



# current issue

## Issue Four

### **Oscar Wilde and the Politics of Irish Aestheticism [1]**

Gary Pearce

Readings of Oscar Wilde have been burdened by an affliction he struggled against all his artistic and intellectual life: cliché. The strongest and earliest clichés or stereotypes were provided by Wilde himself, in the form of the English aristocratic dandies that populate his society comedies. These seemed suited to light, if engaging, Victorian melodramas designed to appeal to a popular audience. More recently, however, many critics have attended to the subversive edge within his drama. They have recognised the modernist challenge that underlies the veneer of Victorian culture. Katherine Worth has stressed the psychological or existential aspects of Wilde's drama. The influences of symbolism and aestheticism, of course, very clearly point to his connection with later modernisms [2]. Wilde is increasingly recognised as one of those who undertook, in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, new experiments in language, identity and form.

But Wilde is not the only one to travel under the burden of cliché; modernism itself has been similarly burdened. The hypostatisation of breaks in form that accompanied modernism's institutionalization has done much to simplify and contain its engagement with modern life. It has become sharply differentiated from previous more connective literary modes, and from the wider process of modernisation. This institutionalisation also helps explain the resistance to accepting Wilde as a genuine example of European modernism. Sos Eltis notes that even more recently the view of Wilde's conventionality has been qualified rather than rejected [3]. Norbert Kohl's ambivalence regarding Wilde's modernism is evident, for example, when he asks: 'In terms of literary history, is he an epigonic romantic, a Victorian in disguise, or – in the flattering company of Baudelaire and Nietzsche – a member of the nineteenth-century European avant-garde in the movement against the bourgeoisie?' [4]

Rather than attempt to fit a non-conforming Wilde into our literary models, we might use him to understand how conscious modernism continues to engage with problems associated with the development of self and society. Perhaps what we actually find with Wilde is someone pointing strongly to new modes as part of a broader search for coherence and meaning. We should also recall the extent to which his movement from nationalist Ireland to cosmopolitan London shaped these problems. The importance of such movements between the periphery and the metropolis for modernism has not been fully recognised. Perhaps Wilde's voyage in can further our understanding of modernism's more general history and geography. In the process, the problems of postcolonialism, which are sometimes associated with postmodern themes, might be seen to have greater affinity with a critical and dialectical modernism.

This paper treats Wilde as the moment of emergent Irish modernism. It begins by questioning the view of his aestheticism as a reflection of his social irrelevance. The colonial experience of modernity in Ireland will be seen as central to his development of an engaged aesthetic, most apparently in his role as 'Englishman' Wilde will then be compared to the modernist rebel, this rebellion shown to contain a definite social and political content. Finally, I examine the full and coherent development of Wilde's modernist aesthetic in his collection of essays, *Intentions*, with its emphases on

criticism, the joining of light and dark, commitment to the new, and the positing of art as utopian promise.

Any reading of Wilde's aesthetic must begin with his aestheticism. His essay 'The Decay of Lying' insists on the autonomy of art and rejects any notion of realism: 'Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life' [5]. A concern for aesthetic form, impression, style over content, all clearly point to the emergence of a self-conscious break in form. Like many later modernists, Wilde registered how modern life could no longer be understood immanently. This is often represented, both in Wilde and in modernism more generally, as a withdrawal from the attempt to posit meaning. One common image of Wilde derives from this interpretation: 'Aesthete-decadents like Whistler, Symons, and Wilde accepted the disconnection between appearance and reality, fashioning an aristocratic, dandified aesthetic of surface impressions, of detached cosmopolitan observation' [6]. This reading could derive some support from Peter Bürger's Theory of the Avant Garde, which argues that, where realism had been the 'self-understanding of the bourgeois' grappling with the relationship between the individual and society, in aestheticism this question was overshadowed by an increasing concern with the artistic medium itself. The separation and division that frame the artistic realm within bourgeois society found full development here, permeating even artistic content. While this allowed for a separation from the means-ends rationality, it also produced social and political ineffectuality [7].

