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The travels of John Betjeman's literary voice in 'The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel': from the 1890s to the 1920s, and back again

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The travels of John Betjeman's literary voice in 'The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel': from the 1890s to the 1920s, and back again

Abstract

John Betjeman was a specialist in the culturally obscure. In his critically unacclaimed poem 'The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel', frequently anthologised and thus one of his more familiar works, Betjeman cites the then obscure, but later not obscure, John Buchan as a *bête noire* of aestheticism. By using Buchan's appearance in *The Yellow Book*, Betjeman put into Wilde's voice the petulant remark that 'Buchan has got in it now' to denote the failure of Wilde's stand against the Establishment and the hearties. My interest lies in why Betjeman chose Buchan to represent anti-aesthetics.

By deconstructing the poem to explore Betjeman's self-recreated world of the Victorians and *fin de siècle* aesthetic values, I show how his voice crossed boundaries but also carried assumptions with it. John Buchan was not who Betjeman thought he was. Listening to Betjeman's challenge to changing literary fashions, I suggest that his literary voice, as poet and stylist, is predicated on an oral and temporal clarity which twists time. In naming Buchan, and his voice, as an antithesis to Wilde in the 1890s, I argue that Betjeman was aligning, rather than contrasting, his subjects.

1 Introduction

In this poem by John Betjeman (1906-1984), John Buchan (1875-1940) shares a cultural locus with Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). This is unusual. The poem is generally held to be about Wilde, and Buchan is used to represent his antithesis. However, the poem is more properly understood as Betjeman's impression of the past, heard through the voices of the present, which represent voices of the past. The poem can be read as a convoluted expression of anti-heartiness set in confined spaces, but its use of Buchan may also be read as a simple solution to a matter of metrical convenience.

The poem describes how Wilde might have been arrested in 1895. There are three voices: the voice of the narrator (which was recorded by Betjeman on *Banana Blush* in 1974 as dry and mild, without emotion); the voice of Wilde, which is petulant, alternating between a focus on the immediate and the specific, and on broader underlying principles; and the Mockney voice of the policeman as an enforcer of moral standards. The poem also describes a crux in cultural and literary history: the fall of Wilde, and the parallel defeat of aestheticism by the hearties. The poem also acknowledges the arrival on the literary stage of the 1890s of a writer who was to become an epitome of heartiness, but who was here appearing in a flagship journal of aesthetic values: John Buchan.

I regard this poem as more than a reconstruction of historical record, and more than only a clever undergraduate *hommage* to the myth of Wilde, because of when and by whom it was written. John Betjeman wrote this poem in the late 1920s, while he was an undergraduate at Oxford, and when he was part of a surge of revitalising enthusiasm for the aesthetic values of the 1890s. His voice takes us back to the 1890s with affectionate admiration, but it is when and how he uses Buchan as an expression of heartiness that the times become unstuck, and we do not know from which period we are being addressed: the 1890s, or the 1920s.

Here I attempt an untangling of the poem from its usual position as an appendix to Wildean myth, to consider it as Betjeman may have meant it, and also from the perspective of the time in which it was written.

2 The poem

The poem is unified within a familiar and traditional structural rhythm, tightly held, but with a wide range of stress patterns within the structure. Variety is also introduced by the different rhymes for lines two and four of each stanza, and in the number of feet per line, depending on the requirement of the speaking voice, and of the tone. The first lines of each stanza are almost all consistently amphibrachic, and the anapaestic rhythm mimics a ballad, a strongly oral form. Although the length of the lines varies, the pattern of line length is also balladic,

long-short, long-short, which is supported by the natural speech patterns of Betjeman's narrative voice.

Despite the free movement of conventional speech in these lines, there is a strong suggestion here, at a very basic level, of confinement, something in motion held within rigid rules. A reflection of this idea can be seen in the lace curtains and the 'bees'-winged eyes' (lines 3-4), which suggest a fluttering motion which is yet held in place.

The first and last stanzas are the only ones to share a b-rhyme; 'skies/eyes' and 'eyed/outside', tying these stanzas together neatly. The rhyme scheme reuses only one line as a refrain: 'For this *is* the Cadogan Hotel', in stanzas five and eight. This echoes the opinions of the poet and the policeman that socially awkward activities are taking place in the heart of respectability, and that standards must be maintained, of good service in the hotel, and of not disturbing the residential peace by resisting arrest.

