Oscar Wilde in the Third Millennium: An Introduction

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1. Background and contents

When drawing up our proposal for this special issue on *Oscar Wilde in the Third Millennium: Approaches, Directions, Re-evaluations*, our goal was twofold. On the one hand, we thought that this could be a great opportunity to reinvigorate and possibly expand the interest of Italian scholarly research in the ever-growing, transdisciplinary field of Wilde Studies[1]. On the other hand, we wanted to take up the challenge of a multifaceted approach that might contribute to assessing the international relevance acquired by Oscar Wilde's works and case history throughout the decades, with particular attention to twenty-first century responses.

Wilde's impressive and enduring popularity at a global level, the extent to which he continues to provide challenging food for

[1] Italy does have its own tradition of Wilde scholarship, which has taken hold from the second half of the twentieth century onwards. Including both criticism and translations, this tradition was bolstered by the pathbreaking contribution of Masolino d'Amico and has subsequently been implemented by other academics and intellectuals, such as Benedetta Bini, Franco Buffoni, Alex R. Falzon, Giovanna Franci, Rita Severi, Giovanna Silvani and, in more recent years, Renato Miracco and Enrico Terrinoni. Among twenty-first-century studies focusing on Wilde's connections with Italy, from mutual cultural influences to the reception and dissemination of his works in our country, see D'Amico and Severi (2001). In 2018, a group of academics, including the editors of the present volume, founded the Italian Oscar Wilde Society, a non-profit organisation coordinated by a board of researchers committed to sharing and discussing their Wildean knowledge from multiple theoretical perspectives. Currently counting over eighty members, this literary society issues a six-monthly newsletter and promotes a variety of cultural initiatives.

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thought in high and popular culture, in the sphere of specialised knowledge and among common readers, is of course no mystery. As underlined by Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small,

> Wilde's literary works continue to live in the public imagination partly because they are so entertaining and partly because they have become a focus for a widespread, lively, and easily accessible debate about gender, ethics, nationality, and politics. Yet at the same time those literary works have attracted an enormous body of specialist scholarship. (Guy and Small 2006: 1-2)

Indeed, the critical panorama is so stratified and polyphonic that any attempt at even a concise outline would fail to do justice to the countless trends. To quote Matthew Sturgis's half-amused comment on Wilde's popularity,

> seeing the world through a Wildean prism, as I have done over recent years, rarely do I find a newspaper or magazine that does *not* contain a stray reference to Wilde or his work. And it is not simply his epigrams that have survived in the age of Twitter and shortening attention spans. His plays are still performed. His books are still read. His image is widely reproduced and instantly recognized. He regularly appears as a character on both stage and screen. He has even been turned into a detective by Gyles Brandreth. (Sturgis [2018] 2021: xi)

Gyles Brandreth's thrilling, skilfully plotted *Oscar Wilde Murder Mysteries* series (2007-2019) is just one of the colourful strands in the motley cartography of Wilde's transpositions into a literary character. The mythography of Wilde's afterlife, his reinvention in literature as well as on stage and screen, dates back to when the author was still alive. In fact, it has its deepest roots in the late nineteenth century, as persuasively shown by Angela Kingston's study of Wilde's appearances as a character in more than thirty Victorian novels and short stories (Kingston 2007). Since then, this mythography has continued to thrive. Among the various reconstructions of such a composite picture, Giovanna Franci and Rosella Mangaroni's survey (2002) is particularly helpful in orienting the reader through 'inferential walks' across different genres (biographies, detective stories, epistolary and homoerotic narratives, drama), from Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* (1975) to Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament*

of Oscar Wilde (1983) and Walter Satterthwait's *Wilde West* (1991). Besides plays, films and the visual arts, including photography, some enthralling source material relating to Wilde's creative or fictive treatments can be found in a number of atmospheric graphic novels and comics.

Another course being charted concerns Wildean apocrypha and their further blurring of the boundaries between diegetic, nondiegetic and extradiegetic realms, as highlighted by Gregory Mackie's detailed analysis of celebrative forgeries, or 'fan fiction', by early-twentieth-century devotees of Wilde throughout Europe and the United States. These enthusiasts entered a symbiotic relationship with Wilde's authorial persona and eventually yielded to the temptation of stealing it. However, financial gain and profiteering did not seem to be their primary motive. As if in tune with Wildean readings of Thomas Chatterton's 'sublime resurrection' of Thomas Rowley and 'perfect representation' of an idealised fifteenth-century community, such eccentric forger-fans would be psychologically enraptured in "fantasies of intimacy with a dead author" which culminated in "a remarkable sequence of Wilde fakes – or, indeed, fake Wildes" (Mackie 2019: 5-6). Not unexpectedly, others were to follow the lead of a fan-fiction subgenre inspired by Wilde's extraordinary life, dandiacal wit, iconic style and glamorous notoriety. And, needless to say, these projective fantasies of intimacy and textual fabrications gravitated around a chameleon-like literary man who had often tackled the issues of forgery, artistic illusion, multiform or evanescent subjectivity, and who had indulged in plagiarism himself[2].

Nowadays, the permeability and interdisciplinary crossings of similar forms of reproductions, adaptations, appropriations and (re)evaluations are both a sign of our times – from postmodern rewriting practices, interrogation of mimetic codes and notions of *différance* to the prospect of transnational horizons and ready access to archive or digitalised sources – and a testament to Wilde's

[2] For a broader investigation of the rich phenomenology of Wilde's inheritance and reception, including the domain of his afterlives and 'refashionings', both within and outside the English-speaking world, see Franci and Silvani (2003), Guy and Small (2006), Wood (2007), Bristow (2008), Evangelista (2010), and Powell and Raby (2013: 307-383).

astoundingly prismatic profile. The process is still manifestly underway, as Wilde literature can be seen to branch off in several directions and dialogically remould itself. The wealth of material and plethora of interconnections appear to defy categorisation in much the same way as Wilde systematically challenged single-mindedness and accepted ideas and frequently expressed himself through paradox.

Protean and contradictory, always at one time surface *and* symbol, just like his own art, Wilde had the capability to speak and creatively react to different, even antagonistic epistemological frameworks. His intellectual brilliance, mental openness and ingrained oppositional qualities – his 'light-hearted seriousness' – turned him into soft clay in his own hands, so to speak. Hence his kaleidoscopic equipment of masks that both told beautiful lies and uncovered burning truths, advocated aesthetic refinement and winked at commodity culture, extolled individualism and the 'importance of doing nothing' while endorsing socialist beliefs, courted the English *haut monde* without renouncing republican sympathies. His ironical self-referentiality, unrelenting questioning of conventions and common sense, anti-binarist views and incessant border-crossing have also given poignancy to contemporary conceptions of Wilde as the materialisation of a virtually boundless 'floating signifier'.

Nevertheless, it must not be forgotten that, if captivating and mesmerising audiences of diverse epochs, during the pre-theory stages of his reception Wilde had been mainly and even voyeuristically approached from biographical or defamatory points of view, especially in the wake of his homosexual affiliations and "gross indecency" trials. His reassessment only started in the liberating 1960s, when all his corpus was finally published uncensored, and has increased steadily in the following decades, during which he has been debated under an astonishing variety of critical lenses. The most salient perspectives are those linked to Poststructuralism and Deconstruction, New Historicism, Cultural and Postcolonial Studies, Gender, Feminist and Gay Studies, Queer Theory, Performance and Celebrity Studies. As to the latter field, Wilde might actually be hailed as "the first global celebrity, a precursor to Andy Warhol, Madonna and numerous others of our own day whose cultural 'image' goes far before them": he arguably looked towards "the promotional management of such modern-day

'stars' as Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe and The Beatles" (Frankel 2021: 257).

It is therefore no wonder that Wilde's dazzling personality would never really alienate the critics' interest in his life – from his family circle to the widening range of his multifarious acquaintances – as attested by an ongoing proliferation in biographical surveys[3]. When thinking of Wilde's determination to put his genius into his life, it could indeed be claimed that his "greatest invention was himself" (Frankel 2021: 259). He strove to foster diversity "in his own character with the intention of becoming a symbolic figure, capable of inspiring endless interpretation" (Kingston 2007: 1). And, today, such self-fashioning practices and fluid identity intriguingly resonate with a notion of life writing conceived as a complex and sometimes unsettling literary genre.

