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OSCAR WILDE. THE IRISH AESTHETE, DECADENT AND SATIRIST

Abstract: *The article discusses Oscar Wilde as representative of aestheticism and decadentism, without ignoring his identity as an Irishman. His American South tour lectures and his theoretical essays on the figure of the dandy, the art for art's sake and beauty offer the framework for the study of his dramatic work, out of which the famous play The Importance of Being Earnest has been chosen as an example to illustrate his satirical genius.*

Keywords: *Oscar Wilde, Irishness, aestheticism, decadentism, drama, satire*.

The concept of the aesthetic was coined by the philosopher Alexander Baumgarten in the eighteenth century to refer, initially, to cognition obtained through the senses, the word being derived from Greek (*aistheta* "things perceptible by the senses", Cuddon 12); gradually, it came to denote the perception of beauty in art through the senses (Berys and McIver Lopes 181) and to be discussed in relation to the criticism of the beautiful or to the theory of taste. A number of intellectuals in Britain, to which Ireland belonged then, established a cult for the Aesthetic and Decadent sensibility in the 1880s and 1890s. Before the nineteenth century movement, the Romantic writers agreed with the right of self-government for art and this gave an impulse to the development of the image of the Bohemian and non-conformist artist.

Wilde's aestheticism seems to have been a hybrid of Ruskinian and Paterian ideals. He was affiliated to the Oxford Aesthetes, disciples of John Ruskin and of the Pre-Raphaelites, and an admirer of Walter Pater, author of *Studies in the History of Renaissance*, who proposed that young men in search of a heightened sensibility should burn with a flame like a precious stone (Calloway 34-56). The Irish writer's embrace of art for art's sake meant the rejection of social rules, of definite categorisations of good and evil as far as art is concerned and the constant pursuit of beauty; art as an end in itself should not be didactic, political, propagandistic, moral, or committed to any other requirement than the aesthetic value. The lectures delivered on the occasion of his American tour gave Wilde another opportunity to speak on Keats, pre-Raphaelite sensibility, house decorations, taste, beauty, idealism and arts and crafts. On his return, the appeal of a decadent sensibility, of the fin de siècle, became stronger; Baudelaire and de Quincy prove inspirational as advocates of a morbid and immoral approach, an opium and hashish- inspired exploration, artifice vs. naturalness, art vs. nature, a preoccupation with self-analysis, perversity, elaborate and exotic sensations and the figure of the Bohemian, the artist-dandy as a literary *flâneur* who looks at life detached and contemplative as if in a café watching the spectacle of the

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world; disenchantment, world-weariness and ennui pervades the works of the decadent writers (Cuddon 221).

The beliefs of the Victorians were totally discordant with Wilde's aestheticism and Irishness; thus, they were quick to be a target of his criticism. The implication of aestheticism being that art had no reference to life was that the former had nothing to do with (Victorian) morality; on the contrary, according to Pater, life should be lived like an artistic experience. The master narratives, described by Jean François Lyotard in his *Postmodern Condition* as falsely central to a society's sense of self-understanding, such as knowledge, rationalism, a scientific approach, the material well-being, the sense of physical control of nature and individualism (from Lyotard 71-90) are attacked by Wilde in his literary and theoretical works before postmodern theoretician in the attempt to show that the self is not as indubitable, rational and progressive as it might have been thought; on the contrary, it is constructed through language, constrained by conventions and irrational or grounded in the unconscious. To a certain extent, aestheticism grew as a reaction to the materialism, capitalism and philistinism of the Victorian bourgeoisie. According to Wilde, England could gain in intellectual emulation by developing the critical instinct. But this idea was not always welcomed, the English *Punch* magazine presenting satirical verse targeting Wilde:

> If such be "Artists" then may Philistines
> Arise, plain sturdy Britons of yore,
> And sweep them off and purge away the signs,
> That England e'er such noxius offspring bore. (qtd. in Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 45)

Wilde's fame and attempt to save England from its own faults also gains him enemies and he is subject of a number of satires, in cartoons in *Punch* or in books by Gilbert and Sullivan, such as *Patience,* where Wilde becomes the decadent, lily-loving poet Bunthorne. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, he gets his revenge on Sullivan in the stage directions in the third act in which Algernon and Jack enter: "They whistle some dreadful popular air from a British opera". From his mother, who wrote for nationalist journals under the penname Speranza, Wilde inherited a gigantic body, which recalled unfortunately the gorilla-like Irish peasant in cartoons in *Punch.* To disarm racist critics, the young dandy concealed his massive body with expensive extravagant clothing. And he also got from his mother a love of the pose and a theatrical personality, specific to the dandy.

