

# Michael Wilding's 'Lost Illusions': the Balzacian Underpinnings of *Wildest Dreams*

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In an interview with Michael Wilding conducted in Sydney in 1991 (Wilding, 1993), he told me that he had recently completed a memoir titled 'The Literary Pages'. Seven years later 'The Literary Pages' appeared under the title *Wildest Dreams: A Selective Memoir*. Worried about the dubious marketability of a book with the daunting word 'literary' in the title, the publisher wanted the title changed, and so it was. According to Amazon.com, *Wildest Dreams* is a very popular and much used title – in America at least – a 'nation' that likes to believe it was founded and perpetuated under the rubric and metaphor of 'dreams' – the 'American Dream', all that. From Amazon.com, a few examples: There are seven listings alone for *Wildest Dreams*, and an eighth called *Wildest Dreams: A Horror Novel*. Then there are the self-help co-efficients, of which here is a sampling: *In My Wildest Dreams: Simple Steps to a Fabulous Life*; *Soul Aerobics: Connecting Body, Mind & Soul*, *The Soul-ution for Success Beyond Your Wildest Dreams*; *Recovering from Alcoholism: Beyond Our Wildest Dreams*; *A History of Overeaters Anonymous as Seen by a Co-founder*. Finally, there is a narrative that, given Wilding's interest in the unexplained, the occult, I think he might find interesting: *Beyond My Wildest Dreams: Diary of a UFO Abductee*. Using the search command for *Literary Pages*, one finds several books about the literary marketplace – and *The Literary Pages* by Michael Wilding, the title of the book's release in England. Wilding's English titles seem to be quieter than the American versions. *Great Climate*, a collection of stories published in England in 1991, appeared in the U.S. as *Her Most Bizarre Sexual Experience*.

All of this speculation about titles may seem irrelevant to the topic, but in point of fact it is not. *Wildest Dreams* seems much closer in spirit to the denotative signification of a novel that Wilding had said is the prototype for his own, Balzac's *Lost Illusions*. What Balzac and Wilding have to say about fiction, about literature, is that it begins and ends in a materialist base. More on this later. There is a funny exchange in Balzac's novel when a publisher finally agrees to publish protagonist Lucien Chardon's novel, *The Archer of Charles the Ninth*. The publisher explains: 'We don't like *The Archer of Charles the Ninth*, it isn't enough to excite the reader's curiosity. There were several kings named Charles and so many archers in the Middle Ages! Why now, if you said *A Soldier of Napoleon!* But *The Archer of Charles Ninth?* Cavalier would have to give a course of lectures on French history in

order to sell a single copy in the provinces'. In a final irony, it does not matter what Lucien's novel is called because by the time it is published he is the object of a rival political/journalistic cabal and his novel dies without ever being reviewed. This is one of many illusions about literature that are dashed in Balzac's novel.

In that 1991 interview, Wilding commented at some length on *Lost Illusions* as a precursor, a prototype. Here is what he said: 'What I most recently wrote was my version of Balzac's *Illusions Perdus*, *Lost Illusions*, the definitive novel about the literary life. I'd always wanted to write such a book even before I'd begun writing. I'd read all these books about the young writer goes to Paris, to London, whatever. Now I've done that; it's called '*the Literary Pages*'. It's focussed on postmodernism, on writing about writing. It focuses on reviewing, publishing, movie-making and writing. Other things come into it, but at the same time it has that realist basis and tries to record what happened, what were the costs, what were the debts. It took me about five years to write. At the time I didn't know what I was doing. I'd start a book called 'Farewell to Bohemia' and it would peter out after thirty pages. I'd start an epic and it would peter out. And then a stroke of inspiration came one day and I realised that all of these failed bits were actually part of the same book, which was this memoir of thirty years of writing. I realised that unknown to myself I'd written 2/3rds of this saga and so then I had the direction and could complete it'. He also mentioned that he brought the material into alignment by casting everything in third person and standardising the names. In the process of creating this 'selective memoir', as the subtitle puts it, Wilding left out at least two pieces that could easily have been included. Both, I happen to think, are great stories: 'Joe's Absence' and 'In the Penal Colony'. Of course Wilding had included every story he had written about a writer or about writing, the book would have been at least one and a half times longer than it is (though still well short of the length of Balzac's tome). In conversation with me recently, Wilding said that he included only pieces that had not previously appeared in collections of stories – which explains the absence of numerous related stories about authorship and publishing.

At the beginning of *Wildest Dreams* Wilding alludes directly to Balzac as he writes of the trajectory of his protagonist's early days in Sydney when he was setting out to be a writer. 'It was a scenario and he followed it, wrote about it, read it. In which order? The model had permeated through so many texts, he could not have cited any specific one at that point, though it was another ten years before he read the archetype, *Lost Illusions*.'