Alliteration also contributes to the poem's subliminal suggestions of being tied together. Each verse, except one, uses alliteration in a subdued way, ensuring a smooth sound on recitation with words and lines linked. The exception is the second stanza, which is quite hard to recite. Here consonants clash deliberately, drawing our attention to the poet's disjointed feelings on seeing the new red-brick buildings of Pont Street, which do not have, for example, the cream-coloured, aesthetically-pleasing classical design of the previous century, and are as unromantic and unaesthetic as gaslight and an unmade bed. The poet is not comfortable in this Victorian hotel room, and we feel this because its details are depicted with loving precision. Betjeman was to become an expert on the architecture of the period, and at this period in his life was already alert to the details of Victorian interiors. The palms and the Nottingham lace are standard furnishings for the time; hock and seltzer was a Victorian aperitif which Wilde made famous. Wilde was also well-known for his astrakhan coats, and undoubtedly owned at least one morocco portmanteau: these are all details with impeccable antecedents.

Pronunciation is important in this poem. We are invited to use the upper-class pronunciation of 'Cadogan' as 'k' duggan', not 'ka'dgan' or 'kDOEgn' (which are recognised alternate pronunciations, for example), because the stress in the anapaest in line four of stanza five is presented in italics, and thus dictates the stress pattern for the rest of the line.

Betjeman's exaggerated diphthongs from the voice of the pantomime policeman plead to be spoken aloud, suggesting that this poem really is a performance piece. 'What Betjeman communicates is his urgent sense of the ordinary drama of real life, and he has always in mind a real audience' (Harvey, 96). The speaker is forced to slow down, to enunciate, to work at the complicated conjunctions of aspirated and tongue-sticking consonants. Reading dialogue aloud demands

empathy, and a degree of acting. Do we pronounce 'cretins' in the French or the English way? How should we convey the affection and panic in Wilde's voice as he arranges his affairs? Betjeman intended this poem to be recited to an approving audience, who would appreciate its dignity and pathos: there is no mockery, and no martyrdom. Wilde is shown as petulant and demanding, but he is also steady in his adherence to the importance of details. On hearing this poem read aloud, we are given a sense of impending social doom, the steady metre of the stanzas bringing the inevitable arrival of the police closer and closer.

The epigram at the heart of the poem is impeccably Wildean: 'Approval of what is approved of / is as false as a well-kept vow' (lines 15-16). This is hard to interpret because the line is aggravatingly sybilline in its ambiguity. The first part could be translated as 'following the crowd is not conducive to integrity'. However, the idea of a 'well-kept vow' being 'false' is paradoxical, which mocks the idea of a vow being 'well-kept', thus traducing conventional, and also Victorian, ideas of truth and honour. It could also be that Wilde (through Betjeman's direction) or Betjeman (through Wilde's voice) had issues with the concept of keeping a 'vow', per se. Perhaps, if the epigram merely states that a lack of integrity can be compared to fidelity, then fidelity itself must be tainted.

Whose fidelity is Wilde challenging? Buchan is placed as the obvious subject of this remark, but his inclusion here is deliberately anachronistic, since in 1895 Buchan was nobody. In Betjeman's own time, he embodied heartiness, but in 1895 Buchan was at the beginning of his career and was still an undergraduate at Oxford. The presence of Robbie in the poem is suggestive, but Robbie Ross was one of Wilde's most loyal friends, which posterity, and Betjeman, knew.

An alternate approach may be one of euphony, which Betjeman is recorded as finding more necessary than historical accuracy in another poem. 'Dorset', published in the same collection as 'The Arrest of Oscar Wilde' in 1937, uses personal names in the last lines of its three stanzas:

While Tranter Reuben, T S Eliot, H G Wells and Edith Sitwell lie in
Mellstock Churchyard now.