In 1880, he writes his first play *Vera* or *The Nihilists*, first performed 1883 in America as it is considered too republican for England. Wilde defends his republican idea in front of the American audience, claiming, after the Phoenix Park killings in 1882, that the English were "reaping the fruit of seven centuries of injustice" and that the country would only be saved by becoming a republic (in Kiberd 46). Wilde's republicanism is a feature that would oppose other fellow aesthetes, who defended Renaissance aristocrats as patrons of arts.

In 1890, he writes *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in whose preface he states: "The artist is the creator of beautiful things", "To reveal art and conceal the artist is the art's aim" or "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all", the book advocating decadence, which is a lifestyle and a pose indulged in by the protagonists of the novel, and aestheticism. Aesthetes maintain that art is self-sufficient; it needs to serve no ulterior purpose and should not be judged by moral, political or other non-aesthetic purposes. Wilde becomes, ahead of his time, a promoter of aestheticism which emphatically

rejects the Victorian assumption that the work of art should edify and improve its consumer. Wilde may have been inspired in his aesthetic approach by Matthew Arnold's views on criticism:

> Real criticism ... obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind; and to value knowledge and thought as they approach this best, without the intrusion of any other considerations whatever. (qtd. in David, Hurley and Schwyzer 194)

Artistic disinterestedness would ensure that a work of art really conforms to the standards of an ideal truth and beauty, manifested, according to Arnold in ancient Greek art. Yet, if Arnold's idea is that the critic should offer general views on art, with Wilde the critic "is to see the object as in itself it really is not" (qtd. in David, Hurley and Schwyzer 195). For Wilde, as for Walter Pater, the beholder lends to the beautiful object of art its multiple nuances, making it wonderful and setting it into a dialogue with the age.

Besides being an aesthete, Wilde could also be considered a representative of decadence defended by Walter Pater. Experience, consciousness, identity, all seem to be in a state of flux; our impression gain in importance and since they are fleeting, the purpose of the critic is to analyze and intensify the awareness of a key moment:

> The service of philosophy, of speculative culture, towards the human spirit is to rouse, to startle it to a life of constant and eager observation ... Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us in a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses ... To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life ... While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses. (David, Hurley and Schwyzer 195)

Thus, the emphasis, both with Pater and Wilde, seems to have been on pleasure, sensations, experiments, a hedonistic existence, and decadence came to be associated with "the love of artificiality, the pursuit of the 'unnatural' and the 'perverse', and with ennui, neurosis, eroticism, morbidity, and decay" (David, Hurley and Schwyzer 195). Decadence is a lifestyle cherished by the protagonist of *The Picture of Dorian Gray.*

Another movement, towards which Wilde was drawn as it constituted another blow to Victorian realism and nineteenth century utilitarian values, was symbolism. Wilde is symbolist, for instance, in his poem *Impression du matin*, a poem which could be commented in the terms one would use to describe an impressionist painting: a dreamlike mood, no interest for the city, but the atmosphere enveloping it – lights, colours and sounds, and the wistful woman:

> The Thames nocturne of blue and gold
> Changed to a Harmony in grey:
> A barge with ochre-coloured hay
> Dropt from the wharf: and chill and cold
> The yellow fog came creeping down
> The bridges, till the houses' walls
> Seemed changed to shadows and St. Paul's
> Loomed like a bubble o'er the town.

> Then suddenly arose the clang
> Of waking life; the streets were stirred
> With country waggons: and a bird
> Flew to the glistening roofs and sang.
> But one pale woman all alone,
> The daylight kissing her wan hair,
> Loitered beneath the gas lamps' flare,
> With lips of flame and heart of stone. (Project Gutenberg: *Victorian Web. Oscar Wilde. Poems*)

Wilde's success in ensured by the publication of his next play, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, 1892, which is met with acclaim when first performed. *Salomé* is banned from public performance in Britain for representing such a biblical figure, but he returns to the stage with *A Woman of No Importance*, 1893, which confirms the respect of theatrical London. In 1894, he writes, *An Ideal Husband, The Importance of Being Earnest* and *A Florentine Tragedy,* first performed a year later.