In the critical scenario of the third millennium, the stream of theoretically-inflected, interdisciplinary discussions of Wilde's personality and *oeuvre* has continued to gain ground. Interestingly, one can both single out new directions and recognise familiar paths being reconsidered and updated. Among promising departures are explorations of Wilde from the angles of Ecocriticism, Fan Studies, Media and Pop Culture. At the same time, Reception and Translation Studies as well as Irish Studies have been holding currency along with views which, to varying degrees, find their wellspring back in comparative theory, theatre history, identity politics and, as anticipated, biographical research. No longer triggered by a pressing need to advocate Wilde's 'cause' or correct gross misconceptions, some of these analyses expatiate on discursive terrains coterminous with Irishness and folklore, the history of law (homophobia, the criminalisation of homosexuality and LGBT people), religion (Wilde's ideology of sacrifice and martyrdom, his affiliations with Judeo-Christian culture, Catholicism, Spiritualism, Occultism, Eastern cults), and the vast arena of politics. If the addressed issues tend to multiply and would call for a wider space, a couple of significant examples might suffice to attune readers to this diversified hermeneutic background. On the one hand, Deaglán Ó Donghaile carries out a watertight investigation of Wilde's socialist

[3] See, among others, McKenna (2003), Fitzsimons (2015), O'Sullivan (2016), Mendelssohn (2018), and Sturgis ([2018] 2021).

creed, anarchist thrust, anti-British sentiment and subversive alliances with the *fin-de-siècle* currents of political radicalism (Ó Donghaile 2020). From an opposite standpoint, Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small retrace the steps of Wilde the professional writer climbing the ladder of success in the beating heart of the metropolis and deftly moving the engines of the culture industry within a nascent consumer-capitalism system (Guy and Small 2000). Constantly traversing separate spheres and hovering around antipodal regions, Wilde seemed to be "always at odds with England" and yet living "among the English with rare passion, conviction and imagination" (Frankel 2021: 10). This strange alchemy was probably fostered by the unique "mixture of French-inflected cosmopolitanism, Englishness and Irishness" that was to turn him into a citizen of the world, into an artist whose fame inevitably exceeded national borders (Evangelista 2010: 1).

In sum, "Wilde discoveries" could be compared to an inexhaustible well, revealing "how our knowledge of this fascinating figure continues to expand in ways that scholars might not have predicted even a generation ago" (Bristow 2013: 3). The very bulk of updated documentation and records prompts us to take cognisance of Wilde's abiding legacy and, in parallel, to speculate on buried treasures that might still be "unearthed, as well as understood with greater accuracy" (p. 6). In this light, the huge project pivoting on the Oxford English Texts Edition of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* is both a glaring proof of Wilde's canonisation and a landmark that looks to further avenues in research by showing the rich extent of engagements and connections within the author's macrotext.

Well aware that anything near a comprehensive appraisal of Wilde's canon would be an impossible task for a single volume of criticism, we hope that this *Textus* issue might serve as a stimulus to spark debate, especially in the context of Italian academy, on the prominence of a writer whose name has remained engulfed in silence for too long. Luckily, as regards scholarly attention to Wilde's standing, the tide has markedly turned from marginalisation and ostracism to rehabilitation and apotheosis. A large number of critics, scholars and artists have succeeded in marking a shift and lifting the ban on Wilde's 'unspeakableness'. His far-reaching influence and literary reputation are deservedly acknowledged by a remarkable corpus of serious and reliable enquiries, so that his

status has definitively raised "from *succès de scandale* to best-selling author to classic" (Evangelista 2010: 19).

The articles collected here showcase a selection of analytical approaches that testify to the multilayered and compound nature of Wilde's life and production. We are ushered into a literary map where ecocritical readings intersect with the horizons of biographic fiction, Romantic myths of the artist, queer discourse and the field of Celebrity Studies. The topic of ecological awareness is tackled by Elisa Bizzotto in her "Wilde and Ecocriticism: Some Interpretive Ideas". While observing that environmentalist perspectives applied to Aestheticism and Decadence are still in their burgeoning phase, Bizzotto affirms that thinking through Wilde's writings via the lens of eco-Aestheticism is becoming "not only desirable, but also expected". She thus re-reads three canonical texts – "The Selfish Giant", *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest* – by drawing on her deep knowledge of late-nineteenth-century culture (e.g. John Ruskin) and on environmental criticism, including Rachel Carson's founding text *Silent Spring* (1962). Fresh glimpses are offered into Wilde's 'green proto-sensitivity' and the themes of the garden, outdoor space and ecological (in)justice in "The Selfish Giant"; the elements of pathetic fallacy and the sentient city in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; and the critique of classical Arcadian and utopian/dystopian frameworks in the renowned 1895 comedy.

In "Anatomising the Life of the Artist: *The Incomparable and Ingenious History of Mr. W.H.* and Modern Biographic Fiction", Paolo Bugliani concentrates on the 1921 book-length version of "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." (1889) and its genre affiliations, wavering between diegetic and factual poles. The work is assessed both in terms of an experiment in aesthetic fiction and creative biography on the same wavelength as Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*, and from a documentary viewpoint which postulates a link with eighteenth- and seventeenth-century models of human-life anatomies, such as those by Samuel Johnson and Robert Burton. Wilde's literary portrayal of Willie Hughes is ultimately seen as the heir to a long British tradition of life writing as well as a forerunner of modern biographic fiction. With Marco Canani's "Christ as the 'Romantic Artist': Romanticism and Suffering in *De Profundis*" we move across the territory of Wilde's intense dialogue with the Romantic

tradition (Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and, most of all, Keats) and the Bible, especially the New Testament. Taking his lead from *De Profundis*, the long letter written by Wilde between January and March 1897 during his imprisonment in Reading Gaol, Canani explores the author's imagination and emotional states along a parable of spiritual awakening that was to shed a new light on art and morality, the revealing power of suffering and sympathy, and the pursuit of a "form of individualism divested of self-interest". Wilde famously extolled these notions by virtue of an identification with Christ, to whom he paid homage as a hypostasis of "the supreme romantic type". According to Canani, *De Profundis* could be approached as a "retrospective manifesto" and a theoretical reflection whereby Wilde, as though looking back at his 1882 lecture "The English Renaissance of Art", endeavoured to reconcile the Romantic ethos with the principles of Aestheticism while ultimately disavowing Decadence.

The last couple of essays shifts the focus of concern to the domains of Queer and Celebrity Studies. As suggested by its title, Luca Pinelli's "Queering and Politicising the Fairy Tale in Italy: Oscar Wilde in Conversation with Federico Zappino" sets the pattern for an imaginary conversation between Wilde and Italian philosopher and activist Federico Zappino (1983 –). In so doing, Pinelli juxtaposes different historical periods and national contexts (nineteenth-century Great Britain and twenty-first century Italy) and their engagement with the fairy-tale genre. What emerges, however, is not so much an unbridgeable gap as the "radical and queer potential" of Wilde's parables of self-sacrifice and recognition in the face of political oppression, marginalisation, and what Zappino would bracket with the ideology of heterosexuality. The upshot is that Wilde's fairy tales are seen as entrancingly queering the relations between texts, genres and readers' expectations, destabilising the constitution of the subject and "opening up a space for queer ideality". Conversely, Gerardo Salvati emphasises Wilde's adroitness in galvanising public opinion, 'manufacturing' fame and marketing his own image through the media. In "Wilde Exposed: Victorian Literary Celebrity and the Graphic Revolution", Salvati casts the so-called 'Graphic Revolution' of the nineteenth century as a springboard to celebrity, owing to material factors such as the industrialisation of print, mass reproduction, photographic

technologies, and the pictorial press. The article delves into the construction of Wilde's public persona and finally considers it as both a result of the author's ingenious self-fashioning and as an outturn of crafty advertising strategies – from comic to sensational ones – backed up by the press and entertainment industry. This circuit was so powerful that, by the time Wilde left for his 1882 lecture tour, the expectations of American audiences had already been shaped and his image proved "eye-catching enough for the public to notice it and wish to interpret it".

