

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**

**Educative Ethics in Fin de Siècle Thought with Special Reference to**  
**Educational Hermeneutics in the Life and Works of Oscar Wilde**

by  
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## **Abstract**

This study is intended to reflect an exploration of the relationship between social forces and the nature of narrativity, with specific reference to the life and works of Oscar Wilde.

It is acknowledged that Wilde is a representative figure of the 1890s, exemplifying all the contradictions of the decade. In his works nostalgia and respect for the past are juxtaposed with progressive thought and the Hegelian opposition of thesis and antithesis resonates throughout Wilde's most important work, whether it is creative or critical. In Hegelian dialect these are ultimately reconciled in the synthesis and it is this that forms the strategic pattern that underpins Wilde's thought.

The issues to be addressed in this research concern this conflict as it is expressed in Wilde's work, involving an exploration of the biographic nature of his work. The recognition that a biographic text is an interactive, contextual production between text, writer and reader will be elucidated as will the necessity of a hierarchical structure if the subject is to maintain a sense of order. By recognising that a life is never at an end and revealing the sense that Wilde's life and works are joined to the past and to the future, this research will show how the reader is able to find meaning in others' experiences, so that they give shape to their own, acknowledging that the role of language, as a creative medium and a cognitive force, has an important part to play in the study of biographic methodology.

This research is anchored in the biographical methods promulgated by Denzin (1989), Dickinson and Erben (1995), Erben (1996) and MacIntyre (1985). These methods are used as a tool to explore the formative relationship between the social forces dominating European intellectual life during the last decades of the nineteenth century, the first decade of the twentieth century, the personal life of Oscar Wilde and the lives of those who influenced him. This leads to an appreciation of the hermeneutic methods used to interpret and understand narratives and a reconciliation of the phenomenological aspects of the biographical process. This research explicates these principles, giving an understanding as to why Wilde's life and works are as relevant today as they were one hundred years ago and why the drama of his life should not be allowed to overshadow the excitement of his work. Ellmann, in Oscar Wilde (1988: 553), has gone some way to redress the balance:

He belongs to our world more than to Victoria's. Now, beyond the reach of scandal, his best writings validated by time, he comes before us still, a towering figure, laughing and weeping, with parables and paradoxes, so generous, so amusing and so right.

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## **Abbreviations**

The reference 'CW' placed within the text is as follows:

*The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, introduction by M. Holland, London:

Harper Collins 1994.

# Educative Ethics in Fin de Siècle Thought with Special Reference to Educational Hermeneutics in the Life and Works of Oscar Wilde.

## Introduction

What you call the Spirit of the Age  
Is in reality the spirit of those men  
In which their times reflected.

Goethe (*Faust* 577-9)

In *De Profundis*, Wilde claimed boastfully, but accurately, that he stood 'in symbolic relationship to my age.' As it turns out, he stands in symbolic relationship to every age.

He ranged over the visible and invisible worlds  
and dominated them by his unusual views. He  
is not one of those writers who, as the  
centuries change, lose their relevance. Wilde  
is one of us. His wit is the agent of renewal, as  
pertinent now as a hundred years ago  
(Ellmann 1988: xiv).

It is universally acknowledged that Wilde is a true representative figure of the 1890s, exemplifying all the contradictions of the age. In his works, nostalgia and respect for the past are juxtaposed with progressive thought and the Hegelian opposition of thesis to antithesis resonates throughout Wilde's most important work, whether it is creative or critical. In Hegelian dialect these are ultimately reconciled in the synthesis and it is this that forms the strategic pattern that underpins Wilde's thought.

All identity is relational. Nothing just is - nothing exists in itself. Human history

demonstrates that the most treasured beliefs of one age are often regarded as utter delusions by later epochs. Thus it is with Wilde, when a century ago he was castigated, incarcerated, alienated, disgraced and humiliated for being the embodiment of degeneracy and weakness. Britain has grown up a little since then and society has recognised that Wilde was a prophet of modernity, a modernity that repelled much of English Victorian society. Wilde recognised his invidious position when he claimed before his death in 1900, 'I am dying beyond my means. I will never outlive the century. The English people would not stand for it' (Ellmann 1988: 545).

The reality is that Wilde was one of the creators of the twentieth century. He anticipated the complexities of both modernity and post-modernity in his adoption of the culturally subversive mask of extreme artificiality. He challenged social, moral and sexual conventions, satirising Victorian morality and his own lifestyle, yet subverted the Victorian ideal of art as a moral vehicle. Wilde did not like using literature as a polemic.

This swing of the pendulum in human attitudes during the last century supports the Hegelian theory that perception takes time. The past, by definition, does not exist, and truth will change, developing with history, making our moral code an infirm bed of shifting sands. Thus a life is never at an end and Wilde's is joined to the past and to the future, enabling Wilde's readers to find meaning in others' experiences, so that they can give meaning to their own, in an environment that is increasingly hostile and unstable.

It is no coincidence then that Wilde retreated to France to spend his last years in an environment that was sympathetic to his needs. As the sway of Victoria's empire was, by now, waning, he was exiled from a culture that was already in part being usurped by European decadence. The reaction against the absolutism of Victorian science reached out beyond the rational science of the day, leaving European sensibilities as:

A fecund environment, rife with paradox that recurs throughout the period, at its height in Wilde, whose binary impulses ran as strong as those of the age; decadence and asceticism, socialism and hedonism, the Virgin and the Prostitute, sacred and profane, the exalted and the fallen (Hoare 1997: 28).

Such a European environment was receptive to explorations by Dilthey and previously, Schleiermacher, both of whom sought to challenge the model of neutral, objective explanations of phenomena, characterised by the natural sciences. They were concerned to articulate an epistemology and a method that would give clear guidelines for the interpretations of texts, promoting hermeneutics as a more effective model of human understanding. Dilthey set himself the task of writing a critique of historical reason, wishing to submit the historian's procedure to an epistemological examination as Kant had previously examined the procedure of the mathematician and the natural scientist. This formulation of a definition of historical consciousness was Dilthey's supreme achievement, and Schleiermacher's analysis of the religious consciousness, his conception of the dialectical relationship between universal type and individual instance and his hermeneutic, or theory of the principles of understanding and interpretation, remained familiar themes in Dilthey's philosophy.

Both Dilthey and Wilde recognised the effect of evolutionary pantheism. They both found in the creative imagination of the artist a reflection of the power which underlies all the phenomena of nature and history. Like Wilde, Dilthey describes himself 'as moving in an unknown country', as he explores the psychological mechanism of artistic creativity and

the social and intellectual influence of the arts. The similarity between Wilde and Dilthey does not end here, insofar as in moral and political theory they were not prophets of particular doctrines, but the forerunners and inspirers of a movement from which light has come in a variety of ways, one of whom is Gadamer.

Gadamer's reflections are directed ontologically; it is his view that it is our nature as human beings that we are defined and limited by our entrapment in language and time. As historical beings we are part of a process which is incomplete; we cannot stand outside of time to see it whole. For Gadamer, the hermeneutic circle is an existential condition. It is the hermeneutic circle that makes things meaningful in terms of their relationships, their contingency and contiguity and we can never step outside of this circle. In our understanding of phenomenology and hermeneutic theory, Gadamer's influence has been profound. It is within this framework that this study of Wilde's influence on the twentieth century will undertake a systematic exegesis of educational hermeneutics through an analysis of his life and works.

This research offers an original synthesis of existing material, revealing fresh analysis of a huge wealth of documentation that has been written on Wilde. It seeks to bring to light neglected aspects of Wilde's thought, foregrounding sociological and philosophical connections that have not been made elsewhere. As the current reassessment of Wilde's place in the social and literary history of late nineteenth century Britain gathers momentum, so the people, the events, and the facts, which seemed peripheral thirty years ago, have begun to assume greater significance:

Secondary characters, like pieces restored to  
a mosaic damaged by time, bring the picture  
once more to life and we can now appreciate



the colour of their contribution to the whole  
rather than the dull monochrome of footnotes  
and asides with which we have had to make  
do in the past (Holland, in Beckson 1998: x).

The issues to be addressed in the research concern this conflict as it expressed in Wilde's life and works. It is acknowledged that literary criticism and biography are mutually supportive and lead to progressive understanding of both text and life, as ideas are met through lives. In Wilde's case, the life and work do seem to be markedly interdependent; indeed, much of his criticism is autobiographical in nature, sometimes presenting Wilde as a critic of his own work, as he saw art as self-expression and life as self-development. Thus this research is anchored in the biographical methods promulgated by Denzin (1989), Dickinson and Erben (1995), Erben (1996) and MacIntyre (1985). These methods are used to explore the formative relationship between the social forces dominating European intellectual life during the last decades of the nineteenth century, the first decade of the twentieth century, the personal life of Oscar Wilde and the lives of those who influenced him. This synthesis, the weaving of threads to make a whole, is what makes this work original and what follows is an exegesis of Wilde and his works, in his role as social and moral historian.

These roles are wide-ranging, from minor entertainer to major visionary. They are layered, multi-disciplinary and impossible to separate:

He is more than a figure in the dense literary  
history of Britain; he is a figure in world  
culture, as both hero and victim. Wilde is  
public, international . . . Wilde has been too

eminently appropriable. The life and writings have been too dramatic for many dramatists and too much like fiction for many novelists. Wilde entered the pop culture long ago with the collections of epigrams, the calendars, the coffee-table biographies full of the same illustrations and same anecdotes. Most important of all, there have been the continuous revivals, on the stage, in the movies and on television. The life, the plays, the fiction all seem one (Fletcher and Stokes 1976: 48).

In the absence of a definitive biography, a definitive edition of the collected works, a definitive bibliography, a definitive life, and in the presence of 'so many improper studies' (Fletcher and Stokes 1976: 48) what is offered here is a discourse that attempts to understand some of the essential questions that surround Wilde, his life, his work and his social milieu.

What follows is an appreciation of the hermeneutic methods used to interpret and understand narratives, and a reconciliation of the phenomenological aspects of the biographical process. Wilde's life and works encompass many ideas - education, classicism, hermeneutics, narrativity, modernity, biography, individualism, sexuality, Victorianism, morality and philosophy. The fragmentation of Victorian society lent itself to modernist innovators like Wilde, who recognised that individuality creates progress, whilst conformity threatens it. The pressures towards withdrawal from social consensus had been identified in 1865 by Arnold as symptoms of modernity:

Modern times find themselves with an immense system of institutions, established facts, accredited dogmas, customs, rules, which have come to them from times not modern. In this system their life has to be carried forward, yet they have a sense that this system is not of their own creation, that it by no means corresponds exactly with the wants of their actual life, that for them, it is customary not rational. The awakening of this sense is the awakening of the modern spirit (1962: 109).

Wilde restated this position twenty-five years later, 'It is enough that our fathers believed. They have exhausted the faith-faculty of the species. Their legacy to us is the scepticism of which they were afraid' (CW 1137).

Eliot acknowledges the importance of the radical over the liberal in his essay 'On Modern Education and The Classics' (1932), where he describes radicalism as organising the vital issues, whilst rejecting what is not vital, whereas liberalism excites superficial curiosity:

Radicalism is to be applauded for wanting something. It is to be applauded for wanting to select and eliminate, even if it wants to select and eliminate the wrong things. If you have a

definite ideal for society, then you are right to cultivate what is useful for the development and maintenance of that society, and discourage what is useless and distracting (1932: 514).

This discourse begins with an exploration of the links between being educated and being rational. Eliot states that:

Questions of education are frequently discussed as if they bore no relation to the social system in which and for which education is carried on. It is only within a particular social system that a system of education had any meaning . . . Education is a subject which cannot be discussed in a void: our questions raise other questions, social, economic, financial and political (1932: 507).

Thus it is imperative that some of the ethical positions are shared if any form of social relationship is to be sustained. Identification of individuals by themselves and others is through membership of a variety of social groups. Morgan states that the language of sociology abounds in rhetoric and metaphors, and that:

It is through these metaphors that images of man are created, sustained or modified. In using them we are looking back at the culture

from which they arose and 'forward' to the way in which their articulation gives greater solidity and definition to a social reality already present (1975: 201).

It is through our choice of group that we define the terms of our moral reasoning and set the parameters of educative behaviour. It is important that the sense of history – of what is past and what may come – is acknowledged so that we can interpret events and experiences. The centrality of Hegel's dialectal philosophy, that there is a goal to history and that there can only be progression through struggle, is explored in its relation to Wilde. In Hegel's view, an individual can only acquire a true awareness of the self through being recognised as an independent subject by another individual. Acquiring this recognition, however, is an agonising and elusive process. Because of their own insecurities, fears and misunderstandings, other individuals deny us this recognition and perceive us as beings that are less worthy than themselves, that is, objects rather than subjects. Wilde's enthusiasm for his classical education is well documented and he used this to question society, rejecting any methodological individualism that saw the individual as the basic sociological unit and identity as analysable apart from society. He recognised that change is imperative if humanity is to flourish and he used his classical education to explore the social, political and cultural upheavals, creating the moral space for true debate, that of art criticism. This is where intellectual history, in this case the liberal values of freedom of thought, individuality, diversity, meet the society in which Wilde played his role as a public intellectual, 'a picture of man the innovator, the creator, the person able to evaluate, reject or to change his environment, the person with the ability to say 'no' (Morgan 1975: 203). Individualism, as Wilde perceives it, generates a disobedience which, 'in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made' (CW 1176).

This thesis explores this conflict between the individual and society, as it is played out - as a yearning for freely given recognition from the other and as a nihilist urge to exhort this recognition through the dominance and even destruction of the other. This dynamic becomes even more complicated when we realise that the other is not just a mirror to confirm our own sense of self, but is also driven by a countervailing and equally compulsive desire for recognition. Wilde's obsession with progress gave him an ineradicable strength; none of the knocks, self-doubt or fear touched his obstinate desire to continue – this was his one certainty.

After the trials, all of Wilde's ideas on art and philosophy were framed by the issues of criminality, decadence, degeneration, male effeminacy and same-sex passion, so that the ideas that emerged from the trials were filtered and interpreted through the popular cultural and intellectual milieu. This discourse recognises that, as historical beings, we are part of a process which is incomplete. We cannot adopt a position of objectivity outside the language or time that defines us. This thesis relates this to Wilde, his contemporaries and his audiences, for he intimates scenes of reading and of writing to which, one hundred years later, we may just now be learning how to respond. Auden said this most bluntly and memorably: 'The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living' (ed. Gardner 1972: 919). The living make pragmatic use of the past, taking what can be modified and appropriated, and discarding the remainder.

Wilde was indeed, a creator of our time; a genius who concealed enormous depths behind a mask of exquisitely cultivated frivolity. As Holland states:

Reputations, like languages, need to be on  
the move constantly if they are not to grow

stale and die, and Oscar Wilde's reputation, at least for the general public, is in grave danger of ossifying into the frivolous lightweight form it has kept for one hundred years. Remaining incomprehensible, as he advised James Whistler to do, is no longer enough to carry him into the next century. The delicate process, which he began on himself in *De Profundis*, of understanding without demystifying, is ours to continue, so that we can discover the richness of Wilde's world and start to see some of the greatness which has been too long hidden behind the mask (in Beckson 1998: x).

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Educational Ethics in the Life and Works of Oscar Wilde.**

To be merely well informed is, in a way,  
knowing; it is not to be well educated  
(Quinton 1987: 42).

Everybody, from all cultures and all levels of society, should have some interest in ethics, educational or otherwise. As Haydon (1987: 2) claims in his introduction to *Education and Values: The Richard Peters Lectures*, much effort has been spent on the attempt to give morality in the form of a fundamental principle, or a set of principles, a grounding in some foundation which must be accepted by any rational person. The fact that education features so often in the political and social arenas is because many accept the close link between being educated and being rational. Indeed, educated can be defined as being the description of the process in which moral reasoning and development of self come together. However, in a society that increasingly reflects a multiplicity of traditions, a strong stance has developed, that reflects a scepticism about the possibility of establishing any such foundation. MacIntyre, in *After Virtue* (1985), acknowledges that morality is embodied, not just in the choosing and thinking of separate individuals, but in the practices and conventions and expectations of persons within societies. An individual's ability to reflect on morality as it affects them defines the self.

Aristotle defined the moral good with the social good. Historically, civilisations have generally developed sophisticated criteria to demonstrate the errors of their victims or rivals. Thus the Greeks declared foreigners to be uncivilised, primitive barbarians, who lacked the gift of rational thought. Their culture did not uphold Aristotle's belief that habit and custom are the foundations of morality and civilisation. The cultivation of 'second

nature', the customary modes of behaviour that become so habitual they appear natural, is, Aristotle believes, a fundamental element of statecraft:

This is confirmed by what happens in states;  
for legislators make the citizens good by  
forming habits in them, and this is the wish of  
every legislator; and those who do not effect it  
miss their mark, and it is in this that a good  
constitution differs from a bad one  
(ed. Barnes 1984: 1103b: 2-6).

At the other end of the scale, Aristotle regards any legislator who neglects these qualities to be failing in his duty. The common ground is, of course, that of false consciousness, which allows for the possibility that such faulty thinking, being the product of human invention, might be overcome.

Security and satisfaction for the individual are dependent on a society that regulates itself in such a way that the primary concern is the securing of conditions under which the individual can do most good and, therefore, ensure freedom. With contemporary fragmentation and ethical pluralism of society, groups do not share the same values or educative conceptions. It is, however, imperative that some ethical positions are shared if any form of social relationship is to be sustained. This is illustrated in Amis' blackly comic novel, *Money*:

You know the people I mean. Girls who  
subliminally model themselves on kid-show  
presenters, full of faulty melody and joy,

Melody and Joy. Men whose manners show newscaster interference, soap stains, film smears. Or the cretinised, those who talk on buses and streets as if T.V. were real, who call up networks with strange questions, stranger demands . . . If you lose your rug, you can get a false one. If you lose your laugh, you can get a false one. If you lose your mind, you can get a false one (1984: 31).

John Self, the novel's protagonist and anti-hero, is unable to distinguish between the real world and the world as it is represented in the media. This results in a pronounced ethical deterioration; the only values that Self recognises are those of material wealth and sensual gratification. This is a world of spin-doctors and media consultants, advertising agencies and image creators. Self lives in the era of the image and he has become a conglomeration of images and attitudes from the external environment.

Society is complex and we cannot expect to find a single set of moral concepts that is unambiguous. Indeed, it is through an individual's membership in a variety of social groups that the individual identifies him or herself and is identified by others:

I am brother, cousin, and grandson, member of this household, that village, this tribe. These are not characteristics that belong to human beings accidentally, to be stripped away in order to discover 'the real me'. They are part of my substance, defining partially at least and

sometimes wholly my obligations and my duties. Individuals inherit a particular space within an interlocking set of social relationships; lacking that space, they are nobody, or at best a stranger or outcast (MacIntyre 1985: 33).

Thus in order to develop a sense of self, one has to be a repository of moral choice and have the ability to reflect on choices made. This is not easy if MacIntyre's thesis in *After Virtue* is correct, given that we live among fragmented traditions that once were flourishing. As Haydon (1987: 4) argues, critical reflection on inherited values is a tradition in modern western society, but this ideology may not be shared, or at least may not be accommodated to the same degree in all cultural traditions. There is no single, seamless web by which educative ethics can be measured, but different sorts of enquiry, interests and experiences, and different cultural traditions, all of which have their own standpoint. The boundary between social faces and the self is illusory and constantly shifting, and in order for the self to be able to reflect it is essential that there is some connection with what is already relevant within a tradition. We have to choose to whom we wish to be morally bound; by what end, rules and virtues we wish to be guided. It is in our choice of group that we define the terms of our moral reasoning and set the parameters of educative endeavour. There is not one moral foundation that has superiority, but it is important that the sense of history - of what is past and what may come - is acknowledged. As Marx (1983: 287) observed, men and women, 'Make their own history, but not under conditions that they have chosen for themselves; rather on terms immediately existing, given and handed down to them.' Such an infrastructure is essential for our moral survival. Without it, we would not be able to interpret events and experiences because:

The conservative impulse implies, then, an intolerance of unintelligible events. For if we were to encounter frequently events on which we could not impose interpretation, our behaviour would become alarmingly disorientated. But nothing becomes meaningful until it can be placed in a context of habits of feelings, principles of conduct, attachments, purposes, conceptions of how people behave (Marris 1986: 10).

This point is reinforced by MacIntyre (1985: 206):

It is central to the notion of a setting as I am going to understand it that a setting has a history, a history within which the histories of individual agents not only are, but have to be, situated, just because without the setting and its changes through time the history of the individual agent and his changes through time will be unintelligible.

Thus it is that morality is embodied in thinking and in the practices, conventions and expectations of persons in society. Facts are explained with reference to a tradition of thought and practice, therefore there is no such thing as the rational autonomous moral

agent. The values by which persons live their lives come down to emotive reactions or individual commitments to act one way or another, but even these reactions or 'personal' autonomy are guided by expectations of society. Human beings live their lives in the light of beliefs and values located within their culture:

The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the cooperation or consent of his deliberate reason (Russell 1998: 149/150).

Those that are morally and educatively impoverished are incapable of leading complex lives. Thus negotiated, complex roles exist in urban societies, and an understanding of these is essential if societies are to function.

It is the educator's role to shape the young person so that he or she fits into some social role and function; a sound aim, by all accounts. However, it also falls to the teacher to teach people how to think for themselves, how to be independent, how to be enlightened. It is hardly surprising that MacIntyre (1987: 16) should claim that 'teachers are the forlorn hope of the culture of Western modernity.' He acknowledges that such a mission, under the conditions of Western modernity, is both essential and impossible and therefore mutually incompatible. The outlook is not wholly pessimistic, for MacIntyre believes that under certain types of social and cultural conditions both concepts can find application within one and the same educational system, but only where an educated public exists and where introduction into the membership of that educated public is the goal of

education.

This point is developed further with a paradigmatic example and, as already exemplified, an educated and ethical community can only exist where there is some large degree of shared background of beliefs and attitudes, informed by the widespread reading of a common body of texts which are accorded canonical status within that particular community. MacIntyre (1987: 19) develops this further:

This common possession by a community of such a shared body of texts is only possible when there is also an established tradition of interpretative understanding of how such texts are to be read and construed. So not every literate and reading public is an educated public; mass literacy in a society which lacks both canonical texts and a tradition of interpretative understanding is more likely to produce a condition of public mindedness than an educated public.

The concept of an educated public being made to think for itself was initially accepted in the early eighteenth century, but a thinking public can be dangerous and subversive to those who legislate. The importance of people being made to think for themselves is recognised, but only if it is tempered by accepted and established forms of learning. This is apparent from nineteenth century educational heritage, where the focus ensured that elementary education would not give the lower orders ideas above their station. The elementary school tradition was intended to train the 'lower orders', producing a labour



force able to understand simple written instructions and capable of making basic calculations - the skills necessary for a competent factory labour force. Social education placed emphasis on training pupils to be obedient and to have respect for the property of their betters. Early advocates of elementary education were eager to reassure the middle classes that elementary education would not be too good:

It is not proposed that the children of the poor should be educated in a manner to elevate their minds above the rank they are destined to fill in society . . . Utopian schemes for an extensive diffusion of knowledge would be injurious and absurd

(Colquhoun, quoted in Altick 1957: 143).

The curriculum of any institution can act as the main agent of change, and there is no better agent to use as a control. Certain aspects of our way of life, certain kinds of knowledge, certain attitudes and values are regarded as so important that their transmission to the next generation is not left to chance in our society but is entrusted to trained professionals in elaborate institutions. Thus the strength of the written word has already been identified as being subversive and the failure of public mass education, as outlined by Bantock in *Culture, Industrialisation and Education* (1968), has been attributed to the attempt to force a literary, cultural tradition down the throats of the masses, whose heritage is oral.

The obvious paradigm to use to epitomise this point must be Oscar Wilde. Wilde's heritage was Irish and oral, and this is reflected in his shorter fictions and performance writing, which are oral in tradition and stem from a pre-literate culture. The act of scribing

these narratives has far reaching consequences however, as McCormack (1997: 111) identifies:

To move from an oral to a written culture, as Ireland was moving in the later part of the nineteenth century, is to move from the age-old to a precise moment in history. The oral depends on a performance in a kind of eternal present; it never ages, although its performers may grow old and die. The written is published at a certain date, frozen in history, outmoded as soon as it is inscribed and tied to a dying animal, the author, whose creation it is and who becomes its creature.

Wilde experienced a formal, Victorian, high grade, elite, traditional education in philosophy, aesthetics and history, providing him with the kind of knowledge which would be an obvious badge of his exclusive rank. For this purpose it was appropriate that the curriculum be based upon the classical foundations provided by Greek and Latin. He then used this education to question what he considered to be a stultified and repressive environment, so that his life ended in exile, his works and person vilified and disgraced. Wilde recognised the importance of the concept of education and the belief that people should be educated. He distinguishes between education, which should cultivate the individual, and schooling, which suppresses the individual in a process of socialisation, 'In England, everybody who is incapable of learning has taken to teaching' (in Ellmann 1982: 291). For Wilde, experience is educative and openness to experience allows growth and development; it was an attribute which people either possessed or lacked.

Kiberd (1997: 282) anchors this belief in Wilde's work:

Wilde's Bunburyists might immerse themselves in all kinds of questionable activity and yet emerge with a kind of indestructible innocence, open to experience, while on the other end of the spectrum could be found the Miss Prisms, who preached inexperience as a virtue because their minds really were closed and corrupt, incapable of growth and development . . . At the root of Miss Prism's theory of education is a suspicion of the imagination. In studying her political economy Cecily must omit the chapter on the fall of the rupee, because it is somewhat too sensational. Miss Prism implies that ideas always come from books, whereas Cecily (like the mother of all creation) has all of her promising thoughts in a garden.

The garden is one of the most powerful ideas in cultural history. It is a place of submission, of refuge, of sanctuary and looking inwards for hidden treasures. It is private, but can be a stepping stone to adventure, remaining a benevolent place, with the power to protect and redeem against the evil which may be found there, as In Wilde's *The Selfish Giant*. However, even the pleasures of public gardens were transformed by the Victorians into a sober, respectable family entertainment, with nothing to disturb the equilibrium of a crinoline.

Behind this is Wilde's reminder that a true education teaches the young to rebel and to consider most critically the society which they are asked to inherit. In such a context, disobedience is the only hope of growth and, as Kiberd states, 'the ultimate sign of a good teacher may even be a dissenting pupil – but not in Wilde's time, when education seemed a conspiracy against critical thought' (1997: 283). Wilde observed ironically that:

Thinking is the most unhealthy thing in the world and people die of it just as they die of any other disease. Fortunately, in England at any rate, thought is not catching' (in Ellmann 1982: 291).

Wilde was condemned by the well informed, not the well educated.

In order for this to be understood, it is necessary to take a closer look at the culture and society of Wilde's time. It may be that Wilde's beliefs, as the 'new' claimant undergoing consideration, appeared unintelligible because they did not have connection with what was already taken to be relevant within the Victorian tradition. His actions are revered today and our educated, contemporary society has recognised that Wilde was a prophet of modernity, a modernity that repelled much of English Victorian society. Foldy (1997: xv) depicts Wilde as personifying the 'onslaught of modernity' with its concomitant threats to traditional moral values and its challenges to traditional gender roles and identities. In *The Liberal Imagination* Trilling (1951: 9) points out that:

A culture is not a flow, nor even a confluence;  
the form of its existence is struggle or at least

debate – it is nothing if not a dialectic. And in any culture there are likely to be certain artists who contain a large part of the dialectic within themselves, their meaning and power lying in their contradictions; they contain within themselves the very essence of the culture . . . the yes and no of their culture.

This is especially true of Wilde, who states in *De Profundis* that:

I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. I had realised this for myself at the very dawn of my manhood, and forced my age to realise it afterwards. Few men hold such a position in their lifetime and have it so acknowledged. It is usually discerned, if it is discerned at all, by the historian, or the critic, long after both the man and his age have passed away. With me it was different. I felt it myself, and made others feel it . . . I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art; I altered the minds of men, and the colour of things; I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created a myth and legend around me; I summed up all things in a phrase, all existence in an epigram; whatever I touched I made beautiful (CW

Even if Wilde never fully understood the precise nature of this dialectic, as full understanding only comes with hindsight, he did sense the essential dilemmas of his age with a profundity that is often belied by his work. As historical beings we are part of a process that is incomplete. We cannot adopt a position of objectivity outside the language or time that defines us. Without Wilde, as Ellmann (1988: xiv) argues, the period would not have found its character:

Wilde occupied, as he insisted, a 'symbolical relation' to his time. He ranged over the visible and invisible worlds and dominated them by his unusual views. He is not one of those writers who as the centuries change loses their relevance. Wilde is one of us. His wit is the agent of renewal, as pertinent now as a hundred years ago.

The uncertainties of the modern age make people reflective, increasingly so as the end of one century approaches and another begins. In a time of flux and change it was important for Victorian society to uphold moral philosophy. If moral philosophy no longer had the function of providing the presupposition for, and defining the controversial issues within debates of an educated public, it suffered loss, as did the educated public, because one of the conditions of its flourishing, common public debate, had disappeared. There would be no shared standards of justification amongst the public. Marris (1986: 9) acknowledges the need for a 'system':

What we cannot do is survive without a system of some kind predicting the course of events. It does not matter that the system may be false on another system's terms, so long as it identifies experiences in a way which enable people to attach meanings to them and respond . . . the conservative impulse implies, then an intolerance of unintelligible events. For if we were to encounter frequently events on which we could not impose an interpretation, our behaviour would become alarmingly disorientated. But nothing becomes meaningful until it can be placed in the context of habits of feeling, principles of conduct, attachments, purposes, conceptions of how people behave.

It is inevitable that man's ability to cope with change depends on making sense of what happens to him; 'Anything which threatens to invalidate our conceptual structures of interpretation is profoundly disruptive' (Marris 1986: 10). Hence mankind's innate fear of change and resistance to it. We ignore or avoid certain events that we cannot interpret and pigeon hole different aspects of life in order to defend our ability to make sense of life. Such a system for placing meaning in context is founded at the beginning of life and 'develops from the first through relationships with adults whose own experience is formed by the society in which they grew up' therefore 'the meanings we discover must be, in part, those that our parents discovered before us' (Marris 1986: 11).

Selves therefore conduct their existence as though the future is, to a degree, predictable and that it is composed of a narrative or a variety of empirically possible narratives. In the film version of C.S. Lewis' observed account of bereavement, *Shadowlands*, the audience is told that 'We read to know that we are not alone,' and this reminds us that it is through the hearing and reading of stories that our own narrative selves are slotted into an engagement with culture. We use narratives to define our actions and those of others and these characterise the way individuals carry themselves and contribute towards the construction of social contexts. 'It is the manner in which such narratives occur and are recognised by the participants themselves and by others that forms the establishment of an important mode of social explanation' (Dickinson and Erben 1995: 256). MacIntyre (1985: 209), in acknowledging that when a life ceases to be temporally or causally related to some recognisable narrative, states that we are 'both intellectually and practically baffled . . . our distinction between the humanly accountable and the merely natural has broken down.' The importance of the role of narratives and the part they have to play in underpinning our beliefs and the sense of ourselves is highlighted:

Man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources . . . the telling of stories has a key part in educating us into the virtues.



Narrative might seem to be the antithesis of life as it is, in fact, lived. It depends upon order and structure, where life is disordered and unstructured. The need for narrative is innate in us and is demonstrated by every child who falls silent to listen to a story, responding instinctively to the marriage of a structure and an interpretation which is missing from its own experience. Thus there is a narrative process within literature. There is order, an internal coherence that stems not only from the reader's need to reflect on the world and to seek identification, but also from the writer's need to use narrative as a means of exploring and developing personal preoccupations, of trying to provide explanations and interpretations of human conduct, and to reflect upon the human condition. Lively (2000: 82) develops this:

I am deeply suspicious of the notion that so-called texts are free-floating concepts, the study of which is tarnished by an insistence on context and temporality. I think that writers spring from particular circumstances, are conditioned by them and write out of them. An aspect of this conditioning is, of course, what they happen to read as well as where and how they happen to live . . . but above all he or she writes out of a social and historical climate, and bears witness to it.

It is no coincidence that, as European decadence came to a head at the end of the nineteenth century, the sway of the British Empire was already waning. Intellectual reaction against the absolutism of Victorian science reached out from science itself to moral, economic and political categories of experience. One of these reactions can be

seen by the Decadents in their reappraisal of scientific and technological absolutism, and their acknowledgement of atavistic, spiritual roots. Nowhere is this exemplified more strongly than in the social theorising, criticisms, plays, narratives and biographies of Wilde. The role of literature is fundamental to the understanding of human nature. Literature survives and it is through Wilde's literature that the expression of many artistic ideals, both French and English, coalesced. 'Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing. A new Hedonism - that is what our century wants' (CW 31).

J. K. Huysman's *A Rebours*, published in May 1884, distilled the spirit of the Decadent movement into one text, presenting its followers and their descendants with a Decadent *Baedeker*.

Huysman took decadence out of the sub-cultural bywaters and injected it into the mainstream: from Montmartre's nocturnal bolt-holes to England's middle-classes in one literary leap: like Oscar Wilde, Huysmans gave subversion to suburbia (Hoare 1997: 25).

Such a character as des Esseintes provided the Decadents with their role model and *A Rebours* inspired Wilde to write his own, Anglicised version, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. There is an oblique reference to its influence when Basil Hallward's reaction to an unnamed book is described:

It was the strangest book that he had ever read. It seemed to him that in exquisite

raiment and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb-show before him. Things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed (CW: 96).

Ellmann (1988) has examined the effect of the Decadent movement on Wilde's life. *Rebours* was published during Oscar and Constance's honeymoon and Wilde's subsequent fascination with the 'things that he had only dreamed of' developed just as the novelty of his marriage was beginning to lose its edge, 'It summoned him towards an underground life totally at variance with his above board role as Constance's husband' (Ellmann 1988: 238). Calloway (1997: 48) continues:

Ellmann has noted that perhaps the most significant of the changes in Wilde's attitudes and his distinct move towards the darker and more 'decadent' artistic and moral sensibility that we have examined, coincided curiously with not only his increasing celebrity and growing social status as the literary lion of the day, but also more importantly with his marriage and move to a new and very much family-orientated house in Tite Street; both developments which may have made the exploration of illicit pleasures and 'strange sensations' rather more appealing than

heretofore.

To belong to the Decadent movement gave membership a club mentality, to be part of the 'in crowd'. In 'The Decay of Lying', Wilde invents a society called:

The Tired Hedonists . . . it is a club to which I belong. We are supposed to wear faded roses in our buttonholes when we meet, and to have a sort of cult for Domitian. I am afraid you are not eligible. You are too fond of simple pleasures (CW 1073).

Such an existence, however, was predicated on the material world. Only the cultivated, developed world of the industrial era could allow hedonism and capital consumerism to thrive. 'When asked if members of the Tired Hedonists must be bored with each other, Wilde agreed. 'We are. That is one of the objects of the club'. The real decadence was the trespass of life into art.' (Ellmann 1988: 285). Wilde's rejection of realism in his work, especially in his critical essays, *Intentions*, which includes 'The Decay of Lying', is consistent with the inheritance of progressive characteristics: precisely because life imitates art, art should be progressive. Gagnier (1997: 26) develops this point, when she notes that Aesthetics:

Allied him with the politically progressive Darwinists who saw individuals as naturally social, creative and co-operative and the 'law of the jungle' as an imposition of Britain's particular socio-economic system. Since the

evolutionary progress was towards differentiation and specialisation of function, individuals would be drawn into voluntary co-operation and mutual aid. The inheritance of culture would ultimately make authority unnecessary.

In Wilde's writing, individualism 'is less to do with a human essence, than a dynamic social potential, one which implies a radical possibility of freedom' (Dollimore 1987: 51). Wilde begins 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' by asserting that a socialism based on sympathy alone is useless; what is needed is to 'try to reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible' (CW 1174) and that 'Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism' (CW 1175). Individualism as Wilde conceives it generates a disobedience which, 'in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and religion' (CW 1176). Already then, Wilde's notion of individualism is inseparable from transgressive desire and transgressive aesthetic. This point is illustrated by Dollimore's account of Wilde's developing relationship with Gide, who:

Was deeply disturbed by Wilde, and not surprisingly, since Gide's remarks in his letters of that time suggest that Wilde was intent on undermining the younger man's self-identity, rooted as it was in a Protestant ethic and high moral rigour and repression that generated a kind of conformity to which Wilde was, notoriously, opposed. Wilde wanted to

encourage Gide to transgress. It may be that he wanted to re-enact in Gide creative liberation - which his own exploration of transgressive desire had produce nine years earlier (1987: 48).

This is view with which Ellmann concurs, who states that in the early days of their friendship, Gide was 'overwhelmed by Wilde . . . Until that time Gide had gone through life in a dream, like a sleepwalker. Now he suddenly woke up to find himself on a sloping roof' (1988: 334). This echoes Wilde's words in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', when he declares 'One will live. To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all' (CW 1178). The turmoil that Gide experienced as 'Wilde, I believe, did me nothing but harm. In his company I lost the habit of thinking. I had more varied emotions but had forgotten how to bring order to them' (in Ellmann 1988: 335), mirrors the turmoil that Wilde explores in *De Profundis* with regard to Douglas, where the tone has a sense of hard things being said for the first time. He accuses Douglas of distracting him from his art, of spending his money, of degrading him ethically, of constant scene-making, of deliberately mistreating him and then of thoughtlessly mistreating him:

I remember that afternoon . . . thinking what an impossible, terrible, utterly wronged state my life had got into, when I, a man of world-wide reputation, was actually forced to run away from England, in order to try and get rid of a friendship that was entirely destructive of everything fine in me either from the intellectual or ethical point of view: the person

from whom I was flying being no terrible creature sprung from sewer or mire into modern life with whom I had entangled my days, but you yourself, a young man of my own social rank and position (CW 988).

Wilde despises the imperatives of 'uniformity of type and conformity to rule' (CW: 1195), not only in individuals but also as attributes of class and ruling ideologies. He attacks public opinion, mediocrity and conventional morality, all of which forbid both the desire and the aesthetic. Far from reflecting or prescribing for the true essence or nature of man, individualism will generate:

The cultural difference and diversity which conventional morality, orthodox opinion and essentialist ideology disavow. Wilde affirms the principle of differentiation to which all life grows and insists that selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, but asking others to live as one wishes to live (Dollimore 1987: 52).

