



ONE DAY, OSCAR WILDE

IRISH WRITERS SERIES 4

Edited by Burçin Erol

One Day, Oscar Wilde

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Department of English Language and Literature
Hacettepe University

and

Embassy of Ireland

Irish Writers Series: 4

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Literature, 2016
Ankara, Turkey
Printed by Bizim Büro



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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the colleagues and staff members in the Department of English Language and Literature who have helped in the process of putting together the chapters in this volume which were shorter presentations in the “One Day, Oscar Wilde Conference” organised at Hacettepe University. I owe special thanks to Assistant Professor Dr. Sinan Akıllı for his ever present support and for designing the cover of the present volume. I would like to express my gratitude to Barrie Maguire for allowing us to use his painting, the portrait of Oscar Wilde for the cover. Special thanks are due to the Irish Embassy, the Ambassador of Ireland to Ankara, HE Ken Thompson and Simon Williams, the associate Director of Trinity Foundation who have most kindly collaborated for the conference and made the keynote speaker Julia Rosenthal’s presence at the conference possible. I would also like to express my gratitude to research assistant Osman İşçi for his help in resolving the technical problems. Last but not least I would like to express my gratitude to Hacettepe University for the financial support of the project.



Foreword

This volume is comprised of the articles focusing on different aspects and works of Oscar Wilde that arose out of the presentations of the “One Day, Oscar Wilde Conference” held at Hacettepe University in 2014 with the collaboration of the Embassy of Ireland and Trinity Foundation.

The aim of the volume is to bring together the work of the scholars in Turkey who specialise in and have publications on the works of Oscar Wilde and the guest speaker Julia Rosenthal to provide a compendium of research on the diverse aspects of his works. Oscar Wilde, who is famous for his wit, epigrammatic sayings and colourful and extraordinary personality can be said to be basically known with his plays but he is a prolific writer who has written in the genres of novel, short story, poetry, fairy tales, essays, drama and what he himself defines as prose poems. The articles in this volume discuss various aspects of his works in different genres, and approach his works from different and novel perspectives.

Also, we will have the chance to see how Oscar Wilde has fared in Turkey and Turkish. In fact quite a number of his plays have been translated into Turkish, some more than once by different translators. Some of his plays have been staged in Turkish by the State Theatre, especially in the last two decades. Some of his prose works have been staged as plays. His long ballad and last poetic work *The Ballad of Reading Goal* has been translated more than once. And, interestingly enough his shorter prose work *The Happy Prince* has been included in the hotly debated 100 Essential Literary Works list approved by the Ministry of Education in 2005. His witty sayings have been anthologised in various “wise sayings” collections.

The first article by Julia Rosenthal, an antiquarian and bookdealer, takes a look at Wilde's life, works and his possessions especially written works to provide a different perspective to the studies in the volume. Berrin Aksoy in her article provides an indepth examination of how Oscar Wilde's works were regarded and translated in Turkey, especially concentrating on the earlier years. Huriye Reis provides a study of Oscar Wilde's poetic works calling attention to the fact that as much as he shaped poems he was also shaped by his poems. Lerzan Gültekin gives a detailed analysis of the writers only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the light of Aesthetic movement. Özlem Uzundemir reads the same novel so as to shed light on the ideas of the writer about art and literature. Laurence Raw in his article approaches the novel through the dynamics and power exercise strategies of colonialism. Zeynep Atayurt Fenge discusses two of the dramatic works of Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *A Woman of No importance* in the light of food culture. The last article which is by Neslihan Ekmekcioğlu focuses on the fairytales of the writer arguing that in these works the writer is in fact subverting the values of his time.

I hope that this volume will contribute to the studies of Oscar Wilde by providing new approaches and ways of reading his works as well as presenting new material in the field.

Burçin Erol
2016



1

Why Wilde? From Oxford to Trinity: Collecting and Recollecting

Julia Rosenthal

I should like to set the scene for my chapter by referring to the introduction to my friend Thomas Wright's monograph on Oscar Wilde, *Oscar's Books*, published in 2008¹, which pioneers a unique form of biography through the prism of Wilde's formative reading and later library.

As Thomas Wright states while Oscar Wilde was in Holloway prison all his belongings that were in his house in Tite Street Chelsea were sold by auction. This was done on the demand of his creditors among whom was Marquis of Queensberry. Wilde's belongings were sold by auction on the premises. Perhaps among the most valuable of his possessions such as various portraits, china and furniture were

¹ The original edition published by Chatto and Windus, the references appearing in this chapter are from the American edition *Built of Books, How Reading Defined the Life of Oscar Wilde*. New York: Henry Holt and Co, 2009. The Turkish translation is to be published by İthaki Yayınları in 2016.

his collection of books (Wright 2). He had collected these books from his very early ages. The auction turned into a plunder as “curiosity hunters” were after the belongings of Wilde who had become a notorious figure. Wright narrates in detail the lengths to these crowds went and how peace could only be established by the police (3). The public not only bought the books but were also after any private letter or memento which would relate to his private life. As Wright points out, antique dealers and second hand book dealers flocked to the auction and although the public sale of private letters and manuscripts were forbidden all such possessions of Wilde were sold (4). As Wright states “Extremely personal items were auctioned off, such as first editions of Wilde’s works that he had inscribed to his wife and two sons. Wilde especially lamented the loss of his sumptuous ‘*editions de luxe*’, and the ‘collection of presentation volumes’ that had been presented to him by ‘almost every poet of my time’. He also regretted the dispersal of his ‘beautifully bound editions of’ his ‘father’s and mother’s works’, and the ‘wonderful array’ of ‘book prizes’ that had been awarded to him as a schoolboy.” Wilde’s library which was estimated to contain over 2000 volumes and various other periodicals, and magazines were sold at very low prices and were bought by different members of the public which dispersed them perhaps never to be put together again (4-5). Only very few of these could be bought back by Wilde’s friends and be returned to him. Wilde, as Wright emphasises was inconsolable on learning the fate of his library and as he describes the situation “Like many Nineteenth century gentlemen, he regarded books as his ‘friends’, and his collection as both as a record of his life and as an emblem of his personality. Books were extremely personal objects to him, and he delighted in making them uniquely his own. He inscribed his name on their title-pages in his elegant hand; he also habitually marked and annotated them”(50). Wilde’s library was a rich collection bringing together books from classics, medieval to modern and from French, Italian and German literatures. His collection reflected his wide interests and included volumes on diverse subjects such as folklore, Japanese art, science, philosophy, art history, mythology and archaeology. Books meant a lot to Wilde and as Wright further argues “Books were the greatest single influence on Wilde’s life and writing... he was a man who built himself out of books”(6). Wright also draws attention to how Wilde also used his favourite books as ‘prompt books’ for various roles he assumed in the different stages of his life and points to the fact that he began using Sebastian Melmoth as his name with reference to the hero in Charles Maturin’s novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* after his release from prison (7). His life was imbued with books, he resembled his friends and acquaintances to characters from books. His reading

was a very important source for his inspiration and he alluded to his wide reading in his works. Moreover he made a habit of surrounding himself or posing with his books in interviews and when posing for photographs (Wright 8). Again as Wright puts it "Books appear at every stage on Wilde's life's way from his boyhood, in which he 'loved literature to excess', to the his death, surrounded by books in a cheap Parisian hotel. For Wilde, books were a life-long Romance"(8).

In the Spring of 1895, my maternal grandfather, Wilde's namesake Oscar Levy, then aged 28, who had turned his back on the fetid air of nascent nationalism and militarism in his native Germany three years before, found himself in London during the trials, which he recorded in his unpublished autobiography half a century later:

During this time (1895) the Oscar Wilde "Affair". Convicted by prostitutes (male). Sir Edward Carson, the counsel of the opposite side, is said to have regretted the condemnation all his life. The indignant judge. The indignant public. Hosiers had to stop selling certain collars which Oscar Wilde wore. As the public objects! The saturnalia of the *moral canaille*. England at her "best". Lack of psychology. Pride in Empire - the consequence of a Puritan Valuation that has no other outlets.

Levy, a medical doctor, poet, essayist and translator, had his attention drawn to the works of Friedrich Nietzsche by a patient, and devoted his whole life, most intensely between 1908 and 1913, as the editor and financier of the complete authorised English edition of the philosopher's works in eighteen volumes, to promoting his ideology and disentangling this from the skein of falsehoods woven around it ever since - stating in an article in *The Scotsman* by Walter Shaw, dating to August 1914, entitled "The Philosophical Basis of German Militarism." Levy received a copy, enhanced with a personal dedication: "You have brought this poison to England."

In the autumn of 1921, Levy underwent a trial of his own at the hands of the British Government, when he was expelled from England under the Enemy Aliens Restriction Act, repealed the following year, a cause célèbre vociferously condemned by such writers as Conan Doyle, Galsworthy, Shaw, H.G. Wells, Virginia Woolf and many others. Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde's nemesis, who knew Levy well through their contact on the journal *Plain English*, vouched for him too, personally, at Bow Street Court. Levy's debt to him, not least for establishment boat rocking and publishing Levy's

own - notably a letter on Antisemitism, which contributed to the expulsion in the same year, is warmly recollected in *Mein Kampf um Nietzsche* (My Fight for Nietzsche) (1925). Levy also took Douglas's side in the aftermath of the Wilde affair and regarded him as a scapegoat for the calumnies and falsifications that were common currency at the time.

In 1940, the year that Bernard Shaw penned the blurb to Levy's last published work, *The Idiocy of Idealism*, characterising him as a "well-known and thoroughly tactless Nietzschean [sic] Jew", his future son-in-law, my father, Albi, found *himself* behind the barbed wire at Lingfield racecourse - interned as a half Italian German Jewish émigré (he was not to be granted British citizenship until 1947) - and consoling himself playing Leclair violin sonatas to transcend the camp's confines. Born in Munich in 1914, from the age of ten Albi had longed to become an Englishman, seeing in Heinrich Heine's "Land of Liberty" all the freedoms fast dwindling away in their homeland, and he settled in London in 1933 aged 18, in Croydon, lodging with the distinguished Irish scholar, Robin Flower, then Deputy Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum, whom he always referred to as "Daddy". When the policeman came for him early that summer morning in 1940, the redoubtable concierge at his Mayfair flat stated: "You can't do that! He is practically an Englishman!" Nevertheless, his letters from Lingfield were soon to be "Opened by the Censor". It is not surprising that Levy's only child, my mother Maud, his faithful daughter-secretary born five years before her parents married, a student of literature and history of art at five universities in four countries, inscribed the following Wilde aphorism from *The Critic as Artist* in her quotation book: "What is termed Sin, is an essential element of progress. In its rejections of the current notions about morality it is one with the higher ethics." As Wilde's magisterial biographer, Richard Ellmann, put it: "Along with Blake and Nietzsche, he was proposing that good and evil are not what they seem, that moral tabs cannot cope with the complexity of behaviour"(xiv). As to Wilde's own, his earliest apologist in print, Dal Young, summed up these thoughts as early as June 1895 at the height of his disgrace: "As regards sin, even if we know, or think we know what a man has done, we know nothing about the motive or the manner; and under these circumstances, any outside judgement is a mere impertinence"(np).

With this peripatetic background, in 1968, aged fourteen, I was cast as Miss Prism in our fifth form production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at Oxford High School. In February, I had attended my first Wilde play, a performance of *Earnest* at the

Theatre Royal, Haymarket, with Dame Flora Robson as Prism, whom I ambushed backstage afterwards, seeking advice (First performance 8 February 1986). In May, when our slightly older counterparts were on the barricades, rioting in Paris, we were coming to terms with the delicious paradoxes of Wilde's comic masterpiece, relishing, in our highly competitive academic environment, such lines as "Fortunately, in England at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square." As well as falling totally in love with Wilde's verbal brilliance, I grew very fond of my character - the prim pedagogue with a passionate heart under the high-necked, beribboned blouse, and my first - and only- encounter with a fictional bluestocking, whose conviction depended on me! It is a tribute to Wilde's linguistic hegemony that I still remember my part almost verbatim, 46 years later. The very talented classmate who played my charge, Cecily Cardew, "disappeared" from school shortly afterwards and there was a collection for her wedding present - fair exchange for a "passionate celibacy" perhaps, but surreal nonetheless.

