



CHAPTER 7

The Silencing of Speranza

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Drawing on my experience of writing and publishing my 2014 novel, *The Diary of Mary Travers*, and then researching for my edited collection *The Selected Writings of Speranza and William Wilde* (2020), this essay considers the afterlives of Jane Wilde and the silencing and distorting of her scholarly and intellectual career. In particular, the essay will look at her reputation during her lifetime, her scholarship and her public role within Irish cultural nationalism. After her death, her own voice was silenced by a homophobic discourse around her influence on her son. My argument is that contemporary Irish cultural discourse has remade her reputation and this essay connects this moment with contemporary Irish re-examining of lost and hidden lives. As I write, Speranza has found her moment again in the twenty-first century. There is more than one way to be silenced. You can be parodied, blamed, remade as a caricature of yourself. This is what happened to Jane Wilde.

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On the corner of a beautiful Georgian stands a house where three writers once lived. Two men and one woman. There are plaques to two of them on the wall, one placed there in the 1970s and the other in the 1990s. There is even a statue to one of the writers across from the house, now the site of international pilgrimage. The two writers are men, father and son. On the wall of the house is a blank space. Room for a third plaque to the third writer, one would have thought. The silenced woman. The absent voice. In her lifetime she was vocal, in her poetry and in her essays, a witness to the Irish Famine, a key-eyed critic and social commentator, a travel writer and translator. When one of the writers who lived here first went to America, he toured billed as her son. Son of Speranza. One of her many names. Speranza. Jane Francesca Elgee, Jane Wilde. Lady Wilde. Even John Fanshawe Ellis. However, on the wall of her house there is no trace of her. Until 2021, the bicentenary of her birth.

My engagement with Jane Wilde began when I started researching my 2011 study, *Oscar's Shadow: Wilde, Homosexuality and Modern Ireland*. In this study I examined Oscar Wilde's Irish cultural presence and how his sexuality was perceived in relation to his national identity. While researching this book, I came across many hostile accounts of Oscar Wilde's upbringing in Ireland before his departure to study in Oxford. Much of this hostility centred on his mother, Jane. In addition, many references were made to the Mary Travers libel case of 1864 and the parallels made with Oscar's own trials in 1895.

Firstly, the facts of her career and her achievements should be recounted. Jane Frances Elgee was born to a prosperous middle-class Church of Ireland family in Dublin in 1821 but, despite an apolitical upbringing, she was attracted to the struggle for revolution from a young age and against the wishes of her family. She was largely self-taught as a scholar and was a translator of repute in French, German and Latin. From 1846 onwards Jane Elgee began contributing poetry to *The Nation*, the journal of the Young Irelanders, the younger Irish republicans, she adopted the pen name Speranza, the Italian for hope. Later she was to write of this period of Irish history in her essay, "Irish Martyrs and Patriots", that:

A delirium of patriotic excitement raged through the land as these young orators and poets flashed the full light of their genius on the wrongs, the hopes, and the old heroic memories of their country; even the upper classes

in Ireland awoke for the first time to the sense of the nobleness of a life devoted to national regeneration. (cited in Walshe 2020, 5)

When she began to submit her poems, the editor of *The Nation* Charles Gavan Duffy had not then met the author in person, who also wrote under the name of John Fanshaw Ellis (using her initials Jane Frances Elgee). In his memoirs, Duffy recalled:

I was greatly struck by the first contribution and requested Mr. John Fanshawe Ellis to call at the Nation office. A smiling parlor maid, when I inquired for Mr. Ellis showed me into a drawing room. (...) A tall girl whose stately carriage and figure, flashing brown eyes and features cast in a heroic mold, seemed fit for the genius of poetry or the spirit of revolution. (1898, 75)

Speranza herself became editor of *The Nation* in July 1848 and, in February 1849, Duffy and others were put on trial for publishing a seditious call to arms and revolution, “Jacta Alea Est – The Die is cast”: “Oh! for a hundred thousand muskets glittering brightly in the light of heaven, and the monumental barricades stretching across each of our noble streets, made desolate by England—circling around that doomed Castle” (cited in Walshe 2020, 53). Speranza had written that call to arms herself and she was reported to have stood up in the body of the court during the trial and declared loudly that she was the one responsible. However, it was said that the judge refused to listen to her and thus the *Nation* trial fell apart. In later life, she said that this incident never actually happened, but she enjoyed the sense of drama that the legend invoked. This legend of a public triumph may have led her to another trial, the libel case with Mary Travers.