Wilde becomes famous as an "Ambassador of the Beautiful" and he takes a very successful American lecture tour, speaking on "Decorative Art", "The English Renaissance" and "The House Beautiful". In 1882, when he was in Louisiana, Wilde was asked whether he would look there for some family possessions. What they meant was if Wilde intended to retrace his uncle's possessions; his uncle, J. K. Elgee had bought a plantation in Louisiana. Wilde's answer was the following: "however much I might desire to have a plantation in Louisiana, not the least of the attractions of which would be the proprietorship of groves of magnolia trees, I have no such object of view" (qtd. in Crowell 2). Thus, in a typical witty manner, Wilde offered American Southerners a view over the parallels in the histories of Ireland and the American South:

> [t]he conquest of Ireland and the settlement of Virginia were bound so closely together that one correspondence, dated March 8, 1610, stated: 'It is hoped the plantation of Ireland may shortly be settled. The Lord Delaware ... is preparing to depart for the plantation of Virginia'. (Ronald Takaki qtd. in Crowell 3)

And many figures responsible for the plantation of Ulster were also involved in the plantation of the American South: "Sir Humphrey Gilbert, Sir Walter Raleigh, Ralph Lane, Sir Richard Grenville – had gained their first experience of conquest by crossing the Irish Sea and were armed even now with settlement layout plans that had already been used in Ulster" (Kieran Quinlan qtd. in Crowell 3). Actually, Wilde only restated the Irish-American cultural identification as a fact that had been already settled though the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1610, qtd. in Crowell 3), according to which the term plantation was explained in two contexts: one, in T. Blennerhasset's *A Direction for the Plantation of Ulster,* and the second, in a pamphlet "A True and Sincere Declaration of the Purpose and Ends of the Plantation begun in Virginia".

According to Crowell, in her study on *The Dandy in Irish and American Southern Fiction*, by the time Wilde visited the South in 1882, both the American South and Ireland were in a state of ruin. He obviously paralleled the positions of the Confederate cause in the Civil War and Ireland's relation with the British Empire, his point of departure being his Irishness. Thus, this trip reinforced his ideas on the connection between beauty and decay. Wilde's most iconic character, Dorian Gray, is the product of this interplay of corruption and aestheticism, the writer

being fascinated with the ruined aristocrat. Wilde argues that Southerners are superior, trusting a Southern Renaissance and the aesthetic possibilities of the ruined South. (Crowell 78) as he was an Irishman and trained in nationalism and Romantic defeat. Regarding the picture of Dorian Gray, the claim may be that when Dorian creates his "other" in the picture to take over all his sins and faults, he only manages to make himself filthy. In a similar manner, if the British Empire turns Ireland into its "other", it defiles itself, the novel being a metaphor for the situation.

On the other hand, Ellen Crowell remarks Wilde's ambivalence regarding his political position. He was a Protestant, an Anglo-Irish, but his parents were firm nationalists. He believed in the rightness of the union, but he was convinced of the necessity of freedom for the artist. "Wilde's ideal artist would not want to repeal the union between Ireland and England. But the artist would assert his right to openly mock that Empire and to expose the cultural exclusions and prohibitions upon which the maintenance of Empire depends" (87).

Theatre production in Wilde's time, in the last quarter of the 19th century, underwent dramatic changes and the British theatre was comprehensively transformed. The 1890s saw a revival in the playwriting encouraged, among other things by the new copyright laws in Britain, Europe and America, according to which authors could expect regular loyalties from performances and publication. Therefore, playwriting was a potentially rewarding activity and Wilde turned to the theatre as a good way of making money. The revival of drama was also triggered by the impulse of continental influences; the French fast moving dramas, with numberless crisis, mistaken identities, misplaced letters, past secrets, leading to reconciliation or death, all will be revisited by Wilde from a lighthearted perspective. For instance, the secrets revealed in *The Importance of Being Earnest,* though central in the play, they do not cause tragedies. On the contrary, when Algernon discovers his best friend has lied about his name, he is delighted and reveals his own Bunbury subterfuge. Another influence was the style of Naturalism, whose leading representative in drama was Ibsen, who promoted an analysis of human behavior, psychological motivations, biological inheritance and environmental factors in shaping his protagonists, these ideas being mockingly recycled by Oscar Wilde.