Although I had started to collect autographs of eminent personalities at the age of nine -not that unusual, coming from a dynasty, now in its fifth generation on my father's side, of antiquarian book and manuscript dealers - Wilde was in a different, unique category from the outset. I was convinced, perhaps even genetically predisposed to believe, though unaware of it at the time and equally ignorant of the sexual side, that English society had done him a great wrong and I began the collection with a clear wish, in my small way, to treat him well to atone for this.

My friendship with Richard Ellmann, from 1970-1984 Goldsmith's Professor of English Literature at Oxford, the first American to occupy the chair, was a key component in the development of my collection. We must have met in his early days amongst the dreaming spires, at his home, 39 St. Giles', or in New College, through school. His ferociously bright daughter, another Maud, was in my A-level English class - her donnish perspicacity, aided and abetted by the hooded romantic cloak she always wore, bestrode the class of lesser mortals. She went on to edit Ezra Pound - even the dust-jacket left me out of my depth! Dick was deeply proud of his post-structuralist daughter. One of our most memorable conversations centred around Flaubert's use of the imperfect tense - especially in *Madame Bovary*, a novel I adore, where the accumulation of the incantatory 'ait' and 'aient' endings is such a contributory factor to the "sinless master's" depiction of the

monochrome of provincial, rain-lashed boredom. Far removed from Maud's modernism, who regarded such structures as a bourgeois tyranny, but very close to Wilde, who wrote in a letter to W.E. Henley, dating to the end of 1888: "Flaubert is my master, and when I get on with my translation of the *Tentation* (The Temptation of St. Antony), I shall be Flaubert II, Roi par grâce de Dieu, and I hope something else beyond" (Hart-Davis 76). In exile ten years later, he spent evenings re-reading this text, which he had proudly plagiarized. James Joyce, too, had a tense relationship with Flaubert, challenging his use of the past historic instead of the imperfect in *Trois Contes*, which turned out to be incorrect, a great disappointment to Anthony Burgess: "The pedants, including the lexicographers, say that Flaubert was right, which is a pity. I do not like Joyce's linguistic competence to be thus diminished" he quipped.

As early as 1970, when Ellmann gave up his chair at Yale to come to Oxford, which he thought a suitable venue, he had been engaged on his Wilde biography, in parallel with the revision of his 1959 magnum opus on James Joyce - "the first writer to show us in England what literature really is" Dick claimed, published in 1982 and heralded as the greatest literary biography of the twentieth century by Anthony Burgess and, according to the Trinity College Dublin scholar, David Norris, ranking alongside Boswell's life of Johnson (qtd in Scaduto). Ellmann's earliest monograph, one of two on Yeats, *The Man and The Mask*, came out in 1948 after Dick obtained his first degree at Trinity.

After I had completed my BA in French and German at Durham and worked in an art reference bookshop in London from late 1976 - 1979, I returned to Oxford to run the family antiquarian book business in Broad Street, a venue for bibliophiles in the nineteenth century too, including Wilde. Our premises were perfectly situated at the mid-point between New College and Dick's home. In 1981, a year before the Joyce biography was reissued, Ellmann published *The Consciousness of Joyce*, which included as an appendix a listing of his library in June 1920, some 600 titles, comprising nearly all the books left behind in Trieste, when he moved to Paris - an unsurprisingly wide-ranging collection, in six languages, with editions of Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*, *Intentions*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Salomé*, *Selected Poems*, *The Soul of Man under Socialism* and *A Woman of No Importance* as well as Sherard's monograph on Wilde, published in 1908. Three of Nietzsche's works in my grandfather's edition were also present, and, of course *Madame Bovary*, albeit in English translation. This group also bore witness that Joyce knew the

writings of Freud, Jung and Ernest Jones several years earlier than had been supposed. Dick wanted to reassemble as many works as possible in the same editions Joyce read them in and asked me to help. We managed to bring together 75-odd titles, which did not include volumes he already had or did not need (Ellmann 97-134). It was a thrilling project, which, hand in hand with Wilde meant we met increasingly frequently. I had acquired my first autograph letter, to Lady Randolph Churchill (Winston's mother), in 1976, with probably the earliest written reference to *An Ideal Husband* and with a quotation from Act III of *A Woman of No Importance*: "The only difference between the Saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future!" A *sans-pareil* paradox of my very own!

In the mid 1980s, Dick took on the Woodruff Professorship at Emory University in Atlanta. He confided in me that he was "feeling less immortal than he used to" and was soon to be diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, a cruel terminal degeneration of the nervous system. Although increasingly incapacitated, Dick was determined to complete the Wilde biography, which meant delegating much of the final editing. When he penned the acknowledgements in March 1987, their date, "The Ides of March", referred also to his own; he died in mid-May with the proofs at his bedside (Ellmann *Oscar Wilde* xii). He was 69. Like so many others, I was totally stricken at the loss of such a dear friend and mentor, and consoled myself that his immortality as a biographer, at least, was assured and with Joyce's message that death is no more than a mask - Ellmann's subjects remaining more alive than ever in the amber of his prose, as he does himself. I was delighted to be able to acquire James Edward Kelly's etched portrait of Wilde, commissioned by him in New York in 1882 at the beginning of his American tour, signed in pencil, from Dick's estate, which is reproduced in the biography (210-211). Since its universally acclaimed publication - it won the Pulitzer Prize in 1989 - much, mainly teutonic, ink has been spilt over the myriad inaccuracies and it has started a school of *Besserwissenschaft* (editorial oneupmanship) all of its own. Let us set Ellmann's conclusion against the wielders of blue pencil:

'There is something vulgar in all success' Wilde told O'Sullivan. 'The greatest men fail, or seem to have failed.' He was speaking of Parnell, but what was true of Parnell is in another way true of Wilde. His work survived as he had claimed it would. We inherit his struggle to achieve supreme fictions in art, to associate art with social change, to bring together individual and

social impulse, to save what is eccentric and singular from being sanitized and standardized, to replace a morality of severity by one of sympathy. 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, so right.(*Oscar Wilde Dustjacket*)

This echoes Dick's remark on his Joyce revision: "I have followed Joyce's own prescription of total candor, with the knowledge that his life, like Rousseau's, can bear others' scrutiny as it bore his own. In working over these pages, I have felt all my affection for him renewed" (Epilogue 533-4). "All men have their disciples, and it is usually Judas who writes the biography" according to Wilde. How fortunate he, Yeats and Joyce were in their elective affinity with Richard Ellmann. John Murray's newly commissioned Wilde biography by Matthew Sturgis, doyen of decadence and of the lives of Aubrey Beardsley and Walter Sickert, is due for publication in the autumn of 2016, and will doubtless throw down the gauntlet for the twenty-first century evaluation.

One other friendship, with a nonagenarian neighbour, Sybil Jackson, brought me very close to Wilde. She used to attend my school, riding on horseback from Boars Hill on the outskirts of Oxford and tethering her horse at The Roebuck Inn, where she changed into her uniform. She had proudly entertained Rasputin's murderer, Prince Yusupov to tea, then a handsome young undergraduate at Christ Church. She recalled an afternoon party which Wilde attended. Gesturing expansively, he sent a loaded tray flying across the room out of the hands of the hapless butler - and carried on talking as if nothing had happened. What panache! My father's colleague in the Music Faculty, Bernard Rose, a member of Magdalen College, got hold of the original wooden toilet seat from Oscar's rooms at the time of their refurbishment, and reinstalled it in his home, a relic that, Trinity were glad to know, passed me by! My mother was also close to Wilde's circle through her acquaintance with Reggie Turner during her studies in Florence and his letter to her is in the collection. Turner and Robbie Ross, his most loyal longterm friends, were present when Oscar died in Paris in 1900.

In 1986, at the sale of papers belonging to Carlos Blacker, the dedicatee of *The Happy Prince*, through whom Wilde met Zola, I acquired a visiting card printed in the name of Sebastian Melmoth, Wilde's pseudonym in exile, printed with his location in May 1897,

Bernevalsur- Mer, near Dieppe. In 1991 I was able to add the silver card case, which fitted it exactly, similarly engraved, given by his “Sphinx” and dear friend, Ada Leverson². This marks the beginning of the collection’s focus on exile and the dénouement of Oscar’s life from 1895 -1900. It was preceded by the receipt in the sum of £ 25 from More Adey, dated on the day of his release from prison in the same month, my earliest acquisition in the late 1960s. On May 28th, Wilde’s influential letter on prison reform appeared in the *Daily Chronicle* and its publication as a pamphlet the following year *Children in Prison and Other Cruelties of Prison Life*, movingly describing painful episodes Wilde witnessed in Reading, is in the collection.

Thomas Wright again, this time from his introduction to it:

Wilde had always been a self-consciously European intellectual. In being ‘exiled’ to France, it could be said that he was going home. Wilde famously described himself as ‘French by culture, Irish by race’, before adding ‘and the English have condemned me to speak the language of Shakespeare.’ Wilde made that Anglo-Saxon curse rebound against its authors by turning the English language upside down, and inside out, in his paradoxical, topsy-turvy writings, while at the same time demonstrating that an Irishman could enhance its beauty and range. Wilde also succeeded in evading the ‘English’ curse by writing his symbolist drama, *Salomé*, in French (‘I wanted’, he commented, ‘once to touch this instrument.. to which I had listened all my life ... to see if I could make a beautiful thing out of it.’)(np)

I was able to purchase a copy of the first French edition of *Salomé* (1893), inscribed to the symbolist poet José-Maria de Hérédia, whose oeuvre was an inspiration for the play, mentioned first on Wilde’s monument in Père Lachaise cemetery. On 24 May 1897, the letter inviting the actor, Lugné Poë, who played Herod in the first production of *Salomé* the previous year, to lunch, known only from a typescript when the *Collected Letters* were published in 2000, together with the original Toulouse Lautrec lithographed programme are also present. In a letter in French to the writer Paul Bonnefon, acknowledging the receipt of a book, most likely his monograph on Montaigne, published in 1893, also in the collection, Wilde explains

² Blacker Sale: Sotheby’s London, 10 July 1986, lot 125; card case: Christie’s London 16 December 1991, lot 329.

some of the reasons for his Francophilia, paraphrased as follows: "... in Paris", he writes, "one reveals everything: here [in London] one conceals everything, even wit: that is the difference between France and England." He goes on to praise French conversation: "if the French ceased coming to London, the English would forget what graceful conversation is."

Wright continues:

The seeds of Wilde's francophilia were planted during his Dublin childhood: it is indeed inextricably bound up with his Irishness. Having been taught French at home by a native governess, Wilde became, he later recalled 'particularly fond of French writings' as a youth because he felt they were 'pervaded by an enthusiasm having some kinship with that peculiar to the Irish.' His passion was heightened by the belief, imbibed from his parents, that the French were descended from the Celts. In their ancestry, as well as in their intellectual sophistication, and keen sensitivity to art and to the beautiful surfaces of life the French were for the Wildes, far closer to the Irish than the stolid, plodding, philistine English. Wilde would find solace and tranquility at Berneval, largely because the French continued to regard him as an artist, rather than as a notorious ex-convict and pervert, which was his reputation in England.

Henry Davray, the translator of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, mostly written at Berneval and later Naples, (a presentation copy of the work, which was overseen by its author - his "swansong of Marsyas" [*Selected Letters* 333]- with many other early, illustrated and foreign editions are in the collection), sent Wilde a number of volumes of contemporary French literature inscribed to him by their authors. In an unpublished acknowledgement, dating to mid-December 1898, Wilde professes himself "greatly touched by the sympathy and attention shown to me by you and other French writers." Elsewhere, he refers to France as "the modern mother of all artists", who has "many wilful sons whom she always consoles and often heals."

Twentieth century French critics go even further. In the mid-1970s, Jacques de Langlade calls Wilde a French writer who, ahead of his time, brought answers to questions that had not yet been posed; in this respect, writers as diverse as Maurice Barrès, Proust and Gide recognised themselves in the theory of fin-de-siècle art that Wilde

proposed to them. If the author of *De Profundis* is close to men of today, it is not because he is the incarnation of the period around 1900, but because he knew how to free himself from it (Preface). And, in the words of Kelter Hartley in 1935, Wilde was the first French author of English race since Anthony Hamilton and Beckford (np).