The archetype underlying both novels is, of course, that of the young man from the provinces. 'It's always the same story, every year the same enthusiastic inrush of beardless ambition from the provinces to Paris', says Loustreau, one of the many failed artists turned journalists in Balzac's novel. Wilding writes thus of his hopeful artist at the outset of his career in the city. 'But he knew what it was to be the young writer arrived in a metropolis, unknown yet there to be known, the writer's growth the discovery of the metropolis, objective correlative, homology, or only subject.'

Both Balzac's and Wilding's protagonists are of humble birth: the father of Lucien Chardon (whose last name means thistle) is a chemist who 'sold pills to cure flatulence'; the father of Wilding's protagonist is an iron-moulder, a subject Wilding has written movingly about in his short story 'Class Feeling'. In Balzac the mecca of modernity, of sophistication, wealth, beauty, success, fame, all that the ambitious provincial yearns for, is Paris. Early in the novel Lucien's hopes and illusions about Paris are summed up in one rhapsodic passage: 'He had a vision of Paris in all its splendour: Paris, an Eldorado to the imagination of every provincial; clad in gold, wearing a diadem of precious stones, holding its arms out to talent. He would receive a fraternal accolade from illustrious men. There genius was welcomed. There would be found no envious little gentry to humiliate writers with their cutting sarcasms and no parade of stupid indifference to poetry. There the works of poets gushed forth, were paid for and offered to the world. After reading the first few pages of *The Archer of Charles the Ninth* the publishers would open their coffers and ask him: 'How much do you want?'

A brief summary of Lucien Chardon's career in Paris is useful in light of the progress of Wilding's protagonist, named Graham. Balzac's young writer leaves his provincial town and goes to Paris where he is certain that his 'genius' will be instantly recognised. It is not. Instead he enjoys some success because of his good looks and because he buys the most fashionable clothes in order to transcend his bumpkin beginnings. He quickly plunges into debt and acquires a pretty, loyal, and stupid chorus girl for a mistress. Instead of attending to the craft of writing, Lucien schemes to get his already completed manuscripts published and earns money by becoming a journalist, a reviewer, instead of a real artist. Eventually things come apart for Lucien, the chorus girl dies, and he returns to the provinces. However there is a fourth volume in which Balzac returns Lucien to Paris where, finally, he commits suicide.

Wilding's Paris is Sydney, not London, not Paris, but Sydney, a far-flung outpost quite remote from Wilding's English origins, but increasingly home as the years passed and Wilding became, among other things, an Australian writer.

The opening pages of *Wildest Dreams* are attentive to every detail of the new experience, from the 'romance of the rooming house' to the recognition of the siren lure of the indolent climate: 'You did not need to be wealthy to be warm in Sydney'. The young writer-to-be, we are told, 'fell in love with the city, not initially, not with some sudden immediate recognition. It took much longer than that, it was a matter of discovery, of gradual revelation, of slow familiarity. The harbour welcoming there in the golden sun, blue as the clear sky.' A year or so later, upon returning from a trip back to England, Graham thinks about the differences between old England and new Australia. 'Here people didn't just debate freedom and morality, they fucked. Well, people no doubt fucked in England: but never, it seemed to Graham, with the same gusto, the same ease and readiness. Here the sun and the distance away from the old world had bleached sexual inhibitions. Here people drank and made love and felt the sun on their pores with a freedom that he could never imagine could ever be attempted in England.'

Wilding paints himself, in the guise of Graham, an excellent choice of names, incidentally, for his protagonist, as a double provincial: someone born of proletarian circumstances in a marginalised space, in the Midlands, near the Welsh border. Although Wilding won a scholarship to Oxford, he never forgot his class origins, affirming them when he wrote 'Iron-Moulder' for 'Father's Occupation' on the entrance forms. So this is one degree of provinciality. The second is that he was in a sense 'exiled' to the colonies, to Australia. In a chapter of *Wildest Dreams* called 'American Poets in London', Wilding speaks of exactly this doubleness: 'It was a mark of how far he was expatriated, now he had become a visiting colonial, it was an improvement on being a visiting provincial proletarian.'