Last but not least, the volume closes with a cameo appearance by Thomas Wright, a freelance writer, bibliophile and enthusiastic Wildean scholar who has kindly agreed to grant us an interview. In "A Wildean Table Talk", his conversation with Gino Scatasta, Wright captivates the reader's attention by setting in relief the role played by Italy and Italian culture in Wilde's life and work, covering philological ground with accurate information as well as a sense of empathic imagination interspersed with ironic wit.

As a prelude and complement to these contributions, the following four sections, each of them written by one of the editors, offer further insights into the theoretical routes that underpin the ramified network of Wilde Studies today[4].

2. Oscar Wilde and his world

One of the most notable trends in Wilde Studies is that in the new millennium they have taken a decidedly global turn. The twentieth century witnessed a breakthrough moment when scholars started to demonstrate the advantages of approaching Wilde as a distinctively Irish writer (especially when viewed from abroad, Wilde was otherwise all too often seen to embody quintessentially 'English' mannerisms and concerns). More recently, while the interest in an Irish Wilde has by no means abated, the focus has shifted to broader world perspectives, in line with new scholarly attempts to break

[4] The editors have conceived this introduction together. More specifically, Stefano Evangelista is responsible for "Oscar Wilde and his world"; Laura Giovannelli for "Background and contents" and "Oscar Wilde and prison experience"; Pierpaolo Martino for "Iconicity, performance and celebrity in Oscar Wilde"; and Gino Scatasta for "Oscar Wilde and journalism".

down traditional categories of national literature. This section of the introduction outlines some of the challenges and opportunities that arise when we try to situate Wilde in transnational or global contexts and considers some ways in which the essays in this issue speak to this critical trend.

What was the world of Oscar Wilde? How should we relate the writer and his works to national identity, theories of cosmopolitanism and the embodied reality of geographical space? Within a relatively short but dramatic career, Wilde occupied different positions of belonging and non-belonging, from the expatriate to the exile, and his works reflect this shifting relation to national and social space. Born and brought up in Dublin within an Anglo-Irish milieu (that is, an Irish Protestant community), Wilde moved to Britain permanently after graduating from Trinity College Dublin, when he was an ambitious young man in his twenties. After that, he never wrote from 'home' and his major works contain very few references to Ireland; even so, he did not lose touch with expatriate Irish circles, for instance through his friendship with W.B. Yeats, thereby playing a role, as Noreen Doody (2018) has argued, in the development of Irish literature in the twentieth century. The British Empire was then at its height in terms of economic might and territorial extent. The move from the Irish periphery to the metropolitan centre therefore multiplied the opportunities for social and cultural mobility, which Wilde skilfully seized. But the English-speaking world was too small for him. Throughout his career he sought forms of kinship and intellectual alliances beyond English and Britain's geographical borders. Crucially, he reached out more and more to French literary and social circles, which helped him to develop a distinctly cosmopolitan style: in literary terms, this meant the adoption of Symbolist and Decadent influences; in social terms, it meant cultivating a worldly persona that shaped his self-presentation in the media.

The consequence of this cosmopolitan attitude was that, while Wilde was extremely successful at embedding himself within the most powerful networks of English literary culture, he never sought to belong fully. He was always an outspoken critic of English social customs – most brilliantly in the comedies – and was particularly scathing about the narrow cultural outlook associated with little-Englandism. "England is the land of intellectual fogs", he complained

to fellow Irishman G.B. Shaw (Wilde 2000: 554); and he repeatedly lampooned what in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" he labelled "the stupidity, and hypocrisy, and Philistinism of the English" (Wilde 2007: 298). By means of such statements, scattered across private exchanges as well as public interventions, Wilde carved for himself a role of carefully crafted marginality *vis-à-vis* England and English culture. From this position, which was simultaneously one of outsiderism and of authority, Wilde contributed to provincialising nineteenth-century Britain, to adapt the expression that Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) has famously used in the postcolonial context: that is, he argued that the perception of superiority that came with political and economic power hindered the reception of foreign ideas, and thus weakened the national culture; he showed, in other words, the relative vulnerability of the world's most powerful empire. By so doing, he debunked a powerful nationalist myth.

Adopting such a world perspective is a strategic as much as an ideological choice. In an era that saw an unprecedented quickening in the international mobility of people, goods and ideas, Wilde understood that the literary profession was also internationalising. This ability to place himself in relation to transnational movements and, in material terms, to a global market for literature, is already much in evidence in the American lecture tour of 1882, which Gerardo Salvati analyses here from the point of view of Celebrity Studies. The young Wilde did not enter America as an established author: he had by this point only published a lukewarmly received collection of poems (1881). While he was there, however, he used the country as a gigantic stage of literary self-fashioning, accumulating cultural and mediatic capital that he then spent, or rather reinvested, on his return to Britain.

A similar dynamic of importation and exportation of culture characterises Wilde's lifelong dealings with France, the country with which, as we have seen, he formed his strongest literary ties. There as in America, Wilde behaved as a conduit for a distinctive type of English modernity represented by the Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic Movements, which constituted a valuable currency in French anglophile milieus. In her influential analysis of the global circulation of literature Pascale Casanova has suggested that "world literary space" behaves according to mechanisms of competition akin to those that regulate the stock exchange (Casanova 2009:

12-17). Using her economic metaphors, we could say that Wilde's activity of international mediation carried the high risks associated with global capitalism: it attracted profits in reputational terms but it also generated accusations of opportunism and derivativeness, of plagiarism even. Far from diminishing the value of his work, however, the complex ethical questions generated by Wilde's international mobility are another aspect of his work that lends it renewed relevance today.

In the world of the twenty-first century, where ever-increasing global connectivity goes together with new forms of nationalism, racism and conflict, studying Wilde generates productive questions about literature's relation to national/cosmopolitan identities and international relations. Once again, then, what was the world of Oscar Wilde? Answering this question involves finding different ways of mapping his world-consciousness in relation to turn-of-the-century and contemporary understandings of global space. How did his writings open up new horizons and, conversely, how did they abide by existing boundaries and inscribe new ones? What exchanges and connections did they facilitate in the course of their remarkable international reception, which as of 2022 shows no sign of losing momentum? In approaching these questions we must remember that, for all his mocking of England and for all his transgressive appeal, the global circulation of Wilde's works has also, inevitably, been facilitated by the global dominance of imperial Britain then and of the English language now.

Ironically perhaps, the link with the French language is precisely one of the forms of cultural and national identity that Wilde sought to contest. His decision to write *Salomé* in French is of course key in this respect. Even before its first publication, that is, since its ban from the English stage in 1892, *Salomé* has eluded critics' efforts to box it within traditional categories of national literature, and within a fixed dichotomy between original and translation. To many, the play marks the culmination of Wilde's self-conscious effort to become, in Jacques de Langlade's classic formula, an *écrivain français* (De Langlade 1975). To see Wilde as a French writer is to recognise his success at creating a new cultural identity for himself in order to break free of the creative and moral limitations that he identified with English literary culture. More recently, however, William A. Cohen has proposed a different way of reading Wilde's Francophilia

in *Salomé* by suggesting that "French serve[d] for Wilde as an alternative to British and Irish nationality alike and, at the same time, as an alternative to nationality altogether" (Cohen 2013: 233). According to this interpretation, using French as a universal – at least within the European sphere – language of art enabled Wilde to "conceive of forms of identity and subjectivity organised not around national belonging or linguistic community but instead around aesthetics" (p. 234). By virtue of being written in Wilde's de-nationalised French, *Salomé* therefore exists between languages and between nations.