Since the early 1990s, I have travelled yearly to Berneval, where the first international exhibition of the collection was held in June 1995, to mark the centenary of Wilde's arrest and incarceration, with a catalogue in both French and English (*L'Homme de Londres*); a small group of items was also taken to Paris exactly two years earlier when the Oscar Wilde Society visited. In 1994, I compiled a major exhibition, "Oscar in Carcere," at Reading Remand Centre as it then was, to mark the 150th anniversary of the founding of Reading Gaol in 1844. There were two further Berneval exhibitions in 1997, to mark the centenary of the release and, in 2000, that of Wilde's death. That anniversary saw exhibitions at Schloss Wernigerode in the Harz mountains, Germany, at the Barbican and British Library, the latter without the catalogue which the vast contents, many from private collections, notably that of Mary Hyde Eccles, called, if not cried out for, as well as the publication of the monumental *Complete Letters*, edited by the late Rupert Hart Davis and Merlin Holland, Wilde's grandson, with and from whom, by then I had enjoyed much contact, support and advice (*Complete Letters*). In the spring of 1997, Merlin, his late wife and I visited Berneval and were transported in horse-drawn carriages through the glorious countryside. There was an event with local schoolchildren - Oscar had befriended their ancestors in 1897 when he gave a memorable party to mark Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee - and a lecture given by Merlin in Dieppe. The British Library exhibition, in reduced form, was also shown at the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, in the late summer of 2001. As some of my collection was included, I had the privilege of accompanying Sally Brown, the British Library literary curator, with the original manuscript of *De Profundis* on the flight, Wilde's *Epistola in Carcere et Vinculis* (Letter in Prison and in Chains), which, writing to Robert Ross, he described as "the only document that really gives any explanation of my extraordinary behaviour with regard to Queensberry and Alfred Douglas." Before arriving in New York in 1882 and wary of critics, he wrote of the "cloud of misrepresentation" that must have preceded him. 120 years later, the manuscript's arrival was met by the actual acrid cloud of the smouldering ruins of the World Trade Centre, glinting enticingly in the evening sun when we arrived and destroyed the next morning. Thanks to Oscar, who put me in the thick of it in Manhattan that week, I was able to witness the aftermath at first

hand. What annoyed me most, I have to admit, was that the official exhibition opening, scheduled for the next day, was cancelled; it was deemed inappropriate to hold a party, and my mutterings about the Blitz did not always fall on receptive ears. Sally had also forgotten the keys to the manuscript's case in London, so she found herself, on the morning of 9/11, frantically trying to find a locksmith to break into it to release Oscar's prison letter. I am sure he would have delighted in the irony. My own contretemps with the text took place in 1995, around the time of the inauguration of the Wilde window in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey, also attended by Merlin Holland and his mother, Thelma, Wilde's daughter-in-law. During Simon Callow's reading from the work, my mobile rang de profundis of my handbag - the thickest pillar offered scant protection as the noise, and Callow's fury, reached their crescendo. In January 2002 I returned to New York to collect my exhibits and flew home with another British Library colleague, Hugh Cobbe, and accompanied the manuscript once again, this time without incident but with the appropriate class distinction of business for *De Profundis* and coach for me.

In early 2004, I was able to add a handful of significant items to the collection from the estate of the American bibliophile, Halsted B. Vander Poel, dispersed at Christie's (3 March 2004); like William Andrews Clark in the 1920s and John B. Stetson before that, a pioneer Wilde collector, active from around 1940, far earlier than their European counterparts: two long autograph letters to Wilde's publisher, Leonard Smithers, from Naples, dating to late 1897 and spring 1898, containing detailed instructions for the final corrections to the *Ballad* and its publicity - a proposal for a cheap edition was not realised - the publication of *An Ideal Husband*, requesting a copy of a Beardsley drawing for "a young Russian here ... a great collector, and rich ... his name is Serge de Diaghilew [sic], and two others to Henry Davray," the first already quoted. Wilde's copy of volume two of *The Iliad*, dating from the period of his degree at Trinity in August 1873 and signed as such, with his extensive annotations, was another fascinating addition from the same source. These purchases were made with the support and to the delight of both my parents, though we were keenly aware that the capital needed to expand further at this level would severely limit top end purchases in the future. In July 2004, we attended the opening of the Oscar Levy room in the Nietzsche House, Sils-Maria, Switzerland, where the philosopher penned all his major works in the 1880s, since 1960 a museum and research centre and now housing my grandfather's library and archive, as well as my parents' Nietzsche collection, acquired with relatively modest means in the decades after the war when German libraries were forbidden to bid on letters in the hand of "Hitler's

favourite philosopher”, with characteristic foresight and sense of purpose. My father died a fortnight later. I was involved in placing many items from his estate and, on a trip to Augsburg to deliver a letter by Mozart’s father in November 2006, bought the notoriously rare Tite Street Catalogue³ - the bailiff’s lamentably lotted listing of the books and household effects from the Wilde home, auctioned during the trials, as Thomas Wright has described, two of the most poignant entries being for the Wilde children’s rabbit hutch and a large quantity of toys, one of only four copies known to have survived. It had been offered for sale, unsuccessfully, two years earlier at Sotheby’s, with a considerably higher estimate, and was then consigned to Christie’s. It was my first and only purchase on my mobile in a taxi abroad during a live auction. I had secured the only extant letter to either of his children, addressed to Cyril from Paris in 1891(*Selected Letters* 4-5), on a public telephone on a west London street, at another Christie’s live auction - this time in Melbourne - in 1995.

In 2005, I had been unable to resist, this time encouraged by my mother in memory of hers, an inscribed copy of *An Ideal Husband*, to Fritz and Alexandra von Thaulow, “the wonderful painter and his beautiful wife: from their friend the author. Oscar Wilde. In Recognition.” Ostracized by much of Dieppe society (especially its English contingent) in the summer of 1897, the Thaulows were notable exceptions, receiving Wilde at their home in the first few weeks after his release. The copy formed a perfect adjunct to the one owned by Ellen Terry already in the collection. In middle age, I became more and more enthralled by the evergreen topicality and harrowing profundity of, to my mind, Wilde’s greatest play - so superficially dismissed by its first critic as “a comedy about a bracelet”. There are Mozartian parallels between the comic perfection of *Earnest* and *The Marriage of Figaro* and the uneasy, raw exposure of *Così fan tutte* and *An Ideal Husband*. With these acquisitions and the final, unpublished letter to Smithers about receiving the first copy of *Husband* and his Irish property, known previously only from a forgery, I felt I had crossed the Rubicon.

I had long wished for the collection to find a permanent home outside England, initially considering France - Berneval or Paris; I remember my excitement when Sarah Bernhardt’s home was for sale and toying also with an approach to the Musée Carnavalet. Authenticity of place was paramount - the blueprint of the Nietzsche House reinforced by the placing of our Norman Douglas collection in

³ The Tite Street Catalogue [16, Tite Street, Chelsea]. By order of The Sherriff, A.D. 1895 (Wednesday, April 24th 1895), No 6907.

his birthplace, in Voralberg, Austria, a consolation shortly after my mother's death, in the dark days of early 2008, as was the wish to serve scholarship. But an increasing worry was the ineluctable deaccessioning from public collections worldwide, one of the most serious amid numerous examples, being that of some of Earl Spencer's incunabula (early printed books) from the John Rylands library, Manchester, in 1988, with the totally spurious justification of "duplication", to the Senate House Library, London's, scandalous proposal to sell four of its eleven Shakespeare folios in the summer of 2013, thankfully abandoned. It would be a challenge to find a home where long-term, unthreatened preservation, accessibility to the originals, exhibition and research potential could allow the material to remain together; the reason why I resisted the idea of an auction dispersal. Thanks to Samuel Beckett, the perfect solution presented itself. Through a friend of my father's, the daughter of Marion Leigh, Beckett's partner in Paris for the last twenty years of his life, I placed his correspondence with A.J. Leventhal, known as Con, his close friend in Dublin from the 1920s for the next six decades, at the Harry Ransom Center, Texas, in August 1991. In 2008, I was approached again, this time over the Leventhal Beckett Library of presentation copies to Con, his second wife Ethna MacCarthy, the love of Beckett's life - the Trinity trinity - and Marion Leigh. After an initial approach to the National Library, the collection brought me into contact with Dr. Charles Benson, head of special collections at Trinity College Library, for the first time and his swift decision to acquire it - including all duplicates - impressed me sufficiently to make discreet enquiries about Trinity's Wilde holdings. In the 1960s and 1970s, when so much material came onto the market, the college's focus was elsewhere and this was a gap that Charles was anxious to fill. Again, he set great store by wanting *everything*. The college's ownership of Wilde's birth place, the eponymous Centre for Irish Writing in Westland Row, which, on my first visit to Dublin in the late 1990s had already set me thinking, was a potent attraction, and Charles's retirement was looming. So often in my career, it has been the vision, passion and energy of one individual in large institutions that made things happen, and this was no exception, albeit under the radar. The time was ripe. I had become increasingly disenchanted with crazy prices, the unremitting focus on Wilde the gay icon and martyr - the bane of anality had become banality - and history seemed to repeat itself somewhat, when Melissa Knox, one of a coterie of American academics, many, sadly with tenure, published *A Long and Lovely Suicide*, claiming that Oscar had an incestuous relationship with his adored sister, Isola, who died aged nine, immortalised in his poem *Requiescat*, admired by Yeats, just as Oscar Levy had supposedly penned a preface to Samuel Roth's

forgery, *My Sister and I*, with similar content about Nietzsche and his sister, Elisabeth, even though Levy had died five years before its publication in 1951. The text is still being reprinted despite having been refuted for over sixty years. The idea of the collection coming to Trinity was also warmly endorsed by Merlin Holland and Thomas Wright wrote lucidly about the contents, as we have heard, an accompaniment to the updated catalogue listing we compiled. Its acquisition between 2010 and 2013, brought me together with several Trinity colleagues and Simon Williams, to whom I owe the invitation to speak today. I am extremely grateful to them all, not least for breaking new ground in forging links between a collector and an institution and developing ideas for the future - perhaps the greatest advantage of placing a collection in one's lifetime. Another key element is the college's wish to put the writing centre stage first and foremost, as the Oxford collected works edition is doing in print, even allowing me to make additions and judiciously adding their own, notably the second known letter signed by Wilde at Portora School in June 1871 (*Complete Letters* 4-5), through my late friend and colleague at the distinguished London antiquarian booksellers Maggs Bros., Hinda Rose, a Trinity graduate, who passed away suddenly in the week the transaction was concluded two years ago. The focus on exile - "What captivity was to the Jews, exile has been to the Irish" according to Wilde - common to all in this story, brings it full circle. No one has expressed these considerations more movingly than the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, whose staggering collection of autograph manuscripts, many preserved publically in the British Library and Bodmer Foundation in Cologne, near Geneva, he deemed more worthy of survival than his literary work, despite being one of the most prominent and successful writers of his generation. He took his own life in 1942.

He wrote,

When the Hitler era began, "and I had to leave my home, the joy of collecting was extinguished ... eventually I decided to say farewell to a collection to which I could no longer devote my creative efforts. It is obvious that I never considered myself as the proprietor of these objects, but only as their temporary trustee. It was not the feeling of owning that had attracted me, but the pleasure of bringing together, of shaping a collection into a work of art. ... For a time, I left parts of it in safes, or with friends, but then resolved to say FAREWELL to it altogether, following Goethe's exhortation that museums, libraries and galleries tend to wither if they are no longer developed further. If we,

Why Wilde?

the hunted and exiled had in this period hostile to the arts and to every kind of collecting to learn *one* art anew, it was the art of saying farewell to everything that had been our pride and our love. (*Die Welt* np)

And for Wilde, writing to Carlos Blacker in 1898: "Life that I have loved so much - too much, has torn me like a tiger ... you will see the ruin and wreck of what was once wonderful and brilliant. I don't think I shall ever write again: *la joie de vivre* is gone..."(*Selected Letters*, 9 March 1898 -postmark- to Carlos Blacker). In the warm embrace of the Celtic tiger, Oscar has come home.