Regarding the cultural context of Wilde's plays, it would be revealing to look at ideas promoted by theoreticians and scientists referring to antithesis and determinism. Wilde was aware that antithesis was the key to the Victorian mind, which delighted in absolute distinctions between men and women, good and evil, English and Irish, etc. By this mechanism, the English male could attribute to the Irish all those traits of emotion, poetry and softness which the strict industrial code had forced him to deny in himself.

> If John Bull was industrious and reliable, Paddy was held to be indolent; if the former was mature and rational, the latter must be unstable and emotional; if the Englishman was adult and manly, the Irishman must be childish and feminine. (Kiberd qtd. in Foster 264)

The similarity between women, children and Irishmen had political implications as well in the sense that the Irishman was considered incapable of governing himself. Wilde's effeminacy and his interest in the inner world of children in some of his stories seem to be a sly comment on this issue. The entire play *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a satire on the Victorian urge for antithesis.

Ernest Worthing visits his friend Alegernon in London; from the inscription on his cigarette-case Algernon finds out he is called Jack. In order to escape his ties at Hertfordshire, where he is guardian to young Cecily Cardew, he has a younger wicked brother, Ernest. Algernon confesses that he has invented an ill friend called Bunbury, in order to escape unpleasant dinner

engagements. Jack wants to "kill off" his brother; he is in love with Gwendolen Fairfax, daughter of the tyrannical Lady Bracknell. Jack proposes to Gwendolen, who is delighted, especially by his name, having felt destined to love a man called Ernest. Lady Bracknell insists on approving the match but forbids the engagement when she hears Jack was found in a handbag in the cloakroom at Victoria Station.

The second act is located in the countryside, in the Manor House at Woolton, where Cecily is taught German under Miss Prism's supervision. She arranges that Miss Prism and Canon Chasuble go for a walk. Algernon appears, claiming to be Jack's brother, Ernest Worthing. Cecily is delighted and they walk off together. Jack arrives and tells Miss Prism and Canon Chasuble that his brother died. Jack is appalled by Algernon's untimely impersonation but, on Cecily's insistence, forgives his "brother". Algernon tries to propose to Cecily, who already has plans for them. Her dream has also been to marry somebody called Ernest. Both Jack and Algernon arrange to be baptized as Ernest. Cecily and Gwendolen discover that they both seem to be engaged to Ernest Worthing and then finding out their fiancés' real Chirstian names, leave them alone.

The two men are forgiven. Lady Bracknell approves of Algernon's marriage to Cecily, as she is wealthy, but Jack forbids it as her guardian. Hearing from Chasuble Miss Prism's name, lady Bracknell recognizes it as being the woman to whom her sister's baby had been entrusted years before. Miss Prism absentmindedly placed the manuscript of a romantic novel she was writing in the pram and the baby in a handbag she deposited in a cloakroom at Victoria station. Jack is that baby as the handbag is recognized, and he is Algernon's younger brother. Jack has to discover his real name and realizing he would have been named after his father, being the first boy born in the family, he checks the Army List. As he discovers his father's name was Ernest, all ends happily.

Wilde's essays on Ireland question the assumption that if the English are one thing the Irish must be the opposite. Moreover, Wilde considered that to the Irish, England was fairyland, and the nobility of England seemed as exotic as the caliphs of Baghdad. "If England had never existed, the Irish would have been rather lonely. Each nation badly needed the other for the purpose of defining itself" (Kiberd 2). Examples in Victorian fiction of representations of Irishness as non-Englishness are Heathcliff and Rochester, the protagonists of the Bronte sisters' novels *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre;* the two are represented through classic Victorian images of racial difference. When they are characterized as oppressed, outcast, or "other", they are associated with mid-nineteenth century stereotypes of the simianized Irish whose caricatures and descriptions appeared in *Punch* (1862):