Her writings continued to draw great praise. In her lifetime, the Irish patriot, Charles Gavin Duffy called her “a substantial force in Irish politics, and a woman of genius” (1898, 75). As a poet, Speranza was determined to represent the immediate and disastrous consequences of the Famine. This poem was key in recognising the plight of the dying.

The Stricken Land /The Famine Year. January 1847

I.

Weary men, what reap ye? – Golden corn for the stranger.

What sow ye? – Human corpses that wait for the avenger.

Fainting forms, hunger-stricken, what see you in the offing?
 Stately ships to bear our food away, amid the stranger's
 scoffing.
 There's a proud array of soldiers – what do they need round
 your door?
 They guard our masters' granaries from the thin hands of
 the poor.
 Pale mothers, wherefore weeping? – Would to God that
 we were dead –
 Our children swoon before us, and we cannot give them
 bread.
 (cited in Walshe 2020, 44)

Her husband, William Wilde was already a renowned medical scientist and travel writer when they married in 1854. They lived at first in Westland Row but moved to Merrion Square where Speranza and William Wilde pursued their literary and scientific careers and became part of a wide circle of international writers, scientists and political figures, including Petrie, Edgeworth and Carlyle. Speranza's Saturday afternoon literary salons attracted many of the most celebrated intellectuals of the day and she continued her poetry and her translations, with *The Wanderer*, translated from the French of Alphonse de Lamartine in 1851 and *The Glacier Land* by Dumas (Walshe 2020, 9).

It was also at the height of their success that scandal hit again. What drew my attention to them first was the Mary Travers scandal, which rocked Dublin and brought the Wildes into great national and international attention. In 1864, Speranza was sued for libel by a young woman, Mary Travers, possibly a lover of William's. Afterwards, in a letter to her friend, the Swedish feminist and writer Rosalie Olivercrona, Speranza explained that

You, of course know by now of the disagreeable law affair in which we have been involved. The simple solution to the affair is this, –this Miss Travers is half mad (...) Sir William will not be injured by it and the best proof is professional hours were never so occupied as now (...) All is over, and our enemy has been signally defeated in her efforts to injure us.
 (Tipper 2010, 49)

Later in this essay, I will return to that court case.

Despite the triumph of the case for Speranza, William's health began to fail and soon it was clear that he was dying. Mystery and secrecy were always a part of their life and no more so than on William's deathbed. Oscar recounted the story of the veiled woman who came by agreement to Speranza's house on Merrion Square while her husband was dying:

Before my father died in 1876, he lay ill in bed for many days. And every morning a woman dressed in black and closely veiled used to come to our house in Merrion Square and, unhindered by my mother, used to walk straight upstairs to Sir William's bedroom and sit down at the head of his bed and so sit there all day, without ever speaking or once raising her veil. And nobody paid any attention to her. Not one woman in a thousand would have tolerated her presence, but my mother allowed it because she knew that my father loved the woman and felt that it may be a joy and comfort to have her there by his dying bed. It was not because she did not love him that she permitted her rival's presence, but because she loved him very much and died with his heart full of gratitude and affection for her. (Melville 1994, 129)

William died in Dublin, on 19 April 1876, aged 61, and was buried in Mount Jerome Cemetery. Speranza was left in great difficulty financially but loyally made no complaint. Instead, she sold the house in Merrion Square and made a new life in London with her sons Willie and Oscar. She continued to write and was soon running a successful literary salon in Chelsea, visited by Shaw and Yeats and many others. Yeats later wrote fondly of his visits there to her gatherings on Saturdays: "When one listened to her and remembers that Sir William Wilde was in his day a famous raconteur, one finds it no way wonderful that Oscar Wilde should be the most finished talker of our time" (1934, 77). In London her writing flourished, and she made a living as a freelance journalist, writing for many popular magazines. Her *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland* was published in 1887, provided lively and influential materials for many of those writers central to the Celtic Revival.