Salomé, then, points to a different way of approaching Wilde's works in the light of the literary aesthetics that Rebecca L. Walkowitz has recently called "born translated": works in which translation is not simply something "incidental" that may happen to the future of a literary text, but rather something intrinsic to it, part of the composition or, in Walkowitz's words, "a condition of [its] production" (2015: 4). That Wilde had a longstanding interest in translation is proved by the many reviews of foreign literature that he published in British periodicals, where he often paid close attention to the quality of the English versions, sometimes picking out specific instances of misrepresentation or misunderstanding. This same attentiveness to translation informed his creative practices, both in the essays and fictions, where he repeatedly used translation as a medium for his own original writing. We only need to think of the eleventh chapter of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which famously incorporates a compressed rewriting of J.-K. Huysmans's novel *À rebours* (1884), as Dorian re-enacts Des Esseintes' journey down the path of decadent aestheticism. At this point before the first English translations of Huysmans's work, how should we handle Wilde's creative version? How should we understand the translational aesthetics and ethics of Wilde's novel? What is the place of *Dorian Gray* in relation to the discreet national traditions of English and French Decadence?

Once we start to view Wilde in the light of a radically reconfigured model of world literary space, we can start revising the old accusation that he simply borrowed from English Aestheticism and French Symbolism. Instead, we can recover his role as an exceptionally active agent in the creation of transnational networks. In this special issue, Paolo Bugliani highlights the exchanges with the work of

the French Symbolist writer Marcel Schwob, the author of *Vies imaginaires* (1896), a volume that looks back to a complex nexus of English writing including Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* (1887), which of course Wilde knew very well and indeed reviewed for the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Schwob also helped Wilde revise the manuscript of *Salomé* and, Bugliani reminds us, was a pioneering translator of Wilde ("The Selfish Giant", in 1891) and contributed original articles to British periodicals. The exchanges between the Francophile Wilde and the Anglophile Schwob summarily sketched here bring to light one of the many ways in which Wilde participated in the making of the network-like structure of world literature, understood in David Damrosch's definition as "a mode of circulation and of reading" that takes literary works beyond their culture of origin (Damrosch 2003: 5). Wilde's important contribution to the 'worlding' of literary culture remains one of his most important legacies. The extensive translation, adaptation and global reception of his writings continues this process, transforming and enriching them as they cross geographical space into new linguistic and cultural contexts.

That Wilde conceived of literature as a medium for creating cultural understanding and tolerance is beyond doubt. In "The Critic as Artist", he envisaged that modern literary criticism would set the foundations for a "cosmopolitanism of the future" predicated on "the unity of the human mind in the variety of its forms" (Wilde 2007: 203)[5]. The defence of diversity was central to Wilde's worldview. It can be linked to his homosexual identity inasmuch as Wilde, who was criminally punished and ostracised for his sexuality, becomes for later generations the spokesperson for a type of humanism enabled by the intimate reflection on difference that is at the heart of queer affect. However, as Elisa Bizzotto suggests here, his care for global perspectives can also be linked to an ecological conscience inherited from Ruskin, who promoted a way of thinking of art in relation to environmental issues. The aesthetic environmentalism outlined in her contribution is therefore another form of world-consciousness – one of the many ways in which Wilde engaged with the world, as manifested in its local particularities but also as a totalising idea.

[5] For an extended analysis of Wilde's cosmopolitanism in the light of this passage, see Evangelista (2021: 44-52).

3. Oscar Wilde and prison experience

At the turn of the third millennium, the macro-genre of prison literature has been catalysing new interest and international public attention, as testified to by a growing number of critical and sociological studies dealing with the ordeal of detention, its psychophysical as well as traumatic effects, and the search for viable paths to recovery and rehabilitation. One notable example is the rich miscellaneous volume edited by Michelle Kelly and Claire Westall, *Prison Writing and the Literary World: Imprisonment, Institutionality and Questions of Literary Practice* (2021). From the practices of purging and silencing to the question of life-space constriction, from censorship and different kinds of regimentation to a possible 'unlocking' of the internee's positive potential, this study offers a richly textured account. Importantly from our point of view here, it considers both prison writing and writing about imprisonment, while also looking at narratives of maturing and awakening.

Needless to say, no contemporary investigation of prison life can be oblivious to a seminal work such as Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). As is well known, Foucault anatomises the modern western penal system in a historical and socio-theoretical perspective that draws attention to the phenomenologies and encoded notion of 'discipline' itself, to the regulatory mechanisms of the social order and the technology of power – especially in terms of its effects on people's bodies, in an anticipation of his tenets concerning biopower and biopolitics. Foucault sees the juridical framework that developed in France and Europe through the ascendance of the bourgeoisie as characterised by a peculiar intermingling between the endorsing of a formally egalitarian code and a more or less tangible persistence of asymmetrical power relations. In this context, a whole apparatus of rules and principles was reinforced in order to guarantee the performance of duties and the exercise of control by the state. In a word, bodies had to be made 'docile' by a series of disciplinary mechanisms, training, normalising and an internalisation of rules. At the same time, "the expiation that once rained down upon the body" would be complemented by an allegedly humanitarian/reformist punishment aiming to act "in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, *the inclinations*" of the individuals and their subjectivation

processes, so as to cure and suitably adjust them (Foucault [1975] 1995: 16, my emphasis).

When applying this logic to Oscar Wilde's case history – and, before that, to the infamous Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, which classified male homosexual relationships as acts of "gross indecency" – a wide space for debate dramatically opens up. Indeed, it is difficult to underestimate the fact that Wilde was sentenced to two years' hard labour in solitary confinement, the harshest penalty allowed for by the 1885 legislation. The jury brought in a verdict of guilty, with a scandalised Justice Sir Alfred Wills thus reprimanding:

> That the jury have arrived at the correct verdict in this case I cannot persuade myself to entertain the shadow of a doubt […]. People who can do these things must be dead to all sense of shame, and one cannot hope to produce any effect on them. It is the worst case I have ever tried […]. I shall, under the circumstances, be expected to pass the severest sentence that the law allows. In my judgment it is totally inadequate for such a case as this. (qtd. in Bristow 2016: 51)

In all evidence, then, Wilde's punishment was to be momentous and exemplary, a striking of the soul and body in the name of a normative creed and a redeeming social function. Again, in Foucauldian terms, this severe measure joined ranks with a political tactic and a collective exorcism that looked towards the re-establishment of a positive economy and a 'healthy', 'natural' order as opposed to 'corruption', 'perversion' and a subcultural network of sexual blackmailing and extortions (not for nothing was the 1885 Amendment Act also known as the 'Blackmailer's Charter'). The penalty had to take into account both the seriousness of the offence and the social menace that this very offence might represent for the future. That is to say, its "possibility of having imitators", with a consequently crucial role played by the penal institution as a kind of "coercive theatre" (Foucault [1975] 1995: 93ff).

True, such considerations are not new, and Wilde's penal history cannot be said to have been disregarded by critics and scholars, especially in recent times. In addition to an ongoing flow of variously-declined and authoritative biographical surveys, one could look, for instance, at the engaging contributions in the fields

of Gender and Queer Studies and within the LGBT community. In this connection, a ground-breaking study remains Alan Sinfield's *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment*, where emphasis is placed on how instrumental Wilde's trials had been in fashioning and crystallising a modern type of queer/camp/homosexual identity as distinguished from dandified effeminacy, or what was then euphemistically called 'same-sex passion'. Sinfield points out the link that existed between "art and the leisure class, in opposition to middle-class, philistine, masculine practicality" (Sinfield 1994: 98). Indeed, Wilde's draconian condemnation had been vigorously supported by the English middle-class milieu. And, most likely, this was ascribable not only to Wilde's misconduct with young men and 'immoral' sexual habits, but also to his libertarian creed and resistance to state centralisation, as Deaglán Ó Donghaile persuasively argues in *Oscar Wilde and the Radical Politics of the Fin de Siècle*. The high priest of an anti-Tory subculture aligned with socialist thinking, Wilde was perceived as at once "queer, alternative and politically suspect" (Ó Donghaile 2020: 1). The socially charged component of his oppositional and 'subversive' Aestheticism, as well as his anti-authoritarian protest and sense of solidarity across class divides, should be kept in focus as salient features that would similarly emerge throughout his prison days and writings.