When Wilding read *Lost Illusions*, he doubtless saw in Lucien Chardon's experiences in Paris confirmation of his own experiences in the literary and publishing world of Sydney. Lucien discovers that to most publishers 'books were like cotton bonnets to haberdashers, a commodity to be bought cheap and sold dear'. The more Lucien learns about the real nature of literature, the more he is shocked at the 'brutally materialistic aspect that literature could assume'. In Balzac's France the great enemy of Literature is Journalism, defined by one character as 'an inferno, (a) bottomless pit of iniquity, falsehood and treachery.' Opposed to this view is the idealism of a group of poor, dedicated intellectuals and writers with whom Lucien comes into contact. One assures him that to become a real writer will require ten years of hard work, but Lucien, caught up in the pleasures of Bohemian Paris, becomes a reviewer instead. Reviewing, he learns to his dismay, is simply a matter of literary politics. He learns how to review a book without reading it first, and how to attack a book that he admires and, conversely, how to praise a book that he doesn't admire. Nothing is real in the world of book publication and promotion, what Wilding calls the 'undergrowth of literature'. Lucien's idealism is constantly tested and undercut. Poetry, he learns, is discounted by publishers as a minor, economically unfeasible form of authorship. What is wanted is historical novels in the manner of Sir Walter Scott. But journalism and economic necessity are the biggest impediments to the production of literature. Everything having to do with literature, Lucien learns, has a materialist base. Literature is always constrained by the marketplace. As Lucien realises, 'It's hard to keep one's illusions about anything in Paris. Everything is taxed, everything is sold, everything is manufactured, even success.'

Similarly, Wilding's young hero goes through a series of initiations into the real conditions of literary production. At first he believes the problem is simply which tradition to emulate: 'Graham was torn between Lawrence and Sillitoe and the proletarian tradition, and the conscious artifice of Henry James. Or between the provincial celebration of George Eliot and the exotic expatriation of Durrell.'

But he soon learns that other possibilities intrude upon the purest commitments. There is, for example, the lure of reviewing, the same form of journalism that helped undo Balzac's *naïf*. Wilding identifies the problem: 'And writing about writing, writing reviews, writing lectures, all that was always ready to intervene, the fiction dreamed, delayed.' One of Wilding's solutions, of course, was to write

*fiction about writing fiction*. In some circles this is called postmodernism.

Another salient connection between Balzac's world of writing and that of Wilding's is politics. In Balzac the young writer is willing to change his political alignment to enhance his career. In the case of Wilding, Graham remains true to his political convictions, but not without a price. The cost is years of doubt, suspicion, and neglect. From the beginning Graham aligns himself with the Left, his faith in the Left a mark of his idealism. 'In those years Graham still assumed that every writer was naturally of the Left, every thinker naturally concerned with the humane, the cooperative. Afterwards he found it hard to know how he had been able to sustain that belief. But he did. And it sustained him in its turn for years. Years of misapprehension that were also years of hope.'

Graham's experiences in publishing take him behind the scenes into the world of distribution and marketing. Balzac's fascination with all aspects of book making, from the manufacture of paper itself to the sale of the finished product printed on that paper, is certainly shared by Wilding's Graham. The chapter 'Publish and Perish' details Graham's experience with a business woman named Bobbie (obviously drawn from Wilding's association with Pat Woolley and their Wild and Woolley Press of the early 1970s). From this insider perspective Graham acquires new knowledge of the economic forces driving every aspect of publishing. None of this knowledge is consoling. He learns, for example, to suspect the reported sales figures of certain literary authors. He believes that for various undisclosed reasons, certain writers are 'propped up'. Who does the propping? Revelations about CIA funding of periodicals and authors suggest one answer – an intensely political one.

In short, Graham's adventures in the publishing trade expose the same sort of systems of control and manipulation that Balzac analyses in monumental detail in *Lost Illusions*. . . the play of wheels within wheels in Parisian life, the machinery behind it all.' Despite such glimpses into the darkness of market forces, Graham resists the 'real danger' of 'irrevocable pessimism.' Irony and humour help a great deal in carrying Graham through periods of despondency, and *Wildest Dreams* is laced with the modernist's mordant awareness that the novel today can scarce risk the audacity of nineteenth century realism which sought to understand the entire world: 'In an atomised, isolated existence, each individual locked in a specialised role, social relationships fragmented and reduced, it was hard to see any overall picture, it was hard to get the overview of a Balzac, or a Dickens.'

Overall, Wilding's Graham succeeds in the embracing of Sydney as a literary landscape in a way that Balzac's Lucien never does. Late in *Wildest Dreams* we read this of Graham: 'As he grew into the literary present, he became conscious of the literary past. The flat, dusty walls of the brick city in the dusty sun filled out, developed the depth of a past, emanated the resonances of former hopes, lost futures, offered sites for all those imaginary possibilities, backdrops of desire, settings for anecdotes in its eating houses, pubs, streets.'

*Wildest Dreams* ends with Graham teaching creative writing at a university in California (Santa Barbara). In his office he can look at his bookshelf, 'His oeuvre

stacked there, multiples, overstocks, remainders, cancelled editions, waiting for good homes to go to, better than letting them be pulped into egg cartons.' In the story's last sentence Graham imagines his own ending to a story that one of this student's is trying to write: 'Or maybe he swims out across the Pacific to an island and escapes.' said Graham. 'And survives and writes a book'. The island is Australia, or alternatively, the island in Australia where Michael Wilding lives – and writes. To paraphrase the title of a story he wrote about Christina Stead: We like him to write.

## Works Cited

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