More troubles came to her with her son Willie's struggles with addiction and his decline into bankruptcy and then with Oscar's own trials in 1895. She was still well enough to intervene as W.B. Yeats, wrote in his 1914 autobiographies: "I heard later, from whom I forget now, that Lady Wilde had said, 'If you stay, even if you go to prison, you will always be

my son, it will make no difference to my affection but if you go, I will never speak to you again” (1995, 278). Speranza died in January 1896, while Oscar was still in prison, in poor circumstances and both her sons ruined.

As a direct result of her son’s downfall and his sexual disgrace, Speranza’s valued reputation was eroded and she became a figure of derision and misrepresentation. However, with her son’s trial and imprisonment, her place in literary culture was compromised and a new version began to appear, that of an overbearing, emotionally possessive mother. Bernard Shaw has left a version of her character that would enable all of those wishing to undermine her. Bernard Shaw knew the Wilde family when growing up in Dublin and later, by his own account, was treated with great kindness by Speranza in her literary gatherings in London when he was young and poor. In later life, Shaw repaid Speranza’s kindness badly in his writings on the Wilde family and on Speranza’s responsibility in relation to Oscar’s disgrace. Shaw wrote to Frank Harris about his memories of Speranza and it was then published as part of Harris’s biography of Oscar in 1916. Shaw found it necessary to distance himself from any understanding of homosexuality:

I don’t quite know why, for my toleration of his perversity and recognition of the fact that it does not imply any general depravity or coarseness of character is an acquirement through observation and reflection. I have all the normal repugnance to homosexuality—if it is normal which nowadays one is sometimes provoked into doubting. (1982, 33)

Shaw offers a biological explanation for Wilde’s so-called aberrant sexuality by advancing the theory that Speranza was suffering from an abnormal physical condition called gigantism. Shaw provides no medical proof for this theory, apart from the evidence of his own eyes. However, he clearly feels the need to demonise the sexuality that led Wilde to prison. The most venomous account of the family came in 1952, from the Belfast playwright St John Irvine, a biographer of Shaw, who asserts that “neither of the Wildes had any sanctity to dispense” (1952, 35). Likewise, their biographer, Terence de Vere White, acknowledges that “[the Wildes] had acquired something of the inevitability and pathos of the routine vaudeville act” (1967, 17). He calls Speranza a pantomime queen but does manage to show some admiration for her famine poetry, despite himself.

In my introduction to the edited collection *Selected Writings of Speranza and William Wilde* (2020, 1–7), I detail the influence of Shaw’s theory on subsequent misogynist and homophobic accounts of Jane Wilde. This was part of my broader concern to highlight the ways in which Jane Wilde had been silenced and to suggest that fiction was one way in which a lost, silenced or distorted cultural presence could be addressed. Overall, this volume of essays deals with the ways in which silence has had a potent “presence” within Irish cultural production, particularly in relation to the Irish Famine, or the traumas of incarceration and containment within religious institutions. Likewise, the silencing of political traumas such as the psychological legacy of the Northern Ireland conflict has been queried, or remade or overcome by contemporary writers like Anne Burns and Jan Carson, to name a few. My own concern as a contemporary writer of Irish fiction is to open up silence, as fiction can evade the constraints of biography or literary criticism. In the words of Adrienne Rich, “Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language—this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable” (1980, 199).

Within the past fifty years, Wildean scholarship has reflected the changes in Irish society to such a degree that the Wilde family and their writings are now read and framed by contemporary critical thinking. To be more specific, the changes in Irish law around homosexuality with decriminalisation in 1993 and then marriage equality in 2015 means that the implicit homophobia of early twentieth-century critical perceptions of Speranza and of Oscar are now being challenged and dismantled. Also changes in the law around Irish women’s bodily autonomy means a more empowered feminist perspective within contemporary critical thinking on Irish women’s writing and the significance of Speranza’s poems and her essays are being reframed within the light of these new voices and ideas.

