

How I Came to Lead An Authentic Life: An Introduction

Over a recent americano in Discovery Coffee on Oak Bay Avenue in rainy Victoria, I read “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” for the first time. Why I had neglected one of Oscar Wilde’s last great works till now eludes excuse. Wilde wrote this long narrative poem about the execution of a fellow prisoner soon after his release from prison on May 19, 1897. His sentence of two years’ hard labour for gross indecency, a legal euphemism for sexual activity between men excluding sodomy, had changed him profoundly. Initially published in an edition of 800 copies in 1898, the year my maternal grandmother was born, Wilde’s poem would remain a disturbing touchstone for many in the watershed years to come.

Though Reading Gaol didn’t permit any prisoner to witness the marked man’s death, Wilde makes it clear the prison population was aware of his passing the day it took place. The consequential sweep of mortality’s anonymous hand couldn’t help but touch them all:

For he has a pall, this wretched man,
Such as few men can claim
Deep down below a prison-yard,
Naked for greater shame,
He lies, with fetters on each foot,
Wrapt in a sheet of flame!

Any death makes clocks stop, but it’s Wilde’s evocations of the annihilating conditions he and the rest of the prison weathered that shall more permanently linger with me:

The vilest deeds like poison weeds
Bloom well in prison-air;
It is only what is good in Man
That wastes and withers there:
Pale Anguish keeps the heavy gate,
And the Warder is despair.

Every stanza in Wilde’s poem is as deeply etched a tracing of torment as any print by Goya. By publishing it under the pseudonym c.3.3., the coordinates for his block, landing, and cell, Wilde aimed to deflect attention from himself in order to give his carefully wrought lines a slim chance of fomenting outcry about the penal system’s brutalities rather than to risk having his views dismissed because his authorship, if known, would taint them with his own crimes. He had come to feel a solidarity with “the criminal classes”—“a new experience for me”¹—his conviction having forced him to count himself among them. The agonies Wilde relates are acutely personal:

And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats
None knew so well as I....

Maybe Wilde felt he knew shame better than most because, prior to his imprisonment, he could never have guessed he would one day find himself crushed by an unjust conviction. Detention and isolation had shorn him of his naivety and presumption of impunity. “Wild regrets,” or “Wilde’s regrets,” tipped a stoved-in top hat to the poem’s autobiographical nature. It invited his coterie of friends, supporters, and later devotees to read in the freedoms he had been deprived of because of his carnal desires, though of

¹ Nicholas Frankel, *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years*. Boston; Harvard, 2017, 147.

these he makes no mention. In comparison, the loss of wealth, status, and reputation, also barely mentioned, seems almost immaterial. The spiritual pain Wilde describes approaches the ecstatic:

Out of his mouth a red, red rose!
Out of his heart a white!
For who can say by what strange way,
Christ brings His will to light...

Though “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” makes palpable how incarceration broke Wilde physically and psychologically, the Victorian laws that locked Wilde away failed to break him wholly. While the poem betrays few vestiges of his sparkling wit, his moral compass and sharp intelligence survive intact. His name eventually appeared in square brackets below c.3.3 on the seventh edition’s title page.

It was into Wilde’s legacy of brokenness and resilience that I was born in 1957, sixty years after the poem’s composition, the year the British government released the Report of the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution. Better known as the Wolfenden Report, being named after Sir John Wolfenden, the committee’s chair who was also rumoured to have had a gay son, it took another decade for the British government to act on Sir John’s recommendation to lift the criminal proscriptions against same-sex relations between consenting adults, albeit only in England and Wales once the emending legislation was passed. Apart from chemical sterilization offered to convicted gay men like Alan Turing as an alternative to prison, this repeal stood as the first significant change in our treatment since the laws under which Wilde had been prosecuted came into force in 1885.

In 1967, I wouldn’t have understood what such a legal change would mean for people like me since I was only ten years old. Nor would I have been aware that Canada had then started what turned out to be a two-year-long debate about making similar changes to our own statutes. The many new municipal parks, stadia, arts centres, and eternal flames unveiled as nation-building initiatives during Centennial Year would have more readily caught my imagination. Of course, the liberalizations beginning to see light in the 1960s were decades in the making. As an adult, it took me years of reading to realize I had grown up against a backdrop of change that’s made the life I have led and the writing career I have pursued abundantly tenable. The history made around me as a child was never integrated into my junior-high or high-school curriculum. Buggery’s virtues were never once debated in Health class.

Nor was an adolescent bedroom in 1970s northwest Calgary, where I hid behind a camouflage of *The Lord of the Rings*, blacklight posters, Melanie LPs, and a portable phonograph, a good place to join the debate. That said, I remember a premonition of self-awareness charge through me when my parents took me to see the film adaptation of *Cabaret* when I was in Grade 10. The fillip of Liza Minnelli’s emerald fingernails and Joel Grey’s conspiratorial leer signaled to me in a code I did not then attempt to crack that my future could be other than what society kept telling me it should be. I became a lifelong devotee of the novels of Christopher Isherwood, upon whose work the stage play, musical, and film are based, though I’d later learn he disparaged every theatrical and cinematic incarnation of his iconic characters, Sally Bowles and the cipher narrator he’d based on himself. Steady and slow, mine was an ever-more literate, literary coming out. It took a while for it to register that the subtext of everything Isherwood wrote pertained to me. When I was a university student, I came across his 1976 memoir, *Christopher and His Kind*, which retells the stories he recounted in *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin*, the two books upon which *Cabaret* is based. This time he does not queer-wash his experiences and instead gives prominence to the not-so-underground gay culture of Germany during the closing libertine years of the Weimar Republic,

The first time I was brave enough to attempt writing a queer poem was in the fall of 1979. I had just moved into a derelict, faux-adobe apartment block on View Street at the periphery of downtown

Victoria. The red door into my apartment was discreetly off the building's gateless courtyard; vines of ivy cobwebbed my front window. In "Enfant Terrible" the narrator is haunted by the ghost of Arthur Rimbaud and his decision to forsake renown in favour of running off to live overseas and experience firsthand the illuminations his poems had extolled:

Rimbaud, you look over my shoulder
in white Abyssinian dress
as I attempt to fix you down
each wall, each word

a stress. Though my back is turned
I feel the window behind you
open through your lack of flesh.
You laugh. The notes of your voice

flutter in the wind like the scarves
of Harari women.