The last three names are changed in each stanza, but the effect is the same, of citing personal names to represent the dead who lie in country churchyards while timeless life continues around them. The point may be made that Betjeman was adapting Thomas Hardy's poem 'Friends Beyond' (1898), which has the opening lines:

William Dewy, Tranter Reuben, Farmer Ledlow late at plough,
Robert's kin, and John's, and Ned's,
And the Squire, and Lady Susan, lie in Mellstock churchyard now!

Hardy himself took the name Reuben Tranter from a character, Reuben Dewy (son of William), in his novel *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), and used it in his poem to denote country continuity, since a 'tranter' was a job description (a carrier) as well as a surname. Betjeman repeated the practice, and added the names of his own friends (Brian Howard, Harold Acton) and names from modernist writing (Edith Sitwell, T S Eliot) to slant the meaning to one of sly irony and sheer unlikelihood. Nonetheless, he added a coda to the poem: 'NOTE: The names in the last lines of these stanzas are put in not out of malice or satire but merely for their euphony' (Guest 1978, 27).

Euphony in the Wildean epigram may be the clue to its presence. The hard alliterated 's' in 'Is as false', and the 'p' sounds of 'approval'/'approved' and 'kept' tighten the couplet in meaning and sound. The three sounds of 'o', in 'approval', 'of' and 'vow' add a languid emphasis to their pronunciation. The sounds of the words may be not so much secondary as complementary to their meaning. It is demonstrable that euphony is important in Betjeman's literary voice, and, I suggest, also holds the key to Buchan's presence in this poem.

3 Historical background

The poem describes the arrest that ended Wilde's social career, and put him in prison. It symbolises the triumph of Establishment, conservative, Victorian values over the antithetical values of aestheticism, which Wilde had hoped would supersede traditional mores. Betjeman suggests that hearty views, anti-aesthetic views, have prevailed. But the narrative voice is ambiguous. Who does Betjeman approve of here?

The arrest of Wilde by two plain-clothes policemen is presented as a mixture of melodrama and farce, and Betjeman cleverly avoids committing himself by adopting an ambiguous tone deliberately playing up the absurd elements in the scene in order to conceal his own response to the tragedy of Wilde's downfall. (Press, 28)

There are shades of feeling which suggest sympathy and disapproval for both sides, and Buchan's ostensible role signals an overt anti-aesthetic/pro-hearty statement (in the terms of the 1920s) which is supported by Wilde's demanding and petulant tone, which is not the voice of an Establishment hero.

Betjeman had had a thing about Wilde for years. While at school he read Wilde because Wilde was disapproved of by teachers and parents alike, and he began a correspondence with Lord Alfred Douglas. Betjeman's father found the letters, told Betjeman exactly what 'a bugger' was and did, and put all further envelopes received from Douglas into the family safe, unopened (Hillier 1988, 116).

But Betjeman was not interested, except perhaps in a symbolic way, in being 'Bosie's boy' the way Douglas had been for Wilde. He maintained the friendship

with Douglas until the latter's death in 1945, and admired his poetry, some might say to excess. While a student at Oxford Betjeman wrote a teasing essay contesting that the poetry of Lord Alfred Douglas was better than that of Shakespeare, and his tutor, C S Lewis, also classifiable as a hearty, was not amused (ibid, 135). It is probable that Betjeman did not think any such thing, that he was hoping for an entertaining exercise in critical debate, but Lewis did not understand, or wish to understand, Betjeman's undergraduate humour. They were not a good combination.

It is entirely probable that Nancy Mitford was satirising Betjeman in her novel *Highland Fling* (1931), by drawing him as the obsessive Albert Gates with a passion for Victoriana, but Betjeman was more than a monomaniac for the unfashionable. Douglas was impressed by Betjeman's 'surprisingly authoritative strength behind the larky whimsical mask' (Wilson, 47). Betjeman was attracted to the rebelliousness of what 'Bosie' stood for (one wonders if by then he had read Wilde's *De Profundis*, which is not flattering to Douglas' character), and he latched onto Douglas as a last representative of a past aesthetic period which Betjeman and his friends were passionately interested in remaking in their own image. Betjeman did the same for other poets of the late Victorian period, notably Theodore Wratislaw, who is the subject of Betjeman's poem 'On Seeing an Old Poet in the Café Royal', published in 1940. This is a lament for ageing poets of an older age, and for the older age itself, seen without sentiment from the age of modernism.

