

## Playing With Beauty

If I seem to have become obsessed with the isomorphism of love and gambling, it is because, like an unexpected number in roulette on a particularly hazardous night, the subject just keeps coming up. Wherever I look, whether to a work of imaginative literature or to a story from real life, at once I note the love interest; and no sooner do I see it than I interpret it in gaming terms, finding in its outline the same mysterious shapes that have brought generations of serious men to ruin at Monte Carlo, Deauville, or Bad Homburg. Hence these interminable lubrications.

The unabridged text of the infamous letter of nearly a novel's length written by Oscar Wilde to Lord Alfred Douglas from prison at Reading, excerpts from which I read in my youth in Russia as *De Profundis*, has been printed in a facsimile edition by the British Library and can be found in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*. The book contains photographs. The one remarkable aspect of the Douglas affair that these images illustrate is the indisputable physical beauty of Wilde's lover and nemesis. I cannot tell whether my saying so will render that judgment more objective, but the young man's face seems to have been made up of fleeting likenesses to the leading actress of the day, the diva Lillie Langtry.

This is important because, obviously, in order to follow the mesmeric twists and turns of a love affair (such as those, for instance, in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*), one must be persuaded that the attraction (such as that felt by a convulsed James Stewart for the *semper idem* of Kim Novak in her little gray suit) is plausible in the first place. And, in this strange case of more than 100 years ago, I am. I understand that Wilde was smitten and, in a rare leap of faith over the apparently insurmountable barrier separating heterosexual from homosexual sentiment, I even understand why. As for Wilde himself, in writing to his literary executor, he acknowledged that the unsent letter is "the only document that really gives any explanation of my extraordinary behaviour."

Now, anybody who in his tender years ingested even a schoolboy's modicum of the Edwardian paradox-monger's aesthet-

ics will know exactly what I mean when I say that, for Wilde the artist, beauty lay at the center of everything. In fact, notwithstanding his well-documented preference for capitalizing the words beginning with *t*'s and *h*'s—apparently because he liked the way these looked in his handwriting—his beauty-centered worldview obliged him to spell *beauty* invariably with an initial capital. Yet the letter to Douglas, harvesting what he perceives as the poisonous fruit of the four-year liaison between them, is, for the most part, an hysterical catalogue of Douglas's alleged misdemeanors.

"You gambled with my life, as you gambled with my money," the Reading prisoner, long declared bankrupt, goes on, "carelessly, recklessly, indifferent to the consequence." Indeed, as is often the case with love of the remembered kind, much bitterness attaches to the collection and recollection of expenses incurred, of gestures unappreciated, of kindnesses unrequited. "Between the autumn of 1892 and the date of my imprisonment I spent with you and on you more than £5000 in actual money"—something like one million dollars today. When, in a Brighton hotel, Douglas came down with the flu, "I got special grapes from London for you, as you did not care for those the hotel supplied." Another time, he whines, "you insisted on my taking you to Monte Carlo, of all revolting places on God's earth, that all day, and all night as well, you might gamble" while "I was left alone outside to myself." As for their famous dinners at the Savoy, what with "the clear turtle-soup, the luscious ortolans wrapped in their crinkled Sicilian vine-leaves, the heavy amber-coloured, indeed almost amber-scented champagne—Dagonet 1880, I think, was your favourite wine," these extravagances "all have still to be paid for."

How to reconcile the persona of the prophet of Beauty, the scourge of Philistinism, and the martyr of Art with the tenor of this missive, which, to my ears, bears an uncanny resemblance to the family-court lamentation of some pasty-faced American girl with glasses who has put her husband through medical school only to have the future Marcus Welby,

M.D., dump her for a roller-skating Mexican waitress named Lola? The answer, I think, is this. Temperamentally and intellectually, Oscar Wilde may have been many things, but he was no gambler.

Wistfully, he speaks of his frustrating "efforts" to "keep Love as the dominant note of my nature." Would a gambler so bemoan his efforts to stay awake in a casino at 5 A.M.? No, only the gambler understands that his love—and, by extrapolation, *all* love—is as infinitely demanding as it is absolutely effortless. One may draw a parallel with good breeding, with tact, with manners. Would it occur to a man of the world to complain that, during the previous four years of his life, he has held the door open for women on 4,342 occasions and that, furthermore, his prodigious consideration has passed all but unnoticed? Would that make him rebel? Demand appreciation? Write wounded letters? "Its joy," Wilde writes of love, "like the joy of the intellect, is to feel itself alive." Why, then, does he not put his mouth where his money is, or was? Why does he wheeze about losing, about having lost, about never winning?

The other night, I went to the casino with £800. Two hours later, with my last fifty straight up on the number, 26 finally came. Then, like a summer storm out of a cloudless sky, it came again. Then 0, then 15, then all the zero neighbors. Twenty minutes later, feeling the heavenly smoothness of each biscuit, one by one, with the fingers of my left hand inside my jacket pocket, I counted that I had £9,000. Another 20 minutes passed, and the pocket was empty. Only the keys, a cigarette lighter, and some loose thread. As I was leaving, one of the managers came up and whispered in consolation: "Mr. Navrozov, you should've quit." I jiggled the keys in my pocket. "Sean," I said, "you know perfectly well that we don't come here to make money. Those of us who do should have their heads examined. But for a few hundred pounds I've just had the joy of losing to you the princely sum of £10,000. What more can I ask?"