Ellmann in his 1987 biography of Oscar tells his readers that the unpleasant stories around Speranza and William came from the undeniable fact that “success promotes malice” (11). Ellman sensibly dismisses the idea that Speranza was responsible for Oscar’s sexuality: “However, accommodating it is to see a maternal smothering of masculinity as having contributed to his homosexuality, there is reason to be sceptical” (11). Davis Coakley’s 1994 study, *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of being Irish*

re-establishes his father and mother's scholarly reputation: "Sir William and Lady Wilde shared a love of learning and their son inherited this trait from them" (3). Coakley makes the point that Speranza was an active feminist and quotes many contemporary admiring accounts of her salon in Merrion Square. Coakley, a Professor of Medicine, dismisses Shaw's gigantism theory as being without any medical proof. Likewise, Colm Tóibín in his 2002 collection, *Love in a Dark Time*, highlights Wilde's respect for Speranza, much needed after all the sneering or grotesque accounts of his mother that appeared: "In all of Oscar Wilde's letters in which he refers to his mother, there is not one word of mockery or disloyalty. Mostly he refers to her not as his mother but as Lady Wilde" (51). Tóibín also makes the point that all grotesque accounts of Speranza happen after Wilde's trials and disgrace. Before 1895, all the contemporary accounts of her are respectful and admiring of her scholarship and her literary standing.

Renewed contemporary scholarly interest on the Wildes has included conferences at Trinity College Dublin and The Royal College of Surgeons, Dublin and the Royal Irish Academy and studies like *The Fall of the House of Wilde* (O'Sullivan 2016) and *The Wilde Legacy* (Ni Chuilleanáin 2003). Publication of several volumes of Speranza's letters and a critical biography by Karen Tipper enhanced Speranza's academic reputation, with several edited volumes of her letters now available in print. Tipper's 2002 biography is an important one as it considers Speranza's writing life in detail and looks at her work as a nationalist, poet, teacher and woman of letters. Contemporary literary criticism has come to recognise Speranza's famine writing, where, in the words of Matthew Campbell, "her poems on the famine not merely intrude, they are focussed on the experience with an effect which approached shock, drawing into verse images of horror garnered from newspaper sketches and journalistic reports" (2018, 82). Contemporary Irish poet Eilean Ni Chuilleanáin suggests:

Her language and her metre are quite different. They are energetic (...) Speranza needs something to slow her down and in fact the most successful of her poems with their long lines and strong pauses have a drag on them, a drag of feeling as much as meter in 'The Famine Year' and in the poem on Henry and John Sheares. Some of the extra weight that ballasts those two poems come from their sense of real history. (2003, 21)

From all of this, I found my sense of Speranza evolving over the past few years. My own observation of Speranza (her complexity, her reputation and the changes in Irish social discourses around gay identity and around feminist thought) informed the process of writing my first novel, *The Diary of Mary Travers*. I was initially attracted to the story because it was the story of a young woman who had been briefly famous (or infamous) when Mary Travers became the focus for so much gossip and newspaper interest due to her libel case against Jane Wilde in 1864. I found accounts of the case when I had been researching my own study of Wilde and Ireland. The libel trial fascinated me, particularly in relation to Wilde's own 1895 London libel trial and I wondered about writing a study of the case. Mary Travers was a silenced or lost voice, and this was a pressing concern for me in terms of framing the novel as a first-person diary, a fictive personal narrative, was to correct the historical fact that her voice was lost to us in the twenty-first century, particularly after the trial of 1864, and so my novel came into being.

The narrative of my novel is based on real events. On 6 May 1864, Jane wrote this intemperate letter to Dr Robert Travers, assistant Keeper of Manuscripts at Marsh's Library in Dublin.