Regenia Gagnier, in an important reading of Wilde, has attempted to refute Bürger through an assessment of the social and political import of Wilde's aestheticism in relation to the rise of consumer culture. She proposes 'a theory of aestheticism from the point of view of consumption, or of the different publics that, in different ways, consumed it. Ultimately, I locate the interrelation of the art world and life world in the practices of modern spectacular society' [8]. For Gagnier, Wilde's aestheticism critiques – but is also itself the product of – commodity fetishism. This might explain the contradictions and paradoxes that characterise his work: Wilde was simultaneously idealistic and cynical, exposing the superficiality of London society in the very process of glamorising it. Gagnier seems to question Bürger's interpretation of aestheticism as lacking in social consequence, particularly when applied to Wilde. Gagnier follows Bürger, however, in seeking to explain aestheticism in terms of the institutional location of art and the artist in bourgeois society. While registering Wilde's critique of modern society, this view sees the artist's characterisation of him as poseur and self-promoter as essentially accurate, so that self-advertisement is placed at the centre of his enterprise. Curiously, one effect of Gagnier's influential account is to update the conventional view about Wilde as located somewhere between Victorianism and innovation, conformity and rebellion.

A full appreciation of the materiality of culture will recognise its force and weight within human production. Ironically, appreciation of this has proved so difficult historically because of the reified separation of art and life that accompanied the institutionalisation of modernism. So influential has this separation been that the only alternative seems to be to reduce art to its institutional status. However, as Raymond Williams recognised, transformations in literature always involve 'finding new means, new forms and the new definition of a changing practical consciousness' [9]. Wilde himself recognised the importance of art and creativity:

the energy of life ...is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms through which this expression can be attained. Life seizes on them and uses them, even if they be to her own hurt [10].

He insisted on the role of art in shaping the world and, through that, shaping new modes of being and living.

This places Wilde within the tradition of modernism as discussed by Marshall Berman in All That is Solid Melts Into Air. For Berman, modernism finds a home in a world no longer characterised by the stability and order of tradition. It embraces the opportunities and risks accompanying modern transformations of time and space [11]. In Wilde's case, such contradictions were overdetermined by the increasingly limited conceptions

of dominant modernity encountered by someone from the Irish periphery. In working through such contradictions, Wilde signals the emergence of a new (Irish) modernist structure of feeling: he wrestles with the inheritance of tradition; he situates himself within and reworks dominant metropolitan forms; he emphasises the active and heroic engagement of the artist/rebel; and he explores what all this means for sense-making and aesthetic representation. Beyond the division between art and life was an aesthetic revolution generated by the need to remain socially relevant and to continue finding meaning.

It is Wilde's relation to tradition, and his relation to the past more generally, that initially suggests his importance for the emergence of a self-conscious Irish modernism. While Wilde was influenced by major figures of English culturalism – Arnold, Ruskin, Morris and Pater – the prospects for transferring the construction of an organic tradition onto a fractured and disrupted colonial periphery were never propitious. The Irish situation contrasts with the apparent organic seamlessness of the relation between tradition and modernity in England: as Lady Bracknell knows, the differences between the Liberals and the Tories are hardly worth mentioning:

LADY BRACKNELL. ... What are your Politics?

JACK. Well, I'm afraid I really have none. I am a Liberal Unionist.

LADY BRACKNELL. Oh, they count as Tories. They dine with us. Or come in the evening at any rate [12].

Where Arnold drew strong and necessary connections between tradition, social cohesion, morality and finally, truth, Wilde's modernism emerged through a recognition of the problematic, indeed often conflictual, relation between these. As becomes evident in examining various aspects of the Wildean perspective, this is a world in which culture and anarchy are intimately related.

The connections between the artist or intellectual, the exile or émigré, and the colonised have been highlighted by recent work on postcolonialism, that of Said for example, whose discussion of the condition of being in exile could almost be a description of Wilde:

Because the exile sees things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, there is a double perspective that never sees things in isolation . . . [A]n idea or experience is always counterposed with another, therefore making them appear in a sometimes new and unpredictable light [13].