Betjeman offered the Oscar Wilde poem to Geoffrey Grigson for publication in *New Verse* in 1933, but it was refused for being 'smart and frivolous' (Hillier 1988, 358). In June that year it appeared in the revived magazine *Oxford and Cambridge*, and was illustrated by R S Sherriffs (Hillier 1984, 68). It was published again in Betjeman's third collection of poems, *Continual Dew: A Little Book of Bourgeois Verse* (1937), but despite its popularity with the public, the poem has not been looked on with favour by poetry critics. 'The Arrest of Oscar Wilde' was only included ('grudgingly', according to Hillier, 2002, 394) in John Sparrow's edition of Betjeman's *Collected Poems* in 1947, for example, under 'Juvenilia'. In a later collection, Sparrow's edition of Betjeman's *Selected Poems* (1952), the editor was critical of the attention paid by the poet to 'beauties and oddities of which others may be unaware; but like all exploitations of taste, by tending towards concentration upon the foreground, it may obscure a wider vision' (Sparrow, 1952). The foreground vision that Sparrow objected to was the focus on detail by which Betjeman's cultural identity was most clearly expressed. His identification with Victorian culture was conveyed through voices crossing time, but still acknowledging the temporal distance. 'One of the surprises of Mr Betjeman's poems is the feeling they convey of just how quickly a past becomes "the past" - "period" era, so to speak' (Stanford, 85).

Betjeman's use of voice in this poem confuses time and draws together the opposing points of view to echo the poem's subliminal impression of connectedness and confinement. We no longer know which voice is from which time, and we are bottling to and fro between periods like an insect trapped between a curtain and a window-pane.

4 *The Yellow Book* and Buchan

'So you've brought me the latest *Yellow Book*:
and Buchan has got in it now:' (lines 12-13)

The poem is set in April 1895. It can't be set at any other period in time because the arrest of Wilde was a historical fact, and Betjeman is, not, I think, being metaphorical here. Volume 5 of the *Yellow Book* came out in April 1895, so presumably we must look for Buchan in that issue. He is not there. For those interested in the *fin de siècle* and its literature it might be surprising to learn that Buchan ever appeared in the *Yellow Book* at all, but he did, three times, which was a fairly high occurrence rate. Did Betjeman glance at the wrong issue and make a simple error with the date? Buchan's stories 'A Captain of Salvation' and 'A Journey of Little Profit' appeared in volumes 8 (January 1896) and 9 (April 1896). His last *Yellow Book* story, 'At the Article of Death' (January 1897, volume 12), nearly was the article of death for the *Yellow Book*, since the magazine folded with the next issue, volume 13.

If Betjeman did make an error with the date, it would be uncharacteristic of a man who took such care over the detail, the foreground vision, in his work. However, there exists the possibility that if Buchan's purpose in the poem was to be snooted at by Wilde, then Betjeman may have felt that such a figure of derision might not be worth the trouble of verifying exactly when he had stormed the aesthetic portals of the *Yellow Book*.

I suggest that there may have been no error, that Betjeman pulled Buchan's first appearance back in time by a year, to heighten the tragedy of Wilde's fall by a more immediate opposition of values. Wilde's downfall symbolised the downfall of aestheticism, which in turn brought down the *Yellow Book* itself. Wilde's association with the *Yellow Book*, although he never appeared in its pages as a contributor, was blamed for its drop in sales. After volume 5, and Wilde's arrest, a group of six *Yellow Book* authors demanded that Wilde's work be dropped from the *Yellow Book's* advertising for the sake of their own reputations, and its publisher, John Lane, agreed under protest (J Lewis May, 80). A year later Buchan appeared there, and although his contributions were not hearty at all, under the terms in which his later thrillers and gripping yarns could be called hearty, they represented a breath of cold but fresh air.