Individualism as an affirmation of cultural as well as personal difference is therefore fundamentally opposed to 'immoral uniformity of type and conformity to rule which is so prevalent everywhere' (CW 1195). Wilde's regret is that:

Society should be constructed on such a basis that man has been forced into a groove in which he cannot freely develop what is

wonderful, and fascinating, and delightful in  
him - in which, in fact, he misses the true  
pleasure and joy of living (CW 1178).

Wilde's oppositional stance to the English 'uniformity of type and conformity to rule' may stem from his Irish identity. Wilde's parents were part of a small breed of Irish protestants who, in the second half of the nineteenth century, supported the cause of Irish nationalism and yet remained both members of a ruling class in Ireland and comfortable with the governing classes in London. Their addiction to the cause of Irish freedom gave them an edge, lifted them out of their own circumstances and led to individuality and independence of mind. They lived inside the established world and outside it:

They were an essential part of Dublin society at the height of Victoria's rule, yet they flouted the rules of sexual morality. And neither managed to be discreet. Their allegiance was to an Ireland which had not yet come into place, a dream-Ireland of her (Lady Wilde) poetry and his (William Wilde) antiquarianism, and at the same time to their own sense of privilege and power, which derived from the very oppressor of the ancient culture they admired. Their dual mandate, the ambiguity of their position, allowed them to be noticed and remembered, allowed them to do whatever they liked (Tóibín 2001: 11).



During the nineteenth century, theories of race were advanced both by the scientific community and in the daily and periodical press. Even before the publication of *The Origin of the Species* in 1859, the concept of the chain of being, marking the gradations of mankind, was being subjected to a new scientific racism. An atmosphere congenial to racial stereotyping emerged and in much of the pseudo-scientific literature of the day, the Irish were held to be inferior, an example of a lower evolutionary form, closer to the apes than their 'superiors', the Anglo-Saxons. Cartoons in *Punch* portrayed the Irish as having bestial, ape-like or demonic features and the Irishman, especially the political radical, was invariably given a long or prognathous jaw, the stigmata to the phrenologists of a lower evolutionary order, degeneracy, or criminality. These ideas were not confined to a lunatic fringe of the scientific community, for although they never won over the mainstream of British scientists they were disseminated broadly. Certainly the 'ape-like' Celt became something of a malevolent cliché in Victorian racism. Kingsley was able to write:

I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I  
saw [in Ireland] . . . I don't believe they are our  
fault . . . But to see white chimpanzees is  
dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel  
it so much (quoted in Curtis 1968: 84).

Even seemingly complimentary generalisations about the Irish national character could, in the Victorian context, be perceived as being damaging to the Celt. Following the publication of Renan's *La Poesie des Races Celtiques* (1854), it was argued that the Celt was poetic, imaginative, playful, passionate and sentimental. These, however, were characteristics that the Victorians associated with children. Thus the Irish were immature and in need of guidance by others who were considered to be more highly developed

than themselves. Irish emotion was contrasted unfavourably with English reason, Irish femininity with English masculine virtues, and Irish poetic attributes with English pragmatism. The fact that the Irish were regarded as criminal, childlike, excessively sexual, filthy, having no religion, irrational, supported the argument of British rule in Ireland.

Two years before the publication in 1891 of 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', Wilde addresses England's exploitation and repression of Ireland. In the eighteenth century, says Wilde, England tried to rule Ireland 'with an insolence that was intensified by race-hatred and religious prejudice'; in the nineteenth, with 'a stupidity . . . aggravated by good intentions' (in Ellmann 1982: 136). When Ross interviewed Wilde for the *Pall Mall Budget*, Wilde threatened, 'If the Censor refuses *Salome*, I shall leave England to settle in France where I shall take out letters of naturalisation. I will not consent to call myself a citizen of a country that shows such narrowness in artistic judgement. I am not English. I am Irish, which is quite another thing' (Ellmann 1988: 351). The meaning of Englishness and Britishness is contextualised historically by Barczewski (2000), who explores the establishment of English studies in the universities and the popularisation of the doctrine of racial difference in nineteenth century Britain through the inherent superiority of Aryan/Germanic/English stock over, on the one hand, the Celt - romantic, poetic, impractical, and in the Irish variant, Catholic and feckless - and the barbarian peoples of Empire on the other.

Out of this racial consciousness, however, Wilde did not embrace a 'provincial primitivism' (Prewitt Brown 1997: 24), but he developed a critical sensibility and a theory of the utmost importance of the critical spirit to the creative enterprise. Wilde's cultural criticism demonstrates a more 'logical application of ethnological and evolutionary theory to methods of cultural improvement' (Smith and Helfand 1978: 199). Beginning with a

belief that aesthetics and creative abilities are racially inherited, Wilde develops a scheme for both the individual and social development of these characteristics. In 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' he envisions a 'nonauthoritarian socialist state which would free individuals to pursue autodidactic education and so true self-realisation' (Smith and Helfand 1978: 199) and in 'The Critic as Artist' he insists that 'it is only by contact with the art of foreign nations that the art of a country gains that individual and separate life that we call nationality' (CW 1131). He therefore recognised the interconnections among cultural institutions and the consequent need for reforms not only in education but also in all those social institutions which affected human development.

Sammells (2000: 21) highlights how Wilde came to symbolise the very antithesis of Englishness, as 'his sexuality and his nationality coalesced in the discourses of 'healthy' late – Victorian society'. Dudley Edwards (1995: 12) suggests that Wilde's Irishness was on trial at the Old Bailey as much as his sexual deviancy, 'Come down to the Old Bailey and watch the Paddies whack.' In Eagleton's play *St Oscar* (1989: 46), Wilde announces that he objects to the trial on the grounds that 'no Irishman can receive a fair hearing in an English court because the Irish are figments of the English imagination. I am not really here; I am just one of your racial fantasies. You cannot manacle a fantasy.'

Wilde was building on educational theory expounded by Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) and *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), a case made by Smith and Helfand (1978). In these works Arnold suggests a rationale for the influence of race on a national culture, in which a nation's consciousness of its racial heritage could radically change its cultural life. Arnold believed that education provided the best hope for social and cultural improvement and that 'English national character was explainable as a consequence of historical intermixture of three Indo-European strains, the Celtic (which included the Irish and French), the Norman (which contained the Latin strain), and the Teutonic (which

included the Saxon and the German)' (Smith and Helfand 1978: 200).

He states in *On the Study of Celtic Literature*:

Modes of life, institutions, government, climate  
and so forth, - let me say it once and for all, -  
will further or hinder the development of an  
aptitude, but they will not by themselves  
create the aptitude or explain it. On the other  
hand, a people's habit and complexion of  
nature go far to determine its modes of life,  
institutions and government, and even to  
prescribe the limits within which the influence  
of climate shall tell upon it (1867: 120).

He argues that 'the insolence, hardness, unintelligence and fumbling which characterised the Philistine domination of Ireland would be changed if the English recognised their racial relationship to the Celts' (Smith and Helfand 1978: 200). Arnold provides a practical instance of his educational theory by proposing the establishment of a chair of Celtic Studies at Oxford and assumes that a change in curricular content would provide students with the necessary knowledge to choose between his Celtic, or better, self and his dominant Philistinism. 'Ultimately for Arnold only the individual's personal enlightenment and conscious and moral choice should be the effective agency of beneficial social change' (Smith and Helfand 1978: 200).

Renan 'discovered the Celt somewhere about the year 1856' (Holbrook Jackson 1950: 147) but in the year 1891 Grant Allen made the discovery that there was such a thing as a Celtic movement in English art. In the same edition of *The Fortnightly Review* in which Wilde published 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', Grant Allen published 'The Celt in

English Art', in which he argues that:

The great and victorious aesthetic movement . . . may be regarded in its wider aspect as just a particular part of the general racial, political and social return-wave. It is a direct result, I believe, of the Celtic reflux on Teutonic Britain, and of the resurgence of the Celtic substratum against Teutonic dominance . . . The Celt comes back upon us with all the Celtic gifts and all the Celtic ideals - imagination, fancy, decorative skill, artistic handicraft; free land, free speech, human equality, human brotherhood (1891: 272).

To highlight the connection between the Celtic decorative revival and the Celtic upheaval of radicalism and socialism, Allen pointed specifically to Wilde, who recognised a political and intellectual ally in Allen, 'Mr. Oscar Wilde, whom only fools ever mistook for a mere charlatan, and whom wise men know for a man of rare insight and strong common-sense, is an Irishman to the core' (1891: 273).

Wilde's remarks in 'The Critic as Artist' demonstrate that he shared Allen's views:

And though the mission of the aesthetic movement is to lure people to contemplate, not to lead them to create, yet, as the creative instinct is strong in the Celt, and it is the Celt who leads in art, there is no reason why in future years this strange Renaissance should

not become almost as mighty in its way as  
was that new birth of Art that awoke many  
centuries ago in the cities of Italy (CW 1147).

Smith and Helfand (1978) outline Wilde's extensive knowledge of scientific and social theories and his Oxford Notebooks (1989) reveal his recognition of the importance of scientific racialism. He believed that science gave a picture of human nature and its development very different from the dominant Victorian view of 'a selfish, competitive and brutal creature who improved through a bloody intraspecies struggle for existence caused by an inevitable scarcity of human necessities' (Smith and Helfand 1978: 205).

Wilde relied upon science as the soundest guide to methods of social improvement, but, whilst affirming Arnold's humanistic ideal, he observed the failure of his method, 'It was reserved for a man of science to show us the supreme example of that 'sweet reasonableness' of which Arnold spoke so wisely, and, alas! To so little effect. The author of the *Origin of the Species* had, at any rate, a philosophic temper' (CW 1153). He turned to Darwin for the scientific foundation of his cultural criticism:

Aesthetics, in fact, are to Ethics in the sphere  
of conscious civilisation, what, in the sphere of  
the external world, sexual is to natural  
selection. Ethics, like natural selection, make  
existence possible. Aesthetics, like sexual  
selection, make life lovely and wonderful and  
fill it with new forms, and give it progress,  
variety and change . . . The nineteenth  
century is a turning point in history, simply on

the account of two men, Darwin and Renan,  
the one the critic of the Book of Nature, the  
other the critic of the books of God. Not to  
recognise this is to miss the meaning of one of  
the most important eras in the progress of the  
world. Creation is always behind the age. It is  
Criticism that leads us. The Critical Spirit and  
the World Spirit are one (CW 1154).

Evolutionary and ethnological science helped Wilde to develop a coherent theory of social improvement, which Smith and Helfand (1978: 207) identify as having four implications. Primarily there is the establishment of a nonauthoritarian social polity and economy as explored in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism'. This proposes a cultural criticism which 'trusts to socialism and science as its methods' (CW 1197). Secondly, his ideal society was both individualistic and pluralistic, 'There is no one type for man. There are as many perfections as there are imperfect men' (CW 1181). Thirdly, given this utopia, Wilde envisioned an ideal situation for autodidactic education for all persons and finally, Wilde suggested that sexual selection, eugenics, would contribute to the continuing improvement of culture.

Thus Wilde regarded socialism and individualism, considered in his own day to be antithetical, as interdependent elements necessary for human evolutionary progress. Because he assumed the biological origins of culture, he asserted that the perfection of personality required a freedom to develop according to 'its own laws' (CW 1179):

For it will not worry about the past, nor care  
whether things happened or did not happen.

Nor will it admit any laws but its own laws; nor  
any authority but its own authority (CW 1179).

Smith and Helfand explain further:

It should now be clear why Wilde stressed the interdependence of socialism and individualism. If a competitive social structure repressed the development of the aesthetic, intellectual, and moral faculties which Wilde regarded as innate, concentrated race-experience, then only under socialism could this 'soul of man' emerge. The inheritance of culture made cultural authority unnecessary (1978: 209).

Wilde's educational theory, as expressed in 'The Critic as Artist' and 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', is consistent with these premises. Wilde believed that formal schooling played only a small role in what should be 'a spontaneous yet guided awakening' (Smith and Helfand 1978: 207) of the individual's inherent aesthetic sensibility. It is at this point that Wilde's argument differs from Arnold's advocacy of a centralised state education system which would teach the individual to choose the good, 'Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught' (CW 1242). He agreed with Arnold that the present educational system placed emphasis on the memorisation of unconnected facts, 'We, in our educational system, have burdened the memory with a load of unconnected facts, and laboriously striven to impart our laboriously-acquired knowledge. We teach people how to remember, we



never teach them how to grow' (CW 1152). He believed that 'truly desirable and humane education would lead to self-realisation through the cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility and a critical intellect' (Smith and Helfand 1978: 210) and he maintained that Plato's dialectical method provided an antiauthoritarian model for the growth of intellect, a paradigm that Wilde uses in 'The Critic as Artist'. Both Plato and Wilde proposed 'that real love of beauty . . . is the true aim of education' (CW 1146) and that perfection could be accomplished only autodidactically, 'For the development of the race depends on the development of the individual, and where self-culture has ceased to be the ideal, the intellectual standard is instantly lowered, and often, ultimately lost' (CW 1140).

Thus Wilde's proposals for cultural improvement, based on evolutionary and ethnological theories of his day, represent a coherent plan in which socialism, self-education and biology would function to perfect both individual and society.

Individualism joins with socialism to abolish other kinds of conformity, 'Individualism, then, is what through Socialism we are to attain. As a natural result the State must give up all idea of government' (CW 1181). Individualism is both the desire for a radical personal freedom and a desire for society itself to be radically different, the first being inseparable from the second. Wilde says of human nature:

The only thing one really knows about human nature is that it changes. Change is the one quality we can predicate of it. The systems that fail are those that rely on the permanency of human nature, and not on its growth and development. The error of Louis XIV was that he thought human nature would always be the

same. The result of his error was the French revolution. It was an admirable result. All the results of the mistakes of governments are quite admirable (CW 1194).

Dollimore elaborates, 'Typically, within idealist culture, the experience of an essential subjectivity is inseparable from knowledge of that notorious transhistorical category, human nature' (1987: 53). Wilde's reply to those who claim that socialism is incompatible with human nature is to reject practicality itself as presupposing and endorsing both the existing social conditions and the concept of human nature as fixed, each of which suppositions socialism would contest, 'But it is exactly the existing conditions that one objects to; and any scheme that could accept these conditions is wrong and foolish. The conditions will change and human nature will change' (CW 1194).

The key concepts of Wilde's aesthetic are 'protean and shifting' (Dollimore 1987: 53). One of the most significant referents of concepts like life and reality is the prevailing social order and even 'Nature, conceived as the opposite of culture and art, retains a social dimension' (Dollimore 1987: 53). Wilde recognised this when he claimed that, 'The nineteenth century is a turning point in history . . . Creation is always behind the age. It is criticism that leads us. The Critical spirit and the World spirit are one' (CW 1154). Nature and reality signify a prevailing order which art ignores and which the critic 'negates, subverts and transgresses' (Dollimore 1987: 53). Criticism and art are aligned with individualism against a prevailing social order and Wilde explores the effect that popular control, 'the meanest capacity and the uncultivated mind' can have upon the artist:

To meet such requirements the artist would have to do violence to his temperament, would have to write not for the artistic joy of writing, but for the amusement of half-educated people, and so would have to suppress his individualism, forget his culture, annihilate his style, and surrender everything that is valuable to him . . . The public are quite right in their attitude. Art is Individualism, and Individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. Therein lies its immense value. For what it seeks to disturb is monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine (CW 1185/6).

Art is also self-conscious and critical; in fact, 'Self-conscious and the critical spirit are one' (CW 1118). And art, like individualism, is oriented towards the realm of transgressive desire, 'What is abnormal in Life stands in normal relations to Art. It is the only thing in Life that stands in normal relations to Art' (CW 1242). For Wilde, form is virtually synonymous with culture and 'life is at best an energy which can only find expression through the forms that art offers it' (Dollimore 1987: 54). Wilde recognises the priority of the social and the cultural in determining meaning, even in determining desire. So for Wilde, 'although desire is deeply at odds with society in its existing forms, it does not exist as a pre-social authenticity; it is within and in-formed by the very culture which it also transgresses (Dollimore 1987: 54).

Wilde rejects the concept of human nature as being fixed, 'it is exactly the existing conditions that one objects to . . . The conditions will be done away with, and human nature will change' (CW 1194). He accepts that there is something like human nature, but, far from being the source of our profound being, it is actually ordinary and boring, the least interesting thing about us. It is where we differ from each other that is of definitive value, when the 'true value of life is bound up with individual uniqueness' (Dollimore 1987: 55), a point which Gide reinforces, 'the part in each of us that we feel different from other people is the part that is rare, the part that makes our special value' (1902/1960: 51).

Wilde seeks to subvert the social order:

What is termed Sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless. By its curiosity Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism it saves us from the monotony of type. In its rejection of the current notions of morality, it is the one with higher ethics (CW 1121/1122).

In seeking to do so, he reinstates that which society forbids through and within some of its most 'cherished and central cultural categories - art, the aesthetic, art criticism, individualism' (Dollimore 1987: 57).

To understand fully why Wilde was regarded as a threat to social, moral and sexual order, it is necessary to explore Dollimore's paradigm of nature/culture (1987: 57):

X	for	Y
surface		depth
lying		truth
change		stasis
difference		essence
persona/role		essential self
abnormal		normal
insincerity		sincerity
style/artifice		authenticity
facetious		serious
narcissism		maturity

Dollimore states that 'deviant desire reacts against, disrupts and displaces from within; rather than seeking to escape the repressive ordering of sexuality, Wilde reinscribes himself within and relentlessly inverts the binaries upon which that ordering depends. Inversion defines Wilde's transgressive aesthetic' (1987: 56). More specifically, the attributes in the X column are substituted by those in the Y:

Deviant desire is legitimated in terms of culture's opposite, nature, or in a different but related move, in terms of something which is pre-cultural or *always more than* cultural . . . for Wilde transgressive desire is both rooted in culture and the impetus for affirming

different/alternative kinds of culture. At the same time as he appropriates those categories (art, the aesthetic, art criticism, individualism) he also transvalues them through inversion, thus making them now signify those binary exclusions (the X column) by which the dominant culture knows itself (thus abnormality is not just the opposite, but the *necessarily always present* antithesis of normality) (1987: 57).

Following the third trial, after which Wilde was found guilty and sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labour, the editorial of the London Evening News subjected him to a vicious attack. He had, it claimed, tried to subvert the 'wholesome, manly, simple ideals of English life'; moreover his 'abominable vices . . . were the natural outcome of his diseased intellectual condition' (in Montgomery Hyde 1948: 12). In addition, the editorial also saw Wilde as a leader of a like-minded but younger subculture in London.

One of the reasons that people thought as they did was to do with the perceived connections between Wilde's 'aesthetic transgression and his sexual transgression' (Dollimore 1987: 58). Society regarded homosexuality as rooted in a person's identity. This sin may pervade all aspects of an individual's being and its expression might become more insidious and subversive. As Dollimore states, 'sexual deviation is symptomatic of a much wider cultural deterioration and/or subversion' (1987: 59).

The concept of degeneration derived its authority and power from the structure of scientific explanation and, as Foldy acknowledges (1997: 72), historically, degeneration

was the metaphor used to characterise the 'dark side of progress':

The idea of degeneration had a powerful appeal to British men and women in the period after 1885 . . . because it appeared to account for developments in British life . . . (which included the perceived increase in) 'urban' diseases such as alcoholism, crime, insanity, suicide, and various sexual perversion . . . about which there was widespread concern (1985: 64/67).

The particular appeal of the idea of degeneration during the last twenty five years of the nineteenth century can be situated within the discursive confines of the debate between, on the one hand, the defenders of progress and, on the other, the critics. The 'defenders', exemplified by Gladstone, looked at the benefits of progress and 'emphasised the concrete material advances which were seen as resulting from the accumulations of technical innovations and positive social reforms' (Foldy 1997: 73). The critics, personified by Hardy, Tennyson and the French philosopher Sorel, examined 'the victims of progress, and emphasised instead the physical, psychological, and spiritual costs of the processes of industrialisation and modernisation (Foldy 1997: 73).

If the concept of degeneration was often used in the evolutionary sense to describe a regressive social process that could be seen as the antithesis of complement of progress, it was just as often used in the medical and psychiatric sense to describe a developmental process in individuals that was regarded as being increasingly unhealthy. All the forces generally perceived as criminal or socially disruptive which contested the

authority of the dominant social order were viewed as socially regressive by many and labelled 'degenerate':

In accordance with this view, the epithet 'degenerate' was widely assumed to characterise anyone who did not meet or aspire to bourgeois standards and values, or anyone who threatened to subvert the existing (religious, social, political, sexual) status quo in any way, shape or form (Foldy 1997: 74).

There is an important sense in which Wilde confirmed and exploited this connection between discursive and sexual perversion, 'What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion' (CW 1018).

What held those 'wholesome, manly, simple' ideals of English life in place were traditional and conservative ideas of what constituted human nature and human subjectivity, and it was these that Wilde attacked: not so much the conventional morality itself as the ideological anchor points for that morality, namely notions of identity whose criteria appear in the 'Y' column above (Dollimore 1987: 59).

Wilde came to represent a potent threat to the 'health' of Britain at a very critical juncture



in the nation's history, and Wilde's conviction and imprisonment in turn represented a concerted effort on the part of society to address and cure a sickness and to reaffirm the existing moral order. Even though there may now be a temptation to dismiss both the Victorians' 'wholesome, manly, simple ideals of English life' and Wilde's inversion of them, the fact remains that, in successively reconstituted forms, those ideals come to form the moral and ethical base of English studies in the twentieth century and, indeed, remain culturally central today. Wilde turns the vocabulary of English moral and social criticism against itself, allowing its latent contradictions to emerge; and, in so doing, he brings about a transformation from within.

Nostalgia and respect for the past, juxtaposed with progressive thought, resonate throughout Wilde's literature, whether it is creative or critical. His beliefs have considerable currency in an age of growing and expanding published material. Eliot (1993) in particular, has observed that there was an increase in the number and variety of new books titles and periodicals published in the 1890s. The success of newspapers and magazines at this time is often associated with the reading habits of a newly literate and economically significant working class, but Wilde also recognised the inherent dangers in mass communication, most notably in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism'. Wilde's belief, that individualism was central to modernity, was under threat, as Gagnier (1997: 19) has observed. 'The worst excesses of market ideology and the industrial revolution showed that technology could be as destructive as beneficial, and mass communication . . . could lead to mass control as easily as to enlightened understanding.' This can be developed further with direct reference to Wilde. The commodification of Wilde and his works, in a consumer society, complicates the pursuit of individuality and freedom of thought and expression. This is the moment when intellectual history and the pursuit of liberal and individual freedom of thought meet with society, the society in which Wilde played his role as a public intellectual. The contrast

between his public works in which he exposed his audience's superficiality and lack of moral fibre, whilst at the same time presented them with images that made them powerful and attractive, and his private works written in prison without an audience, is significant. His works reflect a philosopher who publicised ideas in a mass society composed of audiences with often conflicting interests:

Situating Wilde in the context of late-Victorian social institutions of journalism, advertising, public schools, homosexuals, communities, criminology, etiquette, theatre and prisons, sheds light not only on Wilde's paradoxical style but also on the circulation and consumption of knowledge in market society, in which knowledge is never pure of its packaging, the message never separable from the medium (Gagnier 1997: 27).

Clifford (1979: 38) distinguishes two ways in which beliefs are publicly influential. Primarily they are publicly expressed. Secondly, to have a belief is to be disposed to act in some ways, rather than in others. This underpins Wilde's work and existence. The reality is that Wilde was one of the creators of the twentieth century. He anticipated the complexities of both modernity and post modernity in his adoption of the culturally subversive mask of extreme artificiality. He challenged social, moral and sexual conventions, satirising Victorian morality and his own lifestyle, in short, subverting the Victorian ideal of art as a moral vehicle. The Decadents and their art did not fit in; they did not function organically within society's natural evolution, and therefore by definition they were degenerate rather than progressive. Wilde himself, however, regarded his

personal and literary styles as models of growth, not degeneracy. He did this from a position changed and influenced by the works of classical Greece and Rome, as well as an easy familiarity with the subsequent literature of the European tradition, a theme to be explored in the next chapter.

Whilst direct Hegelian influence has yet to be determined, it is known that *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* was inspired by classical Greek and Renaissance art. It responds to quite a broad canon of literary writing that, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, sought to exploit cultural models that would permit at least some public legitimisation of sexual desire between men. *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* seeks to locate the homoerotic intimacy of Shakespeare's sonnets in the context of Renaissance understandings of love, and the connection between classical Greek and the early modern sensibility was clearly defined in the respect shown towards male friendship. Such works as the translation of Plato's *Symposium* in 1492 and Montaigne's essay on *Friendship* encouraged men to elevate friendship and in its Platonic formulation it is intensified by its movement across a generational divide, and works such as *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* mark the culmination of the broadening and liberalising Platonism of Oxford that in the mid 1870s opened Wilde's eyes to exemplary forms of intellectual, spiritual and emotional companionship between men. It may not be inappropriate to read *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* as a piece of resistance, in a time where High Victorian society was setting the moral tone for the next seventy years and this narrative, in showing us how such relationships are 'unrepresentable, fantastic and fatal, is hardly assuring us that the Socratic ethos survives intact in the late-Victorian period. If anything, male friendship appears unfulfillable, dystopic, not to say tragic' (Bristow 1997: 210).

Wilde's defence in the course of his second trial demonstrated his sincerity:

'The love that dare not speak its name' in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michaelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michaelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as 'Love that dare not speak its name,' and on account of it I am placed where I am now. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder has the intellect, and the younger has all the joy, hope, and glamour of life before him. That it should be so, the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it (Montgomery Hyde 1973: 201).

The response of the 'well educated' judiciary reveals the precarious position of such Hellenic sentiments in the late Victorian period and it is in this role of social and moral historian that Wilde believed that individuals were products of societies and that social inequality would prevent the general flourishing of individualism:

If we lived long enough to see the results of our actions it may be that those who call themselves good would be sickened with a dull remorse, and those whom the world calls evil stirred by a noble joy. Each little thing that we do passes into the great machine of life which may grind our virtues to powder and make them worthless, or transform our sins into elements of a new civilisation, more marvellous and more splendid than any that has gone before (CW 1121).

Dollimore argues that we need to be more historical in our practice of theory:

Only then can we see the dialectical complexities of social process and social struggle. We may see, for example, how the very centrality of an essentialist concept to the dominant ideology has made its appropriation by a subordinate culture seem indispensable in that culture's struggle for legitimacy. Conversely, we may also see how other

subordinate cultures and voices seek not to appropriate dominant concepts and values so much as to sabotage and displace them. This is something we can observe in Wilde (1987: 61).

Paradoxically, the multiplicity of Western culture is reflected in Wilde's own life, which has become increasingly contradictory and complicated than ever. Holland (1997: 16) perceives that 'the inherent duality lives on, now more of a plurality. Will the real Oscar Wilde please stand up? Half-a-dozen figures oblige.' 'Biographers,' said Wilde, 'are the body-snatchers of literature. The dust is given to one and the ashes to the other and the soul is out of reach' (CW 1109).

Wilde recognised that the self was not inevitably indubitable, rational and progressive, but was, to a marked degree, socially constructed, through language and social institutions. He recognised that change was imperative if humanity was to flourish and that without the taking of intellectual risks, 'Human knowledge, as we politely call the corpus of general beliefs that are widely acknowledged to be well-founded, will stagnate. Since the conditions of human life keep changing, unless our knowledge keeps pace with them, there are likely to be unpleasant consequences.' (Quinton 1987: 51). There is no doubt that Wilde's exploration of the self and identity scandalised bourgeois culture in the 1890s and, in a sense, cost him his life. Wilde understood that the inheritance of progressive characteristics in life should be reflected in art:

Aesthetics . . . are to Ethics in the sphere of conscious civilisation what, in the sphere of the external world, sexual is to natural

selection. Ethics, like natural selection, make existence possible. Aesthetics, like sexual selection, make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, and variety and change (CW 1154).

This is why Wilde's works are as relevant today as they were one hundred years ago and why the drama of his life should not be allowed to overshadow his work. His work explores what we are now beginning to attend to again, 'The complexities, the potential and the dangers of what it is to transgress, invert and displace from within; the paradox of a marginality which is always interior to, or at least intimate with, the centre' (Dollimore 1987: 62). Ellmann (1988: 553) has gone some way to redress the balance:

He belongs to our world more than Victoria's.  
Now, beyond the reach of scandal, his best writings validated by time, he comes before us still, a towering figure, laughing and weeping, with parables and paradoxes, so generous, so amusing and so right.

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## **Chapter 2**

### **Formation in the thought of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe.**

Whatever is modern we owe to the Greeks.

Whatever is anachronism is due to medievalism (CW 1117).

Two great principles divide the world and contend for the mastery; antiquity and the Middle Ages. These are the two civilisations that have preceded us, the two elements of which ours is composed. All political as well as religious questions reduce themselves practically to this. This is the great dualism that runs through our society (Acton, quoted in Butterfield 1960: 212).

The tension between these two views is central to an understanding of Victorian Hellenism. The extensive nineteenth century concern with Ancient Greece was a novel factor in modern European intellectual life. Europe had a Roman past and European civilisation was congruent with Latin Christendom. It was not until the second half of the eighteenth century, when the values, ideas, institutions inherited from the Roman and Christian past became problematical that the search for new cultural roots, albeit peripheral, developed 'out of the need to understand and articulate the disruptive, political, social and intellectual experience' (Turner 1981: 2).

Whilst those disaffected with society in the twentieth century have been able to idealise other systems - fascist or communist, in the nineteenth century there were no such alternatives in the civilised world. As Jenkins (1980: 14) observes:

For agnostics and atheists, Hellas was the supreme example of a non-Christian society that had reached the highest degree of humane civilisation; for radicals Athens was the state that had come closest to political perfection.

Long before Hellenism reached England, Greek antiquity first assumed major intellectual significance in Germany, where, from approximately 1750, the moral variety in Greek culture contributed to the breadth of its relevance as:

Poets, literary critics and historians of art looked to ancient Greece as an imaginative landscape on which they might discover artistic patterns, ethical values and concepts of human nature that could displace those of Christianity and ossified French classicism. . . Things Greek thus contributed both to the devising of new myths and to the sustaining of old values in novel guises (Turner 1981: 2).

The pervasive influence of 'things Greek' was not to be avoided. Hellenism was not a fashion statement and regardless of what opinions might be, the Hellenistic influence touched on most cultural aspects of Victorianism, as a foil to the Gothic enthusiasm that had underpinned what some believed to be their natural inheritance. Hazlitt had already pre-empted Wilde's comments on Medievalism, when he stated that the Middle Ages seemed darker and older than 'the brilliant and well defined periods of Greece and Rome' (Hazlitt, in Jenkyns 1980: 16).

Another independent factor in the appeal of Hellenism, which was breathing life into the cold body of eighteenth century classicism, was the association of Ancient Greece with liberty. After the fall of the city states of Ancient Greece, it was not until the eighteenth century that societies that could be called democratic made their reappearance - a period of more than two thousand years. The first was the United States of America, founded in 1776. Only thirteen years later, the French Revolution of 1789 gave a wholly new impetus to the propagation of similar ideals throughout Europe. Democratisation in the modern sense had begun. The idea of combining the freedom of the individual with social equality played a leading role in these developments and the association of the ancient Greeks with liberty was strengthened and lent glamour by the struggle of the modern Greeks for independence. The focus on revolutionary experience highlighted the examination of Greek democracy and the idea of contemporary Greek democracy fascinated those who had become increasingly dissatisfied with existing structures in society. The Greeks were experimenters and throughout the Victorian age, Greece engaged the enthusiasm of a splendid variety of disparate men. Wilde was being truthful when he said:

The forms of art have been due to the Greek  
critical spirit. To it we owe the epic, the lyric,

the entire drama in every one of its developments, including the burlesque, the idyll, the romantic novel, the novel of adventure, the essay, the dialogue, the oration, the lecture . . . and the epigram (CW 1119).

This was the added attraction of Hellenism to the Victorian age - the largely undefined nature of classics as a discipline. The Ancient Greeks were lucky; they were not weighed down by other influences. Taking pleasure in the past became intensified as more could be left to the imagination:

Except for linguistic ability in Greek and Latin, the analytical tools and categories employed to examine a question or problem from Greek antiquity were almost invariably derived from other modern disciplines or modern religious and philosophical outlooks. Modern aesthetics guided the consideration of Greek sculpture. Modern religious sensibilities and anthropological theories determined the interpretation of Greek myths. Modern biblical scholarship influenced the reading of Homer. Modern political thought and anxieties were brought to bear on the Athenian democratic experience. Greek philosophers were judged before the bar of modern epistemology and



political philosophy (Turner 1981: 7).

The sense that other eras have more appeal, are more magical and fantastic, was inherent in the Victorian age:

Ay, but every age  
Appears to souls who live in it (ask Carlyle)  
Most unheroic. Ours, for instance, ours!  
The thinkers scout about it, and poets abound  
Who scorn to touch it with a finger tip  
(Barrett Browning 1978: 200).

This backlash was a reaction to the perception of the nineteenth century being, in intellectual terms, a scientific age, that 'scientific thought, hard, remorseless and factual, was draining the magic and fantasy out of the world' (Jenkyns 1980: 25). England was deemed to be growing uglier, thoughts inspired by the visible remains of the Industrial Revolution. This longing for city dwellers seeking to escape, if only in the imagination, the life around them, was described as 'a deep vein of rural nostalgia' (Bradbury 1971: 46). Wiener (1981: 50) continues:

Literary historians agree that there was a striking increase in the number and popularity of novels, poems and essays on country subjects in the last years of the century. The new wave of rural writing usually claimed to reveal the 'true' England. A popular literary image of England took shape that gave a

central place to the countryside.

In literature, Pater (1910: 99) speaks of the 'Neu-Zeit', the new time, and his character, Flavian, draws out the parallels between the second century and his own:

Why not be simple and broad, like the old  
writers of Greece? . . . the most wonderful,  
the unique point, about the Greek genius . . .  
was the burden of precedent laid upon every  
artist increased since then!

Pater had an assured vision of the new era. Marius portrays an age of transition with a glorious future ahead. Others, whilst recognising that the Victorian era was in an age of transition, were not so certain about how 'golden' the future would be. Both Mill and Tennyson expressed uncertainty. Mill (quoted in Jenkyns 1980: 58) described his 'present age . . . an age of transition. Mankind have outgrown . . . old doctrines, and have not yet acquired new ones.' Tennyson (quoted in Tennyson 1899: 337) agreed, 'All ages are ages of transition, but this an awful moment of transition.'

Paradoxically, writing about Greece became a way for the Victorians to write about themselves. Greek subjects were made to conform to contemporary categories of thought, culture and morality. Victorian writers and readers were determined to find the Greeks as much as possible like themselves and to rationalise away fundamental differences. Whilst such selection is seemingly a limitation, this exploration and interpretation of the Ancient Greek culture occurred within the context of rational, intellectual communities whose characters bore the distinctive imprints of their respective political, academic and religious structures. The study and criticism of Greek life reflected

the political, religious and philosophical preoccupations of the national culture. Within rational context, discussions of Greek antiquity provided an arena wherein writers could debate all manner of contemporary questions and there almost always existed a particular motivation for drawing the direct relationship. These motivational factors were not mutually exclusive, functioning in hermetically sealed units, and whilst links can be drawn between them, there is no overriding pattern, as scholars pursued their own lines of interest. What was established was a substantial framework, by means of which Victorian writers sustained their belief that the experience of the Greece was directly significant for their own culture.

Turner (1981: 12), in his exegesis of four theories, has highlighted why this should be so. Primarily, the Greeks had played an important linguistic and philosophical role in preparing the world for the Gospel. In addition, Christian writers regarded the Greeks as having the highest moral nature that human character could assume, without having had sight of the Gospel. Secondly, certain ages of Greek history were seen to be analogous to certain periods of modern history and thus subject to the drawing of parallels. Thirdly, adherents to Comte's law of three stages of intellectual development tended to conceive Greek religious and philosophical life as a microcosm of the Comtean pattern of development. Finally, Hegel's concept of historical development of Greek philosophy also suggested that Greek thought and culture held particular relevance for the Victorian experience.

Greek antiquity first assumed major intellectual significance in Germany. Between the 1780s and the 1880s a growth of philosophy occurred in the German-speaking world such as had not been seen since the time of the Ancient Greeks. Kant set the stage for German philosophy during this period, promulgating a new, transcendental approach to philosophy. His work was enriched and extended by Schopenhauer, who presupposed

Kant's ideas as a starting point, extending Kant's doctrines into new fields, and correcting what he thought to be Kant's errors. Fichte and Schelling also drew from Kant as their point of departure. Hegel produced a philosophy of absolute idealism. Marx took over the framework and vocabulary of Hegel's philosophy but substituted materialist for idealist values. Nietzsche mounted an onslaught on the whole of existing morality. The University of Jena was at the core of much of this work from 1787 to 1806, when Fichte, Hegel and Schelling and the writers Schlegel and Schiller were all on its teaching staff.

The influence of Schlegel and Hegel, who popularised the difference between the Ancient Greeks and the Modern World, should not be underestimated. The Germans had long since felt the pull of the South and Schlegel's work served to highlight the differences between North and South, associating the South with Paganism and antiquity and the North with Christianity and modernity.

The unification of Western culture, created through the Renaissance, was undermined when the Reformation broke up the unity of the Church. A fundamental difference emerged between the North and the Protestants, and the South and the Catholics, a difference deepened by a shift in power northwards, and climactic comparisons. Two hundred years later, Forster (1977) explores the emotions inspired by Italy - a room with a view - and those repressed by England - Windy Corner, where the curtains are perpetually drawn to shut out the sun and the view.

In Italy, not only did the Northerner come to the South, but also Modern man returned to the ancient world. Schlegel's lectures on Drama, translated into English in 1815, had a lasting influence in Britain. In these, he popularised ideas, clarifying them in layman's terms, exploring the contrasts between North and South, classic and romantic, antiquity and the Middle Ages. Such ideas were reinforced by the rapid and radical expansion of

England and Germany during the nineteenth century. The past belonged to the South, the future to the North and the gulf between the two was at its greatest during this period. The fascination for this dichotomy between North and South is well charted in Victorian literature, in poetry and prose. Mr. Brooke declares in *Middlemarch*, 'Rome has agreed with you, I see . . . Happiness, frescoes, the antique - that sort of thing' (Eliot 1991: 290). The geography is mapped even more explicitly in the novel *North and South* and not only in the title. Thornton, the mill owner says:

Remember, we are of a different race from the Greeks, to whom beauty was everything and to whom Mr Bell might speak of a life of leisure and serene enjoyment . . . I don't mean to despise them . . . But I belong to Teutonic blood; it is little mingled in this part of England to what it is in others; we retain . . . their spirit; we do not look upon life as time for enjoyment, but as time for . . . exertion (Gaskell 1995: 326).