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2

Oscar Wilde in Turkish

N. Berrin Aksoy

The translation history of Oscar Wilde's works in Turkey is fascinating and full of surprises and is closely connected with the initiation of the cultural revolution which supported the Westernization programme of the secular Republic of Turkey (Paker 578). Oscar Wilde died in 1900, 23 years before the proclamation of the Republic. The Republic immediately ignited the efforts to create a national modern Turkish literature. As one of the cultural reforms of the Turkish Republic, the literary vacuum in the polysystem had to be replaced by the creation of an indigenous national literature which would be based on national sources and models that were dormant or not properly surfaced. The use of vernacular language of the people especially after the transition to the Roman script in 1928, that is, the alphabet reform, was one of the most important objectives in this cultural project.

Wilde's first entrance into the Turkish literary polysystem can be seen within the frame of such an ambitious cultural project which was to be carried out by means of translations of Western canonical works. The promotion of Westernization after 1923 (which actually dates back to the 19th century in the Reformation period) went hand in hand with a deliberate policy of encouraging translation activities. As nation states all over the world evolved and established a coherent language policy, the importation of texts with significant

value from outside national boundaries required extensive policies. These were designed to transform and modernize the state and the language, as well as to motivate the artists of the receiving culture to produce works of similar value. This was the situation in the Turkey of 1923's and after. The principle motive for the translation activities, which were rather individually carried out, and disorganized at the beginning until 1940, was one of acculturation/enrichment and linked to the efforts of creating a literature of our own. The first individual initiatives in that sense were: Remzi Kitabevi, a private publishing company, which started its series Translations from World Authors, Hilmi Kitabevi, Abdullah Cevdet's publications and a few others (Paker 578).

Against, this background, Oscar Wilde is one of the first foreign authors to appear in translation in the very early days of modern Turkey where paper was scarce, printing houses few, translators few and a very small circle of readers, with no coherent translation policy yet. Nevertheless, in spite of these obstacles and difficulties, we come across Oscar Wilde translations, the earliest one being in the years 1926-27 in Abdullah Cevdet's journal, *İçtihad*. The first translator of Oscar Wilde is Salih Zeki Aktay. He translated six stories of Oscar Wilde, namely "The Happy Prince", "The Selfish Giant", "The Remarkable Rocket", "The Devoted Friend", "The Nightingale and the Rose", "The Sphinx without a Secret." The first four of these stories are printed in 1926 and 1927 in the *İçtihad* periodical.

In order to understand how and why Oscar Wilde made such an early entrance into the modern Turkish literary polysystem and his reception in the cultural and literary milieu of those times, a look at the *İçtihad* periodical and Abdullah Cevdet, the owner, is necessary.

İçtihad was first printed and published in Geneva in 1904 by its owner Abdullah Cevdet, a medical doctor. The journal's life in Geneva ended after a year, in 1905, when it was closed down, and Abdullah Cevdet had to move the journal to Cairo. In 1911, he moved to İstanbul where he opened the house of *İçtihad* and continued the periodical's publication along with other translations and his own writings. *İçtihad* periodical was published for twenty-eight years until the death of Abdullah Cevdet in 1932. It consisted of twelve volumes and 358 numbers. Abdullah Cevdet, is an important figure in the late Ottoman and early Turkish translation tradition. In fact, in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* edited by the distinguished translation studies scholar Mona Baker, in the Turkish Tradition

Section prepared by Prof. Dr. Saliha Paker an eminent and one of the earliest translation studies scholar in Turkey, Abdullah Cevdet's name appears in one paragraph on page 580, along with Nurullah Ataç, Sabahattin Eyüboğlu, Ahmet Mithad Efendi, Mütercim Asım, Şemseddin Sami and Ahmet Vefik Pasha. Abdullah Cevdet translated and published nearly 60 books of which a small number were printed in Switzerland and Cairo. He is the first to produce full translations of Shakespeare's tragedies (Paker 580). He also translated Gustave Le Bon, Schiller Alfieri, Byron, Guyau, Dozy, Emile Boutry and others. Dr. Abdullah Cevdet was born in Arapkir in 1869; he was an Ottoman Turkish intellectual, and died in 1932. He was a poet, translator, radical free-thinker and an ideologist of the Young Turks who led the Westernization movement in the Ottoman Empire from 1908 until 1918 during the Second Constitutional Era. Abdullah Cevdet was brought up under strict religious education, but he later put a distance between himself and religion under the influence of his readings. He went to İstanbul Military Medical Academy. He was influenced by Western materialistic philosophies. In *İctihad* periodical he published his own articles on socio-religious, political, economic and literary issues and expressed and promoted his modernist thought. Cevdet was tried several times in the Ottoman Empire, because some of his writings were considered to be blasphemous. He is regarded as one of the leading figures of Westernization in the social, economic, cultural and education aspects of the Turkish society (Uçar 7-30; Gündüz 1067-1088). Through his literary translations, Cevdet aimed to introduce new literary and cultural "options" into the Ottoman "culture repertoire", especially with his Shakespeare translations. His non-literary translation presented materialist options to mobilize and modernize Muslims and received large-scale active resistance by the conservative Ottomans (Ayluçtarhan).

Thus, *İctihad* periodical was a spokesman of his idea of creating a liberal, free-thinking arena of publication, consisting of writers and thinkers of varied opinions. In that sense, the periodical was innovative in the Ottoman society. It was published in French and Ottoman Turkish and had a life span of twenty-eight years (1904-1932), beginning in Abdulhamid II era, until the early years of the Republic, covering a wide spectrum of social, cultural, economic changes and transformations from the Ottomans to the Republic (Esemenli 55-58). The periodical was published in Ottoman Turkish until November 30, 1928, and after that date, it was published in Roman Script (Seçkin 24-6). *İctihad* was regarded as an influential mouthpiece and the first periodical to reflect and promote Western thought and modernization since its first volume.

Oscar Wilde's first and earliest appearance took place in a periodical of such qualities in 1926 and 1927. The translations were in Arabic script at that time. The purpose of the selection of Oscar Wilde as a representative of the Western canon must be evaluated against such an atmosphere. The translator is also very important in this frame, since, it was the translator who proposed that Wilde should appear in the periodical.

Salih Zeki Aktay (1896-1971) was born in Şarkikaraağaç, Isparta. After 1918, he worked as a teacher of Turkish Literature, and as a librarian in İstanbul libraries. There, he took part in the classification of works written in foreign languages. He is a poet, a translator, and a man of letters. He was especially interested in and admired Greek mythology and history. He learned French at high school, and worked as a high school French teacher after the end of World War I. Later, he moved to İstanbul after a family tragedy that resulted in his pregnant sister's suicide. This event gravely upset him and caused him to cut off links with his family and birthplace. He worked as a librarian in İstanbul in the department of foreign publications.

Salih Zeki wrote poetry under the influence of Greco-Roman mythological themes, elements and mystical topics. It should be remembered that, Oscar Wilde's engagement with ancient Greek had also influenced his lifelong interest in Greek language and culture. Wilde visited Greece, had courses at Oxford in Greek and ancient languages, and used Greek mythology, especially the royal foundling theme, in two children's stories "The Young King" and "The Star Child", and later in some of his poems (Şahbaz 140-150).

Looking for answers to the questions why Salih Zeki picked Oscar Wilde to translate and get them published may be explained by the affinity caused by their common interest in Greek mythology. "The Happy Prince" translated as "Bahtiyar Prens" (1926), "The Selfish Giant" as "Hodkâm Dev" (1926), "The Remarkable Rocket" as "Maruf Fişenk" (1927), "The Devoted Friend" as "Cömert Dost" (1927) were the stories that were published in *İçtihad* during the years 1926-27, and they were all translated into Ottoman Turkish in Arabic script. Later, with the addition of "The Nightingale and the Rose"-*"Gül ve Bülbül"* and "Sphinx without a Secret" as *"Esrarsız Heykel"*, all six stories were reprinted by Ahmet Sait Matbaası, İstanbul (1943) in today's Turkish.

Salih Zeki published more than 50 translations during the years 1927-1948 among which, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is the most

striking one. *Metamorphoses*, translated as *Değişişler*, was transformed into Turkish from French, and was published in *Dün ve Yarın Tercüme Külliyyatı*, Vakıf Matbaası, İstanbul (1935).

Oscar Wilde translations also seem to be second language or mediating language translations. They were translated from French and the sources are Jozef Rene, Hanri, D. Davroy, Renelalo (Şahbaz 140-150). At the beginning of the translations in *İçtiḥad*, Salih Zeki presents a preface on Oscar Wilde, under the title "Oskar Wilde'e Dair Bir Tetkikten".

In the year 1927, the second translation of "The Happy Prince" appeared under the title of *Oskar Vayld'ın Masalları* by Şaziye Berin Kurt. Şaziye Berin Kurt's translations of "The Nightingale and the Rose", "The Remarkable Rocket", "The Birthday of Infanta" were a selection of Oscar Wilde's stories. They were published by Yeni Matbaa, which, unfortunately, can not be traced and there is no information about it. Information about Berin Kurt is also little. I have found out that she studied philosophy in Germany under a special scholarship programme especially designed by Atatürk which aimed at sending bright Turkish students to distinguished foreign universities to transfer knowledge of science, arts, and humanities to Turkey, and to contribute to the process of advancement in science and arts in the modern Republic. In that sense, Berin Kurt is regarded as the first Turkish woman philosopher, and she was very fluent in German and French. The stories are translated into Ottoman Turkish, German as the mediating language. Kurt's translation is important. In Anıtkabir, Atatürk Library, this translation appears as the 2127th book in the list of books that Atatürk read. (www.tsk.tr/ing/ii_anitkabir/kutup/vw.html).

"The Happy Prince" is followed by Nurettin Sevin's *Salomé*, published by Hilmi Kitabevi (1935), and Burhan Toprak's translation *De Profundis* (1935) the same year.

I would now like to take a look at the first appearance of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Turkey, as *Dorian Gray'in Portresi* (1938), translated by Süreyya Sami Berkem, from its original, and published by Hilmi Kitabevi, İstanbul. The same year, Ferhunde and Orhan Şaik Gökyay's translation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appeared as *Doryan Gray'in Portresi* (1938) by Remzi Kitabevi, reprinted in 1968.

Süreyya Sami Berkem, the first translator of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a Turkish author who wrote *Anı Kitabı Unutulmuş Günler*. His initial name was Samizâde Süreyya. *Unutulmuş Günler* is

about Atatürk and the War of Independence, and the events that happened in those times (Hilmi Kitabevi 1960). He was a journalist and a translator too, and for a time, chief editor of the periodical *Hayal-i-Cedid*, a humor magazine in İstanbul, between March 1910-1911, in Ottoman Turkish. He worked as a columnist in 1939 for *Cumhuriyet* newspaper.

Süreyya Sami Berkem is one of the fervent followers and supporters of the Westernization efforts in the Ottoman and the Republican periods, and a devoted follower of Atatürk and his reforms. In 1937, *Varlık* periodical published articles on the issue of creating a national culture which necessitated reading and translating Western classics, and Süreyya Sami Berkem was one of the contributors (Demiral www.academia.edu).

Hilmi Kitabevi, on the other hand, initially called Kitaphane-i İslam (1896) is also very significant in the modernization and Westernization efforts in the Ottoman Empire and in modern Turkey. The founder of Hilmi Kitabevi was Tüccarzade İbrahim Hilmi Çığıracan. He was born in Romania in 1876, and is one of the first publishers in the Ottoman State and in the Republic. He was also a journalist and an Ottoman intellectual who published the first daily newspaper *Millet* after the Second Constitution. He also published initially military books and religious books and later text books for primary school (especially during the War of Independence) (Dosay 425-432). He published Turkish authors such as Hüseyin Rahmi, Ahmet Refik, Mehmet Rauf, and others. He published Western classics under the title of "A Selection of Western Classics". *Doryan Gray'in Portresi* was published with an introduction in 1938 under this serial. This is the first recorded translation of *Dorian Gray* in Turkish, translated from English.