> A creature manifestly between the Gorilla and the Negro is to be met with in some of the lowest districts of London and Liverpool by adventurous explorers. It comes from Ireland, whence it has contrived to migrate; it belongs in fact to a tribe of Irish savages: the lowest species of the Irish Yahoo. When conversing with its kind it talks a sort of gibberish. (in Michie 47)

Wilde's merit, according to Kiberd, is to have realized that the stage Irishman tells us more about English fears than Irish realities; just as the Irish jokes tell us less about the Irishman's foolishness than about the Englishman's desire to say something funny. So, he chose to say something funny for the English in a performance of Englishness which was a parody of the notion in itself. "By becoming more English than the English themselves, Wilde was able to invert, and ultimately challenge, all the time-honoured clichés about Ireland" (Kiberd qtd. in

Foster 264). Actually, Wilde did not define his identity as English, on the contrary: "I am not English. I am Irish – which is quite another thing" (qtd. in Pierce 111). Stage-Irish comedy was indeed dependent on the gulf between England and Ireland, and much of it was created by Irishmen in England, including the Anglo-Irish playwrights William Congreve, George Farquhar, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Dion Boucicault, and George Bernard Shaw. Some medieval settlers in Ireland had become "more Irish than the Irish themselves," but Wilde and Shaw became more English than the English themselves. Perhaps the most perfect example of this phenomenon is Wilde's masterpiece *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which could be interpreted as a parable of the Anglo-Irish relations. Acquainted with upper class of the English society, yet always examining it from the perspective of a Dubliner who spent his first two decades in Ireland, Wilde parodied English customs and language, creating a balanced yet ludicrous world. For example, the clever talk between Jack and Algernon reveals a lot about the importance of superficial platitudes and wit to the Victorian comedy. While in London, Wilde was offering a critique of the imperial culture. The English society took its revenge on Wilde shortly after the great success of this play by sending him to prison, not only because of his homosexuality but also because of his Irishness.

Wilde is also satirizing the determinism of Marx or Carlyle, who considered that certain elements such as social conditioning or parental upbringing determined consciousness. The belief that the Irishman was a prisoner of heredity, diet, climate, like the conviction that the woman must be docile, submissive, soft and loyal were characteristics of Victorian determinism. Determinism is taken to the absurd in Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* in the account of the two girls Gwendolen and Cecily who think that it is their destiny to marry a man named Ernest. Gwendolen accepts Jack in the mistaken belief that he is Ernest and Cecily is happy to have found her Ernest, who is actually Algy. The very plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is an example of determinism pushed to its limit.

> Algernon. [...] You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-learning person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your cards. (*The Importance* 7)

Or, for instance, in the play, it is the women who read German philosophy, attend university and discuss the finer point of men's features, while men are emotional or simply lie on sofas trying to look pretty. When Algy proposes to Cecily, it is she who runs her fingers through his hair and asks if it curls naturally, the answer being that it does but with a little help from others. Moreover, it is women who are businesslike and make cynical economic calculations about marriage, while men remain impractical; the most relevant example is the manner in which Lady Bracknell conducts her interview meant to show whether Jack would be suitable for her daughter:

> Lady Bracknell (pencil and note-book in hand): I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton had. We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke? (*The Importance* 18)

The danger about adopting such a despising attitude towards Celts as feminine may consists in extending the diminishment to women in general. So, Wilde's first action when he took over the *Ladies' World* magazine, he changed its name to *Woman's World* (Kiberd 45).

The ideal personality in Wilde's view was best illustrated in the doctrine of the androgyny or of the integrated being, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "All women become like their mothers – that is their tragedy. No man does – and that is his" (*The Importance* 23). Gwendolen praises her father for conceding that a man's place is at home and the public affairs may be safely entrusted to women. "Why should be one law for men and another for women?" (*The Importance* 80), asks Jack of Miss Prism. Wilde liked to create manly women and womanly men, as a challenge to the stratified thinking of his days. Interestingly, later Joyce's Leopold Bloom appears as "the new womanly man" in "Circe" episode in *Ulysses.* The traditional contrast in the comedy of manners between corrupt city dwellers and the unfallen country characters is exposed as a simplification. Jack and Algy's cynicism hide their willingness to experience novelty, whereas the apparent innocence of Canon Chasuble conceals a more sinister awareness.