Thornton, who represents the best sort of Northerner, goes to Hale to learn Greek and to read Homer, Plato and Thucydides. Eventually he marries a Southern woman and their offspring will combine the best of both worlds.

The pervasive influence of Hellenism therefore touched most aspects of Victorian culture, not least the curriculum. Decisions about what happens in our education system are inseparable from those about our values, about the kind of society that we want, about our fundamental ends and purposes as human beings. Eliot (1932: 507) makes this point,

when he describes education as:

A subject which cannot be discussed in a void: our questions raise other questions, social, economic, financial, political. And the bearings are on more ultimate problems even than these: to know what we want in education we must know what we want in general, we must derive our theory of education from our philosophy of life.

The curriculum should reflect a statement of what one generation values sufficiently to wish to pass it on to the next. These are concerns that were tackled by Plato and Aristotle two and a half millennia ago. Tate (1999: 7) develops this point:

In a society which rarely re-engages with the past the better to look forward, it is instructive to remember the answers they gave to the question. In addition to Plato and Aristotle, I am thinking of people like Aquinas, Milton, Matthew Arnold, Newman and, in our own century, writers with views as diverse as Eliot and Gramsci. Their answer to the question 'what is education for?' is always an answer about the kind of society, and the kind of human beings, they would like to see. The broader picture always comes first.

The attitudes and values of the nineteenth century that were held to be so important that they were transferred to the next generation and entrusted to institutions were anchored in the ancient world. The inheritance of the humanist education enjoyed by the educated classes in Britain since the Renaissance made the appeal to and the use of Greek antiquity both possible and effective. The literate classes were familiar with the ancient world as a source of prescriptive values and moral and political illusions. Grote (1856: 114), professor of moral philosophy at Cambridge, observed:

Classical study . . . is a point of intellectual sympathy among man over a considerable surface of the world, for those who have forgotten their actual Greek and Latin bear still generally with them many traces of its influence, and in fact it is this which, more than anything, makes them in common parlance, educated men. That any one subject should be thus extensively cultivated, so as to make such sympathy possible, is a most happy circumstance, supposing it simply historical and accidental. The destruction or disuse of it will destroy one bond of intellectual communion among civilised men, and will be, in this respect, a step not of improvement. And though studies more definitely useful might succeed it, there is a utility lost, and one, which will hardly be considered trifling.

Knowledge of classics and the values communicated through classical education empowered the ruling political classes of Europe, giving them confidence. Such significance lasted until the social and political impact of the First World War which, among other things, undermined the vestiges of aristocratic life in Europe, including the primacy of the classical curriculum. Turner (1981: 5) reflects upon the significance of such a requirement, which:

Set the major pedagogical pattern for the public schools and all other secondary institutions that hoped to send students to those universities or to provide the veneer of an elite education . . . . Consequently, a knowledge of Greek and a familiarity with Greek culture were characteristic of a large portion of the British political elite as well as of the leaders and clergy of the Church of England. So long as this educational situation prevailed, discussions of Greek history, religion, literature and philosophy provided ready vehicles for addressing the governing classes of the country and could be expected to find them a potentially receptive and possibly responsive audience.

This programme of study involved then, as now, detailed and careful translation and criticism of a set list of texts - the Greats. In its final form the Oxford Greats course



consisted of five terms spent on ancient literature, followed by seven of history and philosophy. These changed during the course of the century to reflect the changes in modern thought:

The ancient classics resemble the universe. They are always there, and they are very much the same as ever, but the philosophy of every new age puts a fresh construction on the universe, so the classics scholarship finds a perennial object for ever fresh and original interpretation (Cornford 1903: 19).

Wilde's enthusiasm for his classical education is thoroughly documented in Ellmann (1988: 21):

What distinguished him was his excitement over the literary qualities of Greek and Latin texts, and his disinclination to enter into textual minutiae. Not until his last two years at Portora, 1869-71, when he began to make deft and mellifluous oral translations from Thucydides, Plato and Virgil, did his fellow students realise his talent. The classical work that caught his imagination was *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus* . . . At a viva voce on it, Wilde walked away from all the others . . . *The Agamemnon* stirred Wilde's sensibilities

so that he never left off quoting from it.

It was during this time and his years at Trinity College that Wilde laid foundations for his study of the Greats at Oxford. Wilde crowned his classical career at Trinity by winning the Berkeley Gold medal for Greek and, at the age of twenty-two, he won the Newdigate Prize whilst at Magdalen.

This education, heavily biased towards classical and literary studies and against science and technology, inculcated attitudes which were unfavourable to industry and commerce. Most regard was placed on tradition and the past and was at odds with a mobile and progressive society. The liberal education which the sons of industrialists received in public schools fitted them for leisure, public service and gentlemanly pursuits, rather than for the rise of economic endeavour and business success. By the end of the nineteenth century a hierarchy of status among businessmen is perceptible, 'with those engaged in finance and commerce, centred on London, regarded as superior to the manufacturers of the Midlands and the North' (Harrison 1990: 20). Such social and cultural exclusivity associated with the Classics served to increase their prestige in the short term; in the long term it contributed to their downfall.

Before elementary schooling became universal, the power that education gives was appreciated more readily, and the power of knowledge was often confused with the social advantages which education, and especially a classical education, conferred. Moreover, though the true lovers of the classics were few, they included a great many of those who gave the Victorian age 'its religious, moral and political tone' (Jenkyns 1980: 65).

It was not just the benefits of studying and learning about the ancient world that were gained by Greek scholars, but the education of the curious. Even though Greek and Latin

may have been passed over in later life, it was believed that there was much to be gained from early studies, not least a greater liberality of tastes and ideas, and an independence of thought founded on understanding. The role of the teacher was not to impart knowledge, but to teach the means of gaining knowledge.

The tension between the Christian faith and a love of Greece ran through the nineteenth century and indeed continues through to the twenty first century, in the form of shame culture versus guilt culture. Visser (2001) believes that Christianity has shaped Western culture and she explores the move from Hellenic shame culture to a Christian guilt culture, something understood negatively by Walter Pater and later, Wilde, who stated in *De Profundis*:

As one reads history, not in the expurgated editions written for schoolboys and passmen, but in the original authorities of each time, one is absolutely sickened, not by the crimes that the wicked have committed, but by the punishments that the good have inflicted; and a community is infinitely more brutalised by the habitual employment of punishment than it is by the occasional occurrence of crime (CW 1182).

This negative reaction to guilt continues through to the twenty first century, but Visser shows how liberating guilt could be. A shamed person is shamed forever and brings dishonour to the family and to the nation, like Oedipus. Guilt however, allows individual responsibility, expiation and the chance of forgiveness. The Greeks thought of shame as

something fateful, whereas guilt is the consequence of personal actions, 'Without the ultimate model of a forgiving God, guilt loses its social and therapeutic purpose. The tabloid 'name and shame' campaign is straight out of Greece and Rome' (Winterson 2001: 10).

Many clerics clung to classical learning out of conservatism and the gulf between Hellenism and Hebraism mirrors much of the diversity that existed in the Victorian age. Jenkins (1980: 69) reinforces this point:

It was a time, certainly, when both faith and doubt grew in strength and fervour; and similarly progress and decline, hypocrisy and integrity, all forms of conformity and disaffection, social, moral and political, seemed to have intensified. The religious conflict was often fought out within the compass of a single human mind, and in other ways too many of those eminent men whom we or their contemporaries have chosen to regard as typically Victorian seem to have represented their age in microcosm by being pulled in different directions by contrary pulses.

To solve this conundrum the Victorians' response was to impose a value system and they justified the study of a pagan culture by Christian people by conceding that clerics needed Greek in order to study the New Testament. The study of Greek authors for a

classical education was necessary because they represented culture, an ethos offered by God to man, and it was through the study of the classics that culture could be acquired.

The comparison of the Victorian era with the Ancient Greek culture gave rise to historical self consciousness:

The 'spirit of the age' is a novel expression. I do not believe that it is to be met with in any work exceeding fifty years in antiquity. The idea of comparing one's own age with former ages, or with . . . those which are yet to come, . . . never before was itself the dominant idea of any age (Mill, quoted in Jenkyns 1980: 52).

Jenkyns (1980: 74) places the spirit of the Victorian age in context:

The nineteenth century was an age of universal histories; some times with heroic enthusiasm, often with fatal superficiality, the Victorians tried to impose laws and systems upon the infinite complexity of human experience.

Just as people desire to assimilate the people of past ages with themselves, so do societies:

For history, like politics, is the art of the possible. And just as the development of political economy led to the theory that economic motives lie behind all human behaviour, so the growth of social history induced the belief that historical events should be explained by the nature of the societies in which they happened (Jenkyns 1980: 82).

It took the culture of Germany to teach the English how to revere the Greeks. The 1890s mark the end of the great period of Anglo-German literary relations: a period of cross-stimulation which began with the German cult of Richardson and Sterne, and included the English cults of Goethe, Heine, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Wagner and Nietzsche. Schlegel delivered his lectures on drama in 1808; seven years later they were translated into English. The 1830s witnessed the major impact of German scholarship on the British universities, followed by the publication in English in 1840 of Mueller's *History of Greek Literature*, even before it was published in German. This study aimed to show how Greek literature 'sprang from the taste and genius of the Greek races and the constitution of [their] civil and domestic society' (quoted in Jenkyns 1980: 83). The growth of social history induced the belief that historical events should be explained by the nature of societies in which they happened.

This was followed in the 1860s in the Hegelianism of Jowett's *Introduction to Plato* (1875). German idealism suddenly became the vogue, a cause furthered by the publication of *The Secret of Hegel* in 1865 by Stirling and Pater's essay 'Winckelmann' in 1867, in which he discussed Greek art largely in Hegelian terms and which was deeply informed by both Hegel's aesthetics and modern anthropology. Pater produced, in

'Winckelmann', his own distinctive contribution to the Anglo-German cultural exchange and Germany gave him his early philosophy and his life-long aesthetic paganism, just as it gave him 'the tools of his critical trade and the idea of its proper function, but what he made of all this was something very English' (Bridgwater 1999: 42). Oxford, in the mid-century, was increasingly Germanised and its influence was particularly strong in the humanities (aesthetics and art history, classics, history, modern languages, oriental studies, philosophy and theology), looming large in the subjects involved in contemporary Oxford's most renowned degree course, the Greats. A crucial lack in the English aesthetic tradition is revealed when it is compared with that of German aesthetics. The relation of consciousness, conduct and artistic activity had, by the time of Wilde, almost a century of philosophical investigation in the work of Schiller, Goethe, Kant and Hegel. Wilde was himself familiar with this tradition and in Germany, Wilde's reputation has been elevated and has so remained during the twentieth century, enjoying a high estimate. This position offers a context within which Wilde may be placed, and within it, his place is enhanced. Regarding Wilde from this perspective, Trilling has judged Wilde's intellectual significance to be such a magnitude as to bear comparison with Nietzsche (in McCormack 1976: 254).

The effect of this pervasive German influence was to emphasise the role of reason, and therefore, of scepticism, in education and this laid the foundations for the final phase of the German theological debate to be played out in Oxford:

The scepticism with which Pater himself was inculcated is a case in point. Not that rationalism and scepticism are the same thing, for, as Pater knew, rationalism involves scepticism, but scepticism need not involve

rationalism. German influence therefore served to hasten the secularisation of the university. That Pater and George Eliot both lost their faith under the German influence is no coincidence; the same thing later happened to Edward Carpenter. The idealist philosophy which Goethe's Germany bequeathed to Europe might be mocked by the likes of Thomas Peacock for its lapses into unintelligibility, but it was a glittering achievement and a post-Christian, humanist one. In succumbing to it, Pater, who had been impressed by Keble as a child, was following the impulse of history (Bridgwater 1999: 9).

Jowett, whose pupil Pater was, was in Germany in 1844 and was a Germanist; he was also active in introducing Hegel to English readers and was the inspiration behind Pater's study of Hegel in 1862-4; the study of Plato encouraged an interest in the German idealists and vice versa. Jowett's appeal was his ability to teach the means of gaining knowledge, which he did through the Socratic method. This is documented in Jenkyns (1980: 248). Jowett seems to have found the Hegelian pattern operative because he also accepted the Victorian concept of analogous ages and it is important to understand the philosophy of Hegel if the significance of this experience of Greece for Victorian culture is to be comprehensible.

The rise of Hegelian thought and Hellenism were concurrent. Hegel was the first philosopher to see human nature in historical terms and whose method is referred to as



being dialectical. Although Hegel gives it its characteristic modern application, this term goes back to Plato. The Hegelian dialectic of 'zeitgeist' was, for Hegel, the ultimate essence of being. Hegel's central insight was that he saw everything as having developed. Everything that exists is the outcome of a process. Every complex situation contains within itself conflicting elements and these are destabilising. The conflicts have to work themselves out, until they reach a resolution. This will lead to a new situation and, therefore, new conflicts. This Hegel called the dialectal process, which is made up of three stages: firstly - the thesis, or the initial state of affairs, secondly - the antithesis, or the reaction to the thesis which contains conflicts and countervailing conflicts, thirdly - the synthesis, or the new situation arising out of the resolution between the thesis and antithesis. However, the synthesis will contain new conflicts and is therefore the beginning of a new process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Nothing stays the same. Everything is relational.

Because change is the product of the operation of historical forces, the individual caught up in it has no real power to direct it. Even in matters of creativity a person is enveloped in the spirit of time - zeitgeist. It is impossible to jump out of history and make oneself independent of the dialectical process.

The only thing that would put a stop to this pattern of change and, in doing so, give the individual their freedom, would be the emergence of a conflict free situation. The ideal state of affairs will then have been reached and a further change is neither necessary nor desirable. Such a society will rise above the values of liberal individualism, as every individual is a harmonising, functioning part of the whole, serving the interests of a totality very much greater than himself. Until such a time arrives when geist comes to know itself as the ultimate reality and realise that everything it had regarded as alien, is, in fact, part of itself and not in conflict with it, geist will continue to be alienated from itself. The

individual will be enmeshed in conflict, will not know himself and will not be free. This state of alienation will continue to provide the motive force for further dialectical change.

Changing attitudes towards Wilde support the Hegelian theory that perception takes time. The past, by definition, does not exist and truth will change and develop with history. Reality is a historical process. It can only be understood in terms of how it came to be what it is and how it is becoming something else.

Before Hegel, philosophers had thought of reality as a highly complex, but given state of affairs, upon which they were called to explain. Since Hegel, however, historical awareness has entered into the way we look at everything. Eagleton (1983: 20) recognises the significance of the emergence of Hegelian theory:

It is no accident that the period we are discussing sees the rise of modern 'aesthetics', or the philosophy of art. It is mainly from this era, in the work of Kant, Hegel, Schiller, Coleridge and others, that we inherit our contemporary ideas of the 'symbol' and 'aesthetic experience', of aesthetic harmony' and the unique nature of the artefact . . . Now these concrete, historically variable practices were being subsumed into some special, mysterious faculty known as the 'aesthetic', and a new breed of aestheticians sought to lay bare its inmost structures.

The history of the world has a rational structure and the key to understanding this is the law of change - the dialectic. Plato exercised this when writing his dialogues with Socrates; a process of question and answer which gradually eliminates error and moves towards the truth. Wilde repeatedly uses this structure in his writing, an exegesis of which will follow.

Wilde's alienation and ostracism can also be explained in Hegelian terms. Man, in the process of building his own civilisation, creates a variety of institutions, rules and ideas that then become constraints on him, external to himself, despite the fact that they are his own invention. The issue here is where intellectual history, in this case the liberal values of freedom of thought, individuality and diversity, meets the society in which Wilde played his role as a very public intellectual. Wilde repeatedly made himself at home in the culture of other nations and was thus dialectical in nature. Wilde was in sympathy as much with the classical and German philosophical traditions as he was with the English and French.

The strongest case for Wilde as a philosopher engaged with other philosophers has been made by Smith and Helfand, whose exegesis of Wilde's *Oxford Notebooks* of the 1870s and the influence of his Oxford education in his later writing, presents Wilde as a consistent Hegelian dialectician:

At Oxford, Wilde found in Hegelian philosophy a variety of idealism better suited than Mueller's and Ruskin's to incorporate the material assumptions and findings of science - especially evolutionary theory. . . 'The Rise of Historical Criticism' (1879): this early essay . . is a Hegelian description of the origins and

development of a scientific historical method. He argues that the idea of uniform sequence came to the Greeks by inspiration and was developed into a self-conscious critical method through the dialectical interplay of materialist and idealist philosophers and historians. . . He builds his recommendations for an aesthetic and ethical approach to integrating the arts with the activities of life and work. He adopts and modifies the Hegelian paradigm for the historical development of art to explain the English Arts and Crafts and aesthetic movements as rebirths of the Hellenic spirit (Smith and Helfand 1989: viii).

Specifically, Wilde rejected any methodological individualism that saw the individual as the basic sociological unit and identity as analysable apart from society, in favour of H. Spencer's and W.K. Clifford's theories of cultural evolution, in which individuals inherited their characteristics from their cultures. Gagnier (1997: 25) develops this point further:

This theory of cultural evolution took on an organic purposiveness when combined with Hegel's notion of a historico-critical spirit working towards freedom. Thus Smith and Helfand argue that Wilde's rejection of realism in his critical work, especially the essays in

*Intentions* ('The Critic as Artist', 'The Decay of Lying', and 'The Truth of Masks'), in favour of utopian art is consistent with the inheritance of progressive characteristics, precisely because life imitates art, art should be progressive.

Thus the inheritance of culture would ultimately make authority unnecessary, as the geist comes to know itself as the definitive reality.

The concurrent growth of Hellenism and Hegelianism during Wilde's formative years gave rise to the broadening and liberalising Platonism of Oxford, that in the mid 1870s opened Wilde's eyes to exemplary forms of intellectual, spiritual and emotional companionship between men. As stated in Chapter One, it is known that *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* was inspired by classical Greek and Renaissance art and that it responds to quite a broad canon of literary writing that, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, sought to exploit cultural models that would permit at least some public legitimisation of sexual desire between men. The widely held belief that Greek was the stamp that authenticated culture and class, as well as providing a greater liberality of tastes and notions, was promulgated by Wilde's tutor, the Reverend J.P. Mahaffy, whilst he was at Trinity College:

In defence of Greek wholesomeness, Mahaffy ventured to touch gingerly upon the vexed question Greek homosexuality. No previous scholar, writing in English for a general audience, had done as much. Mahaffy characterised it as an ideal attachment between a man and a handsome youth, and

acknowledged that the Greeks regarded it as superior to the love of man and woman. Unless debased, as he conceded it sometimes was, it was no more offensive 'even to our tastes' than sentimental friendship (Ellmann 1988: 27).

In his *Commonplace Book* Wilde wrote on the different education of a Roman and a Greek boy:

The Roman was educated for the family and the state: to be pater familias and a civis: the refinement of Greek culture coming through the romantic medium of impassioned friendships, the freedom and gladness of the palaestra, were unknown to the boy whose early recollections were those of the senate house and the farm (Wilde, in Smith and Helfand 1989: 115).

In the mid nineteenth century, a powerful intervention was made on the question of homosexuality by several eminent scholars who increasingly turned to the works of Plato and Plutarch to consider how same sex eroticism was historically part of male sexuality. Such works as the translation of Plato's *Symposium* in 1492 and Montaigne's essay on friendship encouraged men to elevate friendship, and in its Platonic formulation it is intensified by its movement across a generational divide.

By the end of the nineteenth century there was not necessarily any homophobic stigma attached to the young effeminate figure of Wilde as he courted the most fashionable company.

His Hellenism and its high-minded commitment to art, emerged from the Socratic ethos that had been fostered by his distinguished alma mater for the past half century after a period of rapid reform in which the teaching of Plato extended at last to the *Symposium* (Bristow 1995: 5).

Wilde's adopted style had a wholly comprehensible place in the move towards civic diversity that was sponsored by a broadening and enlightened liberalism. Even during the second trial, when Wilde made his impassioned speech about the 'love that dare not speak its name,' his terms of reference were to the Bible and Plato; texts to which he naturally turned 'to uphold forms of intimate homosociality which had long gained legitimacy among the Oxford faculty' (Bristow 1995: 5).

Dowling (1994: 152) acknowledges that:

It is, perhaps, one measure of the ideological potency of Victorian liberal Hellenism that it can in this moment speak without a loss of persuasive power through the medium of precisely the most notoriously dandy-aesthete-effeminatus of the day.

*The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* seeks to locate the homoerotic intimacy of Shakespeare's Sonnets in the context of Renaissance understandings of love, and the connection between classical Greek and early modern sensibility was clearly defined in the respect shown towards male friendship. Wilde suggested that Masilio Ficino's fifteenth century translation of Plato's *Symposium* could well have influenced the Sonnets, for in Plato:

In its subtle suggestions of sex in soul, in the curious analogies it draws between intellectual enthusiasm and the physical passion of love, in its dream of the incarnation of the Idea in a beautiful and living form, and of real spiritual conception with a travail and a bringing to birth, there was something that fascinated the poets and scholars of the sixteenth century. (CW 324).

Bristow's (1995) detailed exploration of the double-edged nature of 'l'amour de l'impossible' in *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* suggests that a homoerotic 'portrait', like Wilde's own, must be forged in two senses:

On the one hand, it must escape authenticating identity that would give license to the state to criminalise it even further. Yet, on the other, unless such love gains some form of public representation . . . then young men . . . will be driven to take their lives - or at



least, sent to jail (1995: 45).

If *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* is read as a piece of resistance it is hardly assuring us that the Socratic ethos survives intact in the late Victorian period.

*The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* develops a Hegelian interpretation of Shakespeare and the Sonnets as the essential expression of the Renaissance spirit, as it fictionalises the development of the critical and historical method that Wilde describes in his early essay, *The Rise of Historical Criticism* (1879). *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* dramatises the dialectical process involved in the perception and understanding of art. The three major characters in the story enact methods of interpretation which correspond to the stages of critical development Wilde describes in *The Rise of Historical Criticism* and 'The Critic as Artist'.

This dialectical process is also mirrored in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where there is a blurring of the boundary between human and artefact. Wilde draws on the structure of narrative, which pretends to order sequentially, what is actually the destruction of all sequence. In the story of what happens to Dorian, Wilde explores the paradoxical loss and gain that occurs when:

We moderns give ourselves to a work of art.  
Our ethical norms, whatever they may be,  
tend to pale before the experience of the  
'fiery-coloured' world illuminated by art. Dorian  
becomes increasingly curious about  
experiences, which lie outside the norms he  
has known. The painting has burdened him  
with this new consciousness; for Dorian's new

life is not etched on his face but mirrored in the physiognomy of the portrait (Prewitt Brown 1997: 79).

In this critical fiction, novel and literary criticism become one. Whereas *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* leaves us uncertain as to what form has been encountered in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the idea of criticism is fulfilled: a work of criticism becomes an autonomous work of art, as Schlegel had demanded it should be, and as Wilde had wanted it to be in both 'The Decay of Lying' and *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*

In his defence of the novel, Wilde was quite explicit about his intentions:

It is a story with a moral. And the moral is this: all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment. The painter, Basil Hallward, worshipping physical beauty far too much, as most painters do, dies by the hand of one in whose soul he has created a monstrous and absurd vanity. Dorian Gray, having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure, tries to kill conscience, and at that moment, kills himself. Lord Henry Wotton seeks to be merely the spectator of life. He finds those who reject the battle are more deeply wounded than those who take part in it. Yes; there is a terrible moral in *Dorian Gray* - a moral which the prurient will not be able to

find in it, but which will be revealed to all whose minds are healthy. Is this an artistic error? I fear it is. It is the only error in the book (Wilde, in Holland and Hart-Davis 2000: 430).

It is evident that Wilde's conscious ethical norm was Aristotelian, 'the harmonious development of all of one's powers. To love beauty too much, to be a detached and passive observer of life, and to pursue a life 'mere sensation and pleasure' are errors in a story about the destructiveness of obsessions or one-sided development' (Smith and Helfand 1989: 96).

If one point emerges clearly from Wilde's work, it is his 'acute awareness that the dandified man of letters is likely to be defeated by the puritanical attitudes of late Victorian England' (Bristow 1995: 20). Wilde describes the last two decades of the nineteenth century as a place where 'the soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful' (CW 28).

This viewpoint seems remote from the description given by Beerbohm. In his essay, '1880', he provides a window, through which a glimpse of the immediate past is given:

Beauty had existed long before 1880. It was Mr Oscar Wilde who managed her debut. To study the period is to admit that to him was due no small part of the social vogue that Beauty began to enjoy. Fired by his fervid words, men and women hurled their

mahogany into the streets and ransacked the curio-shops for the furniture of the Annish days. Dados arose upon every wall, sunflowers and peacocks curved in every corner . . . Into whatsoever ballroom you went, you would surely find, among the women in tiaras and the fops and the distinguished foreigners, half a score of comely ragamuffins in velveteen, murmuring sonnets, posturing, waving their hands. Beauty was sought in the most unlikely places. . . Aestheticism (for so they named the movement) did indeed permeate in a manner of all classes (Beerbohm, in Holbrook Jackson 1950: 23).

The gulf between these two viewpoints can be explained by the diversity of literature and ideas in this period, which acts as 'a camouflage for a simple battle between those who placed art above society and others who put society above art' (Pittock 1993: 2). Just as Symbolism was coming to prominence as a literary idea, ideas of national and cultural decline were gaining force among the scientific and well-educated community, partly due to an inverted interpretation of the Darwinian theory of evolution, and partly due to a comparison of the European powers with the states of Greece and Rome, as already explicated: 'the apogee of their power presaging subsequent and inevitable decline' (Pittock 1993: 6). Members of the establishment also drew comparisons between Britain and Athens, Germany and Sparta, but the reading of Greece seemed 'perpetually primed to subvert the official vision of Britain as a towering intellectual power defended by citizen-warriors in favour of a languid, passive image of sexual exhaustion' (Pittock 1993: 84). It

was in response to this that some artists of the 1880s and 1890s defined themselves as Decadents; to be a Decadent was to express a further degree of dissatisfaction with society: a reaction against the utilitarian and philistine materialism of the nineteenth century and a desire for it to come to an end. The title they adopted taunted the educated bourgeoisie by celebrating the very fears cultivated by them:

The Decadents identified themselves with declining civilisations of the past (and sometimes with their reputed behaviour), not out of imperialist angst, but in order to glorify the role of art in the death of civilizations, and also in their implicit rebirth, for the concept of renewal was sometimes present in Decadence's premises of destruction (Pittock 1993: 6).

Winckelmann (in Jenkyns 1980: 75) introduced into the study of art the concept of historical cycles within which a civilisation's creative powers, like a living organism, went through a process of growth and decay, reflecting Hegel's dialectal process. Wilde anticipated the decay long before his contemporaries, hence the deliberately anti-social position adopted in 'The Decay of Lying' and *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. It is acknowledged that Wilde bridged the chasm between 'the self-contained individualism of the Decadents and the communal aspirations of the more advanced social revolutionaries' (Holbrook Jackson 1950: 25). Wilde on his 'showy American tour was an Aesthete; Wilde on trial was a Decadent; Wilde as writer was in many respects a Symbolist' (Pittock 1993: 3). All three points of view regarded art as a different world with its own priorities and the decay of civilisation was inherent in the growth of the artists,

who drew strength from that which weakened society. Art was held to be of paramount value and self-sufficient; 'art for art's sake' became the catch phrase of aestheticism. Art should be regarded as the supreme human achievement and should be subservient to no moral, political, didactic or practical purpose: its purpose is to exist solely for the sake of its own beauty. Hints of Aestheticism can be seen as early as the 1820s, in Keat's ending of *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1979: 210):

Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

The determination to establish the aesthetic mystery beyond any sort of temporal or scientific definition became an obstacle to the cause. That the movements of Aestheticism, Decadence and Symbolism advocated both regeneration and degeneration caused confusion and critics focused on the movements as a limited historical phenomenon, seeking to locate it in the works or theories of small groups or groups of authors. The pattern of thinking however, characterised a great number of writers in a great number of fields:

The Eighteen Nineties were the decade of a thousand 'movements'. People said it was 'a period of transition', and they were convinced that they were passing not only from one social system to another, but from one morality to another, from one culture to another, and from one religion to a dozen or none (Holbrook Jackson 1950: 29).

Pittock (1993: 8) however, identifies that the reason for the imprecise nature of many of the attempted definitions of Symbolism or Decadence in critical writing is that the critic has not entered into the pattern of thinking, 'he or she is trying to describe it from outside, as an objective phenomena; but the whole point of Symbolist thought is its flux and subjectivity, its opposition to conventional approaches being perpetually manifested in its hunt for the transcendent symbol.' Even critics of the calibre of Holbrook Jackson tended to regard Decadence as 'symptomatically present in various kinds of behaviour and artistic display without having any deeper ideological roots' (Pittock 1993: 8):

Our new found freedom seemed to find just  
the expression it needed in the abandoned  
nonsense chorus of *Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay!*  
which, lit at the red skirts of Lottie Collins,  
spread like a dancing flame through the land,  
obsessing the minds of young and old, gay  
and sedate, until it became a veritable song-  
pest (Holbrook Jackson 1950: 29).

It was no coincidence that the degeneration theorists of the late nineteenth century labeled such writers and artists as literary madmen and used them as scapegoats for the perceived and feared decline of their societies, accusing them of neglecting objective moral criteria.

As outlined in Chapter One, the concept of degeneration appeared to derive much of its authority and power from the structure of scientific explanation, springing primarily from Darwinism, since it was in many respects the reverse of evolutionary theory. Darwin's beliefs that:

- Biological types or species do not have fixed, static existence but exist in permanent states of change and flux
- All life takes the form of a struggle to exist
- This struggle for existence culls out those organisms less well adapted and allows those better adapted to flourish
- Natural selection, development and evolution requires long periods of time, so long that the everyday experience of human beings provides them with no ability to interpret such histories
- The genetic variations ultimately producing increased survivability are random and not caused by God or by the organism's own striving for perfection

had significance for the late nineteenth century, because they moved man away from the centre of creation and implied that man could hardly be its crowning glory, a thought that did not sit comfortably with the Victorians. As Pittock acknowledges (1993: 50), 'Social Darwinism, which urged the transfer of the struggle for the survival of the fittest from a natural to a political context, was an attempt to forestall degeneration by maintaining the conditions for evolutionary struggle in society itself'.

Degeneration postulated that human beings were deteriorating both physically and morally, and that social competition could not restore matters. It is therefore no surprise that it was a criminal anthropologist, Cesare Lombroso, who concluded that there is a criminal 'type' of person who could be identified by statistical analysis of various physical aspects. Graham Hall and Smith (2001: 3) state that 'he considered sexual inversion to be both criminal and pathological, a variety of 'moral insanity' and that the born criminal possesses the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity. Accordingly he considered that all criminals, including inverts, should be imprisoned and not be allowed to procreate.' Such



atavistic views worked toward isolating, analysing and classifying various symptoms of degeneracy. Pick (1993) argues that the medical/psychiatric model of degeneration that evolved in the second half of the nineteenth century should be understood as an ideological production that was embraced by the various European states for purposes of social control. Any collective or individual force that was perceived to be criminally or socially disruptive and questioned the hegemony of the dominant moral values was considered degenerate.

Nordau's *Degeneration*, first published in 1892, enjoyed a brief vogue in England and throughout Europe during the spring and summer of 1895, just as Wilde's trials were being held. An entire chapter of his book is devoted to Wilde and other Decadent writers. For Nordau, any deviation from an idealised, middle class world view was suspect. Complacency and conformity were the highest bourgeois ideals for Nordau and he defined degeneracy as the morbid deviation from an original type. His central thesis was 'that those who were far above average were just as dangerous as those who were far below average' (Foldy 1997: 74) and that society had just as much to fear from artists and geniuses as from the most dangerous criminals and the craziest madmen. In *Degeneration*, he expressed attitudes which are still widely entertained if less clearly articulated. Conventional attitudes lash out against the various criticisms that various intellectuals have directed at them. To Nordau, not only did Baudelaire show all the mental stigmata of degeneration during the whole of his life, but Rossetti and Verlaine are imbeciles, Swinburne is a criminal and Wagner a crazed graphomaniac. Wilde was predictably stigmatised as a chief among degenerates.

Nordau charges such dissidents with degeneracy, putting forward an ideal of health that invokes Comte and Spencer, but above all Lombroso, whose theory of criminal atavism underpinned Nordau's theories. Whilst Lombroso had been concerned primarily with

classifying characteristics of physical degeneration, Nordau was concerned with identifying the characteristics of mental degeneration that were commonly found in creative artists.

Wilde's particular impulse was defined by Nordau (1895: 319/320) as 'anti-socialistic, ego-maniacal recklessness and hysterical longing to make sensation', with its chief aims being the 'heckling of the Philistine' and the 'irritating of the majority unnecessarily.' He continues in the same vein, feeling that Wilde's desire for 'queer costume' represented an effeminate and 'pathological aberration of racial instinct' (in Foldy 1997: 75). Nordau highlights the three decadent leitmotifs that are celebrated in Wilde's work as inactivity, immorality and art and then proceeds to analyse these concepts to illustrate the 'absurdity, irrationality, or anti-social nature of each. For Nordau, this evidence proved sufficient to confirm Wilde's mental infirmity, moral insanity, and inability to adapt to society' (Foldy 1997: 75).

The timing of the publication of *Degeneration* in English, coinciding as it did with Wilde's trials, created a pronounced impact on an educated public already suspicious of the way art was developing. Nordau 'made it respectable to dislike art, and argued his case in a quasi-scientific fashion which lent a veneer of authority to what was otherwise hysterical diatribe' (Pittock 1993: 50). What made his argument stand out from other theorists was that it was not directed at the urban masses, but at the cultural elite:

Nordau's aim was not directed against racial or social targets, but at 'Mystics . . . egomaniacs and filthy pseudo-realists' in art, a group which as he himself confessed, formed but a small band in society: an early

perception of the *trahison des clercs*, betrayal of society's goals by the educated elite (Pittock 1993: 51).

In a society felt to be decadent in the sense of being demoralised by such values, rather than trying to restore aristocracy, or romantically pining for past eras, artists and writers tried to create another perspective in the world as art, a mental space free from the oppressive doctrine. Domestically, they were responding to all manner of social, political, and cultural upheavals, outlined by Foldy (1997: 78) as being the 'accompanying psychic dislocations':

The diaspora of the impoverished residuum as a result of the planned demolition of urban slum areas; the devaluation and relativisation of morality, and other effects of the decline of organised religions and the spread of materialistic ethos; the loss or attrition of traditional values and local customs, and the increased blandness and uniformity of life; the ongoing forces and effects of industrialisation and urbanisation; the problems caused by the growing expansion of the electorate and the concomitant politicisation of the masses; the pressures resulting from the competition between the established social; and political ideologies and the challenges to customary ways of life posed by the new ideologies of

mass democracy, socialism, feminism; the stresses resulting from the challenges represented by new technologies; and the strains resulting from dealing with the contingencies and vicissitudes of an increasingly complex everyday life.

Thus the Decadents were responding to a discrete set of historical circumstances, some liberating and others oppressive, that recent social critics have described variously as the effects of modernisation, 'the experience of modernity' and the onset of the 'postmodern condition' (Foldy 1997: 78).

The influence of French ideas has traditionally been accorded a major role in the intellectual development of the 1890s in Britain, fuelled by Le Gallienne and Moore and also the positive view that Pater and Swinburne took of French literature. The French Decadents represented less a homogenous group with an articulated ideology and a specific cultural or social agenda than 'a loose confederation of poets and artists' (Foldy 1997: 76) whose works shared a general interesting, and phenomenological approach to, experiences that were regarded by conventional bourgeois standards as unusual, perverse or extreme. Verlaine regarded contemporary society as being in a state of decay which resembled the decay of previous civilized societies, whilst de Nerval defined decadence as an ambivalent, solipsistic and escapist attitude which was function of present historical conditions:

Our period was a mixture of activity, hesitation and idleness; of brilliant Utopias, philosophical or religious aspirations, vague enthusiasms .

. . . boredom, discord and uncertain hopes. Ambition was not of our age . . . and the greedy race for position and honours drove us away from spheres of political activity. There remained to us only the poet's ivory tower where we mounted ever higher to isolate ourselves from the crowd. In those high altitudes we breathed at last the pure air of solitude; we drank forgetfulness in the golden cup of legend; we were drunk with poetry and love (in Gilman 1980: 79).

The influence of Baudelaire on Wilde is documented in Turquet-Milnes (1913), who identifies Wilde, Beardsley and Arthur Symons as being disciples of Baudelaire. In *What is Enlightenment?* (1991), Foucault summarises Baudelaire's attitude to modernity:

Modernity for Baudelaire is not simply a form of relationship with the present; it is also a mode of relationship that has to be established with oneself. The deliberate attitude of modernity is tied to an indispensable asceticism – Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not liberate man in his own being; it compels him to face the

task of producing himself (1991: 41-42).

To experiment with the self becomes an empowering necessity and to create the new self as artifice and style signals the modern artistic enterprise. Baudelaire's projection of the modern self as artist generating new forms and new experiences relies upon the necessity of immersion into modern life and his *topos* is that of the modern city – the discursive and experiential locus of the modern. Baudelaire's priorities are not amoral but deliberately immoral, 'Baudelairean art is concerned with the pursuit of lust or sacrilegious pleasure; moral anarchy, pessimism, and solitude of the soul; and self-analysis and torment in love' (Pittock 1993: 24). The dominant category in Baudelaire's definition of dandyism is attitude. Although Baudelaire claimed for dandyism a long history, he saw it principally as a kind of modern heroism, a way of embodying individualism in an age of increasing conformity and utility. Baudelaire's hero of modernity in this context, is personified in the image of the dandy, who occupies an awkward and negative space in modernity, by virtue of an originality which is highlighted and asserted through the contrasting relationship with the crowd:

Fastidious, unbelievables, beaux, lions or dandies: whichever label these men claim for themselves, one and all stem from the same origin, all share the same characteristic of opposition and revolt; all are representatives of what is best in human pride, of that need, which is too rare in the modern generation, to combat and destroy triviality (Baudelaire 1988: 421).