Likewise, in 1938, Remzi Kitabevi, under the serial "A Selection of Translations from Authors of the World" published Ferhunde and Orhan Şaik Gökyay's translation. Remzi Kitabevi, as compared to Hilmi Kitabevi or İctihad is more recent. It was established in 1927 by Remzi Bengi. It also published Western classics along with translations in the fields of education, arts and social sciences.

Orhan Şaik Gökyay (1902-1994) was born in İnebolu. He was a teacher of literature, a poet, a turcologist and a man of letters. He worked in various high schools and teacher training colleges in İstanbul, and for two years between 1959-60 as a lecturer in Turkish Studies in London. He is the poet of the famous poem "Bu Vatan

Kimin" (1937), the second best-known poem in Turkey after "İstiklal Marşı" (the national anthem). It is a very nationalistic poem emphasizing the Turkish national and spiritual characteristics, the process of nationalisation and formation of a national culture within a Turkish homeland. Orhan Şaik Gökay is also an educationist who believed in progress, and supported the efforts to enrich Turkish culture through translated models, and to open up to foreign cultures.

Consequently, as mentioned in Turkish scholars Gürçağlar, Paker and many more, translation since the Reformation period in the Ottoman Empire, has been used as an object of planning and organizing, as a tool for cultural change which would be a means of transformation in other aspects of life. In the context of Oscar Wilde's appearance in the Turkish literary polysystem, although the first translations were from a mediating language, it is seen that they were selected and produced under a concrete project of culture-planning, which was carried out by private publishing houses before the establishment of the Translation Bureau in 1940. The private publishing houses emerged with the proclamation of the Republic, and some of them can be traced back to 1921. The Alphabet Reform in 1928 accelerated the initiative to create a new literary canon in Turkey, which in turn, would give rise to a new Turkish literature (Gürçağlar 308). The history of early Oscar Wilde translations in Turkey demonstrates the complications and difficulties encountered in these efforts to instigate an awakening in the literature of Anatolia.

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3

Oscar Wilde the Poet

Huriye Reis

Not included in Gonzales's *Modern Irish Writers*, because too little of his work concerns Ireland (xiv), and considered to be a poet whose "reputation as a dramatist and prose writer has overshadowed his poetry" (Quinn 57), Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854, to a Protestant Anglo-Irish family, and became the most popular but also the most hated and despised poet who dominated the literary world of Europe, particularly Britain and France, as well as the United States from the early 1880s to his arrest and conviction for sodomy in 1895. Five years after his death, Sir Max Beerbohm in *Vanity Fair*, March 2, 1905, stated that Oscar Wild was "primarily ... a poet, with a lifelong passion for beauty; and a philosopher, with a life-long passion for thought" (qtd. in Hyde 205). Oscar Wilde's career indeed began and ended with the publication of his poetry. He had published two books of poetry, *Ravenna* (1878) and *Poems* (1881), before he was twenty five (Frankel 25)¹. His poetic career was completed with the publication of his *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* in 1898, two years before his death. However, as Merlin Holland states,

¹ See Nicholas Frankle's chapter on Wilde as poet for Wilde's construction of his poetic identity as English and the critical neglect of his Irish poetry in *Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books*.

Wilde is very much a figure of dualities and paradoxes; he fascinates and confuses as he is

the Anglo-Irishman with Nationalist sympathies; the Protestant with life-long Catholic leanings; the married homosexual; the musician of words and painter of language who confessed to Andre Gide that writing bored him; the artist astride not two but three cultures, an Anglo-Francophile and a Celt at heart. And overlaid on it all is the question of which facets of the Wildean dichotomy were real and involuntary and which were artificial and contrived for effect. (3)

As Kohl explains, in his book *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*, Oscar Wilde displays a wide ranging variety and conflicting interests in his poetry. Wilde's

subject matter varies from political engagement to philosophical speculation, from religious longing to feelings of love, admiration and ennui testifies to a disposition that is without ties and is open to new impressions and influences... Corresponding to the multiple views of reality is an extraordinary multiplicity of forms and styles. (28)

Indeed, Wilde uses almost all of the poetic forms that the English poetic tradition affords through the poets he admired and imitated most. He uses, for instance, couplets in the "Ballad de Marguerite", *terza rima* with a rhyme scheme of aab in the "Harlot's House", Tennyson's "In Memoriam Stanza" form in Impressions: 2, f as well as sestets, sonnets, ballads and villanelle. Moreover, Oscar Wilde's predominantly conventional diction has recourse to a rich web of medieval and Biblical allusions, mythological references, detailed lists of flowers, alliteration, personification, synaesthesia and a particular preference for colour. It is important to note that, because Wilde did not believe that poets should speak of the real world, his poetry derives its material and inspiration from his literary predecessors and sources (Kohl 29). Wilde's poetry shows that his use of mythological figures, gods and nymphs and such as natural inhabitants of the poetic world he depicts are "part of an attempt to create an Arcadian dream world, as far away as possible from the real world (Kohl 29). In a sense Oscar Wilde needs no introduction to his art and poetry as he sums up his position in life and its relation to his art in *De Profundis* (1897) In this long letter of autobiography, Oscar Wilde reviews his life and art as a poet who served a two-year

sentence in prison. He states that he is “a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age” (*Collected Works* 1071). Oscar Wilde’s self-portrayal indicates that he is in many respects a privileged man of talent, a “genius, a distinguished name” who has a “high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring”. Oscar Wilde rightly states that he made “art a philosophy, and philosophy an art” and managed to change the minds of men and how they perceived the world. Most importantly, Wilde confirms his philosophy that “Art” is “the supreme reality, and life ... a mere mode of fiction” (*Collected Works* 1071). Oscar Wilde comes to modify his views about the source of his poetry but he is rather convinced that when art and life become confused, the result is destructive, since “action[s] of the common day” are important character builders and when one allows “pleasure to dominate” one ends “in horrible disgrace” (*Collected Works* 1071).

The idea that life experiences are important in Wilde’s poetry is confirmed by Wilde, too. He states, “The two turning points in my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison” (*Collected Works* 1074). Indeed, while his education at Oxford turned him into a leading aesthete poet to claim a position for art that contests art’s relation to life and its responsibility as a medium of moral instruction, the unfortunate prison experience he had to go through because of his sexual preferences brought an end not only to his aestheticism but also to his poetry. At Oxford, as Ellmann suggests, “Oscar Wilde made himself” (98). It is at Oxford that he changed his name from Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde into Oscar Wilde. It is at Oxford that he met John Ruskin in his first year and Walter Pater in his third year and developed his interest in aestheticism (Chapin 28). Wilde’s *Poems* published in 1881 shows the influence of Pater, aestheticism and Hellenism. Despite the fact that the first collection that Oscar Wilde published to introduce himself as a poet of aesthetic norms led to the denial of the title poet to him, before his imprisonment for homosexuality, Oscar Wilde was a champion of poetry as the supreme art in his day as the leader of the movement Art For Art’s Sake (Roditi 6). A copy of the *Poems* Wilde sent to Oxford Center was rejected on account that

It is not that these poems are thin - and they are thin:
it is not that they are immoral - and they are
immoral... it is that they are for the most part not by
their putative father at all, but by a number of better-
known and more deservedly reputed authors. They are
in fact by William Shakespeare, by Philip Sidney, by
John Donne, by Lord Byron, by William Morris, by

Algernon Swinburne, and by sixty more... The Union Library already contains better and fuller editions of these poets: the volume which we are offered is theirs, not Mr Wilde's. (Beckson and Fong 63; Ellmann 140)

An equally drastic review of his poetry appeared in *Punch*, which, referring to Wilde's prominence as an aesthete, stated "There is a certain amount of originality about the binding but that is more than can be said about the inside of the volume. Mr Wilde may be aesthetic but he is not original" (Kohl 16). Wilde's first collection was criticized not only for plagiarism but also for inconsistencies and contradictions. When in 1881 he rather confidently sent his collected poems with some new ones to a publisher with a letter that claimed "Possibly my name requires no introduction" and although the publication became as popular as to go to five editions in one year, it was stated of him that he was a poet with "no genuine lyrical feeling", "no distinct message" and had a language which was "inflated and insincere" and his poems had "profuse and careless imagery" (Kohl 15). Significantly, such criticism never discouraged Wilde. Wilde owns inconsistencies and contradictions as integral elements of self-recognition as a poet. He replied in "The Critic as Artist" to charges of inconsistency that "We are never more true to ourselves than when we are inconsistent" (Chapin 32). According to Wilde, borrowing from other poets is part of the poetics of aestheticism. Indeed, studying "a fine poet without stealing from him" is almost impossible for a good poet, as a poet "is able to draw new music" from the reeds through which he blows, despite the fact that they "have been touched by other lips" (Mendelssohn 146). Oscar Wilde thus was pioneering the Art for Art's Sake movement in poetry. As Michelle Mendelssohn states

Aestheticism ...[is] the literary and artistic movement that flourished in Britain and America between 1870 and 1900 and that advanced art for art's sake in opposition to the utilitarian doctrine of moral or practical usefulness... Aestheticism was an argument about art and culture. According to Wilde, its chief characteristics were to increase appreciation for 'beautiful workmanship' (RW 197), to recognise 'the primary importance of the sensuous element in art', and to liberate art from ethical considerations by embracing 'art for art's sake'. (5)

As an aesthete, Oscar Wilde strongly defended the position, in his Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that "The artist is the creator of beautiful things...There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well-written or badly-written. That is all...All art is quite useless" (*Collected Works* 4). Hence, "Wilde became a convenient and controversial symbol of what aesthetic culture entailed" (Mendelssohn 1). In the mid-and late-nineteenth century when Oscar Wilde wrote as an aesthete, the aesthetes subscribed to Pater's idea of "Art for Art's Sake" and to the freedom of art from social responsibility. The aesthete thus demonstrated a taste for medievalism, Pre-Raphaelite art, Japonism and Swinburne's poetry. Accordingly, it is of importance that Wilde's aesthetic poetry gives expression to the two most important figures of influence on his life and poetry. He subscribes to Keats's idea that a life of sensations is better than a life of thoughts and Pater's statement that one should "be forever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions" in several of *Poems* (Kohl 30). "Helas!", the poem that prefaces the collection *Poems* seems to be the expression in poetry of what Wilde promised to himself as a student at Oxford. Recognised by Wilde later as his most representative poem, "Helas!", begins with an anti-Victorian attitude towards any moral purpose in life and replaces it with passion: "To drift with every passion till my soul / Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play ..." and advocates a life of sensations at the cost of loss of "ancient wisdom and austere control" (*Collected Works* 769). Perhaps, as Ellmann suggests, Wilde's "self-indulgence,... was never without remorse" as the concluding lines of "Helas!", when Wilde quotes the Biblical passage quoted by Pater to present his position, read: " . . . lo! with a little rod / I did but touch the honey of romance - / And must I lose a soul's inheritance?" (*Collected Works* 769).

Expressing a strong awareness that the contemporary world is not pro-art in its materialistic preoccupations and scientific worldview, the "Garden of Eros," presents beauty as the ultimate remedy:

Spirit of Beauty! Tarry with us still,
It is not quenched the torch of poesy,
...
Although the cheating merchants of the mart
With iron roads profane our lovely isle
And break on whirling heels the limbs of Art.
(*Collected Works* 780,781)

The speaker suggests that Pre-Raphealite poetry is “a better mirror of” the age and consequently disowns the present in favour of the new art he attempts to introduce: “Methinks that was not my inheritance/For I was nurtured otherwise, my soul /Passes from higher heights of life to a more supreme goal” (*Collected Works* 783). Hence, the poem redefines art as beauty which he suggests will live on in the works of the poets:

They are not dead, thine ancient votaries
Some few there are to whom thy radiant smile
Is better than a thousand victories,
...there are a few
Who for thy sake would give their manlihood
And consecrate their being, I at least
Have done so, my thy lips my daily food
And in thy temples found a godlier feast
Than this starved age can give me, spite of all
Its new-found creeds so sceptical and so dogmatical.
(*Collected Works* 779)

In such poems of beauty and pleasure Wilde seeks a break from the dreariness of his age which appears to be growing in tastelessness and dogmatic violence. Similarly, in “Theoretikos”, the speaker describes the present world as one of increasing corruption and loss, a “vile traffic house where day by day/Wisdom and reverence are sold at mart” (*Collected Works* 776). It appears that flight from such a world is necessary for the soul of the poet and his individual stance: “It mars my calm: wherefore in dreams of Art/And loftiest culture I would stand apart” (*Collected Works* 776). Wilde’s philosophical poem “Humanidad”, similarly, engages in a contrast between the purity and energy of nature and mood in its criticism of the corruption of his age, the anarchy, ignorance and greed. It laments that Beauty, “That Spirit hath passed away” (*Collected Works* 861).