Sir –You may not be aware of the disreputable conduct of your daughter at Bray, where she consorts with all the low newspaper carriers in the place, employing them to disseminate offensive placards in which she makes it appear that she has had an intrigue with Sir William Wilde. If she chooses to disgrace herself that is not my affair; but as her object in insulting me is the hope of extorting money, for which she has several times applied to Sir William Wilde, with threats of more annoyance if not given, I think it right to inform you that no threat or additional insult shall ever extort money for her from our hands. The wages of disgrace she has so loosely treated for and demanded shall never be given her. (Melville, 1986, 167)

Robert Travers' daughter, twenty-nine-year-old Mary Josephine was the subject of this complaint although she had been a long-term intimate of Jane Wilde and of her husband, the recently knighted Sir William. In the preceding months, that intimacy had turned decidedly sour and Mary had been conducting a very public campaign of vengeance and harassment against the Wildes, pushing Jane to the limit of her patience and provoking her to write this angry and potentially libellous letter. When Mary Travers discovered the letter in her father's study three weeks later, she immediately went to a solicitor and issued a writ against Jane Wilde,

claiming damages of £2000 as compensation for her honour. However, Jane Wilde refused to pay and instructed her solicitors to enter a defence of justification.

On 12 December 1864, the case of Travers versus Wilde opened in the old Four Courts in Dublin. The case was brought before Chief Justice Monaghan and lasted five days, with a formidable legal team lined up on each side. Isaac Butt, nationalist MP, was one of the team of counsel for Mary Travers and Edward Sullivan, later Lord Chancellor of Ireland, headed the Wildes' legal team. Jane Wilde was already a public figure thanks to her scholarship and her poetry and so was William Wilde, because of his medical and scholarly achievements. The Travers libel case attracted widespread public interest and amusement as the private life and letters of the Wildes became public property.

My interest here in this novel was to find a way of breaking a silence or recovering a lost story and frame it in such a way that contemporary readers would gain an insight into the societal processes by which Mary Travers became first infamous for speaking out and then was silenced by history. I have written biography and literary history but it seemed to me that what had happened to Mary Travers could not be fully accounted for by historical research. As Norman W. Jones argues in relation to the fictions of Alice Walker,

To judge historical fiction by the standards of nonfiction history is to misunderstand fiction. Walker identifies her protagonist with an actual historical figure for various reasons, but especially to explore and articulate certain mysteries inherent in sex, and how these mysteries, despite being unsolvable, can serve as a catalyst and foundation for ethical transformation. That transformation, in turn, creates a new kind of community with implications for how we think about history. (2008, 2)

The unsolvable mysteries of the lives of Mary Travers and Jane Wilde seem to me to serve as a catalyst for our contemporary understanding of how such lives were silenced.

My sense of Mary Travers was that she was infamous for a moment, where her character, her sexuality and even her sanity were ridiculed and criminalised in the Irish newspapers. And then she disappears and her powerful angry voice, so resonant in the libel trial, was silenced. With so many lost or silenced stories re-emerging with the testimony of the Magdalen Laundries, for example, I felt the moment was right to create a

novel. I decided to make it a first-person diary, to give a silenced voice a fictive afterlife. The novel is written from the perspective of Mary Travers herself, looking back in middle age during Oscar Wilde's time in the London courts at her earlier self and reliving her tempestuous relationship with both William and Jane Wilde. However, as I researched further into the story, I found so many silenced, unnamed, or lost women, not just Mary Travers herself. I found Mary and Emily Wilde, William's daughters, born before he was married to Jane, and dying tragically young when they were burned to death trying to save each other. Their names had been deliberately misspelt in the newspaper reports of their death to hide their true parentage. The veiled woman who comes to visit William on his deathbed, with Jane's approval was another lost or silenced woman. Was she the mother of the dead women?

But, for me, the most powerful moment of transformation was my imagining of the character of Jane Wilde herself, and the more I wrote the more I felt she had been wronged. She was not a pantomime queen but an impressive scholar, a skilled poet and an erudite essayist. I grew to admire Jane and her charm, and the charismatic role she played in Irish society and she almost took centre stage for me as I wrote. Her charm and the complexity of her life fascinated me.

The novel takes place within the time of Oscar Wilde's trials in 1895 and, over the passage of time, the older Mary remembers the first days of her friendship with Jane Wilde thirty years previously, with a reluctant admission of Jane's charisma.