This said, my suggestions regarding further lines of enquiry follow a trajectory that is built on the very historico-juridical premise of Wilde's prosecution at the Old Bailey, with its stringent dynamics unfolding through lawyers' pleas, witness statements and multifarious courtroom events. The proceedings lasted from 3 April to 25 May 1895 and notoriously led to Wilde's conviction. In spite of this, a heavy veil of silence was drawn over an assemblage of trial transcripts and procedural documents that have been a long-censored chapter in the author's life. Fortunately, specific research into this controversial phase has advanced in the last twenty-five years[6], with Joseph Bristow's fresh-off-the-press *Oscar Wilde on Trial: The Criminal Proceedings, from Arrest to Imprisonment* (2022) fittingly completing the circle.

Merlin Holland, whose *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess: The*

[6] See, in particular, Foldy (1997), Hoare ([1997] 2017), Holland (2003; 2013), and Cocks (2013).

Real Trial of Oscar Wilde (2003) contains one of the first accurate versions of the libel trial, is adamant that his grandfather's court case and detention should be seen more as a consequence of his association with London's rent-boys and the urban underclass than a direct result of his love affair with Lord Alfred Douglas (Holland 2013: 207). Quite a few of Wilde's contemporaries, among whom were Douglas himself and More Adey, also thought that his sentence was political, the Marquess of Queensberry having "certain information about very high persons in the liberal government that would be made public unless Wilde were convicted" (Gagnier 1984: 339).

When picking up on such socio-political entanglements, the vexed issue of Wilde's prison experience – from its shattering effects to its post-traumatic aftermath – is worth further pondering. This ordeal can in fact yield compelling insights into both Wilde as a historical subject getting to grips with a profound sense of shock, devastation and psychological harassment, and the criminal justice system that was in force in England at the time.

As to the carceral administration in the late-Victorian period, the year 1895, when Wilde was sent to jail, did mark a crucial watershed towards a progressive reformation of penal policy thanks to the publication of the Gladstone Committee Report on Prisons. Named after Herbert John Gladstone, the committee's chairman and undersecretary at the Home Office, "this report was welcomed as 'the beginning of a beneficient [*sic*] revolution'" (Harding 1988: 591). Tellingly, when the document was circulated, the then chairman of prison commissioners – Sir Edmund Du Cane – was induced to resign and leave room for liberal-minded Sir Evelyn Ruggles-Brise. Even so, the effects of such a reformative ethos, including programmes that focused on the social reintegration of offenders, were *not* to be felt when Wilde was serving his time. Places of detention were still run in compliance with the Prison Acts of 1865 and 1877, which prescribed a harsh and chastising treatment of detainees. The rallying cry was 'crime deterrence' and 'cellular confinement', in line with a tough-on-felony policy of retribution and curtailment of association that forced the prisoner into a bound and wounded position. From useless labour (treading the wheel, winding the crank or picking oakum) to the forbiddance of interpersonal contact, from an unsustainably meagre diet to an enforced timetable that compelled them to spend most of the day

and all night segregated in their cells, captives were cut off from the world and human intercourse. By means of corporate control and routinised violence, the establishment had paved the way for an imposition of behaviours and an internalisation of rules that would crush the subjectivity of the inmate and render him humble[7].

In the period extending from 25 May 1895 to 19 May 1897, Wilde was taken to Pentonville and then moved to Wandsworth, where he fell into a mood of utter dejection. His health deteriorating quickly, he spent two months in Wandsworth's infirmary and, on 20 November 1895, he was finally transferred to Reading Prison, Berkshire. The dungeon scenario – a cold and smelly location monitored by a stifling regimentation and an unvarying pattern of duties – continued to upset him. Probably the only upper-middle-class literary man there, he felt he was being plunged into a ruthless hell. As one reads in his correspondence and in *De Profundis* – originally entitled *Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis* – he found himself fighting against insanity and suicidal urges, as if torn between despair and grief, rage and contempt. The grim everyday routine and dehumanising *modus operandi* of the penitentiary remained engraved on his memory. Besides mailbag sewing, oakum picking and other degrading punishments, he had his share of unproductive work on the crank and treadmill too. Quite significantly, he would have been unable to write his long epistle to Douglas if, in the summer of 1896, Major James O. Nelson had not taken over from tyrannical Henry Isaacson as the new Governor at Reading. Nelson sensibly stretched the rules by granting Wilde access to books and writing implements. He thus allowed the author to counteract "the uselessness of prison labour" via the "free and productive activity" of intellectual work and to reclaim a "degree of agency and purpose" (Gerzso 2019: 1025, 1028). On his release, Wilde publicly paid homage to Nelson's Christ-like act of kindness, and similarly extolled the humanity and spontaneous

[7] Among well-researched studies of British prisons – from their rules and sanctions to cell conditions, daily routine and staff members – I have drawn on the following, which also include references to or sections on Wilde: Priestley (1985), Storey (2010), and Fludernik (2019). My exploration of this topic took a further leap in 2021, when I participated as a panellist in the "Oscar Wilde in the New Millennium" round table at the XV Conference of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE, Lyon, 30 August-3 September 2021).

generosity of the Irish Warder Thomas Martin, who was dismissed because he gave a biscuit to a hungry, tearful child who had been interned for snaring rabbits.

There is little doubt that this cataclysmic phase of Wilde's life brought him closer to suffering, marginalisation and destitution. If working through trauma meant for him asserting a new self in the face of banishment, it also prompted him to speak out on behalf of a change toward restorative justice. Along with sympathetic awareness came both the redemption of the convicts' humanity (especially children) and civil commitment, in the guise of a public plea urging prison reform. To put it briefly, Wilde resorted to personal testimony "as a springboard for social criticism" and assumed "the role of ethical agent to voice a critique of the Victorian penal system and the standards of morality underlying the cruelties practiced against wrong doers" (El-Din Hassanein 2017: 2287).

Besides his literary masterpieces falling within the province of prison writing, i.e. *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, there are other writings *about* imprisonment penned by Wilde which deserve more attention than they have been given so far. They consist in petitions, correspondence with friends, inmates, jail administrators and reformers, such as the Irish republican activist Michael Davitt (Gagnier 1984: 336). These appeals had their loudest voicing in Wilde's campaigning articles to the *Daily Chronicle*, where he took pains to raise awareness about the inhuman prison conditions and suggested specific measures for improvement. Thanks to Nicholas Frankel's invaluable *Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde* (2018), containing a well-argued introduction and a large corpus of glosses, it is now possible to peruse these articles in their chronological sequence and piercing critique, from "Clemency Petition to the Home Secretary", 2 July 1896, to "Letter to the *Daily Chronicle*", 27 May 1897 (also published in pamphlet form as *Children in Prison and Other Cruelties of Prison Life*, 1898), and "Letter to the *Daily Chronicle*", 23 March 1898.

The fact that Wilde's pieces contributed to enhancing the movement toward prison reform, and hence to the Prisons Bill of 1898, was no small feat. One can surely assert that his campaign was fruitful, since a number of amendments contemplated in the Act were absolutely in unison with his proposals. Importantly, the new law was to abolish "unproductive labour in prisons and stipulated

that prisoners were to work together, learn trades and have a greater access to books" (Storey 2010: 17). Therefore, when hearing about Reading Prison today – from its decommissioning in 2013 to the thorny question of whether the Ministry of Justice should go on with the bidding process, or rather 'save' the building as a permanent arts hub – we ought to remember that what is at stake is more than a cultural monument or a commodified scenery. Reading Prison must remain a vivid symbol and poignant reminder of a complex "'epistemologico-juridical' formation" (Foucault [1975] 1995: 23) which sealed the fate of a population of misdoers and outcasts. The same population of fellow-prisoners who, as confirmed by Peter Stoneley's illuminating archival research, helped Wilde to feel pity, look "at *the others*" and break "his obsession with his own fate" (Stoneley 2014: 457).