Like his role models, the Pre-Raphealites, Wilde also employs some medieval themes and stories in “Ballade de Marguerite” and “The Dole of the King’s Daughter” and “Ravenna”. Accordingly, his poetry gives an equal emphasis to the medievalism that formed an important part of the poetics of the Pre-Raphealites Swinburne, Rossetti and William Morris. In the courtly love convention represented in “La Bella Donna Della Mia Mente” (The Beautiful Lady of My Memory) (*Collected Works* 810-11), the knight suffers because of his secret love for a noble lady. A similar theme is employed in

"The Dole of The King's Daughter" (*Collected Works* 834-5), in which the knights face death for their love for the king's daughter.

In the "Duchess of Padua" and "To Milton" and such sonnets, Wilde employs the Renaissance art forms. In fact, as stated above, Wilde is aware of writing in a well established tradition, a tradition established by the Pre-Raphaelites and the Romantics before them and duly acknowledges his debt to them in the "Garden of Eros" where he identifies with the "Spirit of Beauty", Keats, Shelley, Byron, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Burne-Jones, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and "Morris our sweet Chaucer's child/Dear heritor of Spenser's doleful reed", (*Collected Works* 780) as his masters. Wilde argued that these borrowings from the Pre-Raphaelites and their pictorial style and ornament was a necessity of the aesthetic poetics. In "Pen, Pencil and Poison", Wilde states: "To those who are preoccupied with the beauty of form nothing else seems of much importance (*Collected Works* 947). According to Wilde "the very key note of aesthetic eclecticism...[is] the true harmony of all really beautiful things irrespective of age or place, of school or manner" (*Collected Works* 950). Accordingly, "In a very ugly and sensible age, the arts borrow, not from life, but from each other" (*Collected Works* 954). Borrowing and imitating thus become "the privilege of the appreciative man" (Wilde qtd in Saint-Amour 92). In this context, Wilde's first published poem "Ravenna" seems to set his standard for poetic production. As a poem celebrating Ravenna as a city of art and ancient civilisation Ravenna provides a compendium of the city's literary history with references to English romantics, although the poem is argued to be, "virtually plagiaristic, including allusions and quotations from Wordsworth's 'Daffodils', Browning's 'Home Thoughts From Abroad', and 'Love Among the Ruins', Tennyson's 'Mariana', Shelley's 'Ozymandias' and 'Ode to the West Wind' as well as wholesale borrowings from the tone and imagery of Keats" (Robbins 23).

Wilde's paint poetry can be considered in this category, too. In accordance with his poetic principle that poetry should be divorced from life and its instruction, Wilde states in "The Decay of Lying," that realism is the most dangerous for the future of art; it should be acknowledged for perfect art that "life imitates art far more than art imitates life" (*Collected Works* 933). Wilde contends in "The Critic as Artist" that "When man acts he is a puppet. When he describes he is a poet" (*Collected Works* 980). Hence, his poems "Impression du Matin", "In the Gold Room: A Harmony", "A Symphony in Yellow" and other poems entitled "Impression" illustrate this view. In "Impression du Matin", a descriptive poem of early morning Thames, we observe and enjoy a painting in words:

The Thames nocturne of blue and gold
Changed to a Harmony in Gray
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 (*Collected Works* 805)

An equally impressionistic poem is "Magdalen Walks" which describes the poet's favourite walks of Magdalen College in Oxford:

The little white clouds are racing over the sky,
And the fields are strewn with the gold of the flower of
March
The daffodil breaks under foot, and the tasseled larch
Sways and swings as the trush goes hurrying by.
(*Collected Works* 805)

Similarly, in "Les Silhouettes" the focus is on the description of the beauty of the scene observed:

The sea is flecked with bars of Gray
The dull dead wind is out of tune
And like a withered leaf the moon
Is blown across the stormy bay...
And overhead the curlews cry,
Where through the dusky upland grass
The young brown-throated reapers pass
Like silhouettes against the sky. (*Collected Works* 830)

With its emphasis shifted to the supremacy of desire and the victory of love "Panthea" is a poem challenging the dominant view of art as morally instructive and guiding in its statements:

Nay let us walk from fire unto fire,
From passionate pain to deadlier delight,-
I am too young to live without desire,
Too young art thou to waste this summer night
Asking those idle questions which of old
Man sought of seer and oracle, and no reply was told.
(*Collected Works* 841)

The poem clearly privileges feelings in its philosophical attempt to understand and convey the true meaning of life:

For sweet, to feel is better than to know,
And wisdom is a childless heritage,
One pulse of passion-youth's first fiery glow,-
Are worth the hoarded proverbs of the sage:
Vex not thy soul with dead philosophy,
Have we not lips to kiss with, hearts to love and eyes to see
(*Collected Works* 841)

There is a clear identification of love and poetry, of the lover and the poet, as admirers of beauty, too: "Me thinks no leaf would ever bud in spring,/But for the lovers' lips that kiss, the poets' lips that sing" (*Collected Works* 845). Love seems to compensate for all losses and unhappiness. The wounded spirit that the poet tries to save from the wreck caused by society finds comfort and consolation in love. Similarly, in "Apologia", regretting the fact that now he must become a man of sorrow for unreturned love, the speaker contends that at least he has followed his heart in loving and experiencing his heart's desire:

Perchance it may be better so- at least
I have not made my heart a heart of stone,
Nor starved my boyhood of its goodly feast,
Nor walked where Beauty is a thing unknown.
(*Collected Works* 847)

It is clearly stated that doing otherwise would never have been an option for someone whose life depends on the love of beauty:

But surely it is something to have been
The best beloved for a little while
To have walked hand in hand with Love, and seen
His purple wings flit once across thy smile
....
...yet have I burst the bars
Stood face to face with beauty, known indeed
The Love which moves the Sun and all the stars!
(*Collected Works* 848)

However, Wilde's representation of love, of beauty and desire as the supreme goals in life never went without challenge and controversy. In "Charmides", the only narrative poem in his volume

Poems, Wilde portrays Charmides, an ancient Greek sailor, who, hiding in the temple of the Greek goddess Athena at night, makes love to her effigy. Ruth Robbins argues that "Charmides" represents all the features that Oscar Wilde's poetry represented to his critics and set the critical context in which his poetry was to be evaluated (30). Charmides is clearly transgressive of the sexual norms of the Victorians as it demonstrates "the emphasis on Wilde's sensuality, his pushing limits in proper subject matter, his 'unmanliness', his resistance to generic and other norms and rules, and his lack of originality" (Robbins 42).

Such poems are also instructive of the relationship between life and art that Oscar Wilde tries to redefine in his poetry. Although Wilde claims that the best art is not about life, it is clear that he is well aware of the inevitable correspondence between the two. Indeed, Wilde's early poetry suggests that life claims a larger than necessary place in art and that the confusion of the two is rather dangerous for art. Oscar Wilde tried all his life to keep life away from his art but it is life that finally reestablished the connection between art and life at the expense of the poet and his poetry. Oscar Wilde defines his imprisonment in Reading Gaol as "the second turning point" in his life as stated above. As a man who upheld and promoted beauty and refinement as the ultimate target of his life and his art, Wilde seems to have suffered most because of his fellow creatures and their social norms. His imprisonment for homosexuality brought him full circle and forced him to abandon the amoral stance that he always claimed to belong to art. Consequently, what he defended as an artist, Wilde had to modify as a convict, however ironic and paradoxical this appears to be. Wilde wrote no poetry while in prison but a long letter later was published under the title *De Profundis* in which he records his transfer from Wadsworth Prison to Reading as a traumatic experience. He reports that he stood at

Clapham Junction in convict dress, and handcuffed, for the world to look at...When people saw me they laughed...As soon as they were informed (of who I was) they laughed still more. For half an hour I stood there in the Gray November rain surrounded by a jeering mob.
(*Collected Works* 1094)

It was not only the people who mocked him but also the prison system destroyed him. Wilde wrote in his letter to the *Daily Chronicle on the Prison Hill*, March 24, 1898 when he came out of prison that

The present prison system seems almost to have for its aim the wrecking and destruction of mental faculties. The production of insanity is, if not its object, certainly its result... Deprived of books, of all human intercourse, isolated from every humane and humanising influence, condemned to eternal silence, robbed of all intercourse with the external world, treated like an unintelligent animal, brutalised below the level of any of the brute creation, the wretched man who is confined in an English prison can hardly escape becoming insane. (qtd. in Hyde 3)

The Ballad of Reading Gaol is the product of these inhuman circumstances and it truly reflects the prisoner's world and feelings. In that sense *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is unlike anything that Wilde wrote before. The poem tells the story of an inmate sentenced to death for killing his wife. Wilde stated that the ballad form he adopted for this poem and its publisher *Reynold's Magazine* are suitable for the poem, "because it circulates widely among the criminal classes – to which I now belong – for once I will be read by my peers – a new experience for me" (qtd in Hyde 184). Moreover, as the work of a poet in violation of the social norms, *The Ballad* had to be published anonymously, by Leonard Smithers in 1898 under the name C.3.3., which stood for cell block C, landing 3, cell 3. Thus, Wilde's name did not appear on the poem's front cover. Only after its seventh edition in June 1899, it became public that C.3.3. was actually Wilde. The poem proved to be a commercial success, and brought Wilde a little money which he desperately needed. A passage from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was chosen as the epitaph on Wilde's tomb;

And alien tears will fill for him,
Pity's long-broken urn,
For his mourners will be outcast men,
And outcasts always mourn.

The author of these lines admits, in several letters written to his publisher, during the publication of the *The Ballad* "I am so lonely and poor" (Hyde 174). Wilde never seems to own the poem as his work; he, in fact, had rather ambivalent feelings about it. He stated, "I am not sure I like it myself. But catastrophies in life bring about catastrophies in art" (qtd. in Hyde 157) and described *The Ballad* as a poem that "suffers under the difficulty of a divided aim in style. Some is realistic, some is romantic: some poetry, some propaganda" (qtd. in Hyde 164).

On the other hand, the poem is considered to be the most, if not the only, autobiographical poem by Wilde because of its verses such as the following:

Yet each man kills the thing he loves
By each let this be heard.
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word.
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword! (*Collected Works* 892)

The Ballad also establishes a comradeship between the speaker and the convict of the poem and makes the convict's experience a common one shared by the speaker:

A Prison wall was round us both
Two outcast men we were
The world had thrust us from its heart
And God from out His care
And the iron gin that waits for Sin
Had caught us in its snare. (*Collected Works* 895)

The pun on "wild" in the following stanza, too, suggests that Wilde's *Ballad* is as much about himself as it is about a fellow prisoner:

And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats,
None knew so well as I:
For he who lives more lives than one
More deaths than one must die. (*Collected Works* 902)

Arthur Symonds, a fellow aesthete poet, wrote in his review of *The Ballad* that in it "We see a great spectacular intellect, to which, at last, pity and terror have come in their own person, and no longer as puppets in a play" (Beckson 248). Evidently, experience finally makes its way into poetry in Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* but with the difference that it sums up Wilde's relationship with society and his lifelong conflict with the world he inhabited to a catastrophic end. A poem of earlier date had already given expression to the conflictual and destructive relationship between art and life. The poem is "Tedium Vitae" and it reads thus:

To stab my youth with desperate knives, to wear
This paltry age's gaudy livery,
To let each base hand filch my treasury,

To mesh my soul within a woman's hair,
And be mere Fortune's lackeyed groom,--I swear
I love it not! these things are less to me
Than the thin foam that frets upon the sea,
Less than the thistledown of summer air
Which hath no seed: better to stand aloof
Far from these slanderous fools who mock my life
Knowing me not, better the lowliest roof
Fit for the meanest hind to sojourn in,
Than to go back to that hoarse cave of strife
Where my white soul first kissed the mouth of sin.
(*Collected Works* 851)

Evidently, Wilde's poetry is never entirely divorced from life and his poem "Sweet I blame You not for Mine the Fault was" ends with the confident statement that "I have made my choice, have lived my poems, and, though youth is gone in wasted days, /I have found the lover's crown of myrtle better than the poet's crown of bays" (*Collected Works* 866). The only thing that is wrong here is that Oscar Wilde actually has the "poet's crown of bays", too, a privilege he disdained and disclaimed if it was to be given by a society he so passionately tried to make evolve into something it was not.²

² See Regenia Gagnier, "Wilde and the Victorians" in *Companion to Oscar Wilde* Ed. Peter Raby. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997, 18-33.