Today, as I made my way here and there on the busy pavements, I was reminded again and again of Jane and of her distinctive manner of walking—that stately, unhurried progress that flattered anyone walking with her, a sense that you were with someone innately majestic and that an aura of majesty was being conferred on all around her. All her concentration was on you and if you said something that struck her, she would stop, maybe place her hand on your arm and smile. She was the one person I have ever met who could flatter you just by walking at your side. (Walshe 2014, 44)

Even though Mary Travers has become the lover of her husband, William, or maybe because of it, Jane makes a point of befriending her and woos her, making her part of her family and inspiring her to write. Mary is

flattered by one of the most famous women in Ireland treating her with respect, drawing her into her world, seducing her, almost.

All the while I watched her and said little, the large, beautiful expressive eyes and so much talk—beguiling, charming, comforting talk, caressing away all my fears.

‘You young women are the hope of our beloved country: young women with intelligence, scholarship and bravery. I am teaching my two sons to revere Ireland above all else and they will do great deeds for our country when they are grown up into men, but we need our young women to be just as truthful.’

People spoke of Jane as over-theatrical, as self-dramatising, but all I can remember today as I sit here is the warmth that drew me in, as different from the reserved intelligence of the Doctor, but just as potent. Perhaps even more so.

That first day, she produced a volume of her poems and presented it to me, with her inscription: ‘To Dearest Mary, a sign of the future and a signal of hope for Ireland’s young womanhood, from your true friend, Speranza.’ She told me that we must always be Mary and Jane to each other. (100)

However, as the novel progresses, reality strikes. William breaks off his relationship with Mary and then so does Jane. It becomes clear to Mary Travers that Jane had been making use of her, making her part of her domestic world to keep her under surveillance. Filled with rage and jealousy, Mary plans her revenge and her behaviour becomes more and more insane. She stalks Jane, persecuting her, publishing William’s letters and making herself impossible at several public occasions. Finally, an exasperated Jane writes her angry letter to Mary’s father and the libel case ensues. In the aftermath, Mary has a breakdown and loses contact with the Wildes, until Oscar’s trial begins to dominate the newspapers and the past comes sweeping back to overwhelm her.

As I reconstructed the story for a contemporary readership, Mary Travers follows the newspaper accounts of Oscar Wilde’s trial in London, and longs to meet Jane Wilde again, her enemy from so long ago. Mary is thrilled to discover that Jane is still alive and living in London:

Jane’s son has been arrested. Mr Naylor was correct. It is in all the newspapers and, since the ladies lounge was deserted this morning, I was free to read without any prying eyes. One account of the case says that Oscar

had ample time to escape when the libel case collapsed, but instead, he sat waiting to be arrested, drinking hock and seltzer, and reading a French novel in the Cadogan Hotel. I had no such luxury when my libel case ended –just a flight back to Mamma’s unwilling arms and a collapse into months of sleepless anxiety and living dread. Another newspaper tells of three hundred men crossing over to France last night on the Dover train, all terrified of a witch-hunt and multiple arrests. In the same paper, it describes the scene where his mother, here called the poetess Speranza and living in Chelsea, came to the Cadogan Hotel yesterday afternoon as her son sat drinking and told him that if he stayed in London and even went to jail, he would be her son forever, but that if he fled to France she would never forgive him. So, she is alive. That sounds just like her, all ringing passion and conviction and full of the worst possible advice. Only a fool would stay where there is a chance of a prison sentence. (40)

At the climax of the novel, Mary Travers travels to London and meets the now elderly Jane, to offer her money and seek forgiveness for her persecution years earlier. As a literary critic, I had a dilemma here. This meeting never happened, as far as history records, but what I was beginning to learn about historical fiction was that a novel can permit what a biography can never do. It seemed to me that contemporary Ireland had found ways to use art, music and fiction to represent much of the lost or suppressed stories and narratives that had disappeared in the cracks and so I wanted to use fiction to extend what I could not do as a critic or a biographer:

Jane, this wrinkled, old parody of Jane, struggled to raise herself. I was unable to speak. I wanted simply to turn and leave.

‘Who are you?’ She demanded, her voice, familiar but now tired and a little hoarse.

