nineteenth-century Binghamton was known for its furniture, wagon and cigar manufacturing¹ – realities that seem far removed from Wilde’s world as we now think of it. It is, indeed, difficult to imagine what Americans would have found to interest them in the Irish author of a long poem beginning ‘this English Thames is holier far than Rome’ (*W* 786). Yet J. N. Piercy’s choice of Wilde as the poster boy for their sweets was a brilliant marketing ploy for it reflected the mania of the time, a fascination with aesthetic culture that gripped Americans from Binghamton to San Francisco, and from Dubuque to Savannah.

Although Americans were aware of Aestheticism before Wilde’s highly publicised 1882 lecture tour of the United States and Canada, Wilde became a convenient and controversial symbol of what aesthetic culture entailed. In fact, J. N. Piercy’s advertisement is only one



Intro. 1 *'To be truly esthetic buy your ice cream and confections at J. N. Piercy's, 115 Court St., Binghamton, N. Y.', 1882.*

This advertisement closely reproduces the photographic portrait Napoleon Sarony made of Wilde in New York in 1882. (Courtesy of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library.)

of the scores of trade cards distributed that year that used Wilde to endorse products ranging from hosiery and corsets to stoves and sewing machines.² Wilde neither personally endorsed these products, nor received a fee for the use of his image, yet the cards insidiously implied that he was part of this commercial enterprise and that consumerism was an integral part of being ‘truly aesthetic’. This image of Aestheticism is difficult to reconcile with the commonplace view of English aesthetes as part of a cultural and artistic elite. In *The Aesthetic Movement in England* (1882), one of the very first studies of the phenomenon of aesthetic culture, Walter Hamilton wrote that the aesthetes were generally thought to be part of ‘aristocratic circles’³ and to belong to the cultural ‘Upper Crust’ – a claim that does not accord with J. N. Piercy’s aesthetic scream for ice cream. English Aestheticism undoubtedly had its commercial side, but it was also intimately and prominently linked to exclusive centres of art and culture, such as London’s Grosvenor Gallery, to which Hamilton dedicated an entire chapter. Heralded as the ‘Temple of Aestheticism’⁴ and ‘the Palace of the Aesthetes’, the Grosvenor was *the* place to see aesthetic art and people. The gallery’s opening celebrations were a veritable who’s who of the Anglo-American elite; they included Wilde, Henry James, the Prince of Wales, Mr and Mrs Gladstone, John Ruskin, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, and John Millais.⁵

It was at the Grosvenor’s opening in 1877 that James and Wilde almost certainly met for the first time. Although there is no extant record of this meeting, we can imagine that Wilde, decked out in a spectacular cello-shaped coat custom-made for the occasion, would have attracted James’s attention, though perhaps not his admiration.⁶ Wilde was then a talkative Oxford undergraduate with a passion for Aestheticism and delft, but no serious accomplishments to his name. James, who had recently taken up residence in London, had by then published tales, travel essays and two novels. Wilde and James, aged twenty-three and thirty-four respectively, were both in attendance in their capacity as art critics. It was a measure of their differences that James reviewed the exhibition for the *Nation*, an American magazine with more influence than circulation, while Wilde published his review in the *Dublin University Magazine*. Wilde subsequently sent his review to Walter Pater, whose *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) was often mooted as a breviary to Aestheticism. Pater responded by inviting Wilde to call on him and, in later years, Wilde described *The Renaissance* as ‘that book which has had such a strange influence over my life’ (LW 735). For his part, James saw the