4. Iconicity, performance and celebrity in Oscar Wilde

In all evidence, Wilde has reached iconic status in contemporary popular culture, and the secret of his success pivots around his "capacity for translating his life into a form of writing and his writing into a vital gesture which articulates a complex critique" of late-nineteenth-century English society (Martino 2013: 141). According to cultural critic and novelist Michael Bracewell – author of *England is Mine: Pop Life in Albion from Wilde to Goldie* (1997) and director of *Oscar*, possibly the most fascinating among documentary films on Wilde (BBC, Omnibus Series, 1997) – the Anglo-Irish writer stands out as the first pop star of British history: a pop celebrity, a cultural icon who literally put all his genius into his life and only his talent into his work, in the desperate and yet successful attempt to turn his life into a *work of art*. Bracewell's works (both book and film) are, in this sense, examples of how Wilde "is now reproduced as a kind of Godfather of Rock" (Sammells 2000: 121). Neil Sammells' "now" coincides with the year 2000, but, more than two decades later, this form of Wildean reproduction is still detectable in the domain of popular culture and has given shape to extremely rich and fascinating intermedial performances.

It can be argued that Wilde's iconicity implies a kind of double articulation based on a complex dialogism where temporal levels

intermingle. As Richard Kaye observes, in his own time Wilde was "the most self-conscious marketer of his own image" (Kaye 2004: 193). That is to say, like many pop stars of our age, he carefully constructed his status within society with the intention of 'selling' himself and translating his art and life into a format that could lead to economic success. However, Wilde's iconicity also invests the author's afterlife (see Wood 2007). According to the *OED*, a (cultural) icon "is a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol or as worthy of veneration" (Pearsall 1999: 704). And, undoubtedly, there is something religious about Wilde's iconicity, which today sees admirers worship both his image and the world connected to it (to such an extent that we can speak of a 'Wilde cult', his image and epigrams being everywhere on T-shirts, album covers, and posters). Interestingly, during the last years of his life – in his long confessional letter *De Profundis* – the author described himself in terms of a Christ-like figure. It is also significant that Terry Eagleton chose the title *Saint Oscar* for his 1997 play focusing on Wilde's life. Besides evoking a trend in Gay Studies and gay culture in general, which casts Wilde as the first homosexual martyr in modern history, this title seems to allude to Wilde's self-construction in *De Profundis*, where he depicts himself as a Christ-like figure in opposition to the demonic representation of Douglas.

Wilde's life and works, as well as his extraordinary afterlife, have also proved that a cultural icon can be read as a sort of hypertext, as a living text where different signs, belonging to a variety of discursive modes – literature, art, music, and cinema – can meet and eventually generate complex meanings. This occurs through extensive *dialogicity*, which requires an active response on the part of the reader. Reading Wilde's life and writings prompts us, among other things, to re-read Shakespeare[8], to access the semantic intricacies of Romanticism, both literary and musical, and to immerse ourselves in the seductions of Aestheticism and Decadence. Embracing Wilde also means entering a privileged perspective which enables us to interpret many of the cultural developments of the twentieth century, from Modernism to contemporary popular culture. Wilde fostered

[8] For instance, in *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* Wilde famously investigates the elusive identity of Mr. W.H., the dedicatee of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*.

the cult of celebrity and, through his involvement in performance (on both a theoretical and practical level), became a pop icon well before the rise of pop music; this explains why many performers and songwriters (from Mick Jagger to David Bowie, from Morrissey to Gavin Friday, from Neil Tennant to Pete Doherty) have variously recognised their debt to the Anglo-Irish author.

Wilde acknowledged the *truth* and relevance of masks not only in art but, crucially, in everyday life too. This idea has been enhanced in a number of films released in the last two decades which focus on Wilde's many different masks. These films are Brian Gilbert's *Wilde* (1997), which presents him as a brilliant lecturer during his American tour and as a family man leading a double life; Todd Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), which salutes Wilde's birth in terms of the advent of the first British pop star in history; Al Pacino's *Wilde Salomé* (2011), which approaches him not only as a legend but also as a man of the theatre; and Rupert Everett's *The Happy Prince* (2018), which focuses on Wilde's last years in Paris in the guise of Sebastian Melmoth, an exile and a pariah who found a new world to perform to, where the 'stars' were rent boys, petty thieves, and street urchins.

In short, today the strength of Wilde's life and work resides in the remarkable extent to which they lend themselves to transcodification, especially in the fields of cinema, music, and the visual arts. Moreover, if our contemporary perception of Wilde can be thought of as 'intermedial', the same could be said of Wilde's approach to the arts in his own time. This was due to his capacity for reading one artistic language through the 'eyes' of another (particularly in his criticism) as well as to his tendency to conceive his own artistic discourse as multilayered. His writing has indeed much of the visual and the musical in it (nourished, as it is, by synesthetic associations); at the same time, he used different discursive modes – such as theatre, prose, lectures, and fashion, almost in the same breath – in order to perform his many roles and thus 'stage' his aesthetics.

Nowadays, Wilde's multiplicity has been investigated and performed in a number of texts which establish a complex and fascinating dialogue with the past, namely with Wilde as an extraordinary artist and multifaceted social actor. As underlined by Shelton Waldrep,

> Wilde made clear that he saw his identity as something mutable. For anyone who was interested, he was making the claim that he could – he had – redesigned not just his image but himself. Wilde's subsequent trajectory was not toward some ultimate being – some essential or irreducible self – but the beginning in earnest of a system of becoming, of transformations of self that left any belief that there could be a natural, stable Oscar Wilde in doubt. Wilde's legacy as both a writer and a literary figure of social, political, and cultural significance is such that Wilde the man cannot be readily separated from Wilde the careerist. His roles as aesthete, lecturer, businessman, family man, poet, editor, playwright, seducer, prisoner, and exile are part of a broader role of writer as performer that he used self-consciously in an attempt to destroy the binary opposition separating art and life. (Waldrep 2004: xi)

Wilde's brilliant conversation, love for beauty and dandyish pose turned him into a very special actor within London's society. In this sense too, he might be seen as a forerunner of 'pop' as a space in which the artist's image is central to the construction of his success. When looking at glam icon David Bowie, Sammells acknowledges that

> Bowie's sequence of stage-personae from Ziggy Stardust through Aladdin Sane to the thin white duke and beyond spring from a Wildean aesthetic grounded in 'make believe', in role playing and the inauthentic: and it is one which he self-consciously culled from artists like Warhol and other avant-garde 'underground' sources. (Sammells 2000: 121)

In Wilde, art and life are not confronted in abstract terms but are somehow subsumed into a 'theatre of everyday life', where living cannot be separated from an ongoing process of self-writing. It is therefore no wonder that, particularly in recent years, Wilde's biography and *oeuvre* have often been approached through the theoretical frames of disciplines such as Performance and Celebrity Studies. In Francesca Coppa's words, Performance Studies "recognizes that behaviour, as well as speech, is a language that has rules and is structured by a grammar, and, as with any other language, comprehension depends on recognition or knowing something again when we see it" (Coppa 2004: 73).

In short, performing does not simply mean 'doing', but 'showing-doing' or 'staging' behaviour, since all human behaviour is learned and subsequently put on some sort of display. Wilde's

processes of self-construction and self-fashioning were also, and most importantly, aimed at questioning any pretence of authenticity in the social context and at deconstructing what purported to be normal or normative. In this regard, Heather Marcovitch notes how

> [the] poetics of the performance of the self, according to Wilde, are disarmingly simple: assume and always be conscious of one's inherent fragmentary nature, cultivate each fragment to the best of its artistic possibilities and do so under the rubric of a secular morality that stresses compassion and community with others. (Marcovitch 2010: 13)

Wilde's adroitness at self-fashioning and marketing his identities owes much to his peculiar background, in which a key role was played by his childhood in Dublin, his Oxford/early London years, his tour of the United States and his successfully productive season starting with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the composition of his major theatrical works. He probably inherited this talent for reinvention from his family and certainly showed his mother's flair for romantic self-invention. It must also be stressed how little Oscar had access to Lady Speranza's discussions with her guests at tea time; even though he would not speak, he did become acquainted with the art of conversation, which would prove of paramount importance in the construction of his Oxford and London personae.