‘Please Lady Wilde, do not trouble yourself, and forgive my intrusion. I call merely to pay my compliments.’

She peered up at me. Something of the old manner returned to her eyes and mouth but it was deeply unpleasant, as if Jane had been imprisoned in old, tired flesh and was struggling to be released. She was dressed in dowdy black, her bodice covered in an array of old tarnished looking brooches and chains and an immense black mantilla was clinging uneasily to the neck and her shoulders, caught into her hair by the clasp of a black toothed comb. She smiled at me, as regal as ever and gestured me into the dark red seat opposite her. I sat.

‘An Irish voice. So, few of my fellow-countrymen and women will call in these hateful times. Do I know you?’

I thought for a moment or two and then I decided.

‘Yes, I am Mary, Mary Travers.’

Jane thought for a moment or two and something of the old beauty of intelligence returned to her eyes. She nodded.

‘Mary Travers. Yes, I knew her. A mad poor girl. And so, can you tell me is she still alive? I have not seen her for many years. Someone told me that she was carried off to an asylum in the County Cork.’

‘No. She died there, in her asylum. Last year. It was a sad life.’

Jane shook her head savagely.

‘Good. I am glad she is dead.’

I braced myself for this torrent of venom. I deserved it.

Jane sighed.

‘She is lucky to be dead and was always a sad, confused girl. This can only have been a release for her. I long for death now that Oscar is in that cruel prison. How can people weep at death? To me, it is the only happy moment.’

She paused and investigated the meagre fire. She looked back at me and tried to remember. (171–2)

Because this is an imagined meeting, I decided to deploy a kind of creative ambiguity, to leave the reader uncertain as to whether Jane was now senile and delusional or whether she was playing a part and had really recognised Mary Travers. Jane Wilde had, as a poet, inhabited a public role and had valued greatly the importance of public performance in her self-fashioning as Ireland’s poetic warrior. I wanted to leave this kind of ambivalence unresolved, to suggest that the lost stories we encounter have no real sense of finality:

‘So, Mary Travers is dead. She was so much younger than me, and a bright girl. And I am still alive. I was sorry to hear that her madness overwhelmed her. All those crazed letters and poems. Her brother died in a madhouse in Australia, I believe. Did you know her?’

(...)

I took the envelope from the cake box and placed it into her old wrinkled hands. I remembered those hands, large, plump, busy writing, or waving around as part of an anecdote. She looked down and a gleam came into her eyes. She opened the envelope and looked at the money. At

once, a look of fear crossed her face. She hurriedly put the money into the pocket of her old, black dress.

(...)

‘Who did you say you were?’

‘Mary Travers. I am Mary Travers, the daughter of Robert Travers.’

‘Yes. I remember her. We had to take her to court, you know, years ago. We won. She was clearly mad and got caught up with that awful cad Corney Ward and Isaac too. My former beau.’ She chuckled. ‘Chivalry was never allowed to get in the way of a lucrative case. My William had to pay the lawyers over two thousand pounds, you know and all she got was a farthing for her honour.’ She laughed. ‘Still, we won. It broke her poor father. The last time I saw Oscar in the Cadogan hotel just before they arrested him, I told him, I said, if you stay, even if you go to prison, you will always be my son but if you run away, then I shall never speak to you again.’

Her face crumpled and all the old Jane went with it. She dwindled back into being an old woman. A tear wandered down her cheek.

‘How could I have been so foolish? Two years hard labour. It will kill him. Those animals spat at him on the streets and at the railway station as he waited in handcuffs to go to his prison. My beautiful boy. Lady Queensbury had her son spirited out of town as soon as she could and advised me to do the same. I should have paid attention.’ (173–4)

My other concern was to connect the Mary Travers libel case with that of Oscar Wilde himself, when, in 1895, he sued the Marquis of Queensbury for libel. This was a disaster for Oscar and he ended up in prison, serving two years hard labour for the crime of gross indecency. Oscar’s downfall had profoundly damaging consequences for Jane’s own posthumous reputation and her silencing took another form, the destruction of her literary reputation. In part, my novel attempted to reverse some of this loss of reputation:

I roused myself to speak, if only for myself and not for her. The dark room and Jane’s mad whisperings were beginning to unsettle me.