The resonance between modernism and the experience of colonialism is discernible here. The determining role of language, the fictive quality of rules and conventions, become apparent to those subject to imperial constructions. Joyce's Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* would wonder at how alien the English language appears from an Irish perspective [14]. Wilde's 'double perspective' sees him utilise Victorian theatrical tropes and convention to expose the ideological underpinning of Victorian life generally: the story of the fallen woman that cannot help but reveal the hypocrisy of sexual relations, secret lives that mock all notion of propriety, the neat plot resolutions that threaten to collapse into absurdity. What Declan Kiberd refers to as the 'intentional over-obviousness' of *The Importance of Being Earnest* [15] cannot but operate as a kind of modernist defamiliarisation, exposing the roles, plots and performances of Victorian culture more generally [16]. In the process, Wilde prefigures Joyce's carnivalesque vision.

Wilde saw himself and George Bernard Shaw as part of the 'great Celtic school,' but unlike the members of Irish renaissance, he sought to explore Englishness rather than Irishness. His supposedly apolitical attitudes might be discerned first and foremost in this Englishness. But the Celtic Revival's attempt to purge themselves of English influence had managed merely to create parallel Irish forms: mutually exclusive dichotomies were actually a form of mutual dependence. As many critics have noted, the contrast between the utilitarian English and the passionate Celt receives an important early formulation in Arnold's 'On the Study of Celtic Literature.' Both Ashis Nandy and Kiberd have observed the way Wilde's performative Englishness highlights

qualities the English were concerned to exclude, notably the child-like and the feminine [17]. This is evident in Gwendolen's unique perspective on the gender division of public and private spheres in The Importance of Being Earnest: 'The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for a man. And, certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate does he not? And I don't like that. It makes men so very attractive' [18]. For Nandy, nationalism and imperialism were closely associated with the kind of masculinity typified in the self-image of Lord Alfred Douglas's father, the Marquess of Queensbury, who had given his name to the rules for competitive boxing. By contrast, Wilde was one of those aesthetes and modernists who sought to provide space for the production of an English feminine self [19].

Before concluding that his Englishness was a sign of incorporation, it is important to recognise that Wilde's intention was to deconstruct modernity's dominant forms. By playing the English so closely, Wilde found an effective way of disturbing their stable modernity. For Wilde 'imitation can be made the sincerest form of insult' [20]. He was, however, in no way hostile to English culture and language *per se*. Wilde, who had a prominent and developed sense of his own Irishness, believed nevertheless 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 . . . ' [21]. Rather than indulge in what Said has called the 'rhetoric of blame' [22], Wilde drew attention to the cost of imperialism to the coloniser, the immense cultural damage it caused them [23]. He is part of an early phase of the 'empire writing back' [24]: he voyages into the heart of the imperial capital and seeks to use and negotiate this cultural experience on his own terms. Williams notes the central role of immigration to modernism, the movement 'from the deprived hinterland . . . to the metropolitan systems' [25]. As with later modernists, Wilde is unimaginable in any context other than that of the metropolis he satirises so savagely.

Wilde's opposition to Arnold's philistines was more typical of anti-bourgeois modernism than any defence of organic tradition. His opposition to the naturalisation of bourgeois relations in the late-nineteenth century registers in his rejection of any notion of convention, normativity, or the natural [26]: 'What Art really reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition' [27]. Wilde recognised that the 'custom and unconscious instinct' of bourgeois modernity could forgive everything except contemplation, imagination and art. The decadence and indolence of the dandy embodies all that the bourgeoisie tried to repress in the pursuit of productivity and utility: 'it is not so easy to be unpractical as the ignorant Philistine imagines. It were well for England if it were so. There is no country in the world so in need of unpractical people as this country of ours' [28]. For Wilde, true decadence can be seen not in the morbidity of modern art but in an unthinking faith in the forces of linear progress.