Baudelaire regards these figures as embodying a liminal state and his terms invoke a specific social and political context:

Dandyism appears especially in those periods of transition where democracy has not yet become all-powerful, and when aristocracy is only partially weakened and discredited. In the confusion of such times, a certain number of men, disenchanted and leisured 'outsiders', but all of them richly endowed with native energy, may conceive the idea of establishing a new kind of democracy. Dandyism is the last flicker of heroism in decadent ages (1988: 421).

The Baudelairean dandy exists both as a hero of and despite modernity: his heroism lies above all in the determination to create himself in a context which no longer allows any space for him, as he strives to create a personal form of originality within the external limits of social conventions. In *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Wilde cites Baudelaire as an example of those rare personalities who have managed to realise themselves fully, before the advent of that socialist future which, he believes, will extend the opportunity to everyone:

Under the new conditions Individualism will be far freer, far finer, and far more intensified than it is now. I am not talking of the great imaginatively realised Individualism of such

poets as I have mentioned, but of the great actual Individualism latent and potential in mankind generally (CW 1178).

Wilde looked to France as the ideal, 'In France they manage things better. . . they limit the journalist and allow the artist almost perfect freedom' (CW 1189). The past is rejected as being of no importance:

For the past is what man should not have been. The present is what man ought not to be. The future is what artists are . . . The systems that fail are those that rely on the permanency of human nature, and not on its growth and development. The error of Louis XIV was that he thought human nature would always be the same. The result of his error was the French Revolution. It was an admirable result. All the results of the mistakes of government are quite admirable (CW 1194).

However, Wilde has English practice and precedent as well as French theory upon which to draw and his mode of dandyism was not only indebted to Baudelaire. As Sammells (2000: 119) points out, Beau Brummell, Dickens and Disraeli had all 'employed the dandy's arsenal of sartorial expertise and insouciant wit as a means of attaining social mobility: all were social 'outsiders' (and, in Disraeli's case, a racial outsider) who moved from margin to centre.' By seeming to identify 'Englishness' with



dandyism (in both his life and his writing), Wilde was not following Baudelaire and announcing his allegiance to a beleaguered but still powerful aristocracy which was still the repository of political and aesthetic authority:

He was, instead, simultaneously, parodying those aristocratic attitudes and identifying them with their opposite: with a stylish refusal of social and political hierarchies authenticated by birth and sustained by material exploitation (Sammells 2000: 120).

This signals an attempt to come to terms with an experience which is both a threat and a challenge. The writer/artist creates the moral space for a true debate when other parties in the state are fixed in complacent agreement. It is in this dialectical balance between the fading and emerging that the defiant, artistic act of self-creation intervenes, thus creating a 'negative' synthesis or space, as Wilde:

Seems close to us partly because he grapples with contradictions we have yet to resolve. While proclaiming the importance of individualism, he nevertheless recognizes it as problematic and indeterminate. He champions self-fashioning while undermining the sense of self. These contradictions can be seen as reflective of his historical moment, as symptomatic of an emergent Modernism seeking to extinguish fading Romanticism. But

they are also inherent in Postmodernism. The deconstruction of meta-narratives seems to promise release into existential possibility; simultaneously, the dissolution of meta-narratives of fixed identity denies the existence of a stable self that might exploit that space and freedom. We can see some of these contradictions operative in the ways we now struggle to understand and reproduce him. Thus, insofar as Wilde anticipates and articulates these contradictions we should see him not as simply reflective of his historical moment but as formative of our own. For Wilde, the process of contradiction is enabling and exhilarating, because it promises that no ideological or intellectual impasse is ever final – it will move on, generating its own purpose (Sammells 2000: 127).

Wilde's 'space', his development of formal modes, which fuse subjective and objective expression into what he calls 'art criticism', is apparent in much of his writing. His creation of criticism that is art and art that is criticism was his attempt to symbolise in written form the idealist dialectical theory developed from his synthesis. His repeated use of the process of question and answer, which gradually eliminates error and moves towards truth, exemplifies this point. Plato exercised this structure when writing his dialogue with Socrates. The strength of the Socratic methodology of teaching during Wilde's time at Oxford is thoroughly documented in Jenkyns (1980). The idea had long been current that

the ancient universities offered the only modern equivalent to the way of life depicted in Plato's dialogues. In 'The Critic as Artist', Gilbert speaks of:

That lovely passage in which Plato describes how a young Greek should be educated, and with that insistence he dwells upon the importance of surroundings, telling us how the lad is to be brought up in the midst of fair sights and sounds (CW 1146).

He then likens this ideal to an education in Oxford, where 'one can loiter in the grey cloisters at Magdalen, and listen to some flute-like voice singing in Waynfleetes Chapel, or lie in the green meadow, among the strange snake-spotted fritillaries' (CW 1146).

Part of the Platonist appeal was that Plato is both rigid and flexible. Plato's system seems to be the most rigid and uncompromising of all philosophies, whilst it is also so elusive that men of diametrically opposed views have claimed Plato's support. This duality arises because to understand Plato's gospel necessitated a certain amount of flexibility or imprecision, as the philosopher was adapted to fit modern life:

Like the Scriptures, Plato admits of endless applications . . . and we lose the better half of him when we regard his Dialogues merely as literary compositions. Any ancient work which is worth reading has a practical . . . as well as a literary interest. And, in Plato. . . the local and transitory is inextricably blended with



what is spiritual and eternal (Jowett 1895: 91).

This duality is reflected in two of Wilde's major essays, 'The Decay of Lying' and 'The Critic as Artist' in which he combines subjective and objective in reality. The philosophical approach of 'art-criticism' is fully realised in his works, and Wilde adopted the dialogue because it embodied the dialectic. The form is also associated with Plato - one of the first philosopher/artists who created fiction to convey truth. It is apparent through Vivian's explanations of art that when viewed historically, art 'develops purely on her own lines. She is not symbolic of any age. It is the ages that are her symbols' (CW 987). Cyril agrees and extends the argument, 'the spirit of an age may be best expressed in the abstract ideal arts, for the spirit is abstract and ideal' (CW 988). Wilde's Hegelian and evolutionary assumptions led him to analyse both art and criticism as part of a larger cultural process.

In 'The Decay of Lying', Wilde claims that art, a manifestation of intelligence, should not imitate life, but that life should imitate art. He describes the critical activity in the creative process, the creativity in the critical process and the social implications and effects of both art and criticism on writers and the general population. He regards art as having a crucial function in the progress of culture. Vivian states that it is 'our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place' (CW 970). Wilde believed individuality created progress and saw conformity as a threat to it:

It is a humiliating confession, but we are all of  
us made out of the same stuff . . . that  
dreadful universal thing called human nature.  
Indeed, as anyone who has ever worked with  
the poor knows only too well, the brotherhood

of man is no mere poet's dream, it is a most  
depressing and humiliating reality (CW 975).

Through this dialectic of forms Wilde identifies with, and disassociates himself from, Vivian's doctrine. 'Expository prose is subsumed within artifice, and Wilde's critical discourse remains a fruitful lie, another form of 'art-criticism', which encloses but goes beyond the usual criticism-as-article' (Smith and Helfand 1989: 63).

Wilde aestheticised Plato still further. He recalls telling Gide that 'there was nothing that . . . Plato . . . had said that could not be transferred immediately into the sphere of art and there find its complete fulfillment.' In 'The Critic as Artist' Gilbert says, 'It may be that it is as a critic of Beauty that Plato is destined to live' and he continues, 'to do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world... and the most intellectual. To Plato, with his passion for wisdom, this was the noblest form of energy' (CW 1116).

The detailed explication of these works in Smith and Helfand (1989) demonstrates the continuing importance of the synthesis of philosophical, scientific and aesthetic ideas. Prevailing opinion has painted a portrait of Wilde as an eclectic wit and prophet of modernity, someone who played with ideas but did not believe in them - a dilettante. The Wilde who is discovered in these works 'brings us to a closer historical understanding of a complex intellect and to the ideas which unify and explain much of his critical and fictional work' (Smith and Helfand 1989: 104) - specifically Hellenism and Hegelian theory.

Such a perception can only be arrived at with time. It is since the rise in Hermeneutics and the interpretive social sciences in the late nineteenth century as a more effective model of understanding than the explanatory models already established and characterised by the natural sciences, that this perception has begun to be realised.

These ideas begin with the work of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, both of whom sought to challenge the model of neutral, objective explanation of phenomena characterised by the natural sciences. The social and human sciences were not, in Dilthey's view, susceptible to the same certainty of explanation or reliability of method as natural science. Certainly, just as every age has its basic orthodoxies, so also it has its doubts and difficulties. The late Victorian period was no exception. Almost every aspect of Victorian society was challenged, economic liberalism by socialism and the rise of labour, evangelical religion by an intellectual rejection of Christian claims.

Hermeneutics, from being associated with the elucidation of ancient texts or the teasing out of legal complexities, became in the late nineteenth century a more effective model of understanding than the explanatory models that had proved so useful to science. Both Schleiermacher and Dilthey were concerned to articulate an epistemology and a method that would give clear guidelines to the social scientist as an interpreter of texts. Such concern derives from the changing values of society. Whilst some values are unchanging, the form of expression may alter. Texts from the past/past lives can be interpreted, but because society changes over time, so the interpretations change. There can only ever be an approximation of the real.

The golden age of philosophy in Germany saw a revolution in historical study. History acquired a consciousness of method and direction, which transformed it into a progressive science. Dilthey was the first philosopher to make clear that there is a history in the minds of men, a genuine, intellectual discipline. Man is part of the stream of history and therefore the study of psychology, sociology and philosophy. The nature of man can never be experienced in fixed formulae. All knowledge of man depends on historical knowledge. The successor of Kant and Hegel, Dilthey represented the break up of old

habits and thoughts and the coming of new problems and methods.

The rise of Hermeneutics came when Europe was becoming aware of a challenge to its traditions and a growing uneasiness about the future. The impacts of the Industrial and French Revolutions had disturbed the social structure of Europe. Masses of population were growing up with little attachment to existing social traditions. Lives had become dominated by the competitive spirit of industry, just as Christian mythology was being set aside. New literary writers wrote for the new urban public, sacrificing formal and constructive values for sentimental effect. Humanist philosophy succeeded Christian mythology but was failing to create a common body of convictions. Behind the facade of scientific progress and because of it, reflective minds in the nineteenth century were disquieted. Dilthey's position was therefore strengthened by this unease when his ideas were promulgated.

The position in England was paradoxical. On the one hand, the need for change was more urgent because the Industrial Revolution was further advanced, but on the other, the need for change was less urgent because religion was more deeply rooted. Dilthey's focus in Germany was different, as the Christian tradition was less central as romantic humanism reflected the contemporary ideals of romantic faith in the creative powers of man and his close relationship with the world spirit - Hegel's *geist*.

Schleiermacher's analysis of the religious consciousness, his conception of the dialectical relation between universal type and individual existence and his hermeneutic theory of the principles of understanding and interpretation, all remained familiar themes in Dilthey's philosophy. Dilthey's work traces the development of Hermeneutics, the art and science of interpretation, which, arising in antiquity and kept alive by the Church, came to maturity in Schleiermacher, who generalised it and made it integral to ordinary

epistemology and logic. Dilthey is very concerned with the 'psychological' mechanism of the creative arts. He describes himself as 'moving in an unknown country' (Hodges 1969: 9), as working towards a new way of philosophising. Dilthey's 'Principle of Coherence' applies to all spheres of thought, but especially to the sphere of understanding. The mind is a living unity in which every part is informed by the character of the whole and it is the conflict between pragmatic and speculative ways of writing history, that enables us to get behind the 'momentary action of the individual agent to his deeper motives, policy and character and to the social trends and forces more deep seated still (Hodges 1969: 19). Therefore, it is the imaginative process of understanding which gives life and meaning to the rest.

It is in opposition for this search for a method of validating one's interpretations that Gadamer's reflections have been directed. For Gadamer (1975), 'Truth' and 'Method' are in opposition. Any allegiance to or adoption of a particular 'method' necessarily precludes other possible ways of coming at the 'truth', of arriving at an understanding; and any understanding arrived at will always be incomplete, unfinished. For Gadamer, the question of understanding (*verstehen*) is an ontological question, for in his view it is our nature as human beings that we are defined and limited by our entrapment in language and time. The hermeneutic circle - the dialectical relation between parts and wholes - is an existential condition and it is this circle that makes things meaningful in terms of relationships, their contingency and contiguity and we can never step outside of this circle. As historical beings we are part of a process which is incomplete. We cannot adopt a position of objectivity outside the language or time that defines us. Wilde intimates scenes of reading and writing to which, one hundred years later, we may just now be learning how to respond.

Some of Pater's essays, Wilde writes, are Greek in purity of outline, some are medieval in



strangeness and passion, but:

All of them are absolutely modern, in the true meaning of the term modernity. For he whom the present is the only thing that is present, knows nothing of the age in which he lives. To realise the nineteenth century one must realise every century that has preceded it, and that has contributed to its making. To know anything about oneself, one must know all about others. There must be no mood with which one cannot sympathise, no dead mode of life that one cannot make alive (CW 1137).

Wilde recognised the power of the period's ideas and embraced the pan-European era in terms of artistic and literary expression, partly because the interdisciplinary nature of the period challenges conventional literary criticism. The central force of the 1890s lies, not in its individualism and existentialist heritage, but in the nature of its thought and the challenge that that thought provides to our assumptions that logic, rationalism, and formalism are the only parameters for our experience. The legacy of the nineties was immense and far reaching:

Subjectivism, alienation, the apotheosis of the artist, a sense of fragmentation at the heart of Western culture, the recrudescence of myth in an age of science; these were but a few ways of looking at the world (Pittock 1993: 181).

Wilde clarified this by suggesting that all criticism was a form of autobiography and that the study of literature is in a polemical flux of Heraclitean dimensions; everything flows and nothing remains. He acknowledged the role of art criticism as a means to focus the definition of emergent social identities and to challenge current regimes of political power and cultural authority:

Thirled to its own obsessions, seeing ideological prejudice and presupposition everywhere but in its own work, exalting text above author . . . contemporary literary criticism often reflects Wilde's sharp analysis all too well (Pittock 1993: 182).

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### Chapter 3

#### Elucidation of Educational Ethics in the Thought of Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Europe.

History is not just one damn thing after another, but one thing instead of another  
(Runciman, quoted in Ryan 2000: 3)

In fact the horizon of the present is being continually formed in that we have continually to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing is the encounter with the past and the understanding of the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present than there are historical horizons. Understanding, rather, is the fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves (Gadamer 1975: 273)

The impact of the publication of Gadamer's *Truth and Method - Outline for a Philosophical Hermeneutics* (1975) was different from previous writings on the subject of hermeneutic theory because it evoked a lively response not only from philosophers, but also from historians, social scientists and humanists from various disciplines. This is as it should be, because unlike his predecessors, who conceived of understanding as a



means of overcoming the historical distance between the interpreter and the historical phenomenon, Gadamer maintains the historical nature of understanding. Any interpretations of the past, whether they are performed by an historian, philosopher, linguist, or literary scholar, are as much a creature of the interpreter's own time and place, as the phenomenon under investigation is of its own period in history.

In order to appreciate Gadamer's relationship with the hermeneutic tradition, it is useful to trace the rise of hermeneutic theory. It is impossible to see Gadamer's contribution in isolation and Palmer's (1969: 33) six modern definitions of hermeneutics becomes useful here:

As it has evolved in modern times, the field of hermeneutics has been defined in at least six fairly distinct ways. From the beginning the word has denoted the science of interpretation, especially the principles of proper textual exegesis, but the field of hermeneutics has been interpreted (in roughly chronological order) as: (1) the theory of biblical exegesis; (2) general philological methodology; (3) the science of all linguistic understanding; (4) the methodological foundation of Geisteswissenschaften; (5) phenomenology of existence and of existential understanding; and (6) the systems of interpretation.

Each of these definitions is more than an historical stage; each points to an important moment or approach to the problems of interpretation.

The rise of the two distinct phases in development of modern German hermeneutic tradition has been well documented (Palmer 1969 and Mueller-Vollmer 1986). These have been identified as being the philological (Schleiermacher, Ast, Droysen, Humboldt, and Boeckh); and the philosophical (Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer). This does not mean that these two phases are mutually exclusive, however, as some of the most radical arguments of the twentieth century derive from the insights first articulated by the nineteenth century writers, even though their primary interest was philology and the cultural sciences. Likewise, some of the twentieth century writers have exercised influence upon the way in which literature texts are read and understood. For Gadamer, however, general hermeneutics is part of philosophy because it transcends the confines of individual disciplines and deals with foundations.

For purposes here, this exegesis of hermeneutics will concentrate on the third, fourth and fifth modern definitions, as these are the definitions that have most relevance to this study of educational ethics in the thought of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe. The initial focus will be on Schleiermacher, or the third modern definition modelled by Palmer (1969) – Hermeneutics as the Science of Linguistic Understanding. It was Schleiermacher's contribution to the development of hermeneutic theory that brought about a watershed. He brought together and synthesised the major trends, laying down foundations for a new departure. Palmer (1969: 40) acknowledges that Schleiermacher 'has the distinction of having reconceived hermeneutics as a "science" or "art"' whilst Mueller-Vollmer (1986: 8) states that 'both the philological and historical

hermeneutics of the nineteenth century and the hermeneutic philosophy of the twentieth century are indebted to him.'

Schleiermacher did not create his hermeneutics in a vacuum and was very much part of the early Romantic Movement which, from 1795 to 1810, revolutionised intellectual life in central Europe and could be identified with the rise of the new aesthetics and poetics created by philosophers such as Fichte and Schelling and critics such as Schlegel. Indeed, the Romantic Movement, which was contemporary with Schelling and Schlegel, found in his writings several of its own convictions expressed in philosophical terms; the importance of Nature, man's unity with nature, the glorification of art and the near-deification of great creative artists. Schelling's belief, that it is in the best of his art that man is exploring and coming to understand the innermost depths of his own being, underpins much of Schleiermacher's thinking. Schelling believed that, as man is an integral part of nature, then the vast on-going phenomenon of Nature has been a development towards self-awareness, and therefore that the *raison d'être* of reality is achieved in creative art. The creative artist is the summit of existence, the embodiment of reason and is why anything exists at all. From this point on, hermeneutics concerned itself with the idea of the author as creator and of the work of art as an expression of the creative self:

In harmony with the poets and philosophers of the period, the hermeneutic thinkers advanced the conception of the organic unity of the work, and adhered to a concept of the symbolic nature of art, which gave rise to the possibility of infinite interpretations. The ancient task of

interpreting and explicating texts suddenly  
appeared in a new and pristine light  
(Mueller-Vollmer 1986: 9).

Additionally, Schleiermacher took his cues from Schlegel and he worked in a consistent and systematic fashion, becoming the founder of modern hermeneutics. By uniting the hermeneutic traditions in theology and the classics with the new transcendental approach promulgated by Kant and Fichte, Schleiermacher created the 'classical' system of Romantic hermeneutics. A new and different usage of the term understanding evolved from Kant's viewpoint as expressed in the Critique of Pure Reason. Understanding (Verstand) appeared as an underlying capacity for thought and experience and acts of understanding (Verstehen) which were present in all thinking and expression, were an expression of man's rationality. Schleiermacher attempted to ground hermeneutics in the concept of understanding. Since then, understanding has become the cornerstone of hermeneutic theory and for the first time, hermeneutics defines itself as the study of understanding itself:

It might almost be said that hermeneutics  
proper here emerges historically from its  
parentage in biblical exegesis and classical  
philology (Palmer 1969: 40).

Schleiermacher became concerned, not with decoding but illuminating the conditions for the possibility of understanding and its modes of interpretation. Understanding, for Schleiermacher, could only happen 'in the coherence of these two moments':

1. An act of speaking cannot be understood as a moment in a person's development unless it is also understood in relation to the language. This is because the linguistic heritage [Angeborenheit der Sprache] modifies our mind.

2. Nor can an act of speaking be understood as a modification of the language unless it is also understood as a moment in the development of the person.

(Schleiermacher, in Mueller-Vollmer 1986: 75)

Man is a linguistic being, the place where language articulates itself in an act of speech and where each spoken utterance can only be understood in relation to the totality of language. But man is also a constantly evolving mind and his speaking can only be understood as a moment in his mental life. Understanding can only happen when these coincide. It is through an authorial act that constitutes itself in the creation of a work that these two planes of the system of language and the inner system of thought become synthesised. Schleiermacher combines the structural and the phenomenological viewpoint:

19. Before the art of hermeneutics can be practiced, the interpreter must put himself both objectively and subjectively in the position of the author.

1. On the objective side this requires knowing the language as the author knew it. But this is a more specific task than putting oneself in the position of the original readers, for they, too, had to identify with the author. On the subjective side this requires knowing the inner and the outer aspects of the author's life.

2. These two sides can be completed only in the interpretation itself. For only from a person's writing can one learn his vocabulary, and so, too, his character and his circumstances.

20. The vocabulary and the history of an author's age together form a whole from which his writings must be understood as a part, and vice versa

(Schleiermacher, in Mueller-Vollmer 1986: 84).

At this stage, links can already be seen to be forming between Wilde's philosophy of art and these developments in hermeneutic theory. The emphasis on the author as creator and of the work of art as an expression of the creative self highlights art as having a crucial function in the progress of culture. Wilde believed that individuality creates progress and conformity threatens it. The integration of arts with the activities of life and work mean that, because life is progressive and because life imitates art, then art should be progressive. A full exemplification of this point will be developed later, through an exegesis of Wilde's philosophy of art and its relation to hermeneutics.

Schleiermacher's contribution to hermeneutics was broadened by his biographer, Wilhelm Dilthey, who saw in hermeneutics the core discipline, which could serve as the foundation for all the *Geisteswissenschaften*, or social sciences. This can be identified as the fourth modern definition as outlined by Palmer (1969) – Hermeneutics as the *Methodological Foundation for the Geisteswissenschaften*. Dilthey (1976) developed a philosophy of method for history and the human sciences that he believed could produce objective knowledge but avoid the reductionist, ahistorical explanatory schema of the natural sciences. Dilthey argued that texts, verbal utterances, art and actions were meaningful expressions whose 'mental contents' or intentions needed to be comprehended. He maintained that investigating human interactions was more like interpreting a poem or discourse, than doing physics or chemistry experiments. Dilthey termed the desired comprehension of events and expressions as 'understanding' (*verstehen*) and attempted to distinguish it from the explanatory knowledge (*erkennen*) generated by the deductive method of the natural sciences. He provided the theoretical underpinning to work elucidated by Humboldt, whose stance was essentially philological and who believed that the historian must apply inner coherence and unite individual events, otherwise they will be meaningless:

Thus there existed for Humboldt an inner affinity between the artist and the historian and their respective crafts: both have to rely on their creative imagination to produce a guiding vision, which would unite all elements into a cohesive whole . . . The historian is involved in what later generations will call the

hermeneutic circle. This means that in any process of understanding the parts must be understood in relation to the whole, just as the whole can only be understood in relation to the parts (Mueller-Vollmer 1986: 15).

Humboldt maintained that the historian should study the 'form' of what happens in history and that the 'preexisting basis of understanding' (vorgangige Grundlage des Begreifens) results from the fact that what is effective in world history is also active within man himself:

When it comes to historical understanding, the gap between historian and event, between subject and object is bridged in a similar manner. It is not by reaching outside or abstracting from his subjectivity that the historian comprehends something, or by passively letting the object affect him. Subject and object, historian and historical phenomenon stand in a pregiven correspondence to each other (Mueller-Vollmer 1986: 17).

With these reflections Humboldt anticipates Heidegger's and Gadamer's notions of an ontological or historical preunderstanding as the basis for all formal understanding and interpreting in the human sciences.



Dilthey's hermeneutic perspective underpinned that of Schleiermacher and Humboldt and he initially followed Schleiermacher in identifying understanding as empathy guaranteed by the notion of a common human nature. Although he recognised that the outlook and values of people varied over different historical periods and cultures, Dilthey argued that, because historians themselves thought and acted, they could relive and understand what people in the past were trying to express in their writings, speeches, acting and art. Influenced by the Kantian idea that works of art and literature embodied the formal values of their respective periods, Dilthey revised his position. What was needed in the human sciences, he believed, was another 'critique' of reason that would do for the historical understanding what Kant's Critique of Pure Reason had done for the natural sciences – a 'critique of historical reason' (Palmer 1969: 41). He emphasised that texts and actions were as much products of their times as expressions of individuals and their meanings were constrained by both the values of their period and a place in their authors' plans and experiences:

Ideas, through which we know the past and the future, exist only for those who are alive in the present. The present is always there and nothing exists except what emerges in it. The ship of our life is, as it were, carried forward on a constantly moving stream, and the present is always wherever we are on these waves (Dilthey, in Mueller-Vollmer 1986: 149 -150).

In this revision, meanings are delineated by the author's *weltanschauung*, or worldview reflecting a historical period and social context. Understanding (*verstehen*), the basis for methodological hermeneutics, involves tracing a circle from the text to the author's biography and immediate historical circumstances and back again. Interpretation, or the systematic application of understanding to the text, reconstructs the world in which the text was produced and places the text in that world. Dilthey believed that understanding as methodological concept has its roots and its origin in the process of human life itself:

Understanding itself is a manifestation of life; acts of understanding are lived by us, they constitute 'lived experience' (*Erlebnis*). The concept of 'lived experience' functions as the middle ground in Dilthey's system. A 'life expression' points back at a 'lived experience' as its source, and we understand its expressed meaning (*Ausdruck*) in the form of a 'lived experience' again (Mueller-Vollmer 1986: 26).

Dilthey's hermeneutics represents the watershed between the nineteenth century theories, which were an outgrowth of Romanticism, and those of the twentieth century, which comprise philosophical hermeneutics and the methodological concerns of the social and historical sciences. On the one hand, he remained a student of Schleiermacher and maintained an interest in his ideas throughout his life; on the other, he provided Heidegger with the impetus to establish new vistas and to move hermeneutics away from the traditional methodological concerns.

Heidegger turned to the phenomenological method of his mentor, Husserl, to bring hermeneutics from a theory of interpretation to a theory of existential understanding:

'Hermeneutics' in this context refers neither to the science or rules of text interpretation nor to the methodology for the Geisteswissenschaften but to his phenomenological explication of human existing itself. Heidegger's analysis indicated that 'understanding' and 'interpretation' are foundational modes of man's being. So Heidegger's 'hermeneutic' of Dasein turns out, especially insofar as it presents an ontology of understanding, also to be hermeneutics; his investigation was hermeneutical in content as well as method (Palmer 1969: 42).

Thus Heidegger rejects the Romantic notion of the sovereignty of the author as the subjective creator of his work, as well as that of the reader who, through the work, 'understands' the author. He claims instead that the understanding of a situation is directly mediated by a fore-knowledge, or a sensitivity to situations, that is comprised by the 'life-world' (Lebenswelt). Suspending that life-world would preclude the possibility of understanding altogether. Heidegger reaches this conclusion by contending that as a necessary part of human 'being in the world' (Dasein), things are perceived according to how they are encountered and used in one's everyday routines. Perception and apprehension thus move from fore-knowledge to an existential understanding, an

unreflective and automatic grasp of a situation that triggers a response. This understanding must be incomplete because Dasein is both historical and finite. It is historical in that understanding builds from the fore-knowledge accumulated from experience. It is finite due to the necessity of acting in situations without the time or ability to grasp the full consequences of actions or plans in advance. Only when actions fail to meet the demands of the situation, do individuals stand back and assume the theoretical attitude of science, which sees things objectively, as discrete objects separate from the self:

What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way. This circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge may move; it is the expression of the existential *fore-structure* of Dasein itself. It is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle, or even a circle which is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing (Heidegger, in Mueller-Vollmer 1986: 226).

Understanding is embedded within the context of specific situations and therefore interpretation, which depends on such existential understanding (*Verstehen*), is not the general logical method found in classical philology, but refers to a conscious recognition of one's own world. Dilthey's methodological hermeneutic circle is replaced by the more

fundamental ontological hermeneutic circle, which leads from existential understanding situated in a world to a self conscious interpretive stance:

As a constitutive element of man's being-in-the-world, understanding bears an inner relationship to his temporality. According to Heidegger, man's being is essentially temporal: his lived horizon includes past, present and future, but he projects himself primarily towards the future. Understanding is that mode through which the possibilities and potentialities of his life are disclosed to a person. In a primordial sense, understanding for Heidegger is both existential and hermeneutic; man interprets Being in terms of his projects in relation to the world (Mueller-Vollmer 1986: 34).

In his philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer follows his teacher Heidegger in recognising that the ties to one's present horizons, one's knowledge and experience are the productive grounds of understanding. For Gadamer, understanding is bound in history because understanding uses the effective history - personal experience and cultural traditions - to assimilate new experiences. The initial structure of an effective-history constrains the range of possible interpretations, excluding some possibilities and including others. As effective-history represents the prejudices brought to bear in understanding, it simultaneously and dialectically limits any self conscious attempts to

suspend those prejudices. Gadamer explicitly opposes the scientific ideal of a 'prejudice-free' objectivity in interpretation. In this respect, he moves beyond Heidegger, who posited a fundamental relation between the mode of being of objects and of humanity and of the structure of time. Gadamer does not deny the importance of either scientific understanding or critical interpretation, but his focus is on the human context of knowledge and he emphasises the need for repeated attempts at critical understanding, through which people can gain the insight needed to put right their prejudices.

The resulting theory of meaning differs from the methodological hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, which identifies the meaning of a text with its author's intentions and which seeks to decipher the text by uncovering the worldview behind it:

According to Schleiermacher, historical knowledge opens the way towards replacing what is lost and re-establishing tradition, inasmuch as it brings back the circumstances of the situation and restores it 'as it was'. The work of hermeneutics seeks to discover the point of contact in the mind of the artist which will open up fully the significance of a work of art, just as in the case of texts it seeks to reproduce the writer's original words (Gadamer 1975: 148).

For Gadamer, understanding recreates the initial intention embodied in the text, by elucidating the subject matter that the text addresses:

The question of the truth of art forces us, too, to undertake a critique of both aesthetic and historical consciousness, inasmuch as we are enquiring into the truth that manifests itself in art and history (Gadamer 1975: 150).

The process moves the text beyond its original psychological and historical contexts and gives it 'ideality' of meaning, which is elaborated in a dialogue between the interpreter and the text. This is grounded in a common concern that is shared by the author and the interpreter. In confronting a viewpoint reflecting a different set of horizons, the interpreter can find his own horizons and reach critical self consciousness. In seeking the key question, the interpreter repeatedly transcends his own horizons while pulling the text beyond its original horizons until a fusion of the two horizons occurs. The Platonic ideal that underpins Wilde's critical works, as explored in the previous chapter, is clearly visible here, as the understanding of other or past is a process of accommodation whereby wider understanding brings one closer.

The meaning of a text is not fixed, but changes over time according to how it is received and read. Thus for Gadamer, to understand is to understand differently than the author or even one's earlier interpretations, precisely because the process involves creating new horizons by eclipsing the old horizons which they replace. This moves beyond Heidegger, because Gadamer allows prejudices to come to a conscious focus that may direct their individual supersession:

The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own foremeanings. . . . This recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust. By the light of this insight it appears that historicism, despite its critique of rationalism and of natural law of philosophy, is based on the modern enlightenment and unknowingly shares its prejudices. And there is one prejudice of the enlightenment that is essential to it: the fundamental prejudice of the enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which deprives tradition of its power (Gadamer 1975: 239-240).

In addition to working through Heidegger's philosophical theories, Gadamer also redirects philosophical hermeneutics along Hegelian lines by using parts of the Hegelian philosophy that Heidegger eschewed. Gadamer's concept of the openness of language and the ability of people to transcend their interpretive horizons are based on Hegel's dialectic of the limit, in which the recognition of the limit constitutes the first step in going beyond them. The idea of understanding as a fusing of horizons derives from Hegel's theory of the dialectal process, as outlined in Chapter Two. Every new achievement of knowledge is a refocusing of the past within a new, present situation. As each opposition



is resolved, the resulting synthesis is found to be opposed to yet another concept and that opposition must be dialectically resolved. Nothing stays the same. Everything is relational.

Gadamer develops another essential element in his notion of understanding – that of the linguistic nature of understanding (*Sprachlichkeit*). He recognises the significance of Schleiermacher's and Humboldt's contribution to hermeneutics, which lay in the linguisticity of understanding. However, Gadamer asserts that hermeneutics is an encounter with Being through language and he raises the question of the relationship of language to being, understanding, history, existence and reality. Whilst Schleiermacher and Humboldt distinguish between language, speech and linguisticity, Gadamer generally uses language to cover a variety of meanings. He maintains that the possibility for all understanding rests ultimately in language itself. The function of language is to bring about the fusion of the horizons of the interpreter and the historical object, which characterise the understanding:

Every conversation presupposes a common language, or, it creates a common language. Something is placed in the centre, as the Greeks said, which the partners to the dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another. . . . To reach an understanding with one's partner in a dialogue is not merely a matter of total self-expression and the successful assertion of one's own point of view, but a

transformation into a communion, in which we do not remain what we were (Gadamer 1975: 341).

Understanding and interpretation for Gadamer constitute the mode of being of all our cultural traditions:

These traditions are necessarily embedded in language. Understanding and interpretation are, above all, events in an historical process. Only secondarily do they constitute a specific method of the human sciences (Mueller-Vollmer 1986: 40).

Literary works live through their reception and form part of an historical continuity which, sustained by a speech community, is itself of a linguistic nature. Rorty (2000: 24) recognises the significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics and his process of 'increasing our understanding':

From the Greeks to the present, this process has usually been described with the help of metaphors of depth. The deeper and more penetrating our understanding of something, so the story goes, the further we are from appearance and the closer to reality. The effect of adopting Gadamer's slogan is to

replace these metaphors of depth with metaphors of breadth: the more descriptions that are available, and the more integration between these descriptions, the better is our understanding of the object identified by any of those descriptions.

The image of 'metaphors of depth' and the 'metaphors of breadth' recall Runciman's quotation, which refers to history as being 'not just one damn thing after another, but one thing instead of another.' Rorty (2000: 25) develops this idea further:

Philosophers in the year 2100 will read Gadamer and Putnam, Kuhn and Heidegger, Davidson and Derrida, Habermas and Vattimo, Theunissen and Brandom, side by side. If they do, it will be because they have at last abandoned the scientific, problem solving, model of philosophy with which Kant burdened our discipline. They will have substituted a conversational model, one in which philosophical success is measured by horizons fused rather than problems solved, or even by problems dissolved. In this philosophical utopia, the historian of philosophy will not choose her descriptive vocabulary with an eye to distinguishing the real and permanent

problems of philosophy from the transient pseudo-problems. Rather, she will choose vocabulary that enables her to describe as many past figures as possible as taking part in a single coherent conversation.

What does emerge from this exegesis of the hermeneutic positions from the eighteenth to the twentieth century is that specific hermeneutic endeavours are dependent upon each other:

It is a history which has been eclipsed by a steady stream of always changing 'new' approaches, trends, and current movements that 'reinterpret', that is, usurp and absorb the past, from their single minded points of view (Mueller-Vollmer 1968: 47).

The development of modern hermeneutics, from the Enlightenment to the present, has displayed the combination of the theoretical and philosophical, the practical and critical concerns of society. Hermeneutic concerns lead back to the consideration of epistemological problems, which in the eighteenth century derived from Empiricism. In the early nineteenth century, Romanticism was a turning away from the notion that writers should aspire towards expressing universal truths. Instead, individual experience and feeling came to be seen as the proper source of knowledge. Mueller-Vollmer (1986: 46) believes that instead of the method of understanding, hermeneutics should be better 'conceived as a logic of the humanities or human sciences', which would complement the

notion of a logic and theory of the natural sciences. This would go some way in redressing the balance between the two. Rorty (2000: 25) pinpoints the dichotomy:

The scientism of the nineteenth century mocked both religion and idealist philosophy because natural science offered a kind of control which its rivals could not. This movement saw religion as a failed attempt to achieve control. It saw Absolute Idealism as an escapist, self-deceptive attempt to deny the need for control. The ability of natural science to predict phenomena, and to provide technology for producing desired phenomena, showed only that this area of culture offered true understanding, because only it offered effective control.

Apel regards the rise of the human sciences from the eighteenth to the twentieth century as relating to the break up of the institutionalised spread of cultural traditions which was effectively valid up to the French Revolution and the rise of industrialist capitalist society:

The process of communication of tradition, without which man would indeed never be able to exist, must in fact assume a different form in our post historical age than in the time prior to the rise of the historical-hermeneutical cultural

sciences. The immediacy of the dogmatic-normative (institutionally established and socially binding) 'application' of the understanding of tradition – as it functioned up into the time of the Enlightenment in Europe and up to the present in most non-European cultures cannot be restored. The process of the communication of tradition must become a complicated, scientifically mediated process (Apel, in Mueller-Vollmer 1986: 46).

Apel's theory of hermeneutics takes it one stage further. Not only does he regard hermeneutics as being part of existing systems of knowledge and therefore unable to be separated from them, but he also believes that the scientific and hermeneutic attitudes should compliment each other. Both the sciences of nature and the sciences of man and society arise from common ground, which Apel identifies as the linguistic community of communication:

The 'classical' or canonical texts of the transmission of culture (religious, philosophical, poetic, legal literary documents) are not primarily 'sources' for the historian which the philologist is merely to edit. The 'philologies' are rather the true hermeneutical cultural sciences in that they are primarily concerned not with processes in

time and space, but with the 'interpretation' of  
'meaning' (Apel, in Mueller-Vollmer 1986:  
331).

Every age has certain ideas that are fundamental to it and the Victorians were no exception:

There are certain doctrines which for a particular period seem not doctrines but inevitable categories of the human mind. Men do not look upon them merely as correct opinions, for they have become so much a part of the mind, and lie so far back, that they are never really conscious of them at all. They do not see them, but other things through them. It is these abstract ideas at the centre, the things which they take for granted, that characterises a period (Hulme 1926: 50).

The emphasis that the Victorians placed on doctrines of natural science was wide reaching. Such doctrines underpinned both political economy and social philosophy and had all the force of the laws of nature. Darwinism strengthened the ideology of competitive capitalism, as Harrison notes (1990: 97):

The principle of the survival of the fittest could easily be popularised to justify the workings of

realism. Merleau-Ponty (1964: 159) recognised the need for a humanistic understanding of a text when he said, 'Science manipulates things and gives up living in them'.