While at Oxford, Wilde's "lifelong performance was actually that of an Oxonian, which meant a distinct feeling of cultural superiority to the rest of society"; he adopted an Oxford accent, developing "his own languid, melodic version, of the intonations of his Oxford friends" (Sloan 2003: 6). This transformation at the prosodic level was accompanied by interesting choices regarding iconicity. Besides adopting a dandified look and way of dressing, with long hair and velvet suits, Wilde started decorating his Magdalen rooms with blue vases filled with lilies, the official symbol of the then fashionable Pre-Raphaelites. Tellingly, Wilde's love of flowers is shared by one of his late-twentieth century 'disciples', i.e. Steven Patrick Morrissey, leader of cult indie band The Smiths (see Rogan 1993).

When Wilde came down from Oxford to London, in 1879, he self-designated himself on his visiting cards as 'Professor of Aesthetics'. However, Wilde had now both to reinvent himself and make his way into the commercial world, where the press played a crucial role.

He thus set out to use the new methods of advertising "in order to oppose the culture in which they were taking root" (Sloan 2003: 10). Wilde was taking advantage of a situation where higher and middle classes had started to mix and which offered opportunities for mobility. In this sense, his visibility also consisted in a capacity for 'being everywhere', giving voice to his witty epigrams and observations and mixing with acclaimed stage actresses such as Lillie Langtry.

Wilde became a global celebrity during his tour of the United States: like many pop stars of our days, in order to become a proper celebrity, he had first to be 'big' in America. The chance was provided by the success of W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's comic opera *Patience; or, Bunthorne's Bride* (1881), which satirised the look, manners and values of the English Aesthetic Movement, notably through the character of the poet Reginald Bunthorne. Richard D'Oyly Carte, the show's producer, asked Wilde to give a series of promotional lectures to offer American audiences the opportunity to see a real-life aesthete. A similar practice was to become quite popular in the 1960s with British rock and pop artists, such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and David Bowie promoting their albums on long American tours (see Martino 2016).

Interestingly, in America Wilde did not link his name with opera, a form of high art, but with comic opera, a sort of low-culture entertainment. Across the Atlantic, hundreds of pictures would immortalise the English aesthete, as happened with the famous Sarony photos, which show Wilde in his typical costume for the tour – a velveteen jacket and knickers, besides his notorious long hair – and perfectly capture his look and capacity for self-promotion. When, on his arrival in New York, a customer official asked him if he had anything to declare, Wilde allegedly answered "I have nothing to declare except my genius" (Ellmann 1987: 152). This is just an example of his sparkling epigrams, which were underpinned by astonishing linguistic and conversative skills. Also, Wilde's speech might be compared to music insofar as he was a great improviser who understood that social interactions were similar to the act of playing music together (see Schutz 1976). In this musical performance – in which he blended various genres and modes (stories, philosophy, wit) – form became more relevant than content. Wilde's epigrams were evergreen melodies on which he improvised

in different contexts, even recycling his pronouncements in plays, essays or everyday conversation. One might then think of a parallel between Wilde and an American artist such as Andy Warhol, who based much of his creations on seriality and who, like Wilde, treated trivial things as the most important ones (and vice versa).

In sum, Wilde was at once a director and actor in the complex and charming play that became his existence and which "now reads like the greatest of his works" (Frankel 2021: 9). Wilde had a theatrical sense of life: his was a dialogical interiority where, as in a play, disparate personae spoke to each other without ever reaching a fixed, immutable identity. The author chose London as the main stage for the performance of 'Oscar Wilde', the most important of his plays. It is no coincidence that the theatre – as a space where the literary word is enacted and through which literature can become a source of entertainment for the audience – gave him world-wide fame. Wilde's most successful play of the 1890s was *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which, in a sense, reflects the author himself as a 'living show' brimming with masks, double identities, inversions of gender roles and verbal hyperconnotations. From its very title, the 1895 comedy alludes to the idea of performance, to the 'importance of being' and playing someone else in particular contexts. Yet, this might also be seen as a paradoxically permanent condition, given the multiple roles which we enact every day. This is why *The Importance of Being Earnest* virtually exceeds the page and the (theatrical) stage and leaves room for *The Importance of Being Oscar*[9], yet another way to look at the metaphor of life as theatre and adopt an ironic approach to identity.

As Eagleton observes, in Wilde everything is "doubled, hybrid, ambivalent" (Eagleton 2001: 2). Indeed, some of Wilde's most intriguing features are his liminality, his bent for conflating contradictory and dissonant realities, his capacity never to take sides, to reject a fixed, predictable or centralising frame of mind. Wilde invented and staged a subversive, critical, intelligent paradigm, which, as we have suggested, would be appropriated by such different artists as Warhol, Bowie, and Morrissey. A paradigm

[9] *The Importance of Being Oscar* is the title of both Micheál Mac Liammóir's one-man show *Entertainment on the Life and Works of Oscar Wilde*, first performed at the Gate Theatre in Dublin in 1960, and a 2019 TV Movie by Richard Curson Smith.

which one might well learn to perform and subsume in an age that appears as more and more 'identity-obsessed'.

5. Oscar Wilde and journalism

Now that two volumes encompassing Oscar Wilde's journalistic production have been published by Oxford University Press and the corpus of Wilde's articles has been substantially identified – after the careful work of the editors to find new articles written by him, or to cast doubt on others attributed to him in the past – one might have expected that a new line of research would be opened. This was not the case, because the most important critical texts on Wilde's journalism, such as Anya Clayworth's introduction to the Oxford University Press selection (2004), John Stokes's contribution to the *Cambridge Companion of Oscar Wilde* (1997), Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small's book on Wilde's position in a world dominated by the "commodification of culture" (2000), and Mark W. Turner's essay in *Oscar Wilde in Context* (2013), all predate or are contemporary to the two-volume Oxford edition.

Perhaps this line of research has not proved as fruitful as it might have seemed, thus explaining the lack of interest in this branch of Wilde's production, but it is noteworthy that, as Clayworth observed, "Wilde was a journalist for nearly the whole of his writing career. His careers as a dramatist and novelist which receive so much critical attention are, ironically, markedly shorter" (Clayworth 2004: ix). This fact and the sheer amount of material that Wilde wrote for the magazines and the journals to which he contributed in the second half of the 1880s should make us aware that this production is not to be dismissed too easily. First of all, it erases once and for all the idea of a writer who wrote only for art's sake, a snobbish author lazily jotting down witty and futile remarks on other authors' books. Wilde worked very hard, not least because he needed the money that journalism could guarantee, and he did so by putting to the test some of his ideas about art and literature that he would later express in his literary essays and his best-known works.

Moreover, Wilde's journalism is placed chronologically at a crucial moment in the development of the British press and this may be helpful in collocating him more firmly in his era. The 1880s mark the beginning of the so-called 'New Journalism', which, as

Matthew Arnold put it, is "full of ability, novelty, variety, sensation, sympathy, generous instincts", but on the other hand it "throws out assertions at a venture because it wishes them true; does not correct either them or itself, if they are false; and to get at the state of things as they truly are seems to feel no concern whatever" (Arnold 1977: 202). One of the newspapers in which Wilde published more than seventy anonymous reviews and articles, between 1884 and 1890, was the notorious *Pall Mall Gazette*, the leading publication of New Journalism, edited by William Thomas Stead. In the years of Wilde's collaboration with the *Pall Mall*, or soon afterwards, other important literary figures of the period, such as G.B. Shaw and a young H.G. Wells, wrote for the same journal (Clayworth 2004: xiii). The articles that gave the *Pall Mall* notoriety were some controversial and sensational accounts of poverty and child prostitution in London. The series of articles, nicknamed *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*, described, among other lurid details, how easy it was to buy a virgin in the poorest areas of London, and it was published in July 1885, a few months after Wilde's first contribution to the newspaper. It is curious to learn that *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon* led to a trial resulting in a three-month prison sentence for Stead, who was found guilty of having purchased a thirteen-year-old girl from her alcoholic mother in order to prove the truthfulness of the stories he told. And even more paradoxical was the fact that one of the consequences of the articles published by Stead was the implementation of the Criminal Law Amendment Act in August 1885, to which a further clause was added, known as the 'Labouchere Amendment', which provided for imprisonment for any man found guilty of acts of "gross indecency" with another man. This was the same law under which Wilde would be convicted ten years later.