Wilde himself was a major symbol of the 'sexual anarchy' [29] that threatened the purposive and reproductive modes of the bourgeois family. Algy mocks the utilitarian nature of modern marriage thus: 'The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one's clean linen in public' [30]. During this period, realist narratives revolving around marriage and inheritance were giving way to fantastic *fin de siècle* tales about split personalities [31]. The Picture of Dorian Gray was typical in its exploration of excess, and its assertion of multiform identities and consciousness. Wilde's critique of the naturalisation of bourgeois relations was particularly evident in the uncertain or hidden heritage, parentage or filiation that forms the crux of many of his plays. Said links Wilde to those modernist writers for whom 'the failure of the generative impulse' is made to symbolise something more general about culture and society [32]. Dorian looks for his lineage and affiliations in a book by a Parisian writer (almost certainly Huysman's À Rebours): '[O]ne had ancestors in literature, as well as one's own race, nearer perhaps in type and temperament, many of them, and certainly with an influence of which one was absolutely conscious' [33]. Rejection of the bourgeoisie becomes associated with the modernist attempt to forge new affiliations within the aesthetic realm.

Wilde was part of a tradition, beginning with Baudelaire and continuing through to the

avant-garde, in which revolt and aesthetics were closely associated. Like Baudelaire, Wilde was contemptuous of attempts at social improvement, be they represented by the pedagogical Miss Prism, or the more general role of the English in Ireland: 'If in the last century she tried to govern Ireland with an insolence that was intensified by race hatred and religious prejudice, she has sought to rule her in this century with a stupidity that is aggravated by good intentions' [34]. Rather than develop a complex and vital understanding of modernity, the Victorian bourgeoisie were mired in hypocrisy and sentimentality. It was only through discontent that a genuine sense of self and a genuine understanding of contradiction could be maintained. Wilde displays here the characteristic political and social ambivalence of the modernist rebel: sometimes detached and disdainful, at others rebelliously independent. His apparent aristocratic detachment was combined with the radical politics of 'The Soul of Man under Socialism.' As Jerusha McCormack reminds us, Arnold had pointed to the similarities between the English aristocracy and the native Irish in their opposition to bourgeois modernity [35]. Wilde, however, doesn't seek Arnoldian reconciliation, but gives a strong and explicit voice to this negative identification, and thereby reveals the consistency of his anti-bourgeois modernism.

Where Arnold famously saw the aim of criticism as 'to see the object as in itself it really is' [36], Wilde, in 'The Critic as Artist,' took Pater's emphasis on the perceiving subject as far as it could go: 'to see the object as in itself it really is not' [37]. Wilde believed criticism to be creative rather than interpretive. As Eagleton notes, if modernism saw art incorporate critical reflection upon itself, then criticism itself came to represent an aesthetic act [38]. For Wilde, 'The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticises as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought' [39]. Criticism's self-conscious resistance to convention and linear forms, is opposed to the empiricism of the English: 'Considered as an instrument of thought, the English mind is coarse and undeveloped. The only thing that can purify it is the growth of the critical instinct' [40]. Empathy with and understanding of others was an integral part of developing an individual critical spirit. It was this, rather than the market place or mere sympathy, that nurtured cosmopolitanism.

Wilde looks not to an art that merely imitates contemporary life, but to one that seeks out our contemporary expressions of beauty, or what Baudelaire referred to as modernité. He sought to utilise inversions, ironies and shifts in points of view to produce new meanings and possibilities, similarly to twentieth-century modernism. To the extent that the modern was associated with realism, the bourgeoisie, journalism and education, Wilde, like all modernists, was anti-modern: 'For he to whom the present is the only thing that is present, knows nothing of the age in which he lives' [41]. He extended Baudelaire's emphasis on the modern heroism of the artist to include the critic: 'it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvelous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age . . . ' [42]. Wilde sought 'the true meaning of the word modernity' [43] in the ideal of beauty, which he found in new and fresh impressions. To be of influence the critic must attempt to make the age conscious, 'creating in it new desires and appetites, and lending it his larger vision and his nobler moods' [44].

Wilde's conception of the beautiful encompassed all aspects of humanity, evil and sin included. His construction of himself as saint and sinner in De Profundis refuses the kind of mutually exclusive positions that reduce choice and agency. This again connects him with the postcolonial concern to realise the mutual imbrication of coloniser and colonised - particularly close in the case of the English and the Irish - and to open up new possibilities. In the face of inherited morality, sin is 'self-expressive rather than self-repressive' [45]. Wilde valued the deliberateness and self-consciousness of lying, as opposed to the 'careless habits of accuracy' [46], because of its association with creativity. His essay on Thomas Griffith Wainwright - artist, critic, forger, poisoner - presents 'an intense personality being created out of sin' [47]. The movement between light and dark was also an important component of later modernism [48]. So Baudelaire's aesthetic of evil finds clear echo in The Picture of Dorian Gray and Wilde's acceptance of his own criminality in De Profundis anticipates Jean Genet [49]. In the face of the unproblematic modernity that underpins English culturalism, Wilde maintains

that 'the sphere of Art and the sphere of Ethics are absolutely distinct and separate' [50].

