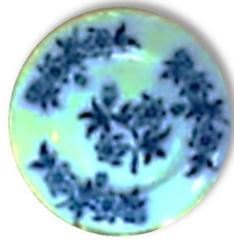


** The Ascension of Old China Blue **



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

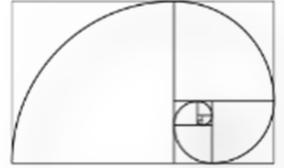
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Old Chine Blue
With a bright sunflower
He'd play by the hour.
He was utterly, utterly, utter-too-too.

— 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*

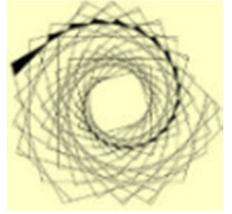
This spiral of blue china, vase
Full of itself, was once sublime.
What is most beautiful with time
Becomes the shade of what it was.

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.

*

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.