Wilde referred rather scornfully to Stead in a letter to Robert Ross written from Reading, in which he claimed that "I don't think that even a British Government with Labouchere, Stead, and the Social Purity League to back them would re-arrest me and send me to prison again" (Wilde 2000: 788). However, Wilde was probably unaware that Stead, even though he did not openly support him during his trials, had not joined the group of his scandalised opponents. Stead himself referred to his position in 1905, in a letter to Ross, in which he also recalled a meeting in Paris with Wilde after his release from prison: "I had the sad pleasure of meeting him by

chance afterwards in Paris and greeted him as an old friend" (Wilde 2000: 788n).

If Wilde's ideas about journalism and the new journalism were those expressed by Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist" (1891), they were not very positive: "As for modern journalism, it is not my business to defend it", says Gilbert. "It justifies its own existence by the great Darwinian principle of the survival of the vulgarest". And he adds, as a conclusion, that "journalism is unreadable" (Wilde 1977: 1015). Later in the essay, Gilbert seems to indulge in his habit of contradiction when he states that "there is much to be said in favour of modern journalism", but the reader soon realises that the arguments in favour of modern journalism are not exactly positive:

> By giving us the opinions of the uneducated, it keeps us in touch with the ignorance of the community. By carefully chronicling the current events of contemporary life, it shows us of what very little importance such events really are. By invariably discussing the unnecessary, it makes us understand what things are requisite for culture, and what are not. (Wilde 1977: 1048)

And his final statement on the new journalism is indisputable: "new Journalism [...] is but the old vulgarity 'writ large'" (p. 1049).

Even assuming that Gilbert is the spokesman for Wilde's opinions, a fact which should not always be taken for granted, there is an observation that could complicate the matter. As Mark W. Turner observes, "in combining journalistic work with other forms of professional writing, Wilde was similar to many of his contemporaries, not least those intellectual giants who so influenced him, John Ruskin and Walter Pater" (Turner 2013: 273). The journals to which Ruskin and Pater contributed had a more educated audience than the *Pall Mall Gazette*, but it is still surprising to learn that, after the death of Pater in 1894, three volumes of his writings were published, mostly consisting in uncollected journalism. Or that he used "the protection of anonymity to 'puff' the work of friends and acquaintances" (p. 274). Although the 1880s witnessed the birth and great success of the new journalism, the landscape of the publishing market, as far as periodicals were concerned, was extremely heterogeneous and the boundaries between them were not always clearly marked. In this respect, the example of *The Court and Society Review* is typical. Far from being the epitome of the

new journalism, it was nevertheless a "miscellaneous publication, providing illustrated serial fiction, book reviews, society gossip, and, perhaps slightly oddly, sporting tips" (Clayworth 2004: xvii). In this weekly, Wilde published "The Canterville Ghost" and "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" in 1887, along with contributions on a variety of topics, including "the role of Americans in British society, the contemporary biographical article, and the mistakes made by American Board-School children when asked general knowledge questions" (p. xviii). He also contributed to the magazine with reviews of plays and exhibitions, all anonymously. Since one of the themes of "The Canterville Ghost" is the relationship between the lively but uncultured Americans and the old-fashioned kindness of the British, it is tempting to consider some of the articles as addenda to the short story or the short story as a fictional reassessment of the same issues addressed in the articles.

An element that might offer a new perspective on Wilde's position on the New Woman question is, of course, his role as editor of *The Woman's World* and his management of the magazine from November 1887 to August 1889. A cartoon by Max Beerbohm "shows Wilde being led on the one side by a female figure labelled 'Fashion' and on the other by a figure labelled 'Women's Rights'" (Stokes 1997: 72). As almost always, 'the Incomparable Max' had hit the mark: not only Wilde, but the magazine in general during his time as editor, tried to balance the demands of the public with the new place that many women were occupying in society, mixing frivolity and commitment, entertainment and engagement. His magazine, as he wrote in a letter, was meant to be the "expression of women's opinions on all subjects of literature, art, and modern life", and it certainly gave many 'new women' the opportunity to express their views on various subjects. Yet, Wilde wrote in the same letter, "it should be a magazine that men could read with pleasure" (Wilde 2000: 297). Introducing men into his project for a woman's magazine probably meant, as Laurel Brake observed, that Wilde sought not only to construct the figure of a "cultivated new woman" but also to instil "a male homosexual discourse into female space" (Brake 1994: 127). Wilde's management of *The Woman's World* has been studied in particular by Catharine Ksinan, who has pointed out that he sought to create "a serious and intelligent woman's journal at a time when few if any existed" in order to "display and disseminate woman's

writing, to exhibit the breadth of their interests, to underwrite their talents as thinkers, artists, scholars" (Ksinan 1998: 409). However, Wilde's commitment to a new role for women in late-Victorian society and his possible, more concealed attempt to propose a different model for men at the same time, deserve a more detailed study, and an analysis of his work as editor of and contributor to *The Woman's World* might offer an interesting perspective.

A last, but perhaps no less suggestive field of research into Wilde's journalism is constituted by the question of anonymity. Since the norm in Victorian journalism was not to sign articles, it has always been problematic to identify those written by Wilde. However, this is only the first step in the issue. Now that, thanks to the Oxford Edition, we have a group of articles that can be confidently attributed to Wilde (and a smaller number of dubious articles that could be attributed to him or that had been attributed to him in the past, even though some doubts about their authorship have been raised), it is possible to take up and expand on a suggestion offered by John Stokes: Wilde used "anonymous journalism as a way of mapping out his personal literary territory" (Stokes 1997: 69). In "The Critic as Artist", Gilbert gives us one of Wilde's most quoted aphorisms: "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth" (Wilde 1977: 1045). What if the mask of anonymity became a way for Wilde to map out not only his personal literary territory but also, more generally, his opinions on many different topics? Anonymity might have been a good mask to express personal ideas that he could later change or recycle: as Turner observes, "many of the ideas and even some of the exact language of the reviews gets recycled and reappears elsewhere – in the critical essays, the late plays and *Dorian Gray*" (Turner 2013: 271). Also, Clayworth shows how the origins of some ideas we find in his fairy tales and in *The Importance of Being Earnest* could be traced back to his journalism (Clayworth 2004: xxix-xxx). Moreover, when reading Wilde's journalism, it is easy to realise that he was never that confident: in spite of his usual irony and witty remarks, there is little trace in his articles of that "insincerity" that for Gilbert is only "a method by which we can multiply our personalities" (Wilde 1977: 1048).

We can assume that what the anonymous Wilde writes is or sounds like the true thoughts he had on his subjects, whereas in his critical

texts he used different strategies to express (or not to express) his opinions. If we want to know Wilde's opinion on the Irish question, for instance, there is little mention of it in his creative works, but if we turn to the articles in which he addressed the issue, his views are clearly expressed. Journalism, as Stokes aptly summarises, was perfect for Wilde to both reveal and disguise himself (Stokes 1997: 77). He could 'reveal' as he expressed his own truth and could 'disguise' because the mask of anonymity he used gave him the time and opportunity to rethink his ideas and re-use them, if necessary. In any case, the insights offered by Wilde's journalism are far from exhausted. It might be interesting and fruitful to follow some of the trends sketched above and see if they can lead us to something new and meaningful about Wilde. If not, we would still have spent some pleasant time reading the intelligent opinions of an intelligent author.

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