In the debate between the ancients and the moderns there was no doubt as to where Wilde stood. Josephine Guy notes that if Pater reworked tradition as a cover for new emphases, Wilde reworked it so as to set the new itself in greater relief. For Wilde, tradition authorises nothing; rather, contemporary purpose authorises tradition [51]. He believed the classics had become degraded in being used as 'bludgeons for preventing the free expression of Beauty in new forms' [52]. In contrast to the maturity of Victorian culture, Wilde's characteristic mode was, in Ellmann's phrase, 'calculated juvenescence' [53]. For Wilde, 'The old believe everything: the middle-aged suspect everything: the young know everything' [54]. As with postcolonialism, he declines to return to the past, emphasising creativity and openness to the future. As with Baudelaire, he looks for beauty, not in any inherited rules or systems, but wherever it happens to be [55]. Art and individuality are associated with novelty. He characterises contemporary art in terms of 'its seeking for new subjects in poetry, new forms in art, new intellectual and imaginative enjoyments' [56].

In response to Victorian restriction, Wilde sought to project a utopian world embodied in the work of art. Nandy draws parallels between Wilde and Adorno's important conceptualisation of the utopian impulse within modernism: 'The art which defies the existent is the art which is subversive; it "undermines things as they are" [57]. Through art, Wilde sought to provide a measure for how far English civilisation still had to develop: 'England will never be civilized till she has added Utopia to her dominions. There is more than one of her colonies that she might with advantage surrender for so fair a land' [58]. It is in this sense that his judgements are aesthetic rather than moral. Importantly, Wilde did not regard art as a rarefied realm, but as the means to find coherence in a world dominated by accumulation and utilitarianism [59].

It was against the strictures of realism that Wilde posited a world in which life imitates art: the utopia represented in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is one in which double lives are not so much exposed, as in conventional Victorian drama, but revealed as true [60]. Hidden lives repressed by convention, are, in the utopian moment, allowed realisation. This is a world turned upside-down; as Kiberd notes, hierarchies are reversed, and oppositions transcended [61]. For Wilde, 'A Truth in art is that whose contrary is also true' [62]. The dialogic form of his essays employ shifting and dislocated viewpoints to rework inherited forms, categories and language [63]. Through this form the thinker is able to

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 ... , 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 . . . . [64]

Rather than moralise or instruct, Wilde sought to make us see anew, he sought to create a totally new audience: 'Now Art should never try to be popular. The public should try to make itself artistic' [65]. Yeats would later draw upon Wilde's ideas in his attempt to create an audience in an emergent Irish nation.

The strong connections between Wilde and later modernisms allow changes in our understanding of both. Far from representing withdrawal into an autonomous realm protected from worldly concerns, Wilde's project is characterised by social and cultural engagement. Modernism can be seen not as the product of an abstract cosmopolitanism but as connected to concerns such as those generated from the colonial periphery. Wilde's interrogation of the selective tradition underlying Englishness opened a space that writers like Yeats and Joyce would later utilise. He struggled against the choices offered him by a dominant modernity, particularly its colonial forms, particularly as experienced in Ireland. The function of criticism was now to interrupt the flow of linear time and make a bid for life on a new basis. This was the beginning of a revolutionary and utopian program which sought a world that would live up to the promise of aesthetic beauty. It also marked the beginning of a distinctly Irish modernism that engaged in a wide-ranging struggle for modernity on its own terms.

