**\* *The Ascension of Old China Blue* \***

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***Farther Revels of Oscar Wilde,* III: Mystical Maths**

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**Blue! ‘Tis the life of heaven,—the domain**

**Of Cynthia,—the wide palace of the sun.**

**—Keats**

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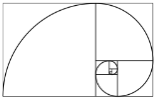
**Old Chine Blue**

**With a bright sunflower**

**He’d play by the hour.**

**He was utterly, utterly, utter-too-too.**

**—Popular song**

***The Ascension of Old China Blue***

*Here, at the podium again?*

*Time: 16 October, 1946.*

*The ‘spiral vase’ seems to be a sort of Klein bottle, un-*

*bounded, non-orientable in space and rather self-absorbed.*

—[Mr V]

1.

Spiral in shape, my fictive vase

Became a staircase I must climb

To view a different place and time

At every turn of what I was.

[*A student creates a disturbance, heckling this tentative*

*beginning as stilted aestheticism. He is escorted out*

*of the lecture hall. A bit ruffled, I must start again.*]

1.

Spiral in shape, my fictive vase

Became a staircase I must climb

To view a different place and time

At every turn of what I was.

2.

I have told you how my spiral vase

Became a staircase I must climb

To view a different place and time.

But did you know that what I was

I saw as what I would become?

And on each landing was a bust

Of something crumbling into dust.

I was alone, and far from home.

3.

You can predict my spiral vase

Will climb the same stairs every time—

But with a difference, yet a rhyme

At every turn of what I was.

I see the one I did become

And on each landing pass a bust

Crumbling into a different dust.

Then dust is where I make my home?

Each turn affords another view

Down the vertiginous stairwell

To various degrees of Hell.

What I did I cannot undo.

5.

The spiral shape, the fictive vase,

Are versions of the stair I climb

But with the difference, this time,

That I turn into what I was.

I am the man I would become

And on each landing pass a bust

Resembling, but only just,

A face that I once knew at home.

Each turn affords a brother view

Or mother view, down the stairwell,

And those whose life I made a Hell

I see, and know not what to do.

The memory of the floors below

Is an accretion of my loss.

A fictive vase with serious flaws

Is the best metaphor I know

For the heartbreak that heals you when

You see the past sink out of view

Like the wrecked vessel that is you.

And you must turn, and turn again.

8. *Constance*

It spirals into itself, my vase,

No matter how far I may climb.

So I grow smaller every time

I see I am taller than I was.

How unbecoming to become

The man I am! I think the bust

Is of the monkey of my lust.

The likeness of a broken home.

I turn to get a better view

And in the depths of the stairwell

I see a face I once knew well.

She wore a veil and said, *I do.*

The memory of it years ago

Became oblivious to its loss.

That’s one of my more serious flaws.

It happened on the floor below

And all her heartbreak happened *then*.

But now her face sinks out of view

And there is nothing I can do

But turn and turn and turn again.

I am sorry Constance! I am so sorry.

But that was on a different floor.

And there are many, many more.

Of course, each story is a story.

Happiness was a thing that used

To happen to me. I am a child

Of mood. My name is Oscar Wilde.

My breath is short. My feet are bruised.

The more I climb the more there is

To climb. Must every step create

Another step? And it grows late.

How shall I ever get out of this?

13. *My Children*

The downward spiral of a vase

Is the inversion of sublime.

Innocent victims of a crime

I see, of which I was the cause.

And into focus now they come,

As I look down. I pass a bust

I do not notice, for I must

Assess the damage as a sum:

I turn to get a better view

And in the depths of the stairwell

I see the children I loved well.

There’s nothing that I would not do

For them, but that was years ago

I did that to them. For I was

As fictive as a spiral vase.

And I weep down on them below,

On all their heartache and their pain.

But now their faces sink from view.

The thing I did again I do.

The turning has returned again.

Cyril, Vyvyan, I am so sorry!

They led me in, and shut the door.

I shall not see you anymore.

Hell is less harsh than Purgatory!

How cruelly you were abused

By relatives who raised you. ‘Wilde’

Was not your name. No, no, no child

Deserves to be so meanly used!