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4

Art versus Morality: Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Lerzan Gültekin

Aestheticism covers the period known as the Nineties, particularly between 1889 and 1895 in the late Victorian era, when it was revised and perfected (Ellmann 288). The origins of this movement are to be found in the works of several German writers of the Romantic period such as Kant, Schelling, Goethe and Schiller who think that art must be autonomous with the right of self-government and therefore the artist was someone special, different from ordinary man, even superior to him (Cuddon 11). The major standpoint of aestheticism was that “art had no reference to life, and therefore had nothing to do with morality” (12). It rejects the utilitarian concept of art as something moral and useful. Walter Pater, whose collection of essays, *The Renaissance* (1873) had a deep influence on the poets of 1890s such as Oscar Wilde, “advocated the

view that life itself should be treated in the spirit of art" (12). The movement was also influenced by the 19th century French symbolist poetry known as decadence, which emphasized the autonomy of art and art for art's sake as its guiding principles (Cuddon 57, 208-9). In England, aestheticism in poetry is also closely identified with the Pre-Raphaelites who strove for beautiful musical effects in their verse rather than for sense.

However, the Victorian era was a time of many contradictions. On the one hand, it was an era of industry, scientific progress and a very strict set of moral standards, but on the other hand, it was also a time of moral corruption, prostitution, poverty as well as materialism and commercialism, which were the effects of the capitalist system of the British Empire. Victorians who were running after the material gains under the influence of capitalist system, were also under the influence of utilitarianism which sought greatest happiness for individuals by the pursuit of utility, namely, a rational notion of usefulness, while failing to recognize people's spiritual and emotional needs. Hence, aestheticism came as a reaction against the materialist and capitalist systems of the late Victorian world, particularly, trying to save art from the influence of utilitarianism through its main principle art for art's sake.

Yet, aestheticism as a movement was not only a reaction against the materialism, capitalism, utilitarianism and commercialism of the late Victorian Period but it was also a reaction against the literary movements, Realism and Naturalism in the second half of the 19th century, which emphasized the portrayal of life with fidelity without any sense of idealization, and both movements rejected the doctrine of art for art's sake. Aestheticism, on the other hand, "was a revitalizing influence in an age of ugliness, brutality, dreadful inequality and oppression, complacency" and hypocrisy (Cuddon 13). It was also against the Philistines of England, in Matthew Arnold's terms, namely, the bourgeois classes who were devoted to money, material objects instead of art and beauty because they were uncultured. Therefore, the movement was regarded as "a genuine search for beauty and a realization that the beautiful has an independent value" (13). Beauty was not an abstract concept because it could be felt by people through their five senses. Hence, in the Nineties, the artists mostly held the view that pleasure should be provided only by arts, not by moral or sentimental messages. Art did not have any moral purpose; it only had to be beautiful.

Oscar Wilde, who lived between 1854 and 1900, established a brilliant academic record at Oxford, following his graduation from

Trinity College in Dublin. However, Wilde became notorious and famous both for his works and for his scandalous life because of his homosexuality which was a serious offence in the Victorian period. Unfortunately, he was sentenced to prison, with hard labour for two years because of his homosexual relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, and as a ruined man who lost his family, friends and wealth, he emigrated to Paris after two years in jail and died there in a hotel room in poverty.

Oscar Wilde, with his aesthetic views about art, was an advocate of aestheticism who reconsidered the relation between art, life, and morality. Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* depicts a story of the idea of art, sensual pleasure, morals, sin, human soul, and civilization in the Victorian society. The book reflects Oscar Wilde's views on aestheticism, first in the "Preface" to the book and then in the story through the themes, plot, conflicts and the symbolic meaning of the characters. When the work first appeared in *Lippincot's Magazine* in 1890, "it was greeted with a storm of protest by the critics" (Holland 11). The revised work appeared as a book in 1891 with six extra chapters and a preface prepared by Wilde which consisted of his epigrams about art, morality, and life. The "Preface" begins with the epigram that "The artists the creator of beautiful things". Indeed *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is replete with beautiful descriptions which reflects his epigram through the use of thought and language as claimed by Wilde in the "Preface" that "Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art". For instance, the first two paragraphs of the first chapter in which the painter Basil Hallward's studio is described, appeals to the five senses of the reader which evokes sensual pleasure with a strong sense of beauty:

The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden, there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.

From the corner of the divan of Persian saddle-bags on which he was lying, smoking as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of a laburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flame-like as theirs; (18)¹

¹ Wilde, Oscar. "The Picture of Dorian Gray" *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. London and Glasgow: Collins, 1976. 17-167. Hereafter all the references will be made to this edition and only the page numbers will be given.

Likewise, in the novel, the actress Sibyl Vane with whom Dorian Gray is deeply in love, is also described like a beautiful art object as if she were a creature that comes from "a finer world", particularly, when she appears on the stage:

A quarter of an hour afterwards, amidst an extraordinary turmoil of applause, Sibyl Vane stepped on to the stage. Yes she was certainly lovely to look at—one of the loveliest creatures, Lord Henry thought, that he had ever seen. There was something of the fawn in her shy grace and startled eyes. A faint blush, like the shadow of a rose in a mirror of silver, came to her cheeks as she glanced at the crowded, enthusiastic house. (80)

....

Through the crowd of ungainly, shabbily dressed actors, Sibyl Vane moved like a creature from a finer world. Her body swayed, while she danced, as a plant sways in the water. The curves of her throat were the curves of a white lily. (72)

Similarly, in the scene in which Dorian's reaction to the actress Sybil Vane's death is depicted, Sybil is again portrayed like a beautiful work of art, this time through the combination of Dorian's language and thoughts. She is compared to Juliet whose extreme suffering and death for love ennobled her as a tragic heroine. Hence, Sybil is exalted and turned into a tragic figure in this scene:

How different Sibyl was! She lived her finest tragedy. She was always a heroine. The last night she played – the night you saw her – she acted badly because she had known the reality of love. When she knew its unreality, she died, as Juliet might have died. She passed again into the sphere of art. There is something of the martyr about her. Her death has all the pathetic uselessness of martyrdom, all its wasted beauty. (90)

However, Dorian's love affair with the actress Sybil Vane is one of the conflicts between art and life. Dorian loves Sybil Vane only in the world of art, not in real life when she does not act. Therefore, for Dorian, her suicide, though painful it is for him, is regarded as "her finest tragedy" by him because she is again turned into a heroine. This love tragedy, like Dorian's sinful life, which his portrait

depicts, symbolically implies that when art is reduced to life, it is destined to die. As Wilde puts it in his essay "The Decay of Lying", "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" (992) or "Art, in a word, must not content itself simply with holding the mirror up to nature, for it is a re-creation more than a reflection, and not a repetition but rather a new song" (qtd. in Beckson 11). Referring to the autonomy of art, Wilde explains the principle of his aesthetics in his "Decay of Lying". He states: "Art never expresses anything but itself. This is the principle of my new aesthetics;" (987). Hence, in the novel, Basil Hallward, the artist, also maintains that "An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them" (25). What Wilde argues in these quotations is that art is superior to life because it creates the beautiful like Dorian's portrait that reflects his innocent beauty. But when it is reduced to life by Dorian, who exchanges his soul for being young eternally, it becomes the symbol of his sinful soul and life. Then it becomes distorted and ugly as it is reduced to Dorian's ugly record of guilt due to his vanity and frailties. However, when he wants to get rid of the portrait by slaying it, he also kills himself and the picture returns to its original beauty. In other words, according to Wilde's aestheticism, if art imitates life with fidelity as in realism, it will depict the materialist world of the Victorians who seek happiness only through material gain while neglecting the sufferings of others.

Lord Henry Wotton, the mentor of Dorian, poisons him through his philosophy of New Hedonism and the "yellow book" he gives. The title of the book is not given but at his trial Wilde "conceded that it was almost Joris-Karl Huysman's *A Rebours (Against Nature)*" (Ellman 298) which is the story of a character, named Jean des Esseintes, an eccentric man who has lived an extremely decadent life in Paris which he loathes, and therefore, retreats to his secluded house where he creates an artificial world of artistic beauty for himself. However, at the end of the book, he returns to human society, realizing that only dissillusion would await him if he were to carry out his plans further. The parallelism between Dorian's life and that of the hero in Huysman's book is clear. Dorian, who was infected by Lord Henry, was misguided by him to such an extent that he was almost withdrawn from life and continued only to live for bodily pleasure rather than seeking love (Miller 29-30). "His relationships become increasingly self-serving, and soon he is happiest only when he is fondling precious gems and fine brocades, for they make no demands upon him" (30). His inner thoughts betray his desperation and loneliness because he cannot get rid of his guilty conscience, after he discovers the alterations in the picture:

Yet he was afraid. Sometimes when he was down at his great house in Nottinghamshire, entertaining the fashionable young men of his own rank who were his chief companions, and astounding the county by the wanton luxury and gorgeous splendour of his mode of life, he would suddenly leave his guests and rush back to town to see that the door had not been tampered with, and that the picture was still there. What if it should be stolen? The mere thought made him cold with horror. Surely the world would know his secret then. Perhaps the world already suspected it. (111)

As Miller argues, "There are moments, however, when even these pleasures become lost to him" because "they force him into awareness and inhibit the escape from reality that he ultimately finds in drugs" (30). At this point it can be argued that in the book, *Oscar Wilde*, as emphasized by Miller, shows the reader that "Art, like experience, is good only so long as it contributes to self-development". If "it is used as a luxurious means of passing time" as Dorian and Lord Henry did, "it is no better than the drugs to which Dorian eventually falls victim" (30). Such a view does not conflict with Wilde's notion of art that art and life are two distinct spheres. On the contrary, in his essay "The English Renaissance of Art," he writes, "Love art for its own sake, and then all things that you need will be added to you. This devotion to beauty and to the creation of beautiful things is the test of all great civilized nations" (<http://www.tfo.upm.es/> ... 20). In the same essay, he also argues that beauty lives for ever and unlike "philosophies that fall away like sand and creeds follow one another like the withered leaves of autumn", what is beautiful is "a joy for all seasons and a possession for all eternity" (20). Similarly, in his lecture "The House Beautiful" which he delivered in Chicago, he maintains,

Today more than ever the artist and a love of the beautiful are needed to temper and counteract the sordid materialism of the age. In an age when science has undertaken to declaim against the soul and spiritual nature of man, and when commerce is ruining beautiful rivers and magnificent woodlands and the glorious skies in its greed for gain, the artist comes forward as a priest and prophet of nature to protest. (qtd. in Beckson 17)

Wilde also puts emphasis on the role of art in training children to be kind to animals and all living things:

Art culture will do more to train children to be kind to animals and all living things than all our harrowing moral tales, for when he sees how lovely the little leaping squirrel is on the beaten brass or the bird arrested in flight on carven marble, he will not throw the customary stone. (qtd. in Beckson 14)