## Endnotes

- [1] This paper is part of a larger study on Irish modernism. I would like to thank my supervisor Associate Professor Andrew Milner for his valuable assistance. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [2] Worth, Katherine, *Oscar Wilde*. (London: Macmillan, 1983), p.5-9. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [3] Eltis, Sos, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde*. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996). p.2. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [4] Kohl, Norbert, *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*. Trans. David Henry Wilson. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989). p.325. Eltis (p.2) also cites a passage from Kohl, and Richard Allen Cave notes that Worth constructs Wilde as a 'transitional figure' between Victorianism and innovation (p.219-220). [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [5] Wilde, Oscar, 'The Decay of Lying' in Richard Ellmann, *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*. (New York: U of Chicago P, 1982). p.311. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [6] Walkowitz, Judith R, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992).p.38. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [7] Bürger, Peter, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984). p.27. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [8] Gagnier, Regenia, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1986).p.7. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [9] Williams, Raymond, *Marxism and Literature*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977). p.54. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [10] Wilde, *Decay*. p.311. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [11] Berman, Marshall, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. (New York: Penguin, 1988). p.15-16. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [12] Wilde, Oscar, *The Importance of Being Earnest* in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. (Glasgow: Harper, 1994). p.369. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [13] Said, Edward, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. (London: Vintage, 1994). p.44. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [14] '- The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.' Joyce, James, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992). p.203. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [15] Kiberd, Declan, *Inventing Ireland*. (London: Cape, 1995). p.41. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [16] After the opening performance of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde is reported to have said to the audience: 'I congratulate you on the great success of your performance, which persuades me that you think almost as highly of the play as I do myself.' Ellmann, Richard, *Oscar Wilde*. (London: Hamish, 1987). p.346. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [17] Kiberd p.30, 44-45. Nandy, Ashis, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1998).p.43-44. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [18] Wilde, *Importance*, p.397. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [19] Nandy p.43-44. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [20] Wilde, 'Decay,' p.313. There are parallels here with the modes of self-protection Nandy identifies in the Indian context: 'a slightly comical imitateness which indirectly reveals the ridiculousness of the powerful; an instrumental use of the ways of the powerful, which overtly grants their superiority yet denies their culture. p.84. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [21] Wilde, Oscar, 'The Critic as Artist' in Richard Ellmann, *Artist as Critic*. p.373. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [22] Said, Edward W, *Culture and Imperialism*. (London: Chatto, 1993). p.19. [Return to endnote reference](#)

- [23] As Nandy points out, the material gains of imperialism failed to compensate for the social and psychological loss, the cultural damage, which brought 'into prominence those parts of the British culture which were least tender and humane' and imposed 'a false sense of cultural homogeneity' producing illusory 'feelings of omnipotence and superiority.' p.30-35. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [24] Ashcroft, Bill et al., *The Empire Writes Back*. (London: Routledge, 1989). [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [25] Williams, Raymond, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*. (London: Verso, 1989).p.47. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [26] This is well taught by Eagleton when he observes that for Wilde 'Nature ... suggests an oppressive normativity. Nature is the family, heterosexuality, stock notions, social convention; and Wilde had only to be presented with a convention to feel the irresistible urge to violate it. His whole instinct was to improvise, experiment, self-fashion; and if he disliked the natural it was because, as one who made a fetish out of originality, he found it repetitive and predictable. One is tempted to speculate one reason for his homosexuality is just the fact that he found heterosexuality intolerably cliched; and Wilde was more afraid of a cliché than he was of appearing on Piccadilly in the wrong cut of waistcoat.' Eagleton, Terry, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*. (London: Verso, 1995). p.334. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [27] Wilde, 'Decay,' p.290-291. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [28] Wilde, 'Critic,' p.385. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [29] Showalter, Elaine, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle*. (London: Virago, 1992). [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [30] Wilde, *Importance*, p.362. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [31] Showalter, p.18. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [32] Said, Edward W, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. (London: Vintage, 1991).p.16. Kiberd notes that 'What is canvassed throughout *The Importance of Being Earnest* is nothing less than the revolutionary idea of the self-created man or woman,' p.46. See also Nandy p.45. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [33] Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray in Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. p.108. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [34] Wilde, Oscar, 'Mr Froude's Blue Book [on Ireland]' in Richard Ellmann, *Artist as Critic*. p.136. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [35] McCormack, Jerusha, 'Wilde's Fiction(s)'. *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Peter Raby. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997).p.96. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [36] Arnold, Matthew, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time.' *The Portable Matthew Arnold*. Ed. Lionel Trilling. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980). p.238. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [37] Wilde, 'Critic,' p.369. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [38] Eagleton, Terry, *Saint Oscar and Other Plays*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997). p.1. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [39] Wilde, 'Critic,' p.364. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [40] Wilde, 'Critic,' p.403. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [41] Wilde, 'Critic,' p.382. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [42] Wilde, 'Critic,' p.367-368. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [43] Wilde, 'Critic,' p.382. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [44] Wilde, 'Critic,' p.400. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [45] Wilde, Oscar, Introduction to *De Profundis* in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. p.xxii. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [46] Wilde, 'Decay,' p.297. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [47] Wilde, Oscar, 'Pen, Pencil and Poison.' in Richard Ellmann, *Artist as Critic*. p.338. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [48] Deane notes that 'Between them Yeats and Joyce recognize in Wilde the first Irish writer in whom the tragic plight of the modern artist is fully represented ... [H]e embodied in his life and in his art contradictions by which he was victimized and at the same time stimulated. The light and bright and sparkling element, which is most pronounced in his comedies, coexisted with a darker more sinister force, most pronounced in his fiction. Deane, Seamus, *A Short History of Irish Literature*. (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1986). [Return to endnote reference](#)