The more I weep the more there is

To weep. What can I do but hate

Myself, or blame it all on fate?

That it is *that*, that it is *this*.

But Cyril, you went off to war

And came back as the ghost I saw

And in the terror and the awe

The tearing open of a scar

Occurred, and I shall call it healing.

And you became my Happy Prince,

With the poor swallow gone long since.

No fire consumes the heart of feeling.

The bird shall sing, the Prince shall praise

The giving of the gems away.

He is in Paradise today.

My vase can only crack and craze.

My heart is in the urn with him.

Ash of my ashes, you, my son,

And Vyvyan, too. All into one

The ashes settle, light grows dim.

How many steps, and for how long

Must I continue to ascend

Into a sky that has no end

To make a rightness of the wrong?

21. *Bosie*

My spiral is a weary vase.

The staircase cannot cease to climb

Through larger spaces, longer times,

Surprised to see how small it was

When higher iterations come

Not quite full circle. And the bust

Is of a spiral quite nonplussed:

The vase contains itself. Its home

Is in another home. Review

The Hellish stories down the well.

Remember Bosie, and your cell.

The panther feasts, and what was due

In the end, and how it fell. Below

My station. Too much revel was

Enough to shatter a fictive vase,

With revelations bringing woe

To me, and Art’s ache, and the pain

Of sacrifice betrayed. My view

Is blurred, my eyes are moist with dew.

Again return, return again,

Dear Bosie, tell once more the story

Of how I walked a stony floor

For you. See how much rope I tore!

Think how the morning’s morning glory

Returns to mourn at evening. Bruised

Is the apple of my eye. Reviled

For ever is this Oscar Wilde.

And I believe you were amused.

The more I brood the more there is

To brood upon. But it is late.

The end game crawls to the checkmate.

Failure, what is the sense of this?

Is Cupid Mars, so to love war?

Your character may have a flaw,

My dear. You lived by your own law

And so did I, but I have the scar

To prove it, you, nostalgic feeling.

Forgiveness when the lover sins

Must scourge him first and make him wince,

But for some wounds there is no healing.

I swallow up my pride these days

For it was I who chased away

My Bird of Paradise. I pray

My pride may go up in a blaze

Of wisdom, but the chance is slim

That I will be the lucky one

Whose ashes fly into the sun.

The Phoenix fire is guttering dim.

The day is short, the shadow long.

And time can never put an end

To brazen sorrow, my old friend,

And grief’s perpetual undersong.

You were my slim-gilt lily boy,

You had the genius of your youth.

I had the genius of my mouth,

My honeyed tongue, my gift for joy.

You were my prince, my fleur de lys

And flirtily familiar with

A thirtyish man who was a myth,

And is a myth eternally.

I fell. You did not make me fall.

The myth, at higher iterations,

Opens onto what revelations?

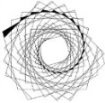
Revels unravel. I willed it *all*.

Perhaps blue blood and a blue face

Cancel each other into love,

Somehow. But from the floor above,

This story is of other days

Much darker down, a depth unclean

With hate. The Irish cock-and-bull

Must face John Bull, and he is full

Of Minotaur. It is obscene.

And how obscene *we* were, together

In our adventures in rough trade!

In Naples love is known to fade

Beside a Bay, in autumn weather.

My spiral is a maze of wandering,

Wandering up to who knows where?

No ceiling but the empty air.

The stars, perhaps, were made for pondering.

The ghosts of old astrologers

Have left their eye-prints on the skies

That do not care who lives and dies.

The stars are Tinkers, Travellers.

34. *The Marquis*

This spiral of blue china, vase

Full of itself, was once sublime.

What is most beautiful with time

Becomes the shade of what it was.

It is the time when monsters come

Out of the closet. Broken bust

Of ugliness, you are the just

Likeness of one who broke my home.

And he comes gibbering into view

And wants to pull me down the well

Into the hate that is his Hell.

What an unspeakable thing to do,

Enter my house and threaten so,

And here you come again! My vase,

Though but the shards of what it was,

Brims over like a cup of woe.

How mad I was to fight the insane!

