ERNEST DOWSON

(2 August **1867**–23 February **1900**)

Considered among the greatest lyric poets of the late 19th century, Dowson was the most admired and technically gifted member of the renowned early-1890s Rhymers' Club. A quintessential bohemian, he was also probably the most distinguished, after Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley, of the nineties "Decadents"—figures whose dedication to Art was virtually a religion and who believed that beauty and a finely tuned aesthetic sensibility were better paths to truth than puritanical ethics. Although ironically Dowson thought of himself as more fiction writer than poet, his poems are almost unparalleled in their haunting beauty, and they generated many phrases that have since been famously borrowed—e.g., "gone with the wind," "the days of wine and roses." His most famous poem "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" [I am not as I was under the reign of the good Cynara] has often been judged one of the world's greatest.

Ernest Dowson 1886

Born in Lee, a southeast suburb of London, on 2 August 1867, Dowson grew up with cultured, modestly well-to-do, if somewhat impractical parents, who both suffered from tuberculosis and, partly for health reasons, shuttled the family back and forth between England and France. Despite irregular early schooling, Oxford University admitted him in 1886 based largely on his exceptional knowledge of classical literature, especially Catullus, Propertius, and Horace. Although strongly encouraged to read for Honors, he nevertheless dropped out suddenly in 1888, partly to assist with the struggling family dry-dock business ("Bridge Dock" at 67 Narrow Street, Limehouse, in the East End of London) but mostly to pursue a career as a writer. Dowson's poetry had always been rich in religious sentiment, even borrowing from Catholic liturgy and hymnology, so it was more logical than formative when, like many of the "Decadents," he converted to Roman Catholicism in August 1891. Far more significant, in late 1889 he fell in love and began a long, platonic, if often indecisive courtship with Adelaide Foltinowicz (only eleven years old initially), a waitress in her immigrant father's Polish-German restaurant at 19 Sherwood Street, Soho. To Dowson's friends it was a puzzling and paradoxical relationship—given his continuing regular nightly patronage of central-London taverns, music halls, and prostitutes—but it continued for years, dissolving only in 1896 when Adelaide became engaged to someone else, a tailor who also waited tables at the restaurant.

Dowson at Oxford 1886

The eventual failure of "Bridge Dock" was already certain, when Dowson's father died suddenly of a chloral overdose in August 1894, and his mother hanged herself in

Ernest Dowson, Drawing by Will Rothenstein 1894

February 1895. Unable to salvage the family business or sustain himself solely on his poetry and stories, Dowson resorted increasingly to translating French novels. Even before his failure with Adelaide, Dowson had developed a pattern of vagrant wandering, and now it only became more pronounced. From late 1895 through 1899, dreading London and suffering from tuberculosis and chronic malnutrition, he began moving about peripatetically, usually around Paris or Brittany, rarely having a permanent address and often staying overnight in cabmen's shelters. Publisher Leonard Smithers generously put him on a small regular salary during this period even though Dowson was writing relatively few new poems and stories. Finally, gravely ill, he was rescued almost literally off the streets by fellow writer Robert Harborough Sherard, and after some six weeks of futile nursing in Sherard's Catford flat, Dowson died on 23 February 1900 at age 32.

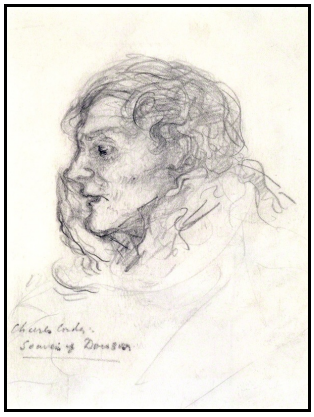
The works of Charles Baudelaire, Émile Zola, A. C. Swinburne, Walter Pater, and especially philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer influenced Dowson's art early, extensively, and powerfully. His poetry, most of it eventually collected in *Verses* (1896) and *Decorations* (1899), customarily presents a consistent paradigm: nuns, madmen, or, most of all, idealized little girls (hence his attraction to the adolescent "Missie") are sequestered in convents, cells, or gardens, thus protected from the swirling change, vulgar decay, insidious hypocrisy, and voracious desire of an "outside" world ever threatening to violate and despoil them. These figures are often aestheticized into the human equivalent of changeless and untainted works of art, suspended in time and worshiped from afar by the self-sacrificing, refined lovers who extol them. Incarnating some timeless original purity long since lost by the egoistic poet himself—a time before any corruption by maturation, sexuality, social contrivance, or sin—such chaste figures are an implicit, though ultimately futile, rebuke of the Schopenhauerean Will's deceptive use of romantic love to disguise the "vilest . . . spawn of Nature's filthy lust." In these poems, the loss of innocent "lily time" results not so much from a single act of sin as from the fated, "defiling" process of life itself.