- [49] Ellmann notes the similarity between Wilde and Genet. 'Introduction,' p.xxvi. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [50] Wilde, 'Critic,' p.393. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [51] Guy, Josephine, *The British Avant-Garde: The Theory and Politics of Tradition*. (New York: Harvester, 1991). p.142,143,151. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [52] Wilde, Oscar, 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' in Richard Ellmann, *Artist as Critic*. p.273. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [53] Ellmann, 'Introduction,' *Oscar Wilde*. (London: Hamish, 1987) p.x. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [54] Wilde, Oscar, 'Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young' in Richard Ellmann, *Artist as Critic*. p.434. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [55] Green, R. J. 'Oscar Wilde's *Intentions*: An Early Modernist Manifesto.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 13.4 (Autumn, 1973): 397-404. p.402. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [56] quoted in Patricia Clements, *Baudelaire and the English Tradition*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985).p.151. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [57] Nandy, p.45. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [58] Wilde, 'Critic,' p.386. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [59] As Willoughby puts it: 'The ideal aesthetic man treats his fellows with the sensitivity otherwise reserved for art, with due regard for the complex uniqueness of each; he strives to turn his own life into an image, 'the most wonderful of poems,' like Christ's life; and he interacts with the world according to the criteria of aesthetics, seeking at any given moment for that 'pure, synthetic impression,' that everchanging 'form' out of 'chaos,' of which Gilbert speaks in *Intentions*.' Willoughby, Guy, 'Oscar Wilde and Poststructuralism.' *Philosophy and Literature*, 13 (1989): 316-324. p.323. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [60] Eltis notes that 'No ... unmasking ends *The Importance of Being Earnest*; Cecily, Algy and Jack become their own fantastic doubles, permanently granted the freedoms which their fiction allowed them.' p.196. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [61] Kiberd, p.41. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [62] Wilde, Oscar, 'The Truth of Masks' in Richard Ellmann, *Artist as Critic*. p.432. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [63] Green observes that 'the modernity of *Intentions* lies less in the answers than in the questions that are raised by the style adopted in these essays - flashy, *bravura*, opinionated and outrageous.' p.400-401. Willoughby notes that 'The nervous crackle of consciousness, perpetually forming and reforming itself in the effort of synthesis, is reflected in the cut-and-thrust dialogue of his best critical essays and plays.' p.321. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [64] Wilde, 'Critic,' p.391. [Return to endnote reference](#)
- [65] Wilde, 'Soul,' p.271. [Return to endnote reference](#)

**Gary Pearce works as a reference librarian at RMIT University Library. He is writing a PhD thesis on Irish Modernism at the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, Monash University. He recently presented a paper on 'Raymond Williams: "Walking Backwards into the Future"' at *Overland's* 'Raymond Williams: After 2000' conference held at Melbourne Trades Hall.**

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