Hitherto, the *Yellow Book* had largely contained intense little vignettes exploring personal fidelity, which Kipling, for instance, was to satirise much later in his short story 'My Son's Wife' (1917). Buchan's *Yellow Book* stories concerned death, loneliness, misery and a faint hope of Christian redemption, all set in cold and wet environments of poverty, particularly the Border landscapes of southern Scotland. These were a far cry from financially comfortable country-house settings, or the self-absorbed talk of art and artists. Buchan's stories were stark and challenging, and were not comfortable. While it is unlikely that Buchan's stories were published as an effort to change the *Yellow Book's* image and to give it a 'healthier' outlook, it is undeniable that his work represented a change of direction for the magazine.

At the time the *Yellow Book* was one of many literary magazines publishing short fiction. Buchan had already been published by John Lane and worked for him as a reader. Sending his stories to Henry Harland and Ella D'Arcy at the *Yellow Book* must have seemed an obvious choice, since Lane and The Bodley Head published the magazine. Other authors, for instance Conrad, considered the *Yellow Book* as one journal among many, and not as the principal shop window for short story writers (Mix, 273). Buchan himself said of the *Yellow Book*, many years later, that he 'had always thought it a very odd medium for work of mine to appear in' (Mix, 197). The recollections of Lord Tweedsmuir, as Buchan had become, from a position of diplomatic power, must be interpreted as having a different set of priorities than those of a 21 year-old self-supporting student on the brink of literary success.

As for Betjeman's views on Buchan, it is not on record whether Betjeman detested him or not, but I think it unlikely that he was a fan in critical terms. Buchan was already unfashionable in the 1920s to the critical reading public, those who looked down on his middlebrow best-sellers so much that they only considered them acceptable, with apologies, as reading matter for train journeys and other situations where there was no escape. It is more likely, given Betjeman's interest in the Victorian period and with pederastic poets, and by his association with privileged subversives like Nancy Mitford, that anyone as Establishment as Buchan had become in the late 1920s would have been fair game for an extended tease. In the poem, Wilde's objections in 'has got in it now' are disapproval of what Buchan stands for, not of his inoffensive person. It could not have been possible for Wilde to have objected to Buchan in 1895 because it is unlikely that he knew of Buchan's existence, and Buchan is not likely to have presented himself to Wilde or his circle, at Oxford or in London. Betjeman manipulated time to get Buchan where he wanted him, to make him the fall guy.

5 Conclusion

It can be seen that the poem describes a historical event in poetic terms by suggesting confinement in the poem's structure and setting, and approaching doom in the repetitive metre. The ballad form suggests a popular, public event, newsworthy and memorable. The central epigram is ambiguous, suggesting a comment on the nature of fidelity, but must be considered, as must all Betjeman's work, as a structure of words and sounds which may have equal value to its meaning: euphony in Betjeman is important.

The historical context is significant, since the poem is about two opposing attitudes of mind and about the centrality of aestheticism versus the Establishment. *The Yellow Book* (which was probably not carried by Wilde at his arrest at all, but is nonetheless placed in the poem by Betjeman) is presented as a symbol of betrayal and changing sides, of the tide turning away from Wilde. John Buchan is cited, alone, as a symbol of the triumph of the Establishment by his breaching of the bastion of aestheticism. But it can also be seen that Buchan could not have performed this role, since he was not in *The Yellow Book* at that date, and his *Yellow Book* fiction was not remotely comparable to the hearty fiction for which he later, in Betjeman's own day, was famous. There is something out of joint, but does it matter? Why should not Betjeman manipulate the facts to suit his purpose? I suggest that in paying close attention to historicist analysis we miss the point.

We need to return to the poem itself. The name 'Buchan' is a perfectly placed trochee. It is legitimate to ask whether Betjeman was really, ultimately, only looking for the perfect foot to complete his line. To have a two-syllable *Yellow Book* author in there was probably his goal: to have the name of an author so amusingly anti-everything that the *Yellow Book* had stood for would have seemed a perfect concatenation of circumstance. The structure of the poem is so neatly underpinned by its rhythm that a missing foot in a line would have made a clumsy hiccup in an otherwise perfectly stressed chain of syllables.

Betjeman may never have bothered looking at the stories that Buchan published in the *Yellow Book*. He may have assumed that this 1920s idol of the hearties had always been like that, and had infiltrated an aesthetic bastion. If he actually had read those early dark and unsettling stories by Buchan, he would not, I suggest, have placed Buchan in opposition to everything that Wilde stood for.

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