Wilde's 1895 play, *The Importance of Being Earnest,* provides an excellent means to make the transition from nineteenth century to twentieth-century literature, both in terms of themes and writing strategies. The play turns its back mockingly on the high moral seriousness associated with Victorianism, satirizing Victorian middle-class love of property, investment in social position, and hypocritical championing of respectability. Wilde's characters adopt a hedonistic lifestyle, which is seen as opposed to Victorian conservative values. Characters are concerned with appearances, not substance. After having asked Jack about his occupation, revenue, estates and investments, Lady Bracknell goes on to discuss "minor matters", such as family and parents. But Lady Bracknell rejects Jack's pretentions to her daughter's hand when she discovers he is an adopted foundling abandoned at Victoria Station cloakroom. Jack and Algernon want to please the girls by becoming earnest/ Ernest in name only and such things as identity, character, personality began to appear as ephemeral or nonsensical. Equally, serious matters, such as education, marriage, family, politics and work are treated with irreverence, for in such matters style is everything. Wilde's works represent a response to the challenge of the new century, welcoming the indeterminacy of a new world in which identities, relations, meanings and structures could be reshaped according to need, context or opportunity.

Wilde was considered by Kiberd as one of the first major artists to discredit the romantic ideal of sincerity and replace it with the requirement of authenticity: he considered that being true to a single self, you may be false to others. He was interested in the potential for theatricality which caused people to assert the plasticity of their personalities, thus advocating the doctrine of the mask. Thus, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* each person turns out to be his own secret opposite: Algy becomes Bunbury, Jack becomes Earnest. Social identities and conventions are revealed as artificial constructs than essences. Algernon advocates Bunburyism – the philosophy of the trickster, who systematically pursues pleasure by manipulating appearances and using lies: "Algernon. Besides, now that I know you to be a confirmed Bunburyist I naturally want to talk to you about Bunburying. I want to tell you the rules" (*The Importance* 10). The play has also been seen by critics such as Declan Kiberd as a long debate on whether to get rid of Bunbury, symbolically standing for the other. Ironically, Lady Bracknell comments on this state of matters, the relationship between Algy and Bunbury being that between England and Ireland:

> I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd. Nor do I in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid. (*The Importance* 13)

The existence of this double could be considered a manifestation of an unbalanced personality, one needing its double in order to obtain the balance necessary. The denied double ends up

setting the agenda for its creator, thus Algy has to take care of his invalid friend whenever the latter needs him. Or the Irish Parnellites set the agenda in England, paralyzing the activity of the Parliament at Westminster (Kiberd 43).

Cecily delights in her extravagant exaggeration of narrative conventions when she invents an entire courtship between herself and the non-existent Ernest, complete with diary entries, letters and a ring. In Wilde we see a response to the promise or threat of a new century, one that welcomes the flux of indeterminacy of a new and modern world in which identities, social relations and meaning structures can be made and unmade according to need, opportunity and desire. Uniting aestheticism, decadence and symbolism, Wilde has been regarded as a precursor of modernism in literature.

Regarding stylistic characteristics mention should be made of word-play, wit and paradox. For example, from the imaginary character Bunbury, the characters derive the verb "to Bunbury" used in the –ing "Bunburying" or in the perfect aspect "I have Bunburyed" or the common noun "Bunburyist" (*The Importance* Act I). Lady Bracknell is a constant source of paradoxical statements: "Ignorance is like a delicate, exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever"; "A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country" (*The Importance* 19). Throughout the play, the reader has the impression that when a character is Ernest he is not earnest and vice versa, the pun Ernest-earnest contains opposing meanings of truthfulness and fiction until the meanings are united in the end when Jack discovers his lies to be true and his truth lies; characters seem to have been replace by their fictional identities.

There are two contrary views regarding Wilde, both held by Yeats; on the one hand, he claimed about Wilde and Shaw that they were "the most complete individualists in the history of the literature, abstract, isolated minds without a memory or a landscape" (Yeats qtd. in Albu 211). On the other hand, Yeats generously acknowledged his indebtedness to Wilde, his concept of the mask or anti-self being based on Wilde's theory that one must study to become the opposite of all that one is by nature and inheritance. Also, recent interpretations consider Wilde and G.B. Shaw as more dynamic contributors to the national revival. The writer himself saw his efforts as part of an Irish Renaissance. Wilde was to the end of his days a militant Irish republican; if for instance, James Joyce's texts are concerned with the rights of sons to usurp fathers, or women to challenge men and the people to shake off an oppressive past, then Wilde may be one of the promoters of such modern views which inspired an Irish national recovery.