‘I am very sorry, Lady Wilde, for your misfortunes.’

‘Thank you, my dear, you are most kind and please do give your mother our deepest sympathies on your father’s passing. It was very kind of you to call and tell us. Dr Travers was a most cherished friend of Sir William’s. When did dear Robert die?’

She smiled at me with some sympathy.

‘Some years ago, now.’

'Yes, we knew his daughter. Mary. A most unfortunate girl, we meant only to be kind, I'm sure. You look a little like her. A handsome girl and full of learning.'

I found myself unexpectedly tearful.

'And you were. Very kind. It is I who was most unkind.'

Jane smiled over at me.

'Not at all, my dear, not at all, it was not your fault. Pray do not blame yourself. Isola died of a fever, it was merely an accident.'

She pulled her mantilla around her and moved her hand towards the fire.

Something cold gripped my heart. I made to speak but she went on.

'No, it was simply that you were young and foolish, it is the duty of youth to be foolish.'

She looked at me. Jane. No longer the old crone.

'Jane,' I said, in a low whisper, 'Jane, I have come back. Can you forgive me, please? It's Mary.'

She looked at me, and seemed about to speak when we heard the rattle of cups on a tray. (174)

This is a key scene in the novel for me, a moment of reconciliation and forgiveness for Mary. Jane had been her friend and mentor, and Mary had admired her writings, her intellect and her vivid personality. The libel case that Mary takes had been motivated by revenge, by hurt and a sense of Jane having dropped her and neglected her. We, the readers, will never know if Mary had been forgiven by Jane and, that is, in a sense, her punishment for her transgression. But now, I realise, in a broader sense, what I realised as I wrote this novel is that Mary Travers had admired the intellectual and creative abilities of the older woman Jane, and had sought to emulate them. Later, when their friendship broke down, Mary Travers published crude parodies of Jane's writings to antagonise her. What I wanted to do was erase that sense of parody and restore a clearer sense of what Jane Wilde had actually achieved as a poet, a critic, a translator and an essayist. Most of these writings were out of print and, as I suggest in the introduction to my edition of the selected writings of Jane and William Wilde:

Key to this volume is the representation of their interests in social observation, medical practice, and the recovery of Irish archaeology and folklore, placing these two Victorian Irish at the centre of an impressive web of international scholarship. Their social writings reach beyond Ireland and

the question of Irish independence to interrogate parallel questions in their contemporary European cultures and societies. (2020, 2)

The range of her work, the essays, the translations, impressed me with how attractive and witty her style is, and what a confidant and accomplished writer she was. Writing this novel led me to the enjoyable and rewarding task of collecting the lost writings of Jane Wilde and it seems to me that the fruitful interchange between writing fiction, and archival recovery is very much part of a contemporary critical moment in Irish literary studies. What marks this moment in Irish studies is the ways in which both art and historical research can be deployed to recover lost voices. Strict categorisation and demarcations between what a novel should be and what a work of literary history or criticism would encapsulate are being creatively blurred in the recovery of what has been lost and what cannot be fully re-articulated within the discourse of literary criticism.

To conclude, on a beautiful cold November morning in Dublin, in 2021, a small ceremony takes place in the centre of Dublin in line with COVID restrictions. A young woman poet reads a tribute to Speranza and then the Lord Mayor of Dublin unveils a new plaque on the house, joining that of the two men, after so many years being absent. The Lord Mayor of Dublin tells us spectators of her admiration for Jane Wilde, and reminds us how few such plaques are in Dublin to Irish women. Now that I write, the plaque has been unveiled. One of Speranza's excellent contemporary biographers, Eleanor Fitzsimons, author of *Wilde's Women*, published in 2015, spoke of the ways in which Speranza has been reclaimed. In addition, a commemorative stamp was issued by the Irish state for International Women's Day and her great grandson Merlin Holland paid tribute to her scholarship at a ceremony at the Royal Irish Academy. The name of his lecture is "Speranza: A Scholar Reclaimed". Her voice has returned. The house now is complete. The silencing is over.

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