Palmer (1969: 7) reinforces this point when he describes literary texts as being:

A human voice out of the past, a voice which must somehow be brought to life. Dialogue, not dissection, opens up the world of a literary work. Disinterested objectivity is not appropriate to the understanding of a literary work . . . . Literary works are best regarded not primarily as objects of analysis but as humanely created texts which speak. What is needed for this is not some scientific method in disguise, or an 'anatomy of criticism' with the most brilliant and subtle typologies and classifications, but a humanistic understanding of what interpretation of a work involves.

The contrast made between scientific and hermeneutic, or historical, understanding, brings greater understanding to the character of humanistic interpretation, and, by default, to the nature of scientific interpretation. Understanding a literary work is not a 'scientific kind of knowing which flees away from an existence into a world of concepts' (Palmer 1969: 10); it is an historical encounter which calls forth personal experience of being here in the world. When the:



the economic system and give it an aura of scientific authority. Not only was economic liberalism natural, reasonable, and just plain common sense, it was also scientific . . . Science seemed to offer unlimited progress.

Winwood Reade (quoted in Harrison 1990: 97) promised that:

When we have ascertained, by means of science, the methods of Nature's operation, we shall be able to take her place to perform them for ourselves . . . men will master the forces of Nature; they will become themselves the architects of systems, manufacturers of worlds. Man will then be perfect; he will be a creator; he will therefore be what the vulgar worship as God.

The changes already outlined in this chapter to the model of neutral, objective experience of phenomena characterised by the natural sciences were of central importance in theology, philosophy and in literary interpretation. Palmer (1969: 5) asserts that literary interpretation in England operates within a framework of realism. The work is independent from its perceivers and the author's intentions are separate from the work; it is a being in itself with powers and dynamics. The European movement of Phenomenology, promulgated by Husserl and developed by Merleau-Ponty in France and Heidegger in Germany, highlights the relationship between scientific perspective and

Foundational 'Hermes process' is at work;  
something foreign, strange, separated in time,  
space or experience is made familiar, present,  
comprehensible; something requiring  
representation, explanation or translation is  
somehow 'brought to understanding' – it is  
'interpreted' (Palmer 1969: 14).

This type of dialectal interaction between the individual author and tradition has to occur within a philosophical framework of ideas. It is essential to grasp that such conceptual changes centre on ideas that have been around since Plato, but are also part of a history of adaptive learning. They make it possible to do something in 1900 that could not be done before. Such a theory recasts our understanding of the past so that we can see it anticipating innovation – for example, when Dickens is regarded as a Symbolic writer or Wilde as self-referential. It is important therefore, to place Wilde's actions in the context of narrative history, as behaviour is only characterised adequately when it is known what the longer and longest term intentions invoked are, and how the shorter term intentions relate to the longer. Our view of truth, as Gadamer has explained, is limited because we are trapped in language and time. The most we can do is strive for a greater awareness of our 'prejudices', which should be developed beyond seeing something as it is in itself. This relates to the Platonic ideal, in that the understanding of the other or past is a process of accommodation whereby our wider understanding brings us closer:

The most important of these ideas derive from  
recurrent philosophical concerns to be found in  
many periods and under different social

conditions, that they often run the artists involved with them into contradiction, and that the problems they centre on are no more likely to be brought to a final solution than the artist is to produce a 'final' work of art from which no others can be derived or 'progress'. Many of the issues which the Modernists faced are still open to debate in epistemology and moral thought; and the continuity of their aesthetic concerns is shown by the fact that our interpretation of the relationship of Modernism to Postmodernism is still a matter of dispute and probably will long continue to be so (Butler 1994: xvii).

It is only within the individual that the new ideas of a period present themselves as problems and attract further thoughts and feelings which can lead to innovation and discovery, in a work which, unlike that of science, will always bear the marks of an individual character and temperament.

Just as every age has certain ideas which are fundamental to it, so it will also have doubts and difficulties. The loss of confidence in the absolutism of Victorian science and the changing European culture and sensibilities within this framework of phenomenology and educational hermeneutic theory caused anxiety. Nietzsche and others contested the all-embracing religious and political frameworks of the nineteenth century, in favour of a

growing pragmatism or pluralism. Many followed Nietzsche (1968: 409) in believing that 'what is needed above all is an absolute scepticism toward all inherited concepts.'

Those intellectuals who felt this tended to see themselves as critics, and if they were not marginalized already from the society in which they lived, then they would probably so become. These pressures towards withdrawal from social consensus and its implied morality had long been identified as symptoms of modernity. Arnold (1962: 109) thought that:

Modern times find themselves with an immense system of institutions, established facts, accredited dogmas, customs, rules, which have come to them from times not modern. In their system their life has to be carried forward, yet they have a sense that this system is not of their own creation, that it by no means corresponds exactly with the wants of their actual life, that for them, it is customary not rational. The awakening of this sense is the awakening of the modern spirit.

Wilde restates Arnold's position in his dialogue 'The Critic as Artist':

It is enough that our fathers believed. They have exhausted the faith-faculty of the

species. Their legacy to us is the scepticism  
of which they were afraid (CW 1137).

He goes on to argue that through the critical spirit 'we shall be able . . . to make ourselves absolutely modern.' For Wilde, the highest expression of individualism, and of life, is art, 'Art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has known' (CW 1184). For Wilde the 'classics' of literature are a form of authority, inhibiting spiritual growth, 'The fact is, the public make use of the classics of a country as a means of checking the progress of Art' (CW 1186). 'Progress,' he argues, 'is the realisation of Utopias' (CW 1184). This state of departure for undiscovered terrain is made possible by Wilde's attitude of dynamic criticism, not complacent or fearful obedience.

The range of reference for Wilde's work, or 'art', is enormous. There is no better place to look for his philosophy of art, of what art is and is not, of what the experience of art means in the modern world, and of the relationship between art and life. Wilde's ideas on the subject developed over time, but nearly everything he wrote after 1888, particularly his critical dialogues, reflects his preoccupation with the philosophical concerns that were definitive for the late nineteenth century. He recognised the ethical advantages of socialism, believing it would make possible a rise of individualism that could never be possible under private property, yet he was also aware of the aesthetic limitations of the socialist vision and its tendency to bypass the question of art.

Trilling (1974: 118) noted that Wilde's importance as a thinker was steadily growing and he predicted that such intellectual consequence would soon cease to be overshadowed by the spectacle of his 'posturing' and 'martyrdom'. Despite such recognition, an appreciation of Wilde's critical writing has been slow to develop. It is only since the

publication of Wilde's Oxford Notebooks (Smith and Helfand 1989), which he kept in Oxford during the late 1870s, that the extent to which Wilde drew upon readings in philosophy, history and science to develop the philosophical taxonomy by which he would later come to explore the problem of art, has been acknowledged. Prewitt Brown (1997: xv) observes that:

The editors' argument is that Wilde achieved a synthesis of philosophical idealism and evolutionary theory while he was at Oxford, and this synthesis is re-enacted throughout Wilde's critical essays, dialogues and novel . . . In the Notebooks, Wilde drew on pure metaphysics and pure science so as to understand their limitations in relation to one another. Only in art, wherein spirit is embodied in the sensuous, do the ideal and empirical realms realise themselves and become 'true'.

Such a synthesis develops the point made by Hegel and thus it is with Wilde, where, in his works, nostalgia and respect for the past are juxtaposed with progressive thought. This has become understandable with Gadamer's notion of effective history, or *Erfrahrung*, which renders the past understandable in terms of effects or influence, which enables things to be known. The travelling is the unforeseen journey of a life and some of the routes are societally derived, whereas the experience of these routes is individually unknown. MacIntyre (1985: 204) maintains that any contemporary attempt to view each

human life as a whole will encounter two kinds of obstacle, one social and one philosophical:

The social obstacles derive from the way in which modernity partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behaviour. And all of the separations have been achieved so that it is the distinctiveness of each and not the unity of the life of the individual who passes through those parts in terms of which we are taught to think and to feel.

The philosophical obstacle:

That particular actions derive their character as parts of larger wholes is a point of view alien to our dominant ways of thinking and yet one which it is necessary at least to consider if we are to begin to understand how a life may be more than a sequence of individual actions and episodes.

Wilde's comment 'if another century began and I was still alive, it would really be more than the English could stand' reinforces our belief that he is a prophet of modernity, but in the Sartrian sense as outlined by MacIntyre (1985: 205):

For a self separated from its roles in the  
Sartrean mode loses that arena of social  
relationships in which the Aristotelian virtues  
function, if they function at all.

This enables a better understanding of Wilde's perception of himself that 'somehow or other I'll be famous and if not famous, notorious' without an abstraction from the cultural and social milieu in which he lived and thought. Wilde became both famous and notorious; first as the deliberately outrageous exponent of Aestheticism, caricatured in Punch and lampooned by Gilbert and Sullivan; later as the witty playwright and social lion, whose work mocked and subverted the pieties of Victorian society. Then came scandal and ruin, when he was pilloried as being the embodiment of degeneracy and weakness. Wilde would be drawn and quartered between the two poles of Modernist self-definition: on the one hand, tradition and Neoclassical standards; on the other, innovation and individualism.

The fragmentation of morality, which accompanied the rise of modernity, mirrors the journey that Wilde was travelling:

Each stage in the emergence of the  
characteristically modern views of the moral  
judgement was accompanied by a  
corresponding stage in the emergence of the  
characteristically modern concept of selfhood



. . . a concept of a self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end (MacIntyre 1985: 205).

Where Victorian society was once organised around a cluster of powerful and widely shared values, many of them emphasising constraint, self-discipline and personal responsibility and acting as a form of social control, it was becoming dominated by a new and more permissive ethos that emphasised personal fulfilment, desire and identity:

The High Victorian synthesis had pretty well come to an end by 1880. The period from 1900 to 1918 is a sort of interregnum, subject to various influences, but with no overmastering purpose. It will be noticed that there is a gap of about twenty years in this skeleton chronology – the years from 1880 to 1900. This is of course the celebrated *fin de siècle*; the period of Walter Pater, of aestheticism and decadence, Ibsenism and Wagnerism. It would be a great mistake to dismiss it as an era of green camations and ethical eccentricity. It was in fact the time when the major influences of continental European thought began to make their impact on England, and the early

part of the new century is still busy adjusting  
itself to them (Hough 1972: 475).

The old culture of 'Victorianism' was essentially a set of bourgeois standards, rules and truths passed down from the nineteenth century and surviving through much of the twentieth century. This new ethos has brought to the fore what was once a dissenting subculture and, as Himmelfarb (quoted by Brinkley 2000: 6) argues, this dissenting subculture remained just that through the first six decades of the twentieth century. It was capable, at times, of shaking the dominant world of Victorian values but never overturning it. The many upheavals of the 1960s strengthened the counter-culture and weakened the dominant one:

Fostering a growing disaffection with  
established institutions and authorities and a  
rejection of the conventional modes of thought  
and behaviour.

Wilde anticipates the complexities of both modernity and post modernity in his adoption of the culturally subversive mask of extreme artificiality. He challenges social, moral and sexual conventions, satirising Victorian morality and his own lifestyle, yet subverting the Victorian ideal of art as a moral vehicle. His thoughts reverberate today, as MacIntyre (1985: 206) acknowledges:

Such a conception of the self is perhaps less  
familiar than it may appear at first sight. Just  
because it has played a key part in the cultures

which are historically predecessors of our own,  
it would not be surprising if it turned out to be  
still an unacknowledged presence in many of  
our ways of thinking and acting.

It is, therefore, important to place Wilde's actions in the context of narrative history. To see intentions in the metaphor of a journey enables us to place them in causal and temporal order, with reference to their role in the agent's history. Narrative history turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterisation of human actions. The central point about experience is that self conscious is the basis of self foundation. Self conscious needs an adventuring journey, focus or application to become constitutive of self formation. It cannot be known in advance whether the experience had en route will out weigh the end (death) in its eventual importance and impressiveness. In this sense it is clear that life itself is an adventure and Gadamer's notion of effective history – the process which renders the past understandable, not as an object to be known as it is in itself, but in terms of the effects or influence which enables things to be known – underpins this theory. It is, once again, the hermeneutic circle that makes things meaningful in terms of their relationships, their contingency and contiguity; and we can never step outside of this circle.

Wilde recognised the role that art has to play in making other cultures part of one's native heritage:

One had ancestors in literature, as well as in  
one's own race, nearer perhaps in type and  
temperament, many of them, and certainly with

an influence of which one was more absolutely  
conscious (CW 108).

It was this broad-based approach to his philosophy of art that enabled Wilde to come to terms with the immense contradictions that were underpinning Victorian culture at the time. This revaluation of the significance of his later critical and creative works has been prompted by the publication of Wilde's Oxford Notebooks, in which Smith and Helfand (1989: vii) show the notebooks to be based on a reasoned philosophical and political stance:

A synthesis of Hegelian idealism and  
Spencerian evolutionary theory which  
fundamentally shaped his criticism and fiction.

In the act of transforming Victorian social and aesthetic criticism, then, Wilde takes his place in a European tradition of thought that stretches from Kant and Schiller, through Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, to the 'pre-eminent cosmopolitan artist-critics of this century, Benjamin and Adorno' (Prewitt Brown 1997: xviii).

Not only does the range of Wilde's writing cover both fiction and non-fiction, but it is also fired by critical response. Le Gallienne, a protégé of Wilde and his set, when reviewing *Intentions*, was the first to suggest that Wilde's work transcends the boundaries between creation and criticism, fiction and non-fiction:

Mr. Wilde, in speaking of the methods open to  
the critic, well says that Mr Pater's narrative is,

of course, only criticism in disguise: his figures are but personifications of certain moods of mind, in which he is for the time interested, and which he desires to express. Now I have been wondering whether one should not, similarly, regard Mr Wilde essentially as a humorist who has taken art-criticism for his medium (in Beckson 1970: 97).

An exegesis of Wilde's critical dialogues reveals the extent to which Wilde believed that the spirit of criticism could reflect society and culture in true Hegelian fashion:

There has never been a creative age that has not been critical also. For it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms. The tendency of creation is to repeat itself (CW 1119).

In 'The Truth of Masks', the final essay in *Intentions*, Wilde states that:

In aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can realise

Hegel's system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks (CW 1173).

His use of dialogue in 'The Critic as Artist', the paradigm established by Plato as the father of the dialectic, allows a plurality of perspective, as he acknowledged:

By its means [the thinker] can both reveal and conceal himself, and give form to every fancy, and reality to every mood. By its means he can exhibit the object from each point of view, and show it in the round, as a sculptor (CW 1143).

Such an approach eliminates subjectivity of thought, as the subjects discussed by Gilbert and Ernest range widely over contemporary polemics, including the notion that the highest criticism treats the work of art simply as a starting point for a new creation, as Gilbert states:

It does not confine itself – let us at least suppose so for the moment – to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final. And in this it is right, for the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it. Nay, it is

rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvellous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age, so that it becomes a vital portion of our lives, and a symbol of what we pray for, or perhaps of what, having prayed for, we fear we may receive (CW 1127).

The dynamic relationship between the work of art and its audience is established and Wilde maintains that the individual is responsible for the construction of meaning generated by the work of art. Its creator lays no greater claim to its significance than its audience, therefore the meaning is not 'single, static or authorised, but multiple, changeful and relative' (Varty 1998: 57). The 'beautiful created thing' acquires its own plural life with the beholder and is relative to the era of the beholder. 'The primary aim of the critic,' states Ernest, 'is to see the object as in itself it really is not' (CW 1128).

It is here that Wilde anticipates Gadamer's notion that the meaning of a text is not fixed, but changes over time according to how it is received and read. To understand is to understand differently than the author or even one's earlier interpretations, precisely because the process involves creating new horizons by eclipsing the old ones they have replaced. The experiential and emotive range of the individual is extended by art, as the critic is led further and further away from the sphere of the action, and into the realms of thought, which again underpins Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics:

It can help us leave the age in which we were born, and to pass to other ages, and find

ourselves not exiled from their air. It can teach us how to escape from our experience, and realise the experiences of those who are greater than we are (CW 1138).

This process moves the text/work of art beyond its original psychological and historical contexts and gives it 'ideality' of meaning, which is elaborated in a dialogue between the interpreter and text. In confronting a viewpoint reflecting a different set of horizons, the beholder can find their own horizons and reach critical self consciousness. Wilde develops this point in the second part of 'The Critic as Artist', when Gilbert and Ernest explore the liberating benefits that can be gained by the individual who practises this method of response:

There is no passion that we cannot feel, no pleasure that we may not gratify, and we can choose the time of our initiation and the time of our freedom also (CW 1135).

It is because the experience of art is inward and contemplative that Wilde regards it so highly:

The contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not *doing* but *being*, and not *being* merely, but *becoming* – that is what the critical spirit can give us (CW 1138-9).



This is the ultimate goal and Wilde elaborates:

From the high tower of Thought we can look out at the world. Calm, and self-centred, and complete, the aesthetic critic contemplates his life, and no arrow drawn at a venture can pierce between the joints of his harness. He at least is safe. He has discovered how to live (CW 1139).

Wilde's development of a philosophical framework that was not subjected to the contradictions of his age enabled him to confront 'the great encompassing problem of his career and life' (Prewitt Brown 1997: 4), namely that of reconnecting art and life on a new basis, or on a basis in which the differences between art and other sensations are preserved in a way that does not lead back to Victorian opposition between art and life, or aesthetics and ethics, or beauty and truth.

Smith and Helfand (1989) document the influences on Wilde's development. Wilde studied classics at Trinity College under J. P. Mahaffy, a Kantian idealist who prepared Wilde for the first major philosophical-linguistic influence he was to encounter at Oxford, that of F. Max Muller:

The most important influences from this program of study came in philosophy, where Wilde adopted Oxford Hegelianism, and in philology, which he studied with F. Max Muller.

In both philological and philosophical studies,  
Wilde learned of the possibility of reconciling  
evolutionary science with philosophical  
idealism (Smith and Helfand 1989: 8).

Muller, educated in Germany in the 1840s, brought to Oxford his historical research in comparative languages, religions and mythologies, as well as a belief in philosophical idealism that grew out of his German university experience and was partly based on an extensive knowledge of Hegel's work.

Wilde was equally receptive to the influences of Ruskin and Pater and it is through association with both of these that the ethical aspect of aestheticism, 'the question of how to live one's life, the possibility of living it aesthetically – first clarified itself for him' (Prewitt Brown 1997: 9). For Wilde, living aesthetically meant, among other things, making a living at it. The tension that existed between the degenerate notions of the period and those which are regenerate, resonated throughout Wilde's life. Jackson (1950: 27) describes the 'intellectual, imaginative and spiritual activities of the 1890s' which are:

Concerned mainly with the idea of social life  
or, if you will, culture . . . . For that reason  
alone the period is interesting apart from any  
achievements in art or science or statecraft. It  
is interesting because it was a time when  
people went about frankly and cheerfully  
endeavouring to solve the question 'How to

Live.' From one point of view such an employment suggests the bewilderment of a degenerate world . . . but those who lived through the Nineties as young men and women will remember that this search for a new mode of life was anything but melancholy or diseased. The very pursuit was a mode of life sufficiently joyful to make life worth living. But in addition there was the feeling of expectancy, born not alone of a mere toying with novel ideas, but born equally of a determination to taste new sensation, even at some personal risk, for the sake of life and growth.

The rallying cry of the aesthetic movement, 'Art for art's sake' embraced the notion of a new kind of art that was free from social rules, or concepts of good and evil, or any other concerns extraneous to the central aim of the pursuit of beauty. This had enormous appeal to Holbrook Jackson's 'young men and women' who were seeking an escape from the 'stifling confines of Victorian painting and writing; from those arts weighed down by an ever increasing burden of moral, social and sentimental baggage' (Calloway 1997: 37).

Wilde's ambition to make his life into art was, ultimately, to be his undoing, but his downfall, as he implies in *De Profundis*, justifies itself; it does so for posterity in the work itself. Having never made an absolute separation between 'art' and 'life', and being

unwilling to sacrifice any aspect of his life to the demands of his art, Wilde was always receptive to experience. Once he had begun on his 'adventuring journey', Wilde realised that he could not go back. A month before his final trial, Wilde said to Gide, 'My friends advise me to be prudent. Prudent! How could I be that? It would mean going backward' (Ellmann 1988: 340). The courtroom became the arena in which he could continue to transcend his own horizons, as is borne out by the autobiographical *De Profundis*:

Do not be afraid of the past. If people tell you that it is irrevocable, do not believe them. The past, present and future are but one moment in the sight of God, in whose sight we should try to live. Time and space, succession and extension, are merely accidental conditions of thought. The Imagination can transcend them, and move in a free sphere of ideal existences (CW 1059).

He recognised that he could not flee from a situation in which he had played so large a part in creating and that the central point about experience is that self conscious is the basis for self foundation; it is constitutive of self formation:

For Wilde, the concept of fate was, from his early years, an aesthetic concept; the aesthetic itself possessed for him a manifestly ethical dimension. Wilde believed, in a fully classical manner, that we realise our potential as human

beings by progressing from the realm of necessity or instinct to the realm of self consciousness and freedom. The contemplative attitude (*theoria*), which was the basis of Aristotle's *Ethics* as Wilde understood it, is the means and end of self-perfection; and Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, which also influenced Wilde, assume that each individual man bears within himself the capacity for ideal manhood and that this ideal unity of spirit and nature, freedom and necessity, can be called into actual life only by 'aesthetic education' (Prewitt Brown 1997: 18).

In *De Profundis*, Wilde recomposes his life in memory and the past and future can come together in a completed work. Each moment 'resonates in a temporal fabric of past and future moments' (Prewitt Brown 1997: 103):

I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure. I did it to the full as one should do everything that one does to the full. There was no pleasure I did not experience . . . But to have continued the same life would have been wrong because it would have been limiting. I had to pass on. The other half of the garden

had its secrets for me also . . . Of course all this is foreshadowed and prefigured in my art . . . [In] the prose-poem of the man who from the bronze image of the 'Pleasure that liveth for a Moment' has to make the image of the 'Sorrow that abideth for Ever' it is incarnate. It could not have been otherwise. At every single moment of one's life one is what one is going to be no less than what one has been. Art is a symbol, because man is a symbol (CW 1026).

Wilde died in 1900, the year before Queen Victoria and the same year as Nietzsche. To place him in this context evokes the modernity of Victorianism and the post-modernity of Nietzsche. *Wilde participated in both. He was indeed a prophet of modernity, as he himself acknowledged:*

The nineteenth century is a turning point in history . . . It is criticism that leads us. The Critical Spirit and the World Spirit are one (CW 1154).

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## **Chapter 4**

### **Narrativity in Wilde's Life and Works**

It is because Humanity has never known where it was going that it has been able to find its way (CW 1121).

The purpose of using biographical method as a research tool is to explore, through the analysis of individual lives, the relationship between social forces and personal character (Erben 1996: 1).

An investigation of biography offers insight into the educative by way of empirical domain. The recognition that a biographical text is an interactive, contextual production between text, reader and writer, will be elucidated as will the necessity of a hierarchical structure if the subject is to maintain a sense of order. By acknowledging that a life is never at an end and revealing the sense that Wilde is joined to the past and to the future, the reader is able to find meaning in the experiences of others, so that they can give shape to their own in times that are fluid and inconstant. Erben (1998: 1) recognises that:

Individual motivations and social influences have no easy demarcation. Such a recognition in biographical studies is seen as a methodological hindrance than a way of observing in the exploration of the narrative features of human

identity, how the structural and interactional are intertwined.

Thus the biographical method regards the individual as a complex social being, reconciling the positivistic, the interpretive, the structural and the phenomenological.

As stated in chapter one, such a system for placing meaning in context is founded at the beginning of life and develops from the first through relationships with adults whose own experience is formed by the society in which they grew up. 'Biographical and autobiographical analyses can examine the significance of selves in relation to general or prevailing values' (Erben 1998: 2). The human subject can only interpret itself by interpreting the signs found in the surrounding world, therefore 'the meanings we discover must be, in part, those our parents discovered before us' (Marris 1986: 11). To the reader, the 'meanings', or experiences, are believable and they are validated, reassuring us that we have not lost hold of reality. We like to be able to interpret events and experiences, deriving meaning from them, because, as Marris (1986: 10) explains:

The conservative impulse implies, then, an intolerance of unintelligible events. For if we were to encounter frequently events on which we could not impose interpretation, our behaviour would become alarmingly disorientated. But nothing becomes meaningful until it can be placed in a context of habits of feeling, principles of conduct, attachments, purposes, conceptions of how people behave.

Amis (2000: 7) encapsulates the chaotic nature of life:

The trouble with life (the novelist will feel) is its amorphousness, its ridiculous fluidity. Look at it: thinly plotted, largely themeless, sentimental and ineluctably trite. The dialogue is poor, or at least violently uneven. The twists are either predictable or sensationalist. And its always the same beginning; and the same ending.

It is through reading that the reader is reminded that he is not the first person to have suffered in this way. The film version, *Shadowlands*, of Lewis' (1961) observed account of his bereavement, states in a lesson to one of his pupils that 'we read to know that we are not alone' and this is encapsulated by Denzin (1989: 22):

There is no real person behind the text, except as he or she exists in another system of discourse. But the central postulate of the biographical method is that there is a 'real' person 'out there' who has lived a life, and this life can be written about.

He argues the case further:

When a biographer purports to be giving the 'real' objective details of a 'real' person's life, he or she is, in fact, only creating the subject

in the text that is written . . . This real person was born, has perhaps died, has left his or her mark on other people, and has probably deeply felt the human emotions of shame, love, hate, guilt, anger, despair, and caring for others. This thinking, feeling, living, breathing person, is the 'real' subject of the biographical method (1989: 21).

An understanding of Wilde's concept of himself is explicit in his work and may be explicated through it. Wilde rejected the idea that any analysis of motivation would uncover the 'real self', 'Consciousness is quite inadequate to explain the contents of personality. It is Art, and Art only, that reveals us to ourselves' (CW 343). Wilde does not mean merely that Art holds up the mirror to ourselves, but that it offers the very structures by which selves are made:

These structures may be defined as dramatic insofar as Art offers us the stereotypes by which we represent ourselves to others – by which we 'act' ourselves. The self thus enacted is shaped not by inner impulse but by the expectations of others which, Wilde argues, are artificially induced: when 'a great artist invents a type . . . Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher.' In this capacity, Life is acting as an agent of Art (McCormack 1976:

This perspective will emphasise Wilde's reflections on the uncertainties of the modern age and his concern with man's stability in an environment that is increasingly hostile and unstable. An understanding of the relationship between the events in Wilde's life and his social outlook will amplify his social and psychological vision and delineate the influences that underpin his narratives.

These narratives (whether past, present or future) are the cohering mechanisms that make up comprehensible human experience. As such narrative analysis, more intricately than any other method, is able to weave social context and individual life together. It is the surest method of avoiding swamping the personal or subjectivising the social (Erben 1998: 13).

Narratives are no longer seen as restricted to certain aspects of culture but as fundamental aspects of human life. Barthes remarked that narrative 'is simply there like life itself . . . international, transhistorical, transcultural' (1977: 79).

What is a narrative and what are its constituent features? The words 'narrative', 'narration', 'to narrate' derive from the Latin *garrus*, meaning 'knowing', 'acquainted with', 'expert', 'skillful', and so forth, and *narro* (relate, tell), which derives from the Sanskrit root *gnâ*. So natural is the impulse to narrate, so inevitable is the form of narrative for any report of the way things really happened, that narrative could be considered a solution for

translating knowing into telling, for fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are human rather than culture-specific. Narrative is characterised by its foregrounding of a series of events or actions which are connected in time. However, narrative is not just a sequencing; it is a sequencing of something for somebody. Narration is a word that implicates its object in its meaning. Only one kind of thing can be narrated – a time-thing, an event, a temporal icon and more than one event is required before we are able to realise that we are in the presence of a narrative. A narration is the symbolic presentation of a sequence of events connected by subject matter and related by time. If the temporal relation is absent then only a list exists.

Forster (1974: 87) draws a distinction between plot and story. He states that 'The King died and then the Queen died' is a story and 'The King died and then the Queen died of grief' is a plot. They are both features of narrative, but the plot transforms events by combining temporal succession with cause. While the first 'narrative' includes two events related in time, the second includes another 'connection', the crucial element of causality. The first simply lists two events, while the second provides the thread of a narrative by showing how they are related. The logical or causal connections between one event and another constitute fundamental aspects of every narrative. The essential distinction is between the events that can be said to happen in 'real' time and their transformation and realisation in a text. Thus 'real' time may be said to be linear, while the textual realisation of an event may occur out of its linear sequence. Rimmon-Kenan (1983: 3) states that:

Whereas a story is a succession of events,  
'text' is a spoken or written discourse which  
undertakes their telling. Put more simply, the  
text is what we read. In it, the events do not  
necessarily appear in chronological order, the



characteristics of the participants are dispersed throughout, and all the items of the narrative content are filtered through some prism or perspective.

Watt (1957: 24) recognises that the novel's plot is also distinguished from most previous fiction by its use of past experience as the cause of present action, 'a causal connection operating through time replaces the reliance of earlier narratives on disguises and coincidences'. The beginning-middle-end sequence of a narrative emphasises its teleological progression – the end as the place to get to. Brooks (1984: 94) has elaborated the ways in which readers' desires are directed towards the end, ways in which narratives are structured towards, or as a series of digressions from, an ending:

We are able to read present moments – in literature and, by extension, in life – as endowed with narrative meaning only because we read them in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them order and significance of plot.

Thus narratives move from a state of equilibrium or stasis through a disturbance of this stability, and back to a state of stability at the end. Because of the conventional emphasis on hermeneutic discovery at the end, endings tend to be particularly over determined places: the reader looks to the end to seek the answers to the questions that the text has raised. Such temporal awareness is fundamental to an understanding of events, as Erben (1998: 13) acknowledges:

The fact that lived time is finite and that our subjects (and we ourselves) have been born and will die is the backdrop against which all life is lived. In short, a life that is studied is the study of a life in time. Further, human beings have a sense of time as an essential part of their mental constitution: persons cannot be cognisant without a sense of occurrences preceding the present or a sense that occurrences will follow what is immediate . . . In short, human identity is relational, lives being composed of the narratives by which time is experienced.

Locke, in *An essay concerning human understanding* (1997), has defined personal identity as an identity of consciousness through duration in time and that the individual is in touch with his own continuing identity through memory of his past thoughts and actions. Hume, in 'A Treatise on Human Nature' (1978), shared with Locke the basic empiricist premise that it is only from experience that our knowledge of the existence of anything outside ourselves can be ultimately derived, whether the experience be our own or somebody else's, 'Had we no memory, we never should have any notion of causation, nor consequently of that chain of cause and effects, which constitute our self or person' (Bk 1, Pt 4, Sect vi). Such a point of view is characteristic of narrative and the intertwining of past and present self-awareness is fundamental to much of Wilde's writing, as this chapter will show.

Dickinson and Erben (1995: 257) conclude that there are four fundamental points to be made about any narrative:

1. A narrative organises actions and events into a meaningful whole.
2. The narrative organises the human experience of temporality
3. The principal of narrativity in human life blurs the boundaries between real and fictional events.
4. Narrative is expressed through language.

### **1. The organisation of events into a meaningful whole.**

The 'amorphousness and ridiculous fluidity' of the daily grind does not automatically relinquish itself into a framework that is readily explicated in the narrative form. As Atkinson (1992: 5) states:

The data that we accumulate day by day, week by week, and month by month do not automatically yield an understanding that is organised in terms of themes and chapters. We all struggle to turn the dense complexity of everyday life into a linear structure - an argument that starts on page one, and progresses through a logical sequence, and ends on the final page.

Wilde's use of the textual convention of the dialogue does not merely raise technical or methodological issues, because it also has moral consequences - it invites judgement as

our sense of the social and moral is underpinned by what we read. Wilde uses dialogue as an oblique, non-committal of expressing a controversial attitude, whilst at the same time, allowing dissociation from it and, as often as not, subverting it by proceeding to express the opposite point of view. The dialogue also enabled writers to 'expose', as readers could search for the truth themselves:

The men of the nineties could see in High Victorian commitment little else than self-delusion and hypocrisy. For every bourgeois Jekyll they promised to uncover a troglodyte Hyde. And perhaps because of this vaunted contempt for mid-Victorian values, the writers and artists worked hard to make the self as different as possible, namely, as much like an artifact as possible. Often, as it happened, it was a delicate balance between life and art in their lives, the art of life and the life of art becoming practically interchangeable. Sooner or later, the lie of this artifice too would have to be exposed (Miyoshi 1969: xvi).

The dialogic nature of 'The Decay of Lying' and 'The Critic as Artist' allow the expression of a variety of points of view, leaving the reader with open questions. The investigation of truth by discussion, whereby a process of question and answer gradually eliminates error and moves towards truth is reflected in Hegel's pattern of reality, where history is seen as an inevitable dialectic. Wilde's creation of criticism that is art and art that is criticism is fully realised in his works - he adopted the dialogue because it embodied the dialectic:

Dialogue, certainly, that wonderful literary form which, from Plato to Lucian, and from Lucian to Giordano Bruno, and from Bruno to that grand old Pagan in whom Carlyle took such delight, the creative critics of the world have always employed, can never lose for the thinker its attraction as a mode of expression. By its means he can both reveal and conceal himself, and give form to every fancy, and reality to every mood. By its means he can exhibit the object from each point of view and show it to us in the round, as a sculptor shows us things, gaining in this manner all the richness and reality of effect that comes from those side issues that are suddenly suggested by the central idea in its progress, and really illumine the idea more completely, or from those felicitous afterthoughts that give fuller completeness to the central scheme, and yet convey something of the delicate charm of chance (CW 1143).

Using this dialectic process to move towards truth can be seen as a journey, the outcome of which cannot be known:

It cannot be known in advance whether the

experiences to be had enroute may outweigh the journey's end in their eventual importance and impressiveness. Nor can it be known in advance whether the journey may change one utterly, in body or in mind. In this particular sense, it is clear that life itself is an adventure (Gadamer 1971: ix).

The reader is introduced to the theme of change through a textual device, a distinctive style and genre. The need for such a device is highlighted by MacIntyre (1985: 210), 'In each case the act of utterance become intelligible by finding its place in a narrative.' He continues:

We allocate conversations to genres, just as we do literary narratives. Indeed, a conversation is a dramatic work, even if a very short one, in which the participants are not only the actors, but also the joint authors, working out in agreement or disagreement the mode of their production. For it is not just that conversations belong to genres in just the way that plays and novels do; but they have beginnings, middles and endings just as literary works do. They embody reversals and recognitions; they move towards and away from climaxes . . . I am presenting both conversations in particular then and human

actions in general as enacted narratives  
(1985: 211).

The use of the dialogue in Wilde's essays transforms and illuminates, encouraging the reader to draw comparisons between a comprehensible field of experience and that which is less familiar. The dialogue furnishes meanings to events and ideas, shaping the narrative into a whole that can be understood by the reader, as the reader moves towards truth. Most of all, it enables the reader to 'understand the deepest and most universal of human experience' (Richardson 1990: 133). Once the dialogic form has been understood then its cognitive force functions, as it becomes persuasive and mimetic. The use of the dialogue to characterise a social world is imperative to the reader's understanding. It gives shape and consequence to the chosen narrative, thus the 'narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterisation of human action.' (MacIntyre 1985: 205).

## **2 The Human Experience of Temporality.**

This introduces the second principle expounded by Dickinson and Erben (1995). The dialogue as a narrative form presents the reader with the central, mimetic experience, offering a medium that has to be negotiated as it involves the reader in emotional and intellectual exercise. The reader does not consider the narrative action as history but rather feels that the narrative is being acted out before him. A life is conceived as a 'story' and this narrativist attitude to life has been conceptualised in various ways in the history of modern thought (Taylor 1989). To see one's life as a linear progression from a starting point, through various phases, up to its final page reinforces that the past often adopts a sense of present and this in turn stresses the irreversibility of time. The present can only be understood in relation to the past, just as the human subject can only interpret itself by interpreting the signs found in the surrounding world. The need to view

an individual life as a unified narrative with a beginning and an end (death) is a condition for asking humanly important questions about its meaningfulness or meaninglessness. Death must be postulated as the imaginary end point, the final event of the story of a life. If there was no death to be expected, it could not be realised that a specific, spatio-temporally restricted life was being led. The fact that death awaits enables us to think about life as a coherent whole with a beginning and an end. Only then can the question of meaning or significance arise. The inescapability of death echoes Kant, insofar as it is a necessary 'transcendental condition' of a meaningful life. Human life as we know it is intelligible only under the circumstances in which death inevitably puts an end to it. Without death, our lives would be something entirely different, something about which we would have no clear conception whatsoever – not from the point of our present human condition, at least.

Death then, plays a decisive role in the human being's understanding of his or her life as a unified narrative. There is no such thing as a notion of self-hood or self-identity that is genetically transferred. We are joined to the past and to the future because it is a constituent feature of mind to have memory and to have projection. The past is always categorically linked to the future and when that future becomes the past it will, similarly, be linked to another future. However, selves are not free agents within this temporal schema. They arrive in the world ready made, in a language already in existence. When individuals interpret or decipher their condition they are already partly socialised - are always in a state of prior signification. As Ricoeur has said, 'an understanding is of necessity mediated by meanings which are not constituent of the self alone' (1988: 168). Subjectivity is therefore the product of a variety of social discourses and a unique, personal life history. Ricoeur's belief is that time is the universal, defining structure of human existence and that it may only be made comprehensible in terms of narrative. It is because these narratives are composed of individual volition and societal influences that



the two are regarded as inseparable:

Given that these narratives are inseparably composed of individual volition and social context the researcher will 'find' the researched life in a conflation of subjectivities and social structure. (Erben 1998: 14).

We tell stories to ourselves; of our journey from birth to death, of friends and family, who we are and who we want to be. Or we tell stories about our history and politics, about our country, our race or religion. At each moment of our lives these stories place us in time and space. They console us, making our lives meaningful by placing us in something bigger than ourselves. The human impulse is to make sense of each moment by referring it to a larger narrative.

The concept of selfhood whose 'unity resides in the unity of narrative which links birth to life to death' (MacIntyre 1985: 220) is apparent in Wilde's life and his biographies, his works and their reviews. Wilde

Is indeed a tragic figure. Laughed at in his youth, misunderstood in his maturity, spurned in his closing years . . . Oscar Wilde enunciated doctrines utterly alien to the ingrained Puritanism and athleticism of the English people. The man who runs counter to national traditions and prejudices is bound to provoke bitter hostility. The man who, in his

country, places art before muscle or sets the individual will above the conventional law, seems sure sooner or later to come to grief. . . His influence was limited to the very few but it existed and will expand further in the time to come (Leadman, in Beckson 1998: 260).