Regarding modern Irish writing, Wilde may have had the genius to open a path that will be followed by many of his fellow writers in the next centuries. In "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.", he noticed that the soul "hides in the dark and broods, and consciousness cannot tell us of its workings" (qtd. in Pierce 50), thus introducing the theme of the Dark Rosaleen, Ireland in a play of darkness and light. In Joyce's *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus, in his role of a bard, states, with reference to an Irish epic that he wishes to writes: "Darkness is in our souls, do you not think" (Joyce qtd. in Pierce 50). Equally at the ending of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen proposes to forge through his calling of an artist the unshaped consciousness of his people, which also shows the Irish in a primeval darkness waiting to be moulded. Darkness is present in the titles of many modern works by Irish writers to follow: Seamus Heaney's volume of verse *Door into the Darkness* (1969), Louis MacNeice's radio play *The Dark Tower* (1946), Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996), to mention only a few. Blind, Hamm in Beckett's *Endgame* sits in the darkness, a mere player in the endgame of the world. Or when Henry James travels from Dublin Castle to the

hospital in Kilmainham in Colm Tóibin's historical novel *The Master*, he feels surrounded by "the hostile stares and dark accusing eyes" of the native Irish (qtd. in Pierce 52). The point is that the dark may be an attempt to deal with hybridity and the colonial encounter of the Irish with the English, of Catholic Irish with Protestant Irish.

Wilde claimed: "I am Irish by race but the English have condemned me to speak the language of Shakespeare", or to an audience in San Francisco: "The Saxon took our lands from us and made them destitute … but we took their language and added new beauties to it" (in Kiberd 35). The same diagnosis would be offered later by Joyce:

> In spite of everything Ireland remains the brain of the United kingdom. The English, judiciously practical and ponderous, furnish the over-stuffed stomach of humanity with a perfect gadget – the water closet. The Irish, condemned to express themselves in a language not their own, have stamped on it the mark of their own genius and compete for glory with the civilized nations. The result is what they called English literature. (in Kiberd 35)

In his "Critic as Artist" essay, Wilde sees the Irish as the followers of the Italian Renaissance generation: "it is the Celt who leads in art ... there is no reason why in future years this strange Renaissance should not be almost as mighty as that new birth of art that woke many centuries ago in the cities of Italy" (qtd. in Kiberd 48). If we were to consider Wilde as approachable from a postcolonial viewpoint, the Empire 'Talks' Back, as Algernon and Jack's talk in *The Importance of Being Earnest* flows wittily, elegantly, with style during an afternoon tea in London studios and drawing rooms. "We are a nation of brilliant failures, but we are the greatest talkers since the Greeks", told Wilde to Yeats (qtd. in Pierce 111), who considered that Wilde tended to attribute his characteristics to his country.

Wilde was basically an exile in London; in *De Profundis*, Wilde writes that the two turning points in my life were when his father sent him to Oxford and society sent him to prison. This is a revealing equation because in both institutions he learned to be an outsider, an Irishman in England, an exile. Oxford strengthened the idea that an Irishman only discovers himself when he is abroad because man is least himself when he talks in his own person but he will tell the truth when he is given a mask. Interestingly, Wilde saw his literary career running parallel to that of Charles Stewart Parnell, about whose intellect he wrote in 1889, when Parnell was at the height of his political power "at home... had but learned the pathetic weakness of nationality, but in a strange land realized what indomitable forces nationality possesses" (in Albu 216). In his play *Lady Windermere's Fan* Mrs. Erlynne chooses to emigrate and takes with her Lord Augustus Lorton, who feels set free of his country away from it yet not deprived from it. Identity is dialogic, so the sense of the self is derived from the other. Wilde believed that a modern Irish culture would be reshaped in contact with the art of other countries. So, jokingly, he told Shaw that his mission was to dispel English fog so that it could make way for the "Celtic School" (in Kiberd 47).

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