If Wilde had so reasoned, he would not have ended up in the slammer. Now *that's* a paradox. c

## Letter From Paris

by Curtis Cate

### Islam in France



When the French historians of our epoch apply their magnifying glasses to the momentous developments of the first two months of this year, most of them, I think, are likely to conclude that the decisive factor leading to the historic National Assembly vote of February 10—when a massive majority of 494 deputies, compared with only 36 opposed (with 31 abstentions), voted to ban the wearing of “manifestly ostensible” religious insignia in state schools—was an instinctive, gut reaction to an act of Islamic provocation that had occurred three weeks before.

The French, as is well known, are a people of *rous-péteurs*, of viscerally constituted malcontents and gripers, ever ready to “descend into the street” in order to give public expression to their grievances. So ingrained a national habit has this desire to let off sonorous steam become that, nowadays, hardly a week goes by in Paris without the staging of one or more demonstrations—regarded by the police as a sacrosanct “right” enjoyed by French citizens—which effectively tie traffic into static knots on major boulevards and streets on both sides of the Seine. Compared with the huge turnouts that disgruntled schoolteachers, railway and other trade-union workers, public functionaries, overworked hospital nurses, ecologists, environmentalists, and antinuclear Greens of every kind, as well as small armies of the unemployed eager to protest the plight of homeless immigrants are capable of mobilizing—with banner-waving cohorts that may involve more than 100,000 chanting or vociferating participants—the demonstration organized in Paris by Muslim militants on January 17, which is estimated to have mobilized little more than 7,000, was, in terms of numbers, relatively unimportant. What shocked so many Parisians and millions of TV viewers, however, was the sight of carefully segregated ranks of headscarved girls and women who, while chanting the now classic refrain—“*Ni frère, ni mari, le*

*foulard on l’a choisi!*” (“Neither brother nor husband, the scarf we have chosen”)—were “protected” on both flanks by a masculine *service d’ordre* and led by a megaphone-wielding, antisemitic rabble-rouser named Mohamed Latrèche, the founder and leader of the Parti des Musulmans de France, who repeatedly denounced President Jacques Chirac and robustly declared (among other things) that those “who insult us must be terrorized politically.”

If the wearing of the headscarf had been an isolated phenomenon, the problem might have been solved on an informal school-by-school basis—which was more or less the attitude of “conciliation” adopted in this controversy by French Catholic bishops. In fact, however, the wearing of the headscarf was simply the opening wedge of an increasingly insidious Islamic assault on France’s contemporary *mode de vie*—now including, for example, the demand that school gymnasiums and swimming pools be strictly segregated. In a word, it at last began to dawn on “moderate” French politicians—whether Socialists or conservatives—that what they were now confronted with was nothing less than a subversive Islamic offensive aimed at turning the clock of “progress” back by reestablishing the subordinate role of women in French society, by challenging values which, in sport as in so much else, the French, like their European neighbors, have inherited from the ancient Greeks.

(It is interesting to note that, in April 1998, replying to a question raised by Jean-Pierre Chevènement, at that time France’s minister of the interior, Sheikh Muhammad Sayed Tantawi, the supreme imam of the Al-Azhar university mosque in Cairo, declared that, if “the French state regards the wearing of the veil in the lycées to be contrary to its traditions, it has the right to do so,” adding that “the most important thing for our religion is that a Moslem woman be decently clad.”)

Fascinating in the variety of their nuances though so many French opinions on this controversial subject were, it is fair to say that many of the debates produced more heat than light. Nothing, indeed, more dramatically illustrated the widespread ignorance of—not to say the casual indifference to—basic Muslim realities on the part of both politicians and the

general public than the extraordinary vagueness of the existing demographic estimates. The reason for this—a typical illustration of the multicultural “drift” that has so often been the driving ideological force behind all-too-casual French “thinking” about problems of Muslim immigration—is that, in 1972, the French government, in a clumsy effort to clear itself of the slightest suspicion of being “racist,” decreed that henceforth in census-taking, no specific reference would be made to an individual’s ethnic origin or religious faith. As a result, there are simply no reliable statistics as to exactly how many Muslims are presently living in France.

When, recently, Nicolas Sarkozy—the bustling minister of the interior who has been tireless in his efforts to establish a working consensus between the present French government and the diverse religious factions that divide members of the Islamic “community”—declared that there are “5 to 6 million Moslems in France,” he may well have been guilty of exaggeration: Even though his motives were radically different from those of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who regularly trots out the figure of eight million to back up his claim that “aliens” such as these constitute a major menace to a traditionally Catholic country and should—many if not most of them—be sent back to their lands of origin.

Last December, French demographer Michèle Tribalat created a minor sensation by openly challenging the usually accepted figure of five to six million Muslims in the weekly magazine *L’Express*. According to her calculations, undertaken on the basis of a “family survey” involving 390,480 persons, the real figure is closer to 3.7 million, not all of whom are practicing Muslims. She cited a survey, dating from 1992, which revealed that 30 percent of adults aged 20 to 29 and born of two Muslim parents declared that they had no religious affiliation. In another survey, conducted three years later, only one third of the “presumed” Muslims interviewed declared that they regularly attended the Friday service at a mosque.

How have the figures evolved since then? No one apparently knows, the subject being still enveloped in a demographic fog. What, on the other hand, is all too well known has been the catastrophic decline in Catholic fervor and