Arthur, tell me,
how many did you let go

to the highlands to calve your sons?
Or did you have none,
women, I mean, all those years alone
in Aden before you left

to die in France? What of Verlaine,
his bullet in your wrist? Was his
the body you had last? When you gave up
words, did you forfeit love as well?²

Rimbaud was twenty-one when he shook off poetry's mantle of gold leaf; I was twenty-two and a student of institutionalized creative writing at the University of Victoria. I definitely couldn't workshop "Enfant Terrible" in class, but I did show it to a friend who immediately observed that it explained *Everything*. It took me another decade to start publishing *Everything* and to formulate an aesthetic of candour and completeness that still animates my work. At the time I wrote the poem's first draft, I didn't know I had put pen to paper ten years after Pierre Elliott Trudeau's government had liberalized Canada's laws pertaining to homosexuality, a clinical word I have never liked. Nor did I know that on June 27, 1969, the day after the bill had received royal assent, the Stonewall Riots occupied the cobbled streets of Greenwich Village in New York for three nights, launching the gay-liberation movement that would shake down attitudes as well as laws. Like so much that has made my life meaningful, I learned about Canada's criminal-code changes and the Big Apple's riots long after they took place, learning also that they had coincided with Judy Garland's death. Unlike Wilde, I was not in Kansas anymore. I've never been vulnerable to being labelled a criminal, at least in the eyes of the law. Accusations of being lawless in festive and other senses could not be avoided.

Though I had come out to myself years before in poems I had been slow to share, I started coming out fashionably late in the flesh. I was twenty-eight, it was 1985 and by then the AIDS epidemic

² John Barton, *Great Men*. Kingston: Quarry, 1990, 70.

had gained the force of a juggernaut. The sentence the virus imposed was not two years of hard labour but a death no doctor could commute. There was safe sex, of course, and I found safety in numbers. I had just moved to Ottawa, mecca of librarians; at library school, I'd read David Leavitt's *Family Dancing* and Jane Rule's *Desert of the Heart*. I joined a gay-men's discussion group and later a queer swim team and a gay-men's reading circle that met at After Stonewall, Ottawa's now-largely defunct LGBT bookstore (its present owners mostly sell giftware). For more than a decade, we weighed the merits of books like Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Lillian Faderman's *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, Thom Gunn's *The Man with Night Sweats*, Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, Simon LeVay's *Queer Science*, and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, among countless novels, histories, collections of poetry, memoirs, theoretical works, and plays. It was both higher education and basic training. We followed the store as it moved from basement to second-floor to storefront locations and, because of David Rimmer's welcoming smile, it was a social hub for more than just us. In 1990, soon after he opened the store, David hosted what would be his first book-signing when Quarry Press published *Great Men*, my fourth book of poems. We became friends and fell into the habit of having dinner at a nearby Vietnamese restaurant each second Tuesday of the month before going back to the store to set up chairs. Ideas arising from the books the group discussed would take a second breath in my poems.

My writing over four decades has evolved in step with the attainment of equality rights in Canada and with the flowering of an orchidaceous, articulate queer culture. I have written to find a community of like minds and to ensure this community is heard. Many tell me that being so open has involved courage, but does courage pertain when I have had no choice but to map my version of the truth in order to live a life that feels authentic? In the essays, memoirs, and manifestos collected here, I believe my passions are clear. They elucidate a fascination embracing not only queer experience but also poetry and my life's work as an editor. My queerness nonetheless infuses every word and accomplishment, for who we are informs our attitudes, locates our polestars, and filters the light that guides us. I am a gay-male writer, not a writer who happens to be gay and male, and I have many concurrent identities, including participant and observer. While I decry the hypocrisies of our liberal, self-congratulatory, often unconsciously homophobic culture, I am in awe of the many from all walks of life whose resolve never fails to stir me. The many may be the queer poets who came before me and upon whose shoulders I find myself standing, or they may be the men who succumbed to or now live with AIDS, men who at their darkest may have wondered if Wilde might have written "And alien tears will fill for him / Pity's long-broken urn" with their sufferings in mind. They may be the men and women who mentored and inspired me as a poet and editor, whose generosity taught me how to mentor. After growing up in a society that has only recently stopped withholding the full pleasures and responsibilities of citizenship from people like me, I have no stake in being critical of others for criticism's and literary discrimination's sake. In essays about queer praxis, the craft of poetry, poets, and the art of editing, I aim to strike a note of affirmation.

It's appropriate *We Are Not Avatars'* publication falls immediately before the fiftieth anniversary in June 2019 of the decriminalization of same-sex relations between consenting adults in Canada. The writing of the book's contents overlaps with the last twenty or so years of this progressively more enlightened half-century. While I have revised these essays for republication and ordered them thematically rather than chronologically, they reflect my thoughts when each was written and I hope, if read together, trace how my thinking's grown and even changed. No longer am I among the outcasts Wilde had so painfully mourned. Maybe I never have been.

Victoria, British Columbia
December 2018