This recalls Eliot's words:

What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from (1944: 58).

No matter how the journey is charted or mapped, a direct correlation will be drawn between time as a narrative and the serialisation of a human life will always be drawn, just as Hardy (1974: 92) implies when Mr Coggan says 'that a true narrative, like time and tide, must run its course and would respect no man.' The image of charting a life complies with Ricoeur's theory expounded in Erben (1996: 6) when he states that:

An emplotment is the charting of a narrative by way of engagement with the temporal. The act of adding a narrative dimension to the seriality of events is the way in which individual identity is established and made comprehensible, the way it is emplotted.

The addition of a narrative provides a system for the action, 'providing the researcher

with a point of mediation to interpret the sense of time's passage, to obtain narrative purchase' (Dickinson and Erben 1995: 265). By narratives is meant the types, varieties and patterns of accounts or stories that compose life-course experience. These narratives place upon existence - past, present and future - a cohering feature constituting the reasons for thoughts and actions. For example, the idea of the Greek gods reappearing in other historical/literary guises appealed to Pater for the same reason as Hegelianism: both reflect his attempt to come to terms with time. 'Hermeneutical analysis of narrative takes Time and its passage as a universal feature of individual and social lives. Lives, as such, are composed of the narratives by which time is experienced' (Erben 1996: 3).

### **3. Real Events and Fictional Events.**

Stories are lived before they are told - except  
in the case of fiction (MacIntyre 1985: 212).

The ancient historians gave us delightful  
fiction in the form of fact; the modern novelist  
presents us with dull facts under the guise of  
fiction (CW 1073).

The third and penultimate principle of 'narrativity in human life blurring the boundaries between 'real' events and 'fictional' events' (Dickinson and Erben 1995: 258) has previously been touched upon on page 177 of this chapter. The fact that someone, somewhere, will have experienced a similar past, whether the motive forces of change were the same or not, is inevitable. The purpose here however, is to explore the structure of fictional narratives and that of real life stories. As Dickinson and Erben

(1995: 258/9) acknowledge:

The two kinds of narrative mutually influence one another as life and art imitate each other. Just as the boundary between real and imaginary events is blurred, so is the boundary between the 'great' narrative and the small personal narrative. The principle is the same whether we have an individual composing his or her life story in internal reflection, a diary, a confidant or, on the other hand, a novelist or historian at work for publication.

The common postulate between fiction and truth is that narration is a human act and the presence or person who is embodying the narration is the richest thing in the narrative. Of all the literary genres, fiction has perhaps, the widest appeal, as it speaks to the reader directly, its intensity and power capable of moving the reader emotionally and canalising the primordial forces.

Wilde understood that art requires an audience to complete the hermeneutical circle:

Art does not hurt us. The tears that we shed at a play are a type of the exquisite sterile emotions that it is the function of Art to awaken . . . For emotion for the sake of emotion is the aim of art, and emotion for the

sake of action is the aim of life, and of that practical organisation of life that we call society (CW: 1135/6).

He realised that each reader perceived a different reality and whilst ready to question the changing intellectual milieu in his works, he begins to erase the boundaries between art and life. In doing so, he invites the reader to perceive a relationship between the creator and the artistic work and to experience the dialogue between the creative process and the raw material. Responsibility for interpretation and any consequent action must lie with the individual who has misconstrued the ideal terms in which art operates. Wilde's own search for a new vision to replace old dogmas becomes the readers', as they participate in a process, by which, through the characters and their dialogues, Wilde proposes, tests, examines and discards moral and aesthetic values. The boundaries between truth and life, fiction or art, become fudged, as finding the way becomes the subject:

André Gide met Wilde several times during the early nineties, and on one occasion that Gide recalls, Wilde inquired of him what he had been up to since their last meeting. Gide, a serious young man already taking sincerity seriously, recounted a few trifling incidents, which prompted Wilde to ask, Did he really do that? Was he really telling the truth? "Absolutely," said Gide, apparently gulled. "Then why repeat it?" countered Wilde. "You must see that it is not of the slightest

importance. You must understand that there are two worlds – the one exists and is never talked about; it is called the real world because there is no need to talk about it in order to see it. The other is the world of Art; one must talk about that, because otherwise it would (Miyoshi 1969: 289).

The opening scene and much of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is taken up with dialogue, a textual convention that has already been recognised as allowing an investigation of truth by discussion. This frees the work from solitary existence, as the reader draws comparisons between a comprehensible field of experience and that which is less familiar.

The painting in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* defies the laws that have, up until now, governed the creation of the visual arts. Instead of preserving on canvas a timeless moment, 'a single exquisite instant, eternal indeed in its beauty, but limited to one note of passion or one of calm' (CW 1123), the painting also acquires 'the temporal powers of narrativity' (Varty 1998: 116). It plays with the Hegelian idea of striving to be different, striving towards the other, within the arts, 'Movement, that problem of the visual arts, can be truly realised by Literature alone' (CW 1124). It is in this fusion of the Hegelian opposition of thesis to antithesis and finally reconciliation in synthesis that, in showing defiance of one art form within the fabric of another, Wilde is able to eschew the difficulty of displaying the impossible, while he also endorses the legitimacy of proper aesthetic constraint. '*The Picture of Dorian Gray* contains a 'moral' about aesthetic over-reaching just as much as it contains a rather more trite 'moral' about how to live' (Varty 1998: 117). Wilde recognised as much when he wrote, 'Basil Hallward is what I think I

am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me; Dorian what I would like to be - in other ages perhaps' (in Holland and Hart-Davis 2000: 585). He defended the use of moral corruption in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, because:

Otherwise the story would have had no meaning and the plot no issue. To keep this atmosphere vague and indeterminate and wonderful was the aim of the artist who wrote this story. I claim that he has succeeded. Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray. What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them (in Holland and Hart-Davis 2000: 439).

He has judged the focus of the novel accurately:

It is not action, nor plot, which dominate the experience of reading the novel, but attention to conversation, to psychological interaction, to the mental effects of action, to impressions in an interior mental landscape (Varty 1998: 127).

The dialogue also becomes the narrative voice as the author tests the accuracy of his beliefs. Conrad's words could well be applied to Wilde's narratives,

A novelist lives in his work. He stands there,

the only reality in an invented world, among imaginary things, happenings and people. Writing about them, he is only writing about himself. But the disclosure is not complete. He remains, to a certain extent, a figure behind the veil; a suspected rather than a seen presence - a movement and a voice behind the draperies of fiction (Conrad 1912/1969: xv).

The double, in this case the self-portrait, is for Wilde the vehicle of self-creation. Consciousness of self implies doubleness, the consciousness aware of itself. Life experience, the development of the self-consciousness, is for Wilde matter for the life of art:

At the point where art is found to be an illusion, a lie at last, the life which is its source, and which in turn models its further life on art is unavoidably a lie – and this, whether the lie is looked upon as salvation (Wilde) or damnation (Hardy). Either way the autonomy of art relative to life is beyond compromise (Miyoshi 1969: 291).

Wilde is clear on this, when he states in 'The Decay of Lying', 'As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way . . . it is outside the sphere of art' (CW 1077). Lord Henry tells Gladys in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 'We can have in life



but one great experience at best, and the secret of life is to reproduce that experience as often as possible' (CW 142). The fact that fiction antedates 'real life' suggests not only that the unconscious perceives more than consciousness, but also that, if the warnings are not heeded, it will anticipate life, even to its tragic conclusion.

Narrative fiction, therefore, becomes self-expressive and ontological, as well as rhetorical, as Wilde strives to define his self and organise his vision into a coherent form that can be readily shared with the reader. In the struggle, Wilde never assumes that he is right and it is this consciousness that stands in the background, completing the full dimension of the work. This invites the intimacy of the shared experience with the reader, making it believable and, ultimately, truthful. Wilde recognised his responsibility to his audience, when he asked Gide to understand that there are two worlds, the real world and the world of art.

#### **4. Narrative and Language.**

Language . . . is the parent, not the child of  
thought (CW 1121).

The fourth and final area of focus is that narrative is expressed through language. This is certainly true of Wilde, many of whose utterances have become life-informing maxims. Wilde once said that people are good until they learn how to talk (Kiberd 1997: 276). He was born into an age when philosophers were coming to the conclusion that language itself is a dubious, slippery commodity and that to talk is to learn how to tell lies. Once again, the boundaries between 'real' and 'fictional' events are blurred.

The range of styles, and it is style, not sincerity that is of importance, which Wilde has

used in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 'dovetail to express the central ethical idea that art, serving as a repository for the conscience of a culture, extends or constrains the perceptual range of humanity' (Varty 1998: 115). Zima (1988: 59) argues that the literary text is the universal form, meaning that it constitutes 'a syncretism of numerous ideological, scientific or group languages and discourses which are characteristic of a particular period', a hypothesis developed originally by Coseriu (1971). He continues:

Unlike the scientist, the lawyer or historian,  
who can merely quote, the writer can  
experiment with all these linguistic forms in  
parodies, pastiches, travesties and dialogues.  
He thus presents society in a nutshell as it  
were, which no other type of discourse can  
achieve (1988: 59).

Thus the sociologist can study society through literature, providing it is not done on a referential level, on the level of collective speech, of discourse. Even though literature may be considered as a particular, autonomous structure, written for the sake of a linguistic experiment, this experiment is still socially significant. 'Or as Adorno would put it: art is autonomous and 'fait social' simultaneously' (1988: 59). A literary text should therefore be conceived of as a response to the spoken and written discourses of its time, as a reaction to 'a particular linguistic situation coinciding with a particular constellation of social forces and group interests' (1988: 61). Language will always lose its neutrality as soon as it functions within a specific group language, marked by a specific semantic and narrative structure, but literary texts cannot be related directly to social groups, classes or milieus, as 'they react to all these social structures on a linguistic level, by imitating, exalting, parodying one or several jargons' (1988: 64). If the

word 'content' has any meaning at all, it denotes the verbal material which an author finds in his social milieu and which he structures according to his interests and needs.

The art of narrative fiction provides the hermeneutical structure in which the reader can dwell. It is not only the production of literature that has an intertextual character, but also the reading process. The critic and the reader do not merely react to the semantic and narrative structures of the text, but relate these structures to the sociolinguistic situation of their time, so that the selections and classifications they make in interpreting a literary text are closely linked to their social group. The expressive range of an individual, as of a culture, defines the boundaries of possible experience, "'Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him, Basil" cried Dorian, with a wild gesture of despair' (CW 116). There is no ideal vision other than what man can make for himself. This is illustrated in Chapter 5 of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where Wilde demonstrates how art fashions the self-knowledge of the individual, through his choice of narrative style of language. The whole episode is written in a style that parodies the conventional melodrama of the period. Sybil Vane's mother is unable and unwilling to experience anything that does not fit the mould:

'Ah! Mother, mother, let me be happy!'

Mrs. Vane glanced at her, and with one of those false theatrical gestures that so often become a mode of second nature to a stage-player, clasped her arms . . . She felt sure that the tableau was interesting (CW 56).

It is not just that Mrs. Vane is morally culpable in failing to distinguish between art and life; she has no other medium of expression with which to represent life to herself.

Similarly, once her daughter, Sybil, feels an emotion that she deems to be real, she has no medium with which to express it, 'I might mimic a passion that I do not feel, but I cannot mimic one that burns me like fire' (CW 72). Here, Wilde's narrative style and use of language compounds the idea that the experiential range of man is constrained by expression. This point is explored further by Kiberd (1997: 277/284), who argues that Wilde correctly sensed that ownership and understanding of the means of expression would be the question of real consequence in the century to come:

An Irish person often uses English with hesitation which is soon admired by the English as a 'lilting charm'; and suddenly the Irish have a style which is a result of their awkwardness in grappling with English idioms. Before they know it, the English phrases which they employ are saying things which they never intended. Because English is a naturally rhetorical language, full of tricks of speech, they find themselves all too often borne on a tide of eloquence . . . All the characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* talk alike, which is to say like Wilde. What the play asks us to endorse in the end is not so much this person or that as an attitude of mind – the morality of the fluid or multiple self. In particular, the ratification is sought for the attempt by young people to become the opposite of all that they are by training and

inheritance, to put on the anti-self.

The use of language enabled Wilde to abandon the attempt at surface realism and tell lies, thus 'cultivating the distortions which are the basis of art' (Kiberd 1997: 284). Wilde repeatedly compares life to a mirror, and then states that art is the higher reality:

Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life,  
and I feel sure that if you think seriously about  
it you will find that it is true. Life holds the  
mirror up to Art, and either reproduces some  
strange type imagined by painter or sculptor,  
or realises in fact what has been dreamed in  
fiction (CW 1085).

The image of the mirror resonates throughout literature and for Wilde, the importance of the mask and the mirror become almost an obsession. The motif of the mask appears constantly in his plays and hides 'a no-man's face, and although everyone fears exposure of his nothingness, to others one's mask is one's face' (Miyoshi 1969: 311), whereas the mirror reflects not only the mask, but hopefully the hidden truth of the face. For most early Victorian writers this self-consciousness is to be suppressed, whereas for writers of the nineties, introspection or mirror gazing is a sanctioned activity, 'For the world you wear your mask; for a true glimpse of yourself, consult your mirror. The mask is for others' inspection, the mirror for one's private introspection' (Miyoshi 1969: 311). Thus the real life is not so much the one that is led so much as the one we create in our imaginations. In 'The Decay of Lying', Wilde rejects Shakespeare's image of art as a mirror held up to life, suggesting that the mirror is now a cracked looking glass, thoroughly discredited:

They will call upon Shakespeare – they always do – and will quote that hackneyed passage forgetting that this unfortunate aphorism about Art holding the mirror up to Nature, is deliberately said by Hamlet in order to convince the bystanders of his absolute insanity in all art-matters (CW 1082).

Kiberd (1997: 284) suggests that here is an even deeper meaning to this image and that is the notion that the cracked looking-glass no longer depicts a single image, but instead a multiplicity of broken images, much like a modernist painting:

Wilde held that the only way to intensify personality was to multiply it: his play, like the cracked mirror, renders a multiple self, showing characters who experiment with various personalities in order to try them for size. In the final analysis, however, it becomes clear that the multiple self is Wilde's own and that the stage space contains the field of force that is the Wildean mind.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde, through Dorian, talks about man in a way that challenges the definition of the self held by earlier Victorians, 'He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a simple thing,

permanent, reliable, and of one essence (CW 107). He asks if sincerity is such 'a terrible thing' and cannot believe it is, preferring to regard it in a positive light, as 'a method by which we can multiply our personalities' (CW 107). McCormack (1976: 262) identifies this more as a style of speech, rather than as a persona that evolves as a role, and that to understand this new style, one must first understand the style that it attacks, the high style of Victorian sincerity. 'To the sincere style may be imputed a single, intense and preemptory inner life.' To this, Wilde opposes a style that is not single, but double; a style which either says one thing and means another or which says two things, one of which contradicts the other:

The efficacy of such a style lies not in dealing on two levels of meaning, but on two levels of meaning which mutually discredit each other; in double dealing, one might say. To this style no self can be imputed; no inner life, no preemptory singleness, indeed, no identity at all (1976: 262).

Miyoshi (1969: 319) argues that what is new about this 'Wildean Faust' is his unselectiveness:

To experience all possible experiences, spiritual and sensual, religious and secular, moral and amoral, man must be a complex, multiple creature. However, to 'experience' at all, one must *be*, first of all. And this is what he is unable, or unwilling to do, since for that he

would have to *choose* what he wants to see, what he wants to do, and what he would like to be. And he cannot choose. He is uncomfortable with morality, Philistine morality being vulgar; he is ill at ease in sin, immorality, after all being unpleasant and tiring: he is suspicious about religion, God being the only one who knows for certain that He exists. Then, too, he is unsure of himself about atheism, being aware he is not really self-sufficient; ill at ease with others, being destined to be alone and lonely; unfamiliar with real solitude because he is so lonesome. Probably the best way is the way out, equivocating on each dilemma as it presents itself. But if that cannot be arranged, and one must stand and fight, a paradox is a well-sharpened sword, and the deliberate presentation of different masks the best shield.

As Miyoshi (1969: 320) acknowledges, the world that Wilde promised would exist if only one talked about it is not at all a possible one for him. The moment he abandons choice and offers himself to a random selection of masks, his possible world of art vanishes. What remains is just talk, 'ready, clever, incessant and tiring after a while'.

Sammells (2000) concurs with the emphasis on multiplicity, rather than simplicity. He



suggests that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was an opportunity for Wilde for self-dramatisation and self-styling, not self-authentication. As previously quoted, in a letter to Ralph Payne, Wilde writes:

I am so glad you like that strange many coloured book of mine: it contains much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry is what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be – in other ages, perhaps (in Holland and Hart-Davis 2000: 585).

In this he distributes himself across the narrative in a series of poses and therefore, if the novel was to express the personality of the author, it would emphasise not simplicity, but multiplicity. The novel deconstructs the surface/depth model of individual identity, which posits the 'real' self as the kernel of the nut, defining it instead in terms of multiformity:

The self is all surface. Dorian's 'kernel' is, literally, a painting, a portrait: or rather, he has no kernel at all. Wilde, in effect, anticipates both the ambivalent, Modernist rejection of the 'authentic' self and the more radical postmodern versions of dispersed and decentred subjectivity. From this angle, Wilde can be seen performing an unlikely yet strangely elegant historical leapfrog

(Sammells 2000: 3).

What is clear is that Wilde, in his defence of the novel, is anticipating 'some crucial notions in contemporary, postmodern narrative theory' (Sammells 2000: 56) and he attempts to short-circuit readings which are moralistic by shifting the responsibility:

Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful  
things are corrupt without being charming.  
This is a fault. Those who find beautiful  
meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated.  
For these there is hope (CW 17).

Thus through other stories, Wilde is anticipating that we learn to tell the stories of ourselves; we learn to 'self-narrate' from the outside, recognising that our reading, however objective and scientific, constructs its object:

Wilde's comments on the process of self-styling (by which, as Lord Henry, Basil and Dorian, he becomes simultaneously Dandy, Dowdy and Debauchee), deconstruct essentialist notions of identity, substituting the idea that, as Currie puts it, 'identity is not within us because it exists only as a narrative' (Sammells 2000: 56).

It is Wilde's range of styles and the different narrative voices that he adopts that enables him to write as the omniscient narrator. He manages to address the paradox between

old and new with equanimity, revealing that language is a dynamic force which registers social developments and political conflicts. He holds things together in a world that is increasingly unstable and unmanageable and he does so through the integrating vision of the omniscient narrator:

Wilde was not drifting with every intellectual current, but was carefully developing the philosophical framework by which to make sense of a confluence of contradictory forces (Prewitt Brown 1997: 8).

Landow (1991) argues that Wilde meets the requirements for the exemplary sage, a role that is possibly defined in the introductory passage of King Solomon's proverbs:

To know wisdom, and instruction; to understand the words of prudence: and to receive the instruction of doctrine, justice, and judgement, and equity; to give subtlety to little ones, to the young man knowledge and understanding. A wise man shall hear and be wiser: and he that understandeth, shall possess governments. He shall understand a parable, and the interpretation, the words of the wise, and their mysterious sayings (Proverbs 1: 1-7).

The passage reads as an outline for the requirements of an exemplary sage:

comprehension of God's subtle auguries; fluency in metaphor, parable and paradox; sufficient distance from the whole to foster an aptitude for seeing connections between morality and politics; credibility and severity enough to communicate this insight; adequate compassion and intelligence to offer the audience escape. Landow (1991) demonstrates that as the message and biography of the biblical prophet are inseparable, so is this the case for modern sage writers and that one must stand apart from the mass of men to speak the truth. The sage is therefore apart from the world that he criticises, but he criticises *his* world; he is not a member of another community, and his subject matter is tied to his biography. It follows that the sage should be above his audience not only in terms of insight, but also in lifestyle. The sage should live the transcendence he has discovered.

In both his life and his literature, Wilde not only stands within the immoral or amoral society that he questions in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but is also a magnet around which it spirals. Indeed, as Terpening (1998) acknowledges, the society from which he stands apart, which rejected him on moral grounds after his book was published, is the nineteenth century moral majority. Aesthetes loved the book; they kept it by their bedsides and read it over and over. Paradoxically, Wilde was embraced by the group that he chastised and rejected by the mainstream voice that he seemed to advocate by destroying Gray, who valued beauty over morality. Terpening (1998: 2) suggests that:

Wilde as a sage represents the dawning of a new twentieth century tradition in which author and narrator are more easily distanced, so that the Epicurean ideals espoused in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* come from a narrator who is an idealised abstract of the author

whose biography certainly lacks Biblical purity  
... or even adherence to the ideals of the  
Greek philosopher he admired. In the  
emerging Freudian world marked by multi-  
leveled personalities and internal struggles  
between conscience and desire, perhaps  
Wilde's biographical incompatibility presents a  
new era for the sage.

On the one hand, Wilde's criticism reflects a faith in technology and it promotes the  
utopian goal of individual creativity. In *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, his argument  
is clearly within the mainstream tradition of Victorian socialist thought, which:

In rejecting classic definitions of work as 'toil  
and trouble' (Adam Smith) in favour of the  
'fulfilment of species-being' (Marx), did not  
distinguish between economic and aesthetic  
life. This insistence on the possibility of the  
progress of all humanity's faculties -  
intellectual, moral and sensuous - once  
mankind was liberated from necessity went  
back to the Enlightenment and continued  
through the Frankfurt School (Gagnier 1997:  
22).

On the other hand, Wilde was sensitive to the revelation of personality choice and  
preference. He was also tempted by the 'more subjective calculations of pleasure that

the new psychologically based economics had introduced' (Gagnier 1997: 22). Dorian 'searches for sensations that would at once be new and delightful' (CW 100) and has an appetite for products of 'all parts of the world' (CW 102) that he cannot satisfy, 'The more he knew, the more he desired to know. He had mad hungers that grew more ravenous as he fed them' (CW 98). Dorian soon tires of the excess and he experiences 'that terrible *taedium vitae* that comes on those to whom life denies nothing' (CW 108). In the midst of this cycle of excess and ennui, Dorian finds himself in a society that prefers form to substance:

Society, civilised society at least, is never very ready to believe anything to the detriment of those who are rich and fascinating . . . It feels instinctively that manners are more important than morals (CW 107).

The narrator describes market society as 'society of the spectacle, style or form over substance' (Gagnier 1997: 23) and the lack of substance is liberating. Form or sincerity is:

Merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities . . . man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature' (CW 107).

The consequence of Dorian's desire is his portrait, where his shame is permanently recorded. At this price, he is given a beauty without limit, 'the scarcest commodity in a

mortal world, that is his sole source of value to others, who commodify and consume him in turn (Gagnier 1997: 23).

Wilde uses the language of his audience and his contradictory messages can only be understood by reference to his audiences, a theme to be developed in the next chapter. The language is not neutral, but at that moment of historical development it is loaded with ideological connotations and it operates so that audience and writer engage in an 'unspoken complicity to exonerate the action' (McCormack 1976: 263). It is intended that the actors be understood to be performing and that the audience recognise in the performance a reflection of their own image. Wilde wrote, in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 'It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors' (CW 17). What the audience discovers in such a performance are the artifices by which selves are presented and, by presentation, made.

McCormack (1976: 266) identifies Wilde's greatest skill as:

His ability to manipulate his audience and his plays are preoccupied with the ways by which performance brings power – over others, over events and thus over oneself. But the dandy's self-possession is an illusion; he is only as powerful as his audience makes him. That necessary collaboration ultimately determined both Wilde's greatest success and his downfall, which arrived almost simultaneously. Beyond this public aspect, Wilde had no other self. There is no Oscar Wilde more real than

the reality with which at any moment an audience would credit him no more reality – and no less – than that of the actor performing his part. Oscar Wilde chose to play the part of himself, larger than life, as a Byronic hero who stood in symbolic relations to his age. In doing so, Wilde acted as a representative of those selves which his age had created; but in doing so he lost the opportunity to become something more than that creature of his age, an egoist without an ego.

Wilde's manipulations of his audience through his diverse use of melodrama, epigrammatic wit, satire, romance and cynicism enables his audience to become fully involved with the lived experience and respond, so that the hermeneutic circle is complete.



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## **Chapter 5**

### **Relationships Between Events in Wilde's Life and his Social Outlook**

The emphasis on the author as creator and of the work of art as an expression of the creative self, highlighting art as having a crucial function in the progress of culture, has been explored in Chapter Three. Here there was an exposition of the Kantian idea that works of art and literature embody the formal values of their respective periods. In following this structure of situating the process in literary conventions to highlight the methodology, the biographic nature of Wilde's life and works will be examined with close reference to the nine areas formulated by Denzin (1989), conventions which structure how lives are told and written about:

1. The existence of others
2. The influence and importance of gender and class
3. Family beginnings
4. Starting points
5. Known and knowing authors and observers
6. Objective life markers
7. Real persons with real lives
8. Turning point experiences
9. Truthful statements distinguished from fictions

Denzin acknowledges that these are the conventionalised, narrative expressions of life experiences and that:

These conventions serve to define the  
biographical method as a distinct approach to

the study of human experience. They are the methods by which the 'real' appearances of 'real' people are created. They are the Western literary conventions and have been present since the invention of biographical form (1989: 17).

The use of these conventionalised devices for an exploration of Wilde's work and life focuses on the belief that the reader should recreate a text to widen his consciousness and sensibility of the historical process, rather than try to shape the text so that it can be squeezed into pre-existing categories. Searle (1974/5: 327) defines this point:

There is no textual property, syntactical or semantic, that will identify a text as a work of fiction. What makes it a work of fiction is, so to speak, the illocutionary stance that the author takes towards it, and that stance is a matter of the complex illocutionary intentions that the author has when he writes or otherwise composes it . . . the pretended illocutions which constitute a work of fiction are made possible by the existence of a set of conventions which suspend the normal operation of rules relating to illocutionary acts to the world.

Such is the intangibility of a biographic text, a chimeric, ambiguous attempt to 'stuff a

live person between the covers of a text' (Denzin 1989: 83), that further definition of the meaning of 'text' is required. Erben (1996: 2) clarifies this:

For hermeneutical research cultural life is regarded as a composition of cultural texts. Texts are areas of signification having cohering and recognisable cultural identities - e.g. a hockey match, *Hamlet*, a hospital ward, the class system, Mrs Thatcher, an unemployed school leaver. In the case of a biography, a life or self is regarded as a text.

To take the subject's life as a starting point does not mean that structure will be separated from subjectivity, 'but to represent them as the first step of the dialectic' (Erben 1996: 7). The life will emerge through an ensemble of themes and facts, an understanding of which can be approached through narrative analysis. Such analysis will add a narrative dimension to the seriality of events, so that a sense of order is maintained and we are able to 'grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society' (Wright Mills 1959: 6).

Wilde's life and works are an ideal starting point for this exploration, for it is now, a hundred years after his death, that we are just beginning to bring some understanding to his life. Wilde's sense of history - of what is past and what may come - heightens the sense of irony, so sustaining the reader's interest and maintaining the educative purpose of his works. Wilde selected his scenes from experience and assembled, recorded and patterned them, distilling them so that they enlarge the reader's knowledge and understanding, whether his outlook is agreed with, or not. During his

time, his life ceased to be temporally and causally related to the recognisable narrative of the setting of the Victorian era. MacIntyre (1985: 206) defines the importance of the setting in historical terms:

A setting has a history, a history within which the histories of individual agents not only are, but have to be situated, just because without the setting and its changes through time the history of the individual agent and his changes through time will be unintelligible.

Wilde's narrative ceased to be shared with the Victorian authorities and his state of alienation arose because the interpreter was unable to identify with it: the interpreter became 'intellectually and practically baffled':

We do not know how to respond; we do not know how to explain; we do not even know how to characterise minimally as an intelligible action; our distinction between the humanly accountable and the merely natural seems to have broken down. And this kind of bafflement does indeed occur in a number of different kinds of situation; when we enter alien cultures or even alien social structures within our own culture (MacIntyre 1985: 209).

Thus mutual intelligibility is built on the notion of shared narrative and the use of



narrative form underpins our lives:

We dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative (Hardy 1968: 5).

It is because we live out our lives in narratives and because we understand our own lives in terms of narratives that we regard the narrative as an appropriate form to interpret the lives of others. It is these narratives that form the social constraints because whilst selves are the centre of their own narrative, narrative selfhood is correlative. The narrative of any one life will interlock with another set of narratives and become 'players within other narratives' (Erben 1996: 9). Stories are already made by what and who have gone before and the subjects have to slip into the narrative. MacIntyre (1985: 215) reinforces this point:

Of course just as they do not begin where they please, they cannot go on as they please either; each character is constrained by the actions of others and by the social settings presupposed in his and their actions.

So 'we enter upon a stage we did not design and we find ourselves part of the action that was not of our making' (MacIntyre 1985: 213).

In addition, the self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in

communities and it is necessary that some ethical positions are shared if any form of social relationship is to be sustained. It is important that the sense of history - of what is past and what may come - is acknowledged, so that we can interpret events and experiences. The use of narrative is fundamental to define our actions and those of others as part of the construction of social contexts:

What I am, therefore, is in key part of what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognise it or not, one of the bearers of tradition (MacIntyre 1985: 221).

Within particular modern subcultures, therefore, versions of the traditional scheme of the virtues survive and, in true Hegelian fashion:

The conditions of contemporary public debate are such that when the representative voices of those subcultures try to participate in it, they are all too easily interpreted and misinterpreted in terms of the pluralism which threatens to submerge us all. This misinterpretation is the outcome of a long history from the later middle ages until the present during which the dominant lists of the virtues have changed, the conception of

individual virtues has changed and the concept of a virtue itself has become other than what it was (MacIntyre 1985: 226).

The opposition between art and life 'provides a way of exempting art - including narrative - from its moral tasks' (MacIntyre 1985: 227). The relegation of art by modernity to the status of a minority activity protects us from any narrative understanding of ourselves. Yet since an understanding cannot be completely expelled without expelling life itself, it continuously recurs within art. Despite this, 'to think of a human life as a narrative unity is to think in a way alien to the dominant individualist and bureaucratic modes of modern culture' (MacIntyre 1985: 227).

In his role as social and moral historian, Wilde believed that individuals were products of society and that social inequality would prevent the general flourishing of individualism. *The Rise of Historical Criticism*, although an academic essay, is steeped in the still operative influences of Ruskin and Pater and in Wilde's own interest in Greek literature and ideas. It identifies the Greek spirit with modernism, especially in the disposition of modern scientific and critical thinking:

In Greek thought, as elsewhere, there are periods of stagnation and apparent retrogression, yet their intellectual development, not merely in the question of historical criticism, but in their art, their poetry and their philosophy, seems so essentially normal, so free from all disturbing external influences, so peculiarly rational, that in

following in the footsteps of time we shall  
really be progressing in the order sanctioned  
by reason (CW 1199).

This rationalism, with its emphasis on iconoclasm and revolt against authority, is one defining motive of Wilde's later critical manner, in his essays of *Intentions*, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.*, and *De Profundis*. A key feature of Wilde's argument in *The Rise of Historical Criticism* is the rejection of the supernatural and mystical as out of place in historical criticism and, by implication, for the modern historical spirit. This incongruity became the reason why the irrational, the supernatural and the mystical underpin much of Wilde's own prose fiction. The reader also finds an early record of Wilde's rejection of 'the inculcation of moral lessons as an aim to be consciously pursued' (CW 1207) in favour of the true motive of art and history, which is the creation of beauty.

Lawler (DLB 57: 361) outlines further clues to Wilde's aesthetic philosophy. In the review 'Twelfth Night at Oxford' (Dramatic Review 20 February 1886) Wilde writes that 'the manner of an artist is essentially individual, the method of an artist is absolutely universal. The first is personality which no one should copy.' Later, in a review of George Sand's collected letters in the Pall Mall Gazette (6 March 1886), Wilde insists that 'art without personality is impossible,' a theme reiterated in his later criticism and one central to Wilde's own critical practice, especially in *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.*, the dialogues of *Intentions*, and *De Profundis*. Wilde gives another insight into his methodology in the same review, 'The Letters of a Great Woman,' when he reveals his view that 'art for art's sake is not meant to express the final cause of art but is merely a formula of creation.' The junction of aestheticism as a formal cause and personality as an efficient cause is one of the two polarities of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the other

being the junction of absolute morality and magic. Taken all together, these themes are as prominent in Wilde's life as they were to become in his mature works. This recalls MacIntyre's premise that 'since an understanding cannot be expelled without expelling life itself, it continuously recurs in art.' The inheritance of progressive characteristics in life should be reflected in art, which is why Wilde's works are as relevant today as they were one hundred years ago.

By taking the life of Wilde and his critical works, access is available to the socio-historical example of his life and this will, in turn, help the reader to understand the nature of human lived experiences. Using Denzin's method as a tool to explore the relationship between social forces and personal lives enables a study of the correlation between the author and social and psychological influences. As Erben (1998: 14) acknowledges, the complementary results of biographical research will refer to what is unavailable in quantitative research - 'that is, *how* individuals experience the objectively structuring, empirically observable features that place them historically where they are . . . this individuality, far from being atomistic allows us to deepen our knowledge of the surrounding social context.' This is reinforced by Wright Mills (1959: 6), who suggests that 'No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey.'

### **1. The Existence of Other**

Biographical texts are always written with an  
'other' in mind (Denzin 1989: 18).

To define the presence of 'the other' is to reveal an awareness of Wilde's audience, 'an intellectual or status community of abstract or specific people' (Denzin 1989: 18). Wilde

regarded himself as a voice of the age to be, rather than the age that was fading and he recognised that criticism of the discipline of art was vital to its progress:

Wilde was one of the first to see that the exaltation of the artist required a concomitant exaltation of the critic. If art was to have a special train, the critic must keep some seats reserved on it (Ellmann 1982: ix).

Wilde reached this conclusion by way of two others. The first is that criticism plays a vital role in the creative process and the second is that criticism is an independent branch of literature with its own procedures. He explained that the critic must have all literature in his mind and see particular works in that perspective rather than in isolation because:

With the development of the critical spirit we shall be able to realise, not merely our own lives, but the collective life of the race, and so to make ourselves absolutely modern, in the true meaning of the word modernity. For he to whom the present is the only thing that is present, knows nothing of the age in which he lives. To realise the nineteenth century, one must realise every century that has proceeded it and that has contributed to its making. To know anything about oneself one must know all about others (CW 1137).

The presence of an 'other' in autobiographical and biographical texts means that they are always written with at least a double perspective in mind: the author's and the other's. The importance of this double perspective is recognised by Denzin (1989: 18), when he describes biographical texts as being written with the eye of the author and the eye of the other. Elbaz (1988: 14) develops this further:

This concept relates within the same ideological configuration to the notions of mediation: the text 'begins' through the voice of a third party because language accommodates the Other by adopting the voice of an Other in its movement towards meaning.

What of this 'intellectual or status community of abstract and specific people'? One of the most influential 'communities' to have affected Wilde's public and private lives must be the Victorian press, from whose attentions Wilde initially benefited whilst his career was on the up, but his fall from grace was helped in no small way by press coverage of the trials. It has been suggested that Wilde was the first doctor of spin, adept at manipulating his reputation and message. It is not difficult to prove that the hostile reviews of his work increased Wilde's publicity; people always enjoy reading what they are told they should not, and the trials marked a distinct turning point for Wilde. He was one of the first of the 'media' celebrities that are all too common today, when publicity can turn from being a benefit to a burden, or worse, in a very short space of time.

Some possible reasons as to why Wilde was selected as a figure for ridicule are easy

to locate and corroborate. Wilde's own presentation of himself, especially his mode of dress and his arrogant self-belief, as a figure for ridicule, accounted for much of the attention. Linked to this was his over-familiarity with High Society, and his educational background. Whether Wilde's homosexuality would make him a target is debatable. Sinfield (1994) has argued that our image of a homosexual as the Oscar Wilde 'type' has been culturally defined this century precisely because of Wilde and his trials, but that before this Wilde's manner and dress were not associated with same-sex practices. Schmidgall (1994), however, suggests that Punch insinuated that Wilde was a homosexual very early on in his career.

In addition to this, the press was increasingly interested in personalities for a variety of reasons. Williams (1970: 16) states that 'the question of any medium of communication is a question about its social structure, its actual and possible organisation and relationships', and the structure of the press had changed significantly in the years leading up to the 1880s. The abolition of the Stamp Tax in 1855 had led to a massive expansion in newspapers, which could then be produced more cheaply. Williams (1961) also credits the Education Act of 1870 with the growth of the popular press, as the working classes became more literate. These newspapers concentrated on crime and sport as their readers were not interested in politics. This led to McCulloch's warning that these cheap papers would 'find it more to their advantage to flatter the prejudices entertained by their readers . . . than to inculcate sounder though less popular principles' (in Cranfield, 1978: 205). Increased competition led to the birth of sensationalism, and the situation that still exists to day, with personalities overriding politics, became common practice. Major London dailies and Sundays felt a greater responsibility to their shareholders than to the public, and placed crime second only to war in their hierarchy of selling values. This led one observer to comment wryly that 'in times of peace a first class sex murder is the best tonic for a tired sub-editor on a dull



evening' (Chibnall 1980: 206). By the time of Wilde's criminal trials, the sex scandal was already well established as a sub-genre within the genre of crime reporting. Foldy (1997: 50) places the Wilde trials as one in a long line of sex-related scandals involving important people that gripped the public imagination in the late nineteenth century.

Wilde realised the strength of the press and, beginning with his London debut when he wore outrageous clothes, he deliberately sought to publicise himself. Gagnier (1987: 14) has acknowledged that 'in the beginning of the age of modern advertising, the press was easily accessible for self-advertisement'. In the beginning, the relationship between Wilde and the press was beneficial to both parties; Wilde had his publicity and the papers had something to write about. However, with the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the hostile reviews that this received, the relationship became more antagonistic. Wilde's opinion of journalists and their function in society was low:

There is much to be said in favour of modern journalism. 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 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 (CW 1145).

The press represented the tyranny of public opinion over and against the self-realised artist and Wilde's view of the press echoed that of Kierkegaard, who, as Foldy reminds

us, argued that the press creates the public, and the public live only through the press:

The levelling power of the public emerges through the press, but while the press poses as the organ of the public, in reality it is the powerful voice of a handful of influential individuals. Wilde noted that while the press, ostensibly representing public opinion, constrained artists and rationed beauty, it paradoxically encouraged and extolled journalists who were purveying the worst sort of trash and ugliness (1997: 51).