Could it be monstrously true

That you are me, and I am you?

I turn again. What do I gain?

Fresh understanding of the gory

Details, which who would not deplore?

They are even uglier than before,

And many times I have told this story,

How I was stubborn, and refused

Advice to let it go, and filed

The suit that brought down Oscar Wilde.

Oh, Queensberry was much amused!

The more one hates the more there is

To hate, there is no end of hate.

He is the monster of my fate.

I cannot climb away from this.



Between the gutter and the star

Most thread their way by rote and law.

I wanted both, that was the flaw

That left me with this shameful scar

That makes another wound of healing.

The Screaming Scarlet Monster wins

Again, then a fresh trial begins,

And the familiar awful feeling.

A monster hides in every maze

And of the lost he makes his prey.

The snake in Eden has his way

With every Eve. I curse my days

Of penance, and I glower at *him*,

The one he hated as his son,

That Bosie boy, the Golden One:

The Parsifal who on a whim

Shot down the swan, but the great wrong

That he had done he would defend

Bitterly to the very end.

And still my way is long, too long!

Their faces haunt me, golden boy

And brutish father, arrogant youth

And the beast who sniffed out the truth,

Base metal of a base alloy.

Why will it not be history

That scholars calmly reckon with?

I am still tortured by my myth.

Am I the Sphinx’s Mystery?

The Marquis did not make me fall.

It was my myth grown out of patience

With all reality, the nation’s,

The world’s, the success of it all,

The *fiat lux*, the course of days,

Provisions for below, above,

And in between. I had had enough

Success, I longed to touch the face

Of failure, though it be obscene.

Happiness, sadly, can grow dull.

And the vase becomes overfull

Of emptiness. Down, down careen

The tragic heroes, heaped together

On the ground floor, how low are laid

The saviours by the mess they made!

An end must come to every tether.

Out of control the spiral’s wandering

The twists of its own turns nowhere

But up the iterative stair

Amazed, when what it should be pondering

Is how the stars, the Travellers,

Can find their way across the skies.

They do not know that they are wise

But know that what occurs recurs.

\*

Look there! Could that be Oscar Wilde?

A serious man, some seventy

Years old. Respectability

Weighs on him, there are Honours piled

Upon his back. He is an old

Master. Upon its plinth, the bust

Of him rests solemn and august,

And he, as well, feels marble-cold,

Depressed by a lifelong success

Which through the decades grew to be

A species of vulgarity

That used to cause him some distress.

But what an *oeuvre* he compiled…

Asterion has eyes so mild!

To being a *Sir* Oscar Wilde

He is grudgingly reconciled.

I am the satyr, and his double

And Doppelgänger—I am the ungrounded

Bacchus, the Man of Gestures wounded.

He is glad he never knew such trouble.

\*

Everything learns to say farewell

By moving farther from its source

Because this is its only course.

We tell what we won’t live to tell.

I bid good-bye, not to my wife

And children, and not to my lover

Or foe, but to the things left over,

The memories of a finished life.

I am beyond myself, beyond

Belief and doubt, and every care.

Estrangement is the truth we share.

The heart of its own heat so fond

Becomes a cloud winds blow away

And leaves behind no scars, no stains.

The lightness of the light remains

When there is nothing left to weigh.

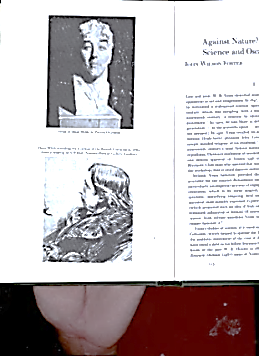
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Blue China I at last live up

To, now that I have climbed the stairs,

You are but a sky that puts on airs.

Let spiral be a simple cup.

Circle is ever at odds with square.

Be genially unreconciled.

And shape no bust for Oscar Wilde.

His is a monument of air.

The scent of roses in a vase.

The sunflower, and the flower on high,

The morning glory in the sky.

For I am not the one I was.

\*

We stars are Travellers, and we roam.

Planets and sea-shells are our traces.

We are at home in many places

But there is no such place as home.



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