Like his fellow devotees to the "Religion of Art" (and like Arnold), Dowson wanted to believe that an *aesthetic sensibility* leads to *moral sensitivity* and can foster human sympathy and communion. But, ironically, in Dowson's works aesthetic perfection is generally shown to be most "pure" and "perfect" precisely in its cold incompatibility with the humane, and the poet-lover who worships ideal innocence is usually made to seem invariably a part of, and partly responsible for, the decay which heralds its passing. In the world of Dowson's art, life is often fundamentally out of phase with poetic dreams, and, as we find out most pointedly in his verse drama *The Pierrot of the Minute* (1897), one cannot ultimately find escape in the world of dreams and ideals. Dowson typically embeds his pessimism stylistically as well as thematically, his frequent use of the conditional "would" and "might" calling attention to the very temporality his characters seek to escape, and his

compelling linguistic repetition and parallelism generating a "closed" structure that intimates paralysis and purposelessness.

A similar fatalism, signaling the influence of Henry James, runs through his short fiction and the two collaborative novels *A Comedy of Masks* (1893) and *Adrian Rome* (1899) written with college friend Arthur Moore (1866-1952). Here circumstance and the yearning of Dowson's introspective protagonists converge to create a redemptive opportunity that, once missed, can never recur. Furthermore, as in his poems, Dowson epitomizes the self-contradictions of the fin-de-siècle "Religion of Art," suggesting that the artistic sensibility itself may even be destructive of human communion: his protagonists embrace their aesthetic sensibilities only to become, or risk becoming, uncompassionate egoists destroying or perverting the innocents who love them. In his two novels the egoistic delusions of vain society contaminate, pervert, and ultimately squander what is noble and pure of the artist's talent and, moreover, end up destroying, through the artist's apostasy, the faith and dreams of those pure and selfless innocents who love him.

Dowson's "solution" for avoiding such consequences is also characteristically Schopenhauerean: since egoism and lust corrupt, the lover must sacrifice —what Arthur Symons called Dowson's "ethics of renunciation"—giving up hope of romantic fulfillment, thus saving the beloved from likely corruption and effecting a triumph of human dignity over avaricious desire. However, as in his other works, one of the central facts of life in Dowson's fiction—and the one which makes his world ultimately unredeemable—is that the bifurcation between "disinterested" aesthetic purity and desire-bound worldly vulgarity is illusory—not a *choice* humans have but the fundamental and inescapable paradox of their existence. Thus, here too, the lover of innocence inevitably contaminates and destroys the very purity and value he seeks to preserve. In light of this vexing vision, it is not surprising, perhaps, that Dowson should have entitled his collected stories *Dilemmas* (his original choice was the even bleaker "Blind Alleys") and decided to title his second notebook of poems "Fragments."



Drawing of Dowson
by Charles Conder

For the first two-thirds of the 20th century, critical opinion about Dowson tended to be more evaluative than analytical, focusing on his biography more than his works and stigmatizing the Decadence as a movement as much about moral iconoclasm as artistic themes and styles. That prejudicial inclination owed no small debt to the tenacity of the notorious "Dowson Legend," a sensational and misleading amalgamation of fact and fiction dating at least from Symons's *Savoy* essay in August 1896, which floridly unveiled a "decadent" and "demoralized" Dowson whose "love of the sordid" marked a "swift, disastrous, and suicidal genius." The "Legend" was strongly reinforced in William Butler Yeats's *Autobiography* (1916), which presented Dowson as perhaps the purest exemplar of what Yeats called the fin-de-siècle "tragic generation"—talented artists who died unseasonably young allegedly because their poetic visions and "untidy" lifestyles could not

withstand life's harsh realities. Consequently, for years scholars routinely endorsed the Legend's view that the "tragic" themes in Dowson's art were the direct result of the jolting losses in his life—most of all, his frustrated love for the teenage Adelaide—even though such themes were, in fact, largely formulated near the outset of his career, predating the setbacks in his life and remaining virtually unaltered by them. Most of Dowson's works were written in the late 1880s and early 1890s and published in various literary magazines, although not collected in book form until sometimes much later. Indeed, if anything, Dowson's "untidy" life was a logical extension of his poetic mythology, like many of his nineties colleagues who felt it a duty to align life with art. If he lived an extremely "unworldly" bohemian life, it was because he cared very little for the world outside of Art.

Dowson's Grave, Restored by Public Donations 2010

The "reality" that the twentieth century came to affirm—that there are no absolute truths but only constantly shifting and often paradoxical meanings and values (a view which was honed under Einstein's relativity theory and Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle")—was precisely a reality that Dowson continually hoped to refute, even as the integrity of his art continually confronted it. Dowson's reputation has suffered over time, as many of the "naïve" paradigms he largely originated and certainly perfected seem now, after many decades of repetition and varied adaptations by others, to be merely clichés. Furthermore, Dowson's brilliant technical skills with rhyme and conventional poetic structures are less valued at present, when most poetry eschews rhyme and fixed forms. For all that, his poems remain among those works required for inclusion in any legitimate anthology of the best 19th and 20th-century poetry. Moreover, his art intensified the inherent contradictions in the *fin de siècle,* pushing traditional Romantic and Victorian concepts to their logical conclusions, and thus acted as an ironic harbinger of ensuing Modernist alternatives.