The hostility of the press towards Wilde arose as a result of Wilde's connection with the Aesthetic movement. The early attacks on him by *Punch* revolved around this theme. The famous aesthetic statement 'art for art's sake' was opposed to all that the press represented. The Aesthetic ideal of separating art from other elements of society did not sit well with the press and was possibly a potential threat to what was regarded to be Victorian stability. This was even truer of Wilde's new strand of movement, which had developed into 'an intricately articulated arena in which new definitions of the aesthetic and its relation to the social were negotiated and renegotiated' (Freedman 1990: xii).

Wilde was aware of this and by deliberately following the aesthetic line to its extreme, he would have known that he would become a martyr for the cause. His famous comment, 'there is one thing worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about' reflects Wilde's perception. In an insightful and prophetic letter to Wilde before

their marriage, Constance Lloyd had written:

The world surely is unjust and bitter to most of us: I think we must either renounce our opinions and run with the general stream or else totally ignore the world and go on our own regardless of all. There is not the slightest use in fighting against existing prejudices, for we are only worsted in the struggle (Ellmann 1988: 230).

Since his death, Wilde has become the archetype of the persecuted, marginalised artist, epitomising the timeless conflict between public and private morality, and between justice and the letter of the law. Though we may wish that Wilde had followed Harris's advice to abandon his case and save himself from what may seem a terrible and senseless fate, perhaps Wilde was right when he told Gide in Algiers, shortly before his arrest, 'Would you like to know the greatest drama of my life? It is that I have put my genius into my life - I have put only talent into my works.'

The cultural space of margins has been long explored in history. The specific power sites of monastery, cathedral court and city existed in Medieval society and these were controlled by specific groups: monks, priests, lords and burghers, serving more than one audience. All societies are built on such an infrastructure, whatever the 'powersites'. The margins of these specific sites of power, including the press, become arenas of confrontation, places where individuals cross social boundaries. Such individuals, Wilde included, intensify the very desires that they delimit, as they test and define boundaries. It is here, at the edge of the church, of the court, of the government,

the school, the theatre, the press - that such individuals find the room for experimentation, for glossing, for parodying, modernising and questioning cultural authority. Viewing marginalia in their proper social and cultural contexts reveals scandalous and subversive aspects, as well as paradoxical and stabilising functions. Such a view projects a vision of culture and society in which marginal resistance, inversion and transgression play an integral, even a necessary role. Individuals that do not quite fit the mould are marginalised, because people are afraid of them and what they represent. Camporesi defines this further:

People's fears were exorcised by dumping them on those who inhabited the edges of the known world, who were lesser in some sense; whether troglodytes or pygmies . . . the outskirts are felt to be infected zones, where all kinds of monstrosities are possible, and where a different man is born, an aberrant from the prototype who inhabits the centre of things (quoted in Camille 1992: 14).

Eagleton (1989: vii) has described Wilde as the 'Irish Roland Barthes', arguing that the ideas of such avant-garde theorists of our own time had to be seen in the context of their socially marginal status:

If, like Wilde, your history has been one of colonial oppression, you are less likely to be enamoured of representational forms, which are usually, so to speak, on the side of

Caesar. You will find yourself a parodist and parasite, bereft of any imposingly continuous cultural tradition, cobbling one together as you go along. Your writing will tend to set up home with anti-realist fantasy and imaginative extravagance, forced often enough into these modes as poor compensation for a harsh social reality (1989: viii).

Wilde himself acknowledges this stance when he claimed that his stand is essentially that of, in his own phrase, the antinomian, 'I am one made for the exception and not the rule.' He claims the right to ignore or defy the norms of ordinary conduct, whether sexual, social or intellectual, 'I have never posed as ordinary, great heavens!'

Whilst endearing him to certain elements, it has made him an anathema to anyone who believes in fixed structures of thought or behaviour, as did those who destroyed him. To picture him as the gay martyr is to play into the hands of those who brought him down. His courage lay, not in his alternative sexuality, but in the freedom of his mind. Wilde's life was one of individualism and this belief in the search for the Socratic goal is sometimes lost by his biographers in the exploration of Wilde's duality and subversive characteristics, as he followed through in life the artistic technique of the imaginative penetration of the lives of others. Wilde's triumph is his honest acknowledgement in *De Profundis*, 'The supreme act is shallowness. Whatever is realised was right.' This was Wilde's last *cri de coeur* - to discover the self and develop it to its full realisation, that is our duty. He knew that his downfall would be perceived as the downfall of this philosophy. This sense of destiny is apparent in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which the key figure is destroyed through taking the Aesthetic line too far. Wilde's belief that

life itself should constitute an artistic statement, ignoring social conventions, led to him being seen as a figure for ridicule by journalists, who could attack the Aesthetic movement through this one figure. By the time Wilde came to write *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his philosophy had changed to a 'new aesthetics', which he expounded in his essay, 'The Decay of Lying'. Here Wilde portrays the supremacy of Art over everything, specifically nature and life, claiming that 'life imitates Art far more than Art imitates life' (CW 1082). For Wilde, the press went against this ideology by imitating reality and this clash of ideologies was at the root of their hostility towards each other:

Newspapers, even, have degenerated. They may now be absolutely relied upon. One feels it as one wades through their columns. It is always the unreadable that occurs. I am afraid that there is not much to be said in favour of either the lawyer or the journalist. Besides, what I am pleading for is Lying in Art (CW 1072).

However, as Ellmann (1988: 95) has shown, Wilde's work comprises of a 'debate between doctrines rather than out of doctrine.' In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as Ellmann (1988) and Laver (1963) suggest, Wilde critiques aestheticism, showing the consequences of taking its ideology to extremes. The story is riddled with references to Aestheticism, but it did not write explicitly about them, possibly to avoid publicising the movement. Instead, as Knight (1994) argues, it deals with this issue in coded terms, replying to Wilde's own codes for the Aesthetic and homosexual elements in the novel. This may seem strange when thinking about the tabloid press of today, but even when Wilde came to trial the word 'homosexual' was not used in the papers. As Vyvyan

Holland has noted, such 'problems' were not accepted as occurring in England. Vice was thought to be exclusive to Paris 'at which . . . the English press kept pointing a finger of scorn' (1966: 70).

The main charge that journalists attributed to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was that it was immoral. In Nietzsche's terms morality arises through compulsion, custom and obedience, until it 'finally almost becomes instinct: then . . . it is linked with gratification - and is now called virtue' (in Eagleton 1990: 236). Wilde regarded morality in similar terms, as a social construct, which did not comply with his ideal of a 'new aesthetics'. His life as a statement had to be independent of rules laid down by society, and to prove the point, he used an 'immoral' theme.

Wilde became very conscious of the 'other' and when the book version of the story was published it included a preface which expounded many of the arguments Wilde had been forced to use to defend his novel. Wilde's portrait is his story which he wrote entirely for his own pleasure, 'The pleasure that one has in creating a work of art is a purely personal pleasure, and it is for the sake of this pleasure that one creates . . . I write because it gives me the greatest possible artistic pleasure to write' (in Holland and Hart-Davis 2000: 438). He was concerned to see that an autobiographical reading had been placed on the text. Bartlett (1988: 93) has claimed that all of Wilde's characters 'are in terror of being discovered' and that life was following art, with Wilde worried about discovery. To redress the balance, Wilde attempted to shuffle off the interpretations onto the shoulders of his readers, thus making the authorial perspective objective, 'Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray. What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them' (in Holland and Hart-Davis, 2000: 439). That this was unconvincing was proved five years later, during his trial, when Wilde had to defend his story once more.

The reviews that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* received did have an effect on Wilde's work - art had been forced to follow life - and the result was *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, a large part of which is dedicated to Wilde's interpretation of his relationship with the Victorian press. He complains of the constraints put on the artist, whom, he believes, is meant to write in the same way as the classicist:

The fact is, the public make use of the classics of a country as a means of checking the progress of Art. They degrade the classics into authorities. They use them as bludgeons for preventing the free expression of Beauty in new forms. They are always asking a writer why he does not write like someone else, or a painter why he does not paint like someone else, quite oblivious of the fact that if either of them did anything of the kind he would cease to be an artist (CW 1186).

For Wilde, the journalist has too much freedom and the artist too little:

In France, they limit the journalist, and allow the artist almost perfect freedom. Here we allow absolute freedom to the journalist and entirely limit the artist. English public opinion, that is to say, tries to constrain and impede and warp the man who makes things that are



beautiful in effect, and compels the journalist to retail things that are ugly, or disgusting, or revolting in fact, so that we have the most serious journalists in the world and the most indecent newspapers (CW 1189).

Wilde also recognises the power that the press has:

In England, journalism . . . is still a great factor, a really remarkable power. The tyranny that it proposes to exercise over people's private lives seems to me to be quite extraordinary (CW 1189).

He sees the press, the other, as the ultimate power in society and his sense of destiny is apparent when he acknowledges its power to defeat him, but in terms of 'the private life of a great statesman' (CW 1189).

## **2. Gender and Class.**

These texts are gendered, class productions, reflecting the biases and values of patriarchy and the middle class. They are ideological statements, often representing the class or gender position of the writer (Denzin 1989: 18).

That Wilde's writing is an ideological statement cannot be denied. He is incisive in attacking the institutions, the underlying ideology, the prevailing conditions and the hypocrisy of conventional, Victorian sexual morality. Wilde was:

Vitally concerned with the clash between  
received ideas and the need for change,  
between customary and learned experience,  
between conventional morality and the truth of  
experience (Eagleton and Pierce 1979: 84).

Art played a vital role in expressing these social conflicts, which reached a 'fever pitch' in the cities of the late nineteenth century. The idea of 'class' within the urban discourse of the fin de siècle does not simply imply inequalities of birth; with the growth of large industrial centres, wealth became a major factor in creating class distinctions. Throughout Europe, writers pointed to these inequalities. Morris explained the growth of cities in economic terms:

It is profit which draws men into enormous  
unmanageable aggregations called towns . . .  
profit which crowds them up when they are  
there into quarters without gardens or open  
spaces; profit which won't take the most  
ordinary precautions against wrapping a  
whole district in a cloud of sulphurous smoke;  
which turns beautiful rivers into filthy sewers;  
which condemns all but the rich to live in  
houses idiotically cramped and confined at the

best, and at the worst in houses for those whose wretchedness there is no name (1934: 657).

Morris was concerned with the ugliness of cities, but other writers found more cause for despair in the undermining of rural communalism. The German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1955: 74) wrote a tract postulating a distinction between *Gemeinschaft*, or community, and *Gesellschaft*, or society. Although he intended these categories to represent ideal types, they also constituted a divide in European culture. *Gemeinschaft* signified nature, the family, the rural community; *Gesellschaft* was mechanism, rationality, science, the urban, the artificial:

The theory of the *Gesellschaft* deals with the artificial construction of the aggregate of human beings which superficially resembles the *Gemeinschaft* in so far as the individuals peacefully live and dwell together. However, in the *Gemeinschaft* they remain essentially united in spite of all separating factors, whereas in *Gesellschaft* they are essentially separated in spite of all uniting factors.

The isolation and separation created by the artificial construction of city life was also pinpointed by Kropotkin (1972:134):

Today the united city has ceased to exist; there is no communion of ideas. The town is a

chance conglomeration of people who do not know one another, who have no common interest, save that of enriching themselves at the expense of one another . . . Only when cities, territories, nations, or groups of nations, will have renewed their harmonious life, will art be able to draw its inspiration from ideals held in common.

Wilde's socialist sympathies were inspired by what he saw as the ugliness of capitalist society; he looked forward to a socialist future where:

There will be no people living in fetid dens and fetid rags, and bringing up unhealthy, hunger-picked children in the midst of the impossible, and repulsive surroundings (CW 1174).

Writers and artists who wished to depict urban life were faced with a dilemma: if they chose to represent the inequality and the seedier characteristics of city life, they had to sacrifice the aesthetic qualities of their art, 'if they avoided the unpleasant, they misrepresented the realities of modern life' (West 1993: 57). Wilde does not reject the modern city in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, but presents ways in which it could be reformed. In this essay, published in *The Fortnightly Review* in 1891, he was participating in the national polemic about the values of socialism. Underlying the argument of this utopia was the idea that change in the formal and visual structure of urban society would facilitate an improvement of its living conditions. As Varty (1998: 53) acknowledges, the style of Wilde's argument is poised. He deploys 'structural

balance and antithesis to posit a view which shows an ideal future in relation to a corrupt present.' The cornerstone of Wilde's argument is 'Individualism' and it begins with 'it is much more easy to have sympathy with suffering than it is to have sympathy with thought' (CW 1174). He rejects sympathy as a motive for political action, castigates altruism and charity, which he regards as vehicles for prolonging the degradation of the poor. His arguments operate at an intellectual level, 'never appealing to the emotions, never appealing to the moral conscience' (Varty 1998: 54). The first principle that he establishes is 'The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible' (CW 1174). He then looks at charity from the point of view of the 'beneficiary' who emerges as a victim as 'Charity degrades and demoralises . . . Charity creates a multitude of sins' (CW 1174). Wilde regards the ungrateful, rebellious poor and criminals as positive agents of change, 'Disobedience, in the eyes of any one who has read history, is man's original virtue' (CW 1176). This leaves him free to consider what benefits will accrue to the individual in such a system and he outlines 'a cult of self-development, open to every individual only when freed from the constraints of material poverty or concern' (Varty 1998: 55).

With the abolition of private property, then, we shall have true, healthy Individualism. Nobody will waste his life in accumulating things and symbols for things. One will live. To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all (CW 1178).

For Wilde, the highest expression of individualism, and of life, is art, 'Art is the most intense mode of Individualism that the world has known' (CW 1184), a principle reached by economic argument and not vague or idealistic aestheticism. The rest of the

essay is devoted to the relationship between the artist and the State. Wilde considers the real terms of late nineteenth century Britain, where journalism exercises tyranny over the artist and compels degenerative art form to dominate false, cultural life. This is contrasted with the ideal terms of his revisioned Utopia, 'The form of government that is most suited to the artist is no government at all' (CW 1192). Wilde envisions 'a classless society in which every member is an artist devoted to the development of their personality' (Varty 1998: 55).

Wilde's role as the dandy exemplifies his belief that the highest expression of individualism and of life is art. The dandy is very much a phenomenon of the nineteenth century capital, specifically London and Paris and it is in the personality of the Dandy that the 'two-sided meaning of urbanity is fully actualised' (Godfrey 1982: 26). An urban phenomenon - of the big city - the dandy is characterised by a certain kind of fine wit and polish that we call urbane and which dates back to Roman times, when people from the Urbs (the city) were opposed to people from the country (rustici). Godfrey continues:

Urbanity, then, that quality of speech that we continue to associate with refinement and irony, takes on its modern connotation in the nineteenth century with the parallel and related developments of the big city and dandyism, and dandyism might thus be considered as a manner bred out of and in reaction to new conditions of urban society (1982: 26).

The dandy (Wilde) consciously defies and eludes the labels of definition that society uses to categorise its members into objects and functional roles and as an eccentric outsider, the dandy defies social order at the same time that he embodies its ultimate standard in good taste. The polemic of the 'beautiful versus the useful' epitomises the dandy's struggle to define the meaning in his own life in terms of beauty in a world devoted primarily to useful production; 'to invert the order of the superfluous and the necessary and redefine the aesthetic concept of 'need' and 'function' ' (Godfrey 1982: 27). Wilde's disingenuous style and use of surprise in his writing and in his way of life disarmed the opposition, and it is through his use of inversion that he exploited the logic of rules of behaviour and discourse, in order to produce the unexpected and challenge society. After all, the dandy would not stand out as an independent phenomenon were it not for a context of general social conventions that he contradicts in his own person. Godfrey pinpoints (1982: 28) the dialectic dependence of the dandy on a society whose conventions and values he seeks to undermine, 'Dandyism is the consequence of a certain condition of society that pre-exists the appearance of the dandy and determines the rules of his game.'

Although the dandy's attempts at self-creation may be short lived or ultimately futile, his desire to be so singles him out from the crowd. Thus, as the crowd engenders and affirms his solitary nature, so does he suffer the pains of self-creation – only to stand out from it. McCormack acknowledges the importance of the manipulation of the plot in Wilde's plays. He describes it as 'an engine of revelation' (1976: 260) and identifies the plot as being used to advance a certain notion of the self. This notion is incarnated in the dandy who, as a self without a history or a heart, is a self to which no self can be imputed. However, in an encounter with a sincere persona, he is in danger of appearing somewhat hollow and flip:

Thus Wilde also employs the mechanism of

the plot to discredit sincerity. He does so by setting one set of personae, and the values they represent, against each other, as men against women, intellect against feeling, and the values of performance against those of honesty. In arranging these encounters, the plot sets up one in order to subvert the other; but in doing so, they also subvert the efficacy of the dandy's role.

The dandy could not exist at all without a public whose standards of taste, hierarchies of value and conventions of discourse he could predict. It is Wilde's attitude of, and belief in, dynamic criticism that enables him to argue that 'Progress is the realisation of Utopias' (CW 1184). As Benjamin (1989: 74) states in his study of Baudelaire:

The hero is the true subject of modernism. In other words, it takes a heroic constitution to live modernism . . . This population [of modern city dwellers] is the background against which the outlines of the hero stand out. Baudelaire captioned the picture thus presented in his own way. He wrote the words *la modernite* under it.

Just as the theme of class resonates through Wilde's writing, so does the theme of gender. For many years after his death, Wilde had come to represent all that was sexually 'other':



Wilde's vices were not simply intellectual perversions, they were physiological. This miserable man had always been under the influence of one of those sexual inversions which turned him into a kind of Hermaphroditus. That distress which he had tried to express in his writings after his condemnation had nothing virile in it: and his best known tragedy *Salome* reveals in its perversion of a legend his own sexual perversion. As he grew older the womanish side of him grew more and more evident. Lautrec saw him in Paris, and in the appalling portrait of him he shows Wilde, swollen, puffed out, bloated and sinister. The form of mouth which he gave him is more than anything exceptional; no such mouth ought ever to have existed: it is a woman's that no man who is normal could ever have had. The face is bestial. A man with a ruined body and a ravaged mind and a senseless brain does not even survey the horror of this hideous countenance in a mirror: this thing that is no more a thing gazes into a void (Symons 1977: 146).

A parallel can be drawn here between the protagonist of Wilde's only novel, Dorian Gray, and Wilde himself, where the sexual criminal had transformed 'into something of a gothic spectre . . . looking at the hideous thing that his immorality has led him to become' (Bristow 1995: 18). Those who transgress, in Wilde's art, are at the mercy of a higher unassailable law. Wilde 'seeks to subvert the dominant order, fully aware that systems of bourgeois authority will, ultimately, maintain their hegemony' (Bristow 1995: 22). Thus the grotesque is a structure, instilling fear of life rather than death. It presupposes that the categories that apply to our worldview become inapplicable and the grotesque is viewed as an ambivalent thing, as a clash of opposites and, in some forms at least, as an approximate expression of the problematic nature of existence. It is no accident that the grotesque mode in art and literature tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by radical changes or disorientation. The most consistently distinguished characteristic of the grotesque has been the fundamental element of disharmony, whether this is referred to as conflict, clash, mixture of the heterogeneous, or conflation of disparates. It is important that this disharmony has been seen, not merely in the work of art as such, but also in the reaction it produces in the creative temperament, both of the artist and the audience.

It is through such associations that we can see how both the ideology and the forms of social organisation have destroyed Wilde and how an individual copes or fails to cope with these forces. This is highlighted by the two logics expounded by Roos (1987: 16). The first, as explained by Denzin (1989: 62) is the logic of the social field, or 'the larger society where a life is played out.' The sense of the field is constructed by a series of transactions, because if it was not crafted the biography would almost always be a 'discontinuous story which lacks coherence itself' (Atkinson 1992: 9). Primarily, this field is created through the writer's vision: secondly it is reconstructed through the writer's

ability to construct a 'text-of-the-field', and thirdly it is reconstructed and shaped through the reader's work of interpretation and contextualisation, as the reader's sense of the social world is shaped by the sense of what can be written about it. The second logic is the logic of the personal life of the individual who writes his or her life story. This logic may lead persons to believe that they have no control over their life, that they are worthless, or that they do have control and that they are worth something.

In this instance, Wilde is positioned as an outcast, as English culture is pictured as innately 'wholesome', only temporarily corrupted by 'the foreigner, whose vices are exposed by the native individual (Lord Queensberry) and punished by native justice' (Varty 1998: 32). Wilde's enterprise had been to force the link between literature and life, and he fell because he wanted to breach the gap between aesthetics and politics.

In 1897, the British psychologist Havelock Ellis isolated a concern for his own and other western cultures:

Now that the problem of religions has practically been settled, and that the problem of labour has at least been placed on a practical foundation, the question of sex - with the racial questions that rest on it - stands before the coming generation as the chief problem for solution (Ellis and Symonds 1897: x).

The new public interest in men and women and how they related to each other was accompanied by polemics of moral outrage which demanded that the study of sexuality

be reserved for doctors, psychologists and policemen. Whilst the explosion of literature on sexual behaviour appeared to result in a greater openness about sexuality, this openness was circumscribed by the conventions of nineteenth century society. However, once sex had entered the public arena it was impossible to drive it away and writers and artists absorbed the concerns of their society. Works of art could be interpreted as participating in the complex debates about gender which dominated sexual studies. Works of art also reinforced the stereotypes that emerged from these wide ranging European debates.

Essentially, studies of sex began with one or two assertions about masculinity and femininity: both men and women had opposite qualities, or each sex had some qualities of the opposite sex within it. West (1993: 69) argues that:

Such a deceptively simple polarisation underlay several decades of intense debate about the roles of men and women in society . . . Contemporary notions of romantic love were frequently rooted in the idea that men and women had totally distinct yet complementary qualities . . . Romantic love was seen to be a prelude to their eventual union, which itself was geared wholly toward the production of healthy offspring.

The dangers inherent in this belief were manifold: scientists and psychologists repeatedly used the differentiation theory as a means of arguing against change. If men became more 'manly' and women more 'womanly', the progress of society was

assured; if the reverse happened, they were experiencing an atavistic regression to a state of primitive homogeneity. Thus the androgyne, or human with the qualities of both man and woman, became a crucial image in late nineteenth century art and literature. It stood as a metaphor for the confusion stimulated by the 'battle of the sexes', an icon for homosexual love, and a symptom of the larger crisis in the construction of male identity. The figure was most represented as a feminised male, as in the description of Wilde by Symons.

West (1993: 76) suggests that the androgynous figures in art allowed a tolerance for implicit homosexual themes, but it did not entirely mask those themes:

Androgyny became an acceptable code for homosexual expression, but it also came to be used to undermine the idea that homosexuality and sodomy were equivalent states. In fact, the use of androgyny in art became a means of expressing a new aesthetic and an idealist philosophy in which love between men was seen as a *higher* form of experience than heterosexual love. Although homosexuality was publicly considered both an aberration and a crime, writers and artists began to use the androgyne as a code for the exalted nature of homosexual union. Through the image of the androgyne, a condition considered 'primitive' by Darwinian theorists was held to be the

highest and most spiritual state of human existence. Through aesthetics, androgyny was stripped of all sexual connotations, and through mystical and occult theories, it was given a spiritual rationalisation.

This subtext is hinted at in Beardsley's illustrations for Wilde's play *Salome*, written in 1891. The play was denied a licence by the Lord Chamberlain and was premiered in Paris in 1896. Beardsley's illustrations of androgynous figures do not represent characters in the play. According to Gilbert (1983: 135-159), Beardsley's images were intended to expose Wilde's own ambivalent response to the roles of men and women in a patriarchal society. By giving Salome masculine features and by desexualising her servants, Beardsley alluded to the debates about unisexuality which were beginning to emerge in late Victorian society and he revealed Wilde's place within these debates. Although when *Salome* was written, Wilde was a famous, if not controversial, public figure, by the time it was first performed in Paris, his homosexuality had been publicly exposed and he was in Reading Gaol.

It is when these two logics overlap that the biographical illusion exists, according to Bourdieu, in Denzin (1989: 62), 'For example, the divorced, unemployed woman may feel stigmatised and worthless, and her life story will express self feelings'. The life story becomes coherent and the larger ideologies that Wilde expresses in his writing become uncovered. The inner psychology and the social conditions mirror the internal and external logics of a story, bringing coherence to the narrative and to the ideologies of gender and class in which he believed.

### 3. Family Beginnings.

Rousseau's assumption is that contact with the corrupting effects of social order must be delayed until the child has built up his natural defences. Until that point the child or adolescent is sheltered from the judgements and opinions of others in order not to hinder the development of his own natural view of himself (Elbaz 1987: 114).

Denzin (1989: 18) interprets this 'zero point' of society, identified by Elbaz, as the family and regards them as having major structuring effects on the life in question. However, beginnings always have a context and are therefore determined by what comes before and, in turn, beginnings determine what comes after. The paradox of the beginning as always already begun is presented by Sterne in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, in terms of both the beginning of a narrative and the beginning of a life:

I wish either my father or mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly consider'd how much depended upon what they were then doing; - that not only the production of a rational Being was concern' in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius

and the very cast of his mind; - and, for aught  
they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of  
his whole house might take their turn from the  
humours and dispositions which were then  
uppermost: - Had they duly weighed and  
considered all of this, and proceeded  
accordingly, - I am verily persuaded I should  
have made a quite different figure in the world,  
from that, in which the reader is likely to see  
me (1983: 5).

This opening is a comic version of Larkin's equivocal opening line to his poem 'This Be The Verse' (1974): 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad'. Thus both narrative and life are already begun, their beginnings displaced to another time. Beginnings augur, acting like promises for what is to come.

In Wilde's private life no woman was more  
honoured than his mother, 'La Madre  
Devotissima,' and none was more betrayed  
than his wife, Constance' (Varty 1998: 13).

Wilde's duality resonates through every aspect of his life, including his notion of the family. From about 1886, his sexuality made orthodox family life an impossibility, as he swung between 'the poles of filial duty and adulterous neglect' (Varty 1998: 13). Instead, he cultivated an intellectual notion of the ideal family, building on his own experiences that had nurtured him as a child. His most radical critique of the family is



given in *The Soul of Man*, while the social comedies suggest that degrees of orthodoxy are appropriate according to the politics of the partners involved. One of his earliest and most conservative pictures of the ideal family provides him with a model for the government of the State. Arguing for the involvement of women in politics, in an editorial for the *Woman's World*, he suggests:

If something is right in a family, it is difficult to see why it is therefore, without any further reason, wrong in the State. If the participation of women in politics means that as a good family educates all its members so must a good State, what better issue could there be? The family ideal of the State may be difficult of attainment, but as an ideal it is better than the policemen theory. It would mean the moralisation of politics. The cultivation of separate sorts of virtues and separate ideals of duty in men and women has led to the whole social fabric being weaker and unhealthier than it need be (May 1889).

His sense that a good family 'educates all its members,' irrespective of sex, came from personal experience. Both his mother and his wife were educated and were articulate, but it is his mother's voice 'which is heard loudest and longest among those of Wilde's women' (Varty 1998: 13).

In the history of the nineteenth century feminist movement, Lady Wilde figures

prominently in what White (1967: 147) calls her 'ceaseless demand for recognition of woman's rights.' 'Moreover', writes Ellmann, Lady Wilde 'had a sense of being destined for greatness, and imparted it. Her son subscribed to her view, and treated her with the utmost consideration and respect, almost as though he were her precursor rather than she his' (1988: 5). She provided much inspiration and example for Wilde and in the development of his personality, she exercised a hold on his imagination. Sherard (1906: 6) remarks that, for his mother, 'Oscar's affection reached the degree of veneration.' Her narcissism and eccentricity had a major impact on Wilde, particularly her view of 'domestic felicity', which, she contended:

Had the best chance . . . when all the family  
are Bohemians, and all clever, and all  
thoroughly enjoy the erratic, impulsive,  
reckless life of work and glory, indifferent to  
everything save the intense moments of  
popular applause (in White 1967: 147-8).

His mother was even better known through Ireland than her husband and she shared his unconventionality as well as his interest in Irish folklore. She became a voice of Irish nationalism, drawing both criticism and praise for her political articles. Throughout her life she adopted causes in which she supported the poor and oppressed, including children. Thus Wilde's concern for the underdog, his predilection for conversation and his love of the arts can be traced to his mother.

Although Wilde's relationship with his father was not close, he had the highest respect for him. When Sir William died, he wrote poems alluding to his death and wrote to an Oxford friend that his father would have been pleased to hear of his having achieved a

First in his examinations, 'I think God has dealt very hardly with us' (in Holland and Hart-Davis 2000: 20).

Having famous and eccentric parents, Wilde realised from a young age the importance of cutting a figure to be noticed in his family. A fragment of a letter written by Wilde when he was thirteen demonstrates his desire to impress his mother with his sense of dress and humour:

The flannel shirts you sent in the hamper are  
both Willie's, mine are the one quite scarlet  
and the other lilac but it is too hot to wear  
them yet . . . And have you written to Aunt  
Warren on the green note paper? (in Holland  
and Hart-Davis 2000: 4).

Wilde shared his mother's humour, since the aunt in question was a staunch unionist who did not approve of her younger sister's nationalist politics. He is on excellent terms with his mother and 'irking Aunt Warren with green note paper was a shared subversive delight' (Ellmann 1988: 5). The influence of Wilde's parents on Wilde is well documented in Ellmann (1988).

#### **4. Textual Turning Points.**

An exploration of the role of the family and the fact that most auto/biographies are anchored in the family, Ellmann's biography of Wilde included, explicates the theory outlined in Denzin (1989: 19) that the 'autobiographical and biographical genre is structured by the belief that lives have beginnings in families. Since this belief is part of the genre, virtually all biographical texts begin with family history.' This presumes that

lives have beginnings or starting points. However, the immutability of nature, or indeed the grand scheme of things, reverberates throughout biography and challenges this conventional view concerning beginnings. Elbaz (1988: 13) determines that:

The reader must, then go to the beginning - which is the end - for autobiography (like fiction) is an act of ceaseless renewal: the story is never 'told' finally, exhaustively, completely. The story of a life cannot be laid out in full detail from beginning to end; the significance of that life cannot be exhausted in a single narrative.

This calls Gadamer (1975) to mind, who, as stated in Chapter Three, recognises that understanding is bound in history because understanding uses the effective history - personal experience and cultural traditions - to assimilate new experiences. For Gadamer, understanding recreates the initial intention embodied in the text, by elucidating the subject matter that the text addresses. To understand is to understand differently than the author or even one's earlier interpretations, precisely because the process involves creating new horizons by eclipsing the old ones which they replace.

Wilde's role as an iconoclast has been clouded by his use of plagiarism and this aspect of his work is explored by Guy (1991). In Wilde's view, traditions were nothing more than the artist's raw materials and it was the artist's unique handling of them which was of primary interest. His solution to the problem of innovation in a culture where the authority of tradition was dominant was characteristically flamboyant, 'It is only the unimaginative who ever invent . . . the true artist is known by the use he makes of what

he annexes, and he annexes everything' (quoted in Ellmann 1988: 358). Wilde is:

Simply laying bare the general principle of the appropriation and reinterpretation of traditions which had guided the more covert 'rehabilitations' of Pater and Morris; his singularity lies in the particular blatant use he made of the strategy (Guy 1991: 142).

Pater and Morris invoked a tradition to disguise or deny the innovative aspects of their thinking. In this sense traditions lent authority to Pater and Morris's idiosyncratic (and subversive) views about the nature and function of art and literature by appearing to invoke historical precedents for those views. Wilde, on the other hand, uses exactly the same general strategy, but he does so in order to exhibit his originality: what Pater and Morris had disguised, he holds up for general inspection.

Wilde claimed that in the hands of true artists all traditions were transformed into something new, and that they had authority only in so far as they 'bore the signature' of the artist who had interpreted them. In Wilde's view, then, no less than Pater's, it was the activities of the contemporary artist which authorised traditions, rather than the opposite - those traditions authorising contemporary activities. Far from possessing a normative function, for Wilde, traditions were merely the 'suggestion'

for an entirely new creation (Guy 1991: 142).

In *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Wilde draws attention to the singularity of the role played by traditions in the field of art and literature:

The fact is, the public makes use of the classics of a country as a means of checking the progress of Art. They degrade the classics into authorities. They use them as bludgeons for preventing the free expression of Beauty in new forms. They are always asking a writer why he does not write like somebody else, or a painter why he does not paint like somebody else, quite oblivious to the fact that if either of them did anything of the kind he would cease to be an artist . . . The true artist is a man who believes absolutely in himself, because he is absolutely himself (CW 1031).

Wilde proposes that authority be removed from traditions altogether and be placed instead in the hands of the contemporary artist. This point is developed in 'The Critic as Artist', where Wilde broadens the notion of artistic creation to include the practice of criticism itself. For Wilde, criticism was simply art at its most innovative:

It is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms.  
The tendency of creation is to repeat itself. It  
is to the critical instinct that we owe each new

school that springs up, each new mould that  
art finds ready to hand (CW 1119).

Wilde had discovered that literary criticism was a more suitable vehicle for the expression of innovative views than other literary forms, so it is 'to be expected that Wilde should set out a theoretical justification for the importance of the critic's - that is, Wilde's own - role in contemporary society' (Guy 1991: 144). For Wilde, the transformative use of traditions defined artistic innovation and the critic was in the best position to create 'fresh forms':

Each new school as it appears, cries out  
against criticism, but it is to the critical faculty  
in man that it owes its origin. The mere  
creative instinct does not innovate, but  
reproduces . . . Anybody can make history.  
Only a great man can write it (CW 1120).

Wilde makes the point when he claims that 'the one duty we owe history is to rewrite it. That is not the least of the tasks in store for the critical spirit' (CW 1121). For Wilde, understanding recreates the initial intention embodied in the text and in confronting a viewpoint reflecting a different set of horizons, the interpreter can find his own horizons and reach critical self-consciousness:

If we lived long enough to see the results of  
our actions it may be that those who call  
themselves good would be sickened with  
remorse, and those whom the world called evil

stirred by a noble joy. Each little thing that we do passes into the great machine of life which may grind our virtues to powder and make them worthless, or transform our sins into elements of a new civilisation, more marvellous and more splendid than anything gone before (CW 1121).

His words prophesy those of Gadamer:

The question of the truth of art forces us, too, to undertake a critique of both aesthetic and historical consciousness, in as much as we are enquiring into the truth that manifests itself in art and history (1975: 150).

It is, as Wilde says, 'because Humanity has never known where it was going that it has been able to find its way' (CW 1121).

## **5. Knowing Authors.**

The experience that selves undergo is reflective as well as naturalistic - that is, as persons experience their lives they are aware that they are doing so, they are self conscious. Self-consciousness as it proceeds through lived experiences becomes constitutive of self-



formation. To investigate the way the self-consciousness of others is utilised to produce self-formation lies at the heart of the biographical method (Erben 1996:1).

The knowing author will fit the pieces together to create a life, 'A life, it is assumed, is cut of whole cloth, and its many pieces, with careful scrutiny, can be fitted into proper place' (Denzin 189: 17). The 'proper place', the narrative, has been explored in Chapter Four. However large or small the story, the human impulse is to make sense of each moment by referring it to a larger narrative. At the end of the nineteenth century, the act of telling stories was increasingly difficult for many. The old narrative forms were no longer making any sense. Religion was beleaguered and its literal truth was made ever more improbable by the inroads of science. The family was in danger: people were seeking new identities away from conventional family ties, as women were looking for some degree of emancipation away from the home. Work became unpredictable, which was:

A direct consequence of the development of technological innovations such as the telephone and typewriter, and also to the general expansion of the tertiary sector of the economy with its consequent demand for more white-collar and white-blouse employees (Harrison 1990: 167).

Personal creativity or development was called into question by the overthrow of old aesthetic and moral standards, as a self-conscious opposition to the past was laid bare

by artists such as Wilde.

It was difficult to determine what had occurred to the plot in this narrative, but two things happened - we became lonely and more powerful than before. We became lonelier because of the insights of science, when Newton and Darwin convinced us that the universe had no need of us because its mechanisms grind on regardless. Our lives were not, as the church had once thought, the point of the cosmic system, rather we arrived by chance and are a by-product of its logic. At the same time, we became gods. Science, which humbled us, then gave us unimaginable powers, to the point that we almost destroy the world twice over. It is hardly surprising that the plot was lost in this vacuum of meaning.

Such a narrative presentation of social action reflects the temporal quality of human experience. Atkinson (1992: 13) endorses this:

Through the narrative the ethnographer - like the historian, the biographer, or the novelist - shapes the individual and collective action, character and motive. The ethnographer embeds and comments on the stories told by informants, investing them with a significance often beyond their mundane production. . . these narrative instances are collected and juxtaposed in the text so that their meaning is implied by the ethnographer and reconstructed by the reader.

The inability of early biographers to separate the man from his works meant that the serious and scholarly study of Wilde's literary works would be impeded by the primary interest in his character. Holbrook Jackson, writing in 1913, acknowledges this:

It is too soon, perhaps even now, to set a final value upon the work of Oscar Wilde. Time, although not an infallible critic, is already winnowing the chaff from the grain, and almost with each passing year we are better able to recognise the more permanent essences of his literary remains. It is inevitable in his case, where the glamour of the personality added so significantly to the character of his work, that Time should insist upon being something more than a casual arbiter . . . But, as the incidents associated with the life and time of Wilde recede further into the background of the mental picture which inevitably forms itself about any judgement of his work, we shall be able to obtain a less biased view (1950: 79).

Caution among the English concerning Wilde's stature as a writer persisted into the 1930s, when perhaps the judgement of the critics was influenced by the political situation brewing in Europe. Raymond wrote in *The Outlook* in 1920:

Those who would pass by this ill-starred man

of genius because of the event which interrupted his career as a writer would be acting almost foolishly as the absurd people (mostly Germans) who on the same account yield him a perverse and irrational homage. Wilde was not only important in himself; he was still more important as the representative of a mood still to some extent within us, but extraordinarily prevalent in the latter years of the nineteenth century. Of this mood he was in letters the only able English representative (in Fletcher and Stokes 1976: 50).

And Archer, whose admiration of Wilde's genius surpassed that of other late nineteenth century critics, remarked in *The Old Drama and The New* (1923) that the continued popularity of Wilde in Germany must 'be taken largely as a political demonstration - a wilful glorification of a man whom England cast out' (in Fletcher and Stokes 1976: 50). Indeed, Wilde was generally regarded in Germany as being one of three great British writers, the other two being Shakespeare and Byron. Attitudes to Wilde remained firm into the 1950s, when Wilde was still being marginalised for his actions. By 1963, Laver wrote in a British Council monograph that although Wilde now had a permanent niche in history, his reputation remained problematic. On the continent of Europe his reputation stood as high as it ever did, and his name was probably, after Shakespeare's, the best-known in English letters. However, Laver feels that Englishmen were inclined to think this estimate exaggerated.

Wilde did not help his place in history, since, he admitted, he devoted his genius to his

life, rather than to his art. This is the theme that resonates through Morley's biography, which intends 'to show that Oscar's own life was indeed the greatest of all theatrical productions' (1976: 10).

With the appearance of Ellmann's (1988) biography, Wilde's stature as a major writer confirmed the judgement of some of the previous writers. Fletcher and Stokes (1976) wrote in their survey of Wilde's scholarship, 'He is more than a figure in the dense literary history of Britain; he is a figure in World culture as both a hero and a victim'. At the opening of his biography, Ellmann (1988: xiii) writes:

Oscar Wilde; we have only to hear the name  
to anticipate that what will be quoted as his,  
will surprise and delight us. Among the writers  
identified with the 1890s, Wilde is the only one  
whom everyone still reads.

Burgess, in his reviewing of the biography, agrees with Ellmann's estimation of Wilde's stature, 'These epithets are just. No one glitters as Wilde does.' Wilde's reputation has come full circle and a new 'demythologised' Wilde has emerged in recent publications:

Wilde becomes the epitome of the new type of  
professional writer at the turn of the century,  
concerned with the unglamorous business of  
self-promotion, negotiating with publishers,  
cultivating potential reviewers and constantly  
polishing his work . . . the 'new' Oscar Wilde is  
preoccupied with issues such as authority,

gender, identity and prison reform; he is seen as thoroughly and seriously engaged with some of the most contentious intellectual issues of his day (Small 1993: 3).

There is a sense of unfinished business about Wilde and his life, because so much of him is relevant today. Wilde recognised that the self was not inevitably indubitable, rational and progressive, but was socially constructed through language and social institutions. In order for the self to be able to reflect, to find a place within a narrative, it is essential that there is a connection with what is already relevant within a tradition, as the boundary between social faces and the self is illusory and shifting. As historical beings, as 'knowing authors', we are part of a process that is incomplete. Reflections on the past are always at some level mediations on the present, and it is in acknowledging Wilde that marginalised, dispossessed people can address their 'frail image', bringing influence to bear on the politics of the present. Eagleton (1989: xi) reinforces this point:

The Irish . . . have to keep remembering their own history because the English keep forgetting it; and it was Sigmund Freud who reminded us that what we do not truly remember, we are doomed to repeat . . . The significant past, Walter Benjamin remarked, is that frail image which flashes up to us at a moment of extreme danger; and Benjamin's practice of revolutionary nostalgia was to summon into the present the shades of unjustly quelled history, so that they might

lend us something of their power.

In his play, *St Oscar*, Eagleton (1989: xii) tries to summon the shade of Oscar Wilde back to our side when we are in urgent need of him, confident in the knowledge that what ever indignities a dispossessed people may have to endure, 'small nations will not rest until they are free'.

Wilde's 'knowing authors' may have failed to give him a story to make sense of his life, but they have given us one to help us make sense of ours.

#### **6 - 9. Objective Markers/Real Persons/Turning Point Experiences/Truth.**

Denzin continues his exploration of the subject's reality, through a discussion of discrete areas. Such segregation is not applicable to this study of Wilde. The areas of objective life markers, real persons with real lives, turning point experiences and truth are not mutually exclusive, being the 'real methods by which the real appearances of real people are created' (1989: 17). Denzin recognises that such conventions are shifting sands, that 'some are more central than others although they appear to be universal, while they change and take different form depending on the writer, the place of writing and the historical moment' (1989: 17).

The interrelation of the conventions has the objective life markers as the catalyst and the identification of the objective and subjective markers by Denzin recalls the notion that Elbaz (1988: 6) promulgates, that 'the notion of a person takes meaning only within the parameters of the discursive event'. The pronoun 'I' is not an entity in itself, but is dependent on the amalgamation of the author/narrator/protagonist, as well as the audience, the nature of discourse the speaker directs at it, his performance, his role

within the social whole. Meanings rise out of the interaction between texts, readers and writers. The point of mediation is the text, as it is created by language. Language becomes a mediation through which and by means of which. The difference between fiction and non-fiction is that the language of fiction becomes the power-base and it provides 'a social dimension to the literary structure' (Elbaz 1988: 9). The 'I' becomes weighted with the personal biography of the person generating the utterance, so that it no longer remains vacuous and empty. 'Behind the pronoun stands a named person - a person with biography' (Denzin 1989: 21).

The line drawn between fact and fiction in writing biography is a fine one and the use of objective markers that reflect key moments in a life suggest the existence of 'real' persons, whose existence in a 'real world can be mapped, charted and given meaning' (Denzin 1989: 19). The question, as Elbaz (1988: 9) perceives, is not whether a given genre can replace reality, but whether 'reality can be replicated in principal - whether truth is found, or created within a social praxis.'

Objective markers, or critical moments, are inherent in any auto/biography, for without, chaos would reign and any narrative continuity would be lost. Pascal (1960: 19) recognises that while 'memory can be trusted because autobiography is not just a reconstruction of the past, but interpretation, yet the linear narrative form of the autobiography imposes a distortion on the truth.'

To develop the point of the narrative, linear structure that brings a person alive and believable, it is necessary to explore the notion of epiphany. Such moments are disseminated throughout literature. Joyce uses the word in *Stephen Hero* (1944) to describe moments of sudden meaning or insight as 'sudden spiritual manifestations'. Any object, he asserts, however trivial, may be epiphanised. Epiphanies have been in



existence pre-Wilde, for Wordsworth's 'spots of time' in *The Prelude* (1959) are similar:

There are in our existence spots of time,  
That with distinct pre-eminence retain  
A renovating virtue.

Moments of insight are crucial for the nineteenth century writer/artist, because the presentation of knowledge unavailable elsewhere assures art's importance. The artist as seer/prophet presents truths that more mundane perspectives miss and the radiance of the epiphanic moment captures the mysterious, often intuitive, process by which such truths are reached. Epiphanic moments afford insight into the glory of the artistic soul. Artists, towards the end of the nineteenth century, used the notion of the epiphany to attack one fundamental tenet of bourgeois life: the idea of the accumulative self. The adoption of the aestheticist creed of valuing things 'for their own sake' underpinned this idea, working against bourgeois ethics, as McGowan (1990: 421) inveighs:

Bourgeois economics and ethics both rest on investment in the future, the acceptance of delayed gratification in the name of a greater future profit. Such thinking carries over to the self wherever the concept of *bildung* appears, with its conviction that the self develops over time toward a desired end by way of a set of formative experiences. The self must be created just as capital is accumulated, by being built up through a long purposeful process. If this process is painful, so much the better; underlying this bourgeois

ethics is an age-old Christian belief that suffering  
is redemptive.

The central importance of the epiphany for Pater was the isolation of each moment. By insisting that each epiphanic moment remains discrete, the moment can be saved from the fate of becoming a pawn in some developmental sequence, 'existing in a separateness that allows no ties to other moments' (McGowan 1990: 421). McGowan (1990: 422) reminds us that a willingness to adopt such a position must be read in terms of the artist's/writer's need to escape the limitations of art's accountability in Victorian culture. 'Only where art feels completely oppressed by the demand that it provide various kinds of information and moral uplift could it experience a retreat into atomistic isolation as liberating.'

Wilde's life is littered with such significant turning points, although he identifies just two, 'The two great turning points of my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison (CW 1020). These can be further delineated into four forms as perceived by Denzin (1989: 71):

1. The major event, which touches every fabric of a person's life. This must surely be Wilde's imprisonment, during which time he wrote *De Profundis* and began to resolve, for himself and for us, some of the equivocation that exists in his life.
2. The cumulative or representative event, which signifies eruptions or reactions to experiences which have been going on for a long period of time. Wilde's sentencing to a term of imprisonment represents a broader picture of many contributing factors that constituted Wilde's 'deviancy' within the context of late Victorian society.

3. The minor epiphany, which symbolically represents a major, problematic moment in a relationship or a person's life. The three trials which Wilde underwent ended his literary career and from late March to late May of 1895, Wilde endured suffering and humiliation, losing virtually everything he held dear; his freedom, his marriage and access to his children, all of his wealth and possessions, his reputation and his will to live and create.

4. Those episodes whose meanings are given in the reliving of the experience. The reaction against Wilde was out of all proportion to the actual threat that he posed and it said far more about society's attitudes than about the charges on which Wilde was convicted. It has taken the greater part of the twentieth century to rehabilitate Wilde's literary reputation and Wilde himself acknowledges that effective history renders the past understandable in terms of the effects or influence, which enables things to be known.

Such formalised expressions of experience shape the meaning of life, locating the personal life within ideas. Wilde states:

To reject one's own experiences is to arrest  
one's own development. To deny one's own  
experiences is to put a lie on the lips of one's  
own life. It is no less than a denial of the Soul  
(CW 1020).

Fleishman (1983:10) describes the Western tradition of confessional and autobiographical writing as one characterised by the mixture of myth and history. Autobiography, he concludes, is not to be distinguished by its truth-values, for the

'intention to "tell the truth about oneself," like other imaginative projects, is a fictional premise which may be issue in highly rewarding constructions of the self'. Autobiographical writing, for Fleishman, has to do with the construction of aspects of selfhood; it is not the 'imitation of something already being there, found or given, but the creation of a new being, a life . . . one that exists as an aesthetic object' (1983: 13). As Small (1993: 167) observes, the 'appropriateness of this as a prolegomenon for the study of Wilde's autobiographical writing is immediately clear' and Fleishman discusses the confessional aspects of the life and the work, especially *De Profundis*. Fleishman suggests that the contradictions in *De Profundis*, which derive from a combination of attempted frankness and layers of self-deception, may be resolved by seeing the letter as a simultaneous 'exercise in Biblical rewriting and in a typological redaction of personal experience' (1983: 286). The intertextual elements of Wilde's work are typological, thus connecting the biblical with the modern.

In drawing on the life of Jesus, Wilde is gaining distance on his own life at the same time that he is coming nearer to its secret meaning. What makes the life of Christ relevant to Wilde's experience in prison is not that Christ offers redemption for sins but that he represents the supreme act of 'self-development', which, for Wilde, has become the essence of artistic life. In *De Profundis*, Wilde converses with himself, acting as his own confessor, purging his conscience without assuming the role of the penitent:

I need not tell you that I am alluding to any external sanction or command. I admit none. I am far more of an Individualist than I ever was. Nothing seems to me of the smallest value except what one gets out of oneself. My nature is seeking a fresh mode of self-

realisation (CW 1018).

Wilde admits no guilt before the 'unjust laws' which have placed him in prison. 'I am born antinomian. I am one of those who are made for exceptions, not for laws' (CW 1019). Instead he uses the experiences of suffering undergone to construct another self, 'a new life, a *Vita Nuova* for me' (CW 1018). Wilde emphasises the individual achievements of his career of which public degradation, bankruptcy, the loss of all personal possessions, the loss of his family and the reduction of his name to the prison cipher C33, cannot strip him. He surveys the past in order to move forward and he inhabits a new world, the world which 'Sorrow' reveals to him, leaving behind the paths of 'Pleasure' which led him to abandon himself to others.

Wilde proceeds to construct a comparison between his own artistic life and that of Christ:

I see a far more intimate and immediate connection between the true life of Christ and the true life of an artist, and I take a keen pleasure in the reflection that long before Sorrow had made my days her own and bound me to her wheel I had written in *The Soul of Man* that he who would lead a Christ-like life must be entirely and absolutely himself, and had taken as any types not merely the shepherd on the hillside and the prisoner in his cell but also the painter to whom the world is a pageant and the poet for

whom the world is a song (CW 1027).

Thus Christ becomes the archetype for the artist and Wilde seeks to make Christ his contemporary. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the artist Basil Hallward described revolutionary moments in the history of art when new media of expression were discovered, so in *De Profundis*, Wilde argues that Christ made precisely such an innovation to the life of humanity, permitting what had previously been formless and inarticulate to take shape and discover a voice:

To the artist, expression is the only mode under which he can conceive life at all. To him what is dumb is dead. But to Christ it was not so. With a width and wonder of imagination, that fills one almost with awe, he took the entire world of the inarticulate, the voiceless world of pain, as his kingdom, and made himself its eternal mouthpiece . . . And feeling, with the artistic nature of one to whom Sorrow and Suffering were modes through which he could realise his conception of the Beautiful, that an idea is of no value until it becomes incarnate and is made an image, he makes of himself the image of the Man of Sorrows, and as such has fascinated and dominated Art as no Greek god ever succeeded in doing (CW 1031).

New definitions in cultural life are coupled with innovation in morality and law. Wilde argues that the conduct of the artist, like that of Christ and like that of the criminal, must always stand in conflict with the established mores of the day:

Wilde manipulates his interpretation of the Gospels to criticise the social inhumanity of his era, to sanctify aestheticism as a way of life, and to establish himself as a martyr in an age of artistic unbelief and imaginative atrophy (Varty 1998: 213).

He illustrates this with an autobiographical example:

People thought it dreadful of me to have entertained at dinner the evil things of life, and to have found pleasure in their company. But they, from the point of view through which I, as an artist in life, approached them, were delightedly suggestive and stimulating. It was like feasting with panthers. The danger was half the excitement . . . Their poison was part of their perfection . . . I don't feel at all ashamed of having known them . . . What I do feel ashamed of is this horrible philistine atmosphere into which you brought me. My business as an artist was with Ariel. You set me to wrestle with Caliban (CW 1042).

He realises that there is no divine providence at work in the world, but that it is up to the individual to make sense of life. Throughout *De Profundis*, Wilde draws attention to the artistic techniques he uses to make sense of his life, particularly the techniques of foregrounding and distancing. The 'static separation between art and life, subject and object, art and truth, is overcome here by means of an idea of becoming' (Prewitt Brown 1998: 97). Wilde writes 'the contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not *doing* but *being*, and not being merely, but *becoming* - that is what the critical spirit can give us' (CW 1138). In *De Profundis*, Wilde has moved on from *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. In the latter, he states that the message of Christ to man was simply 'Be thyself.' That is the secret of Christ' (CW 1179). In *De Profundis*, Wilde transcends what Nietzsche describes as the 'profound superficiality' of the Apollonian stance, beyond the world with which Wilde is sometimes associated. He illuminates the distinction between art and didacticism; the work of art does not 'teach one anything, but by being brought into its presence one becomes something'. It is this transformation of essence, this 'giving oneself to the text in order to find oneself' (Prewitt Brown 1998: 98), that Wilde propounds in *De Profundis*. It is not what one does that signifies, but what one becomes.

Wilde repeatedly reiterates the inward nature of his task, 'Everything must come to one out of one's own nature', 'I have to get it all out of myself', 'I must get far more out of myself than ever I got, and ask far less of the world than ever I asked.' He is conscious of the knowledge that 'my ruin came not from too great an individualism of life, but from too little. The one disgraceful, unpardonable, and to all time contemptible action of my life was allowing myself to be forced into appealing to Society for help and protection' (CW 1041). Once in prison, Wilde became one of those for whom Christianity, as a state of being, became his lifeline. The message 'Be thyself', that he had promulgated



in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* became, for Wilde, a state of being. With everything taken from him, he had no choice but to renounce it all - precisely in order to accept what had happened. Having lost his good name, his social position, his happiness, his freedom and his wealth, he must also suffer the loss of his children who were taken from him by law, 'It was a blow so appalling that I did not know what to do . . . I saw then that the only thing for me was to accept everything' (CW 1030).

This acceptance does not take place in a single act, but is drawn throughout *De Profundis*, as Wilde recomposes his life in memory, re-collecting it. With this 'retrieved personal redemption, his life becomes a "prophecy," a "realisation of some ideal":

The past and the future can come together in  
a completed work, constituting what Wilde  
calls a "symbol." Each moment resonates in a  
temporal fabric of past and future moments;  
"Art is a symbol, because man is a symbol"  
(Prewitt Brown 1998: 103).

Thus Wilde comes to perceive events that he had heretofore appeared failed and repugnant as necessary to its artistic unity:

I don't regret for a single moment having lived  
for pleasure. I did it to the full as one should  
do everything that one does to the full. There  
was no pleasure that I did not experience . . .  
But to have continued the same life would  
have been wrong because it would have been

limiting. I had to pass on. The other half of the garden had secrets for me also . . . Of course all this is foreshadowed and prefigured in my art . . . [In] the prose-poem of the man who from the bronze of the image of the 'Pleasure that liveth for a Moment' has to make the image of the 'Sorrow that abideth for Ever' it is incarnate. It could not have been otherwise. At every single moment of one's life one is going to be no less than what one has been. Art is symbol, because man is symbol' (CW 1026).

Wilde recognises that to understand is to understand differently one's earlier interpretations, because the process involves creating new horizons by eclipsing the old horizons which they replace. The past entails a promise of the future:

Sorrow, passing through its rhythmically linked movements to its certain resolution, with that inevitableness that in Art characterises the treatment of every great theme . . . [The] remembrance of suffering in the past is necessary to us as the warrant, the evidence, of our continued identity (CW 990).

At the end of *De Profundis*, Wilde writes:

What lies before me is my past. I have got to make myself look on that with different eyes . . . This I cannot do by ignoring it, or slighting it, or praising it, or denying it. It is only to be done by accepting it as an inevitable part of the evolution of my life and character (CW 1059).

To transcend is to descend; as in the earlier meditation on Christ as a work of art, Wilde 'Once again realises that for everything to be overcome, everything must be accepted. The whole thing must be gone over again, because the whole thing is eternally before him, eternally in question' (Prewitt Brown 1998: 105). Like Gadamer, Wilde allows prejudices to come to a conscious focus that direct his supersession:

The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings (Gadamer 1975: 239).

Thus points of reference, when exploring biography, are always on the outside the work, in real life and in the non-fictionality of the author. It is at this point that Denzin's (1989: 24) rationale coheres with that of Elbaz and Pascal:

We do not judge an autobiography solely on the evidence of the facts but also upon an intuitive knowledge of the distinctive character

of life as experienced by ourselves individually  
(Pascal 1960: 135).

### Truth

Wilde's power to arouse fantasies in others is seemingly inexhaustible. Everybody has an opinion about Wilde, many of which are ill informed. This is as much a reflection on ourselves, as Siegel (1996) notes:

When we bring to bear on the legend of Wilde  
a more supple conception of our own affective  
lives than the prevailing view of our late  
nineteenth century forebears, we are likely to  
see Wilde as well as ourselves somewhat  
differently. Then it may well turn out that we  
will learn more about our own fantasies than  
about Wilde.

The problem with discovering the truth about Wilde is his subversiveness, which is explored thoroughly by Dollimore (1987). Dollimore argues that Wilde's 'notion of individualism is inseparable from transgressive desire and a transgressive aesthetic,' and that this leads to a relinquishing of the notion of an 'essential self' (1987: 51-54). Dollimore goes on to establish the oppositions that are found in Wilde's work, the familiar oppositions of self and mask, style and authenticity, lying and truthfulness, nature and culture. Wilde claimed in 'Pen, Pencil and Poison' that most artificial people have a love of nature (CW 1101); this elevation of the constructed, the artificial, the specious above the given, the natural, the authentic is at the theoretical centre of *Intentions* (1891). Sammells (2000: 28) acknowledges that:

This wry paradox neatly collapses that binary opposition between Nature and Culture which postmodernism has laboured so indefatigably to deny. When Wilde declares in 'The Decay of Lying' that 'Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach nature her proper place' (CW 1071), he is voicing, as Terry Eagleton points out, a hostility to 'oppressive normativity' which he shares with Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, a normativity which they also identify with constructions of Nature and the 'natural'.

Sammells (2000) continues to explore the theme of art and style in Wilde's work, looking for consistency between Wilde's theoretical essays and his practice as a novelist and playwright. The best example of Wilde putting into practice his principles regarding the representation of the natural world is in the opening paragraphs of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde toys with the distinction between nature and culture, acknowledging it only to collapse it. If 'The Decay of Lying' displays the nature-culture split in order to invert it, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* gives fictional form to the collapsing of the distinction between the two. The relationship between Dorian and his portrait enacts the collapsing of the binary opposition between nature and culture, or art and life, which Wilde's opening to the novel – partly by foregrounding the complexity and artifice of the prose – both describes and embodies. Wilde invokes the natural world at the beginning of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* not simply as a means of setting the scene, but in order to signal the transgressive and subversive strategies which will structure

the novel itself:

By staying eternally young Dorian acquires the immutability of the art-object; by growing old his image is ravaged by the natural processes of decay. Life imitates art and art imitates life (Sammells 2000: 35).

In *De Profundis*, Wilde lays the charge at Douglas and himself of not being true to themselves, and specifically shallowness. Throughout the letter he writes that the supreme vice is shallowness. We learn that Wilde believed that he had changed and he thought of himself as no longer shallow. There is however, also a defence here. Throughout *De Profundis*, the reader is invited to think about how Wilde remembers and how he reinvents his past; so throughout our attention is focused on the self-conscious fiction of the narrative. This self-conscious provokes an elaborately ironical stance. Irony is, of course, a powerful weapon for the philosophical writer. It can work to conceal the position taken by the author and in so doing it then functions as a disavowal of authority. On the other hand, it can lay claim to dispassion; the arguments, made remote from irony, may be read as if in a treatise, free from the attachments that may be thought to distort reason. This is not a stance with which Wilde would have been unfamiliar; Plato and Socrates used this device frequently, in Plato's *Symposium* and in some of the Socratic dialogues. What it does achieve, however, is an engagement with the reader and it is this engagement that shows the reader why we should care. Said (1998) recognises this:

We have to defend peoples and identities threatened with extinction or subordinated

because they are considered inferior, but that is very different from aggrandising a past invented for present reasons. It is far more challenging to try to transform oneself into something different than it is to keep on insisting on the virtues of being an American in the ideological sense. This is why strolling dandies like Oscar Wilde or Baudelaire seem to me intrinsically more interesting than the extollers of settled virtue like Wordsworth or Carlyle.

Wilde's statement in *De Profundis*, that 'I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me' is not far from the truth. Wilde's masks will always be there for his audience. He needed an audience because his relations with others were the only way in which he could establish relations with himself. Wilde created himself in much the same way as any public figure who trades on the expectations of his audience – he performs them, and in so doing represents them to his audience in forms they can recognise and applaud. 'The result is a kind of glorious égoïsme à deux' (McCormack 1976: 266). Wilde thus formulated his art as he formulated himself and during the 1890s, the convergence of his own public conduct, the posturing of his dandies and the formulas of his art criticism illustrate the way in which one becomes the function of the other. Wilde located in his work the meeting place of art and life, 'The point at which history becomes stasis, and stasis itself, as pose or attitude, the medium by which the artist may posit a self with which to represent himself to others' (McCormack 1976: 266), so that the relationship between reader, text and writer remains fluid, thus retaining fictional truth. It is the processes of reading that

inform the reception of the text. Derrida's theory of deconstruction contributes to the understanding that:

There is no clear window into the inner life of a person, for any window is always filtered through the glaze of language, signs and the process of signification. And language, in both its written and spoken forms, is always inherently unstable, in flux, and made up of the traces of other signs and symbolic statements. Hence there can never be a clear, unambiguous statement of anything, including intention or meaning (in Denzin 1989: 14).

The nature of language is such that:

A story is told is never the same story heard. Each teller speaks from a biographical position that is unique and, in a sense, unshareable. Each hearer of a story hears from a similarly unshareable position. But these two versions of the story merge and run together into a collective, group version of the story that was told (Denzin 1989: 72).

Some months after leaving Reading Gaol, Wilde remarked that 'A man's face is his autobiography; a woman's face is her work of fiction' (in Holland and Hart-Davis 2000:



1055n). In his most characteristic writing from the beginning through *De Profundis*, Wilde himself made no distinction between the two genres.

In conclusion, it is through close reading and exploration of Denzin's biographical method that the reader is capable of a closer understanding of Oscar Wilde and the relationship between events in his life and his social outlook. Denzin (1989) recognises that a biographical text is an interactive, contextual production between text, reader and writer and that the hierarchical structure is essential if the subject is to maintain a sense of order. It is a study of the conventions of the other, gender and class, the family, starting points, knowing authors, objective life markers, epiphanies and truth that provides the framing devices for the stories told about lives, enabling the reader to find meaning in another's experiences, so that they can give shape to their own.

This sharing will allow us to write the life documents that speak to human dignity, the suffering, the hopes, the dreams, the lives gained, and the lost lives of people that we study. These documents will become testimonies to the ability of the human being to endure, prevail, and to triumph over the structural forces that threaten at any moment to annihilate us. If we foster the illusion that we understand when we do not or that we have found meaningful, coherent lives where none exist, then we engage in a cultural practice that is just as repressive as the most repressive of political regimes (Denzin 1989:

83).

Wilde may have been writing just over one hundred years ago, but his life and works resonate throughout our lives:

We think in eternity, but we move slowly  
through time (CW 1025).

## References to Chapter 5

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## Chapter 6

### Conclusions

'Know thyself!' was written over the portal of the antique world. Over the portal of the new world 'Be thyself' shall be written (CW 1179).

The suggestion that selves cannot maintain independence from the vertiginous transformations by urban capitalism of the traditional values and social formations in which identity is grounded has been the mainstay of classical sociology, at least, according to McGowan (1990: 419) since Durkheim and Tonnies, if not from Burke and Tocqueville. Wilde's individualism arises in the context of celebrating the artistic genius and is presented as a kind of utopian liberation of late nineteenth century men and women from stultifying conformities of Late Victorian culture. Wilde's defence of individualism is central to artistic production and to the achievement of true freedom and happiness for human beings. When all authority is dismantled, the result will be the infinite variety of true individualism, where each person thinks and acts for himself or herself, discovering in the process his or her uniqueness:

One's regret is that society should be constructed on such a basis that man has been forced into a groove in which he cannot freely develop what is wonderful, and fascinating, and delightful in him – in which, in fact, he misses the true pleasure and joy of living. He is also, under existing conditions, very insecure . . . Now, nothing should be

able to harm a man except himself. Nothing should be able to rob a man at all. What a man really has, is what is in him. What is outside of him should be a matter of no importance. With the abolition of private property, then, we shall have true, beautiful healthy Individualism . . . One will live. To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all (CW 1178).

No one stands as a more emblematic figure of the conflicts of the fin de siècle than Oscar Wilde. Wilde was torn from the beginning between a belief that the self is a fiction that can be reinvented in each successive moment and more traditional notions of destiny and identity that were grounded on a belief in an essential character or soul possessed by each individual. In his works, Wilde makes it clear that the self is a moral category, 'with its persistence over time linked to imperatives of consistency, sincerity, and responsibility' (McGowan 1990: 426). If he is to escape this morality, then this traditional self must be put aside. In a sense, Wilde's double face is indeed symbolic of his fin de siècle: he looks back deep into his own century and forward into ours. Ellmann recognised as much when he said 'Wilde is one of us':

What lies before me is my past. I have got to make myself look on that with different eyes, to make the world look on it with different eyes, to make God look on it with different eyes. It is only to be done fully by accepting it

as an inevitable part of the evolution of my life  
and character (CW 1059).

In his role of social and moral historian Wilde believed that individuals were products of societies and that social inequality would prevent the general flourishing of individualism. Chapter One explores the links between being educated and being rational, noting that it is imperative that some of the ethical positions have to be shared if any form of social relationship is to be maintained. It is through our choice of group that we define the terms of our moral reasoning and set the parameters of educative endeavour. It is important that the sense of history – of what is past and what may come – is acknowledged, so that events and experiences can be interpreted:

Lacan argues that the subject comes into being at the point of intersection between an irrecoverable past and an unattainable future; its structure is that of a ceaseless cross-stitching between what-is-no-longer-the-case and what-is-not-yet-the-case. He speaks of the subject as announcing herself in terms of the 'I shall have been' of the future perfect not simply the 'I have been' of a fixed thing-like past. What this means is that subjects envisage as already complete what has not been fully launched and are placed beyond the goal they have yet to reach. Their horizon moves as they move. Here then is a notion of

decentred time in tandem with the notion of a decentred self, a subject in process where the subject's every present moment is a past futurity and a future pastness (Usher 1998: 23).

The use of narrative to define our actions and those of others becomes part of the construction of social contexts. A need arose for the Victorians to uphold moral philosophy in a time of European decadence and intellectual reaction against the absolutism of Victorian science. They did not need writers and artists like Wilde, who had received a formal, classical education, to question society and anticipate the complexities of both modernity and post-modernity. Wilde did this from a position changed and influenced by the works of classical Greece and Rome, as well as with an easy familiarity with the literature of the European tradition, as Chapter Two concludes.

Thus it is important to place Wilde's actions in the context of narrative history. The rise of historical consciousness characterises the nineteenth century, the 'age of universal histories' (Jenkyns 1980: 74) and was given its characteristic modern application by Hegel. People are enveloped in the spirit of time and cannot be independent of the dialectal process. Changing attitudes towards Wilde have supported the Hegelian theory that perception takes time. The past, by definition, does not exist and truth will change and develop with history. Wilde intimates scenes of reading and writing to which, one hundred years later, we may just now be learning how to respond. It is therefore imperative to place Wilde's actions in the context of narrative history, as behaviour is only characterised adequately when we know what the longer term intentions invoked are and how the shorter term intentions are related to the longer. The understanding of

the other or past is a process of accommodation whereby our wider understanding brings us closer – the Platonic ideal.

However, Gadamer's argument that any allegiance to or adoption of a particular method necessarily precludes other possible ways of coming at the 'truth', of arriving at an understanding, means that any understanding will always be incomplete, unfinished. The question of 'understanding' (*verstehen*) is an ontological question, for in his view it is our nature as human beings that we are defined and limited by our entrapment in language and time. All attempts to understand anything involve us in the subjective process of 'interpreting', of using our partial and prejudiced language to render things meaningful. Thus it is effective history that renders the past understandable in terms of the effects or influence, which enables things to be known. The travelling is an unforeseen journey of a life and some of the routes are societally derived, whereas the experience of these routes individually is unknown.

Wilde's comment 'I will never outlive the century. The English people would not stand for it' (Ellmann 545) reinforces the belief that he is a prophet of modernity, but in the Sartrean sense:

For a self separated from its roles in the Sartrean mode loses that arena of social relationships in which the Aristotelian virtues function, if they function at all (MacIntyre 1985: 205).

This enables a better understanding of Wilde's perception of himself that 'somehow or other I'll be famous and if not famous, notorious' without an abstraction from the cultural and social milieu in which he lived and thought. Wilde became both, as he challenged social, moral and sexual conventions, satirising Victorian morality and his own lifestyle, yet subverting the Victorian ideal of art as a moral vehicle.

The anchoring of an exploration of Wilde's life and works in the research methods developed by MacIntyre (1985), Denzin (1989), Dickinson and Erben (1995), Erben (1996/1998) offers insight into the educative by way of empirical domain. The recognition that a biographical text is an interactive contextual production between text, reader and writer is elucidated, as is the necessity of a hierarchical structure if the subject is to maintain a sense of order. By acknowledging that a life is never at an end and revealing the sense that Wilde is joined to the past and to the future, the reader is able to find meaning in others' experiences so that they can give shape to their own. Nothing becomes meaningful until it can be placed in a context of habits of feeling, principles of conduct, attachments, purposes, conceptions of how people behave. Thus Wilde's interpretation of society at the turn of the nineteenth century must be subject to judgements, judgements made about his readers, by his readers and those made that reflect his own set of values. An understanding of the relationships between events in Wilde's life and his social outlook amplifies his social and psychological vision, delineating the influences that underpin his narratives. There is no textual format that pictures the social world as a perfect simulacrum:

After all, the social world does not present  
itself to us in the form of a thesis, monograph  
or journal article. The data we accumulate

day by day, week by week and month by month do not automatically yield an understanding that is organised in themes and chapters . . . the contemporary ethnographer must make choices in the full knowledge of his or her textual practices and the likely reception on the part of the reader (Atkinson 1992: 5).

So the reader and writer are not mutually exclusive and readers will write just as authors will read, but both will use a common language map, firmly rooted in literary conventions and textual devices – in Wilde's case, his use of dialogue, the boundaries between art and life, and his sense of narrativity. The more faithful the representation of sociological data, the less comprehensible it will become and it is only with the use of conventional literary and textual devices, 'distinctive styles and genres, characteristic tropes or figures of speech, conventions of reporting speech and action' (Atkinson 1992: 2) that the written word will assume plausibility and persuasiveness, becoming readable. Wilde wrote his scenes from experience, assembling, recording and 'patterning' them, distilling them so that they enlarge the reader's knowledge and understanding, whether his outlook is agreed with or not. His use of textual conventions therefore has moral consequences – it invites judgement as our sense of the social and moral is underpinned by what we read, allowing us to search for the truth ourselves.

Wilde's sense of history – of what is past and what may come – heightens the irony of his works. He recognised that the self is constructed through language, through social institutions, such as school, marriage, and family, law and, ultimately, prison and this is



why these apparatuses so exercised his critical faculties. The equivocality of the man and the artist, the blurred edges, which facets were real and which were involuntary, which were artificial and contrived for effect, will never be truly defined. Whilst he proclaims the importance of individualism, recognising that social inequality would prevent the general flourishing of individualism, Wilde understands that it is problematic and indeterminate. For Wilde, the process of contradiction is enabling and exhilarating, because it promises that no ideological or intellectual impasse is ever final – in Hegelian terms, it will move on, generating its own opposite:

He champions self-fashioning while undermining the self. These contradictions can be seen as reflective of the historical moment, as symptomatic of an emergent Modernism seeking to extinguish a fading Romanticism. But they are also inherent to Postmodernism. . . . We can see some of these contradictions operative in the ways we now struggle to understand and reproduce him. Thus, insofar as Wilde anticipates and articulates these contradictions we should see him not as simply reflective of his historical moment but formative of our own (Sammells 2000: 127).

Everything about Wilde - his nationality, his sexual identity, social status, religion and politics – is unstable, double-edged. It is this duality that allows different elements of

society to draw upon Wilde's life and works to support their own beliefs and to claim him as their own. In order for the self to be able to reflect it is essential that there is some connection with what is already relevant within a tradition, as the boundary between social faces and the self is illusory and constantly shifting. Among the writers of the 1890s, Wilde is the only one whom everyone still reads. It would appear that the more Wilde was made to suffer in life and in death, the more apologising there was, and is, to be done.

But there is more to it than that. There is a sense of unfinished business about Wilde and his life, because so much of him is relevant today and we feel that we are picking up the broken threads of his life and weaving them back together. It is as if there is a need for the ending to be rewritten. Wilde has had the last laugh, however. On the end of a granite slab on which the sculptor Maggi Hambling has placed Oscar reclining and gazing up at the sky, is inscribed one of his many enduring sparklers, 'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.'

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## Chronology

- 1854 Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde born at 21 Westland Road, Dublin.
- 1855 Family moves to 1 Merrion Square North.
- 1864-1871 Attends Portora Royal School, Enniskillen.
- 1871-1874 Undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin.
- 1874 Enters Magdalen College, Oxford, with a scholarship.
- 1875 June - travels to Italy with Mahaffey, Professor of Ancient History at Trinity College, Dublin.
- 1876 Death of father.
- 1877 Easter – travels to Greece and Italy with Mahaffey.
- 1878 Wins Newdigate Prize and completes degree with a First in Greats.
- 1879 Takes rooms in London.
- 1880 Moves to Tite Street, Chelsea.  
First play (*Vera; or the Nihilists*) printed privately.
- 1881 Poems published.
- 1882 Sails to America for lecture tour on 'The English Renaissance' and 'Decorative Art in America'.
- 1883 Completes play *The Duchess of Padua* in Paris.  
Visits New York for first production of *Vera*.  
Lectures in UK sporadically for a year.  
Becomes engaged to Constance Lloyd.
- 1884 Oscar Wilde and Constance Lloyd are married in London.
- 1885 'Truth of Masks' published.  
First son, Cyril, is born.  
Wilde becomes active in journalism.
- 1886 Meets Robert Ross.  
Second son, Vyvyan, is born.
- 1887 Editor of the *Woman's World*.
- 1888 *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* is published.
- 1889 *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* is published.
- 1890 *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is published.
- 1891 Meets Lord Alfred Douglas.  
*The Duchess of Padua* is produced in New York.  
*The Soul of Man Under Socialism* is published.  
The extended version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is published.

- 1891 *Intentions* is published.  
*Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* is published.  
*A House of Pomegranates* is published.  
Wilde visits Paris, where he writes *Salomé*.
- 1892 *Lady Windermere's Fan* opens at the St. James' Theatre.  
*Salomé* is banned by the Lord Chamberlain.  
Wilde writes *A Woman of No Importance*.
- 1893 Publication of *Salomé* in French.  
*A Woman of No Importance* opens at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket.  
*Lady Windermere's Fan* is published.
- 1894 *Salomé* is published in English, illustrated by Beardsley.  
Wilde visits Florence with Douglas.  
Writes *The Importance of Being Earnest*.  
*A Woman of No Importance* is published.
- 1895 *An Ideal Husband* opens at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket.  
Wilde travels to Algiers with Douglas, where he meets Gide.  
*The Importance of Being Earnest* opens at the St. James' Theatre.  
Wilde finds the Marquess of Queensberry's card and applies for a warrant for his arrest, for publishing a libel.  
Queensberry is acquitted and Wilde arrested.  
First trial opens, the jury disagrees and new trial is ordered.  
Wilde is convicted of indecency and sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labour.  
Moves from Newgate, to Pentonville and then to Wandsworth.  
Declared bankrupt and transferred to Reading Gaol.
- 1896 Death of mother.  
Constance visits Wilde to tell him of mother's death. It is their last meeting.  
*Salomé* is produced in France.
- 1897 Writes *De Profundis*.  
Released from prison and immediately leaves for France and lives abroad until his death.  
Meets Douglas in Naples.
- 1898 *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is published.  
Death of Constance Wilde.

- 1899      *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband* is published.
- 1900      After being received into the Roman Catholic Church, Wilde dies in Paris.

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