As seen, for Wilde, true art has a kind of healing effect on human beings as long as it is internalized correctly, simply because of the fact that it is beautiful. For Wilde, “the work of art should dominate the spectator”, but “the spectator is not to dominate art” (qtd. in Beckson 20). Unfortunately, Dorian, misguided by Lord Henry who is a product of Victorian society, misinterprets art and fails to recognize the higher pleasures of generosity and goodness his soul needs. Therefore, he becomes a victim of his own sensual pleasures. Lord Henry “denies the soul, denies suffering, thinks of art as a malady and love as an illusion” (Ellman 300). Furthermore, he is also wrong “in praising Dorian’s life as a work of art when it has been a failure”(300). Even though he claims that one can be a spectator of one’s own life, Dorian, no matter how hard tries to remain distant from his life by being unwilling to recognize his responsibilities and obligations, particularly, his moral responsibilities, he cannot overcome the sense of guilt he feels which eventually causes his own death after committing many sins, including the murder of his best friend Basil Hallward, the artist, the creator of his portrait. The novel reflects that for Wilde, art is neither disengaged from life nor deeply engaged in it. As he himself claims in “The Decay of Lying”, “Life is Art’s best, Art’s only pupil” (983). The quotation from “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” below, reflects what he really means:

Art, even the art of fullest scope and widest vision, can never really show us the external world. All that it shows us is our own soul, the one world of which we have any real cognizance. And the soul itself, the soul of each one of us, is to each one of us a mystery. It hides in the dark and broods, and consciousness cannot tell us of its workings. Consciousness, indeed, is quite inadequate to explain the contents of personality. It is Art, and Art only, that reveals us to ourselves. (1194)

Art reveals us to ourselves because it shows us our own soul which is in fact very mysterious and dark like Dorian’s portrait which depicts his soul through a shameless expression of cruelty that he could not bear. As Philip Cohen puts it, “It reveals the soul’s depths,

not the mere surface reality" (143). However, to substitute art for life is also wrong as Sybil and Dorian have done. Dorian who is under the influence of Lord Henry's limited perspective of life and art, cannot understand Sybil Vane and causes her eventual suicide. Lord Henry, on the other hand, is a typical Victorian hypocrite and a cynic who will soon forget all his efforts to influence Dorian, even though, he claims that to influence a person is immoral:

"All influence is immoral – immoral from the scientific point of view."

"Why?"

Because to influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of some one else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him. The aim of life is self-development. To realise one's nature perfectly – that is what each of us is here for. (28-29)

Unfortunately, young Dorian who is poisoned and misguided by Lord Henry "uses art only as a luxurious means of passing time" and lives a life of passionate self-indulgence, which leads to his eventual self-destruction.

As Richard Ellmann also puts it, "by its creation of beauty, art reproaches the world, calling attention to the world's faults by disregarding them" (311). Ellmann further argues that, in the novel, "Wilde presented the case as fully as he could. However gracefully he expresses himself, there is no doubt that he attacks Victorian assumptions about society" (311). What Wilde seems to ask through his work, is "to give up hypocrisy both by recognizing social facts and by acknowledging that" the Victorian society's "principles were based upon hatred rather than love" (311). As Wilde himself also claims, the story of Dorian Gray is moral. The work consists of "the sequence of passages which describes Dorian's relationship with his soul" (Raby 76) even though Dorian's mentor, Lord Henry refuses to acknowledge the existence of human soul to which Dorian's reply is, "Don't Harry, the soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought and sold, and bartered away. It can be poisoned, or made perfect. There is a soul in each one of us. I know it" (161). Concerning *Dorian Gray*, Wilde said: "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” (qtd. in Belford 171). It was an answer against the charges that the novel was immoral which seems contrary to what Wilde advocates about art’s relation with morality. However, as Michael Patrick Gillespie argues,

the Aesthetic Movement in fact took a far more complex view of the relationship between the two. Rather than denying a place for ethics within aesthetic experience... it instead denied primacy to conventional value systems and bluntly asserted the validity of alternative moralities. (142)

Furthermore, Gillespie also argues that Water Pater, the spokesman of the Aesthetic movement in England whom Wilde was deeply influenced by, also advocated that “the idea of art for art’s sake does not abandon ethics”(143). He further argues that even Pater’s “notion of autonomous art, seemingly aloof from the influence of moral judgement, rests upon clear, though admittedly unconventional ethical standards” (143). In the novel, Wilde’s critical approach to conventional morality is expressed through Lord Henry’s commentary on it: “Modern morality consists in accepting the standard of one’s age. I consider that for any man of culture to accept the standard of his age is a form of grossest immorality” (69). It is in this context that Wilde was rendering the relationship between art and morality in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In other words, the novel depicts Wilde’s critical approach to the Victorians’ conventional moral standards and vanity through the characters of Lord Henry and Dorian who conceal their personalities through the mask of hypocrisy. The conversation between Basil, the painter, and Lord Henry clearly depicts Lord Henry’s hypocrisy and cynicism: “I believe that you are really a very good husband, but that you are thoroughly ashamed of your own virtues. You are an extraordinary fellow. You never say a moral thing, and never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose” (20). To this Lord Henry’s answer is, “Being natural is simply a pose and the most irritating pose I know” (20).

The hypocrisy and materialist attitude of the conventional Victorian society is also depicted through brief references to Dorian’s scandalous life, which he seems to enjoy, because it increases his charm “in the eyes of many” despite the strict moral conventions and moral standards of the Victorians:

Yet these whispered scandals only increased, in the eyes of many, his strange and dangerous charm. His

great wealth was a certain element of security. Society, civilised society at least, is never very ready to believe anything to the detriment of those who are both rich and fascinating. It feels instinctively that manners are of more importance than morals, and, in his opinion, the highest respectability is of much less value than the possession of a good *chef*. (112)

The hypocrisy of the Victorian society is mentioned by Dorian in a conversation between him and Basil Hallward as well:

"[...] And what sort of lives do these people who pose as being moral, lead themselves ? My dear fellow you forget that we are in the native land of the hypocrite." "Dorian," cried Hallward, "that is not the question. England is bad enough, I know, and English society is all wrong." (118)

Likewise, the picture which becomes a mirror of Dorian's sinful soul, also depicts his hypocrisy and vanity: "A cry of pain and indignation broke from him. He could see no change save that in the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite" (166). Even Dorian admits that "In hypocrisy, he had won the mask of goodness" (166). Hence, both Lord Henry and Dorian, shaped by Victorian society, fail to understand the role of art in human life as advocated by Wilde through his aestheticism, and follow Lord Henry's New Hedonism instead, which "asserts the primacy of a doctrine of pleasure that absolves individuals from the ordinary responsibilities for their actions" (Gillespie 145).

However, despite Wilde's claims that "an artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them" in *Dorian Gray* and "To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim" in the "Preface" of the novel, critics generally agree that the novel "is very much the author's autobiography" (Belford 170). Richard Ellman writes that the novel, "besides being about aestheticism, is also one of the first attempts to bring homosexuality into the English novel" (300). To him, the work's "appropriately covert presentation of this censored subject gave the book notoriety and originality" (300-1). Indeed, the novel contains many implications of homosexuality: Lord Henry's marriage does not seem to be a happy one and his wife leaves him. Basil asks Dorian why his relationship is so fatal to young men. Both Basil and Lord Henry are attracted to Dorian Gray, particularly Lord Henry's attraction is clearly physical: "Yes, he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank

blue eyes, his crisp gold hair” (27) he thinks when he first meets Dorian who inspires Basil like a muse. And Basil is also very reluctant to introduce Dorian to Lord Henry because he thinks that he might influence him. Obviously, he does not want to share him with anyone else. He also does not want to exhibit the picture of Dorian because he confesses that he has “put too much of himself” in it which he calls “a curious artistic idolatry” and therefore he does not want to bare his soul to the public. In other words, he does not want to disclose his secret. Basil also seems very unhappy when he learns Dorian’s decision to marry Sybil Vane: “The painter was silent and preoccupied. There was a gloom over him. He could not bear this marriage”(70). On the other hand, Dorian feels sorry for Basil after his confession of his secret and understands the meaning of “the painter’s absurd fits of jealousy” and “his wilde devotion”. He thinks that there seems something “tragic in a friendship so coloured by romance” (95) which is an implication of Basil Hallward’s romantic infatuation with Dorian. Basil Hallward also tells about his first meeting with Dorian to Lord Henry at the beginning of the novel, which clearly depicts his fascination with Dorian’s personality even though he tells that it was because of Dorian’s powerful personality. However, the scene seems highly romantic like the first meeting of the two lovers:

When our eyes met, I felt that I was growing pale. A curious sensation of terror came over me. I knew that I had come face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself. I did not want any external influence in my life [...] You know yourself, Harry, how independent I am by nature. I have always been my own master; had at least always been so, till I met Dorian Gray [...] Something seemed to tell me that I was on the verge of a terrible crisis in my life. I had a strange feeling that Fate had in store for exquisite joys and exquisite sorrows. I grew afraid, and turned to quit the room. (21)

In the novel, Basil tells Lord Henry several times how deeply Dorian has influenced him, almost inspiring him like a muse to create his art works which, in fact, reveal the passion of his romantic infatuation with him. However, Basil also reveals his admiration for Greek art as well. He hates realism in art because to him only Greek art never separated body and soul:

Unconsciously he defines for me the lines of a fresh school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek. The harmony of soul and body-how much that is! We in our madness have separated the two and have invented a realism that is vulgar, an ideality that is void. Harry! if you only knew what Dorian Gray is to me! You remember that land-scape of mine, for which Agnew offered me such a huge price, but which I would not part with? It was one of the best things I have done. And why is it so? Because, while I was painting it, Dorian Gray sat beside me. Some subtle influence passed from him to me, and for the first time in my life I saw in the plain woodland the wonder I had always looked for, and always missed. (24)

Robert Miller writes that what Basil Hallward “delicately calls ‘a curious artistic idolatry’ – pretty clearly a euphemism for what is in effect, his passionate infatuation with a younger man” (31). For Miller, homosexuality is one of the daring aspects of the book which is “hardly a new discovery in 1891, but nonetheless a relatively unexplored subject for English literature” (35). The name Dorian Gray is also an implication of homosexuality. “Dorians, Ionians, and Aeolians – it is generally thought that Greek homosexuality originated in the military of the Dorian states... and spread through Dorian influence”, particularly through the “Sacred Band” of Thebes which was “composed only of pairs of homosexual lovers” (Belford 171). And in ancient Greek civilization homosexual male love was both tolerated and respected. In fact, after studying classics at Trinity College, Wilde became primarily occupied with ancient Greek civilization and its supreme form of beauty, particularly through male forms. Besides, Dorian’s last name Gray can be associated with the poet John Gray, who was Oscar Wilde’s friend, and according to Richard Ellmann, “Wilde and Gray were assumed to be lovers and there seems no reason to doubt it” (291). In this context, we may assume that Oscar Wilde wrote *Dorian Gray* to come to terms with his own homosexuality. Wilde himself also admits his own relationship with the novel in one of his letters: “It contains much of me in it. 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” (Miller 33). Wilde clearly associates himself with Basil Hallward, the artist whose only aim is to create the beautiful as pure beauty, and Dorian Gray, despite his wrongs, “with his keen desire to expand and realize consciousness” (Willoughby 74) is like the author, but “in other ages, perhaps”. Obviously, Wilde imagines to live in

future ages when he will live freely and create his works freely without any restrictions of conventional morality. It will be a society in which the harmony between the individual and environment is achieved, because for Wilde, homosexuality was inherent, rather than chosen and therefore it was not a matter of immorality. On the contrary, his transgressive desire which generates his transgressive aesthetic are the main features of his individualism and his art. As he writes in his essay "The Soul of Man", "Art is the most intense mode of Individualism that the world has known. I am inclined to say that it is the only real mode of Individualism that the world has known" (1090). Therefore, his individualism which is a feature of his art, is also a desire for a radical personal freedom in a radically free society. In this context, it is natural that Wilde prefers Romanticism to Realism in art because Realism depicts life as it is with all its ugliness whereas Romanticism, which is independent from any kind of restriction, depicts what is beautiful. He states in his "The Decay of Lying" that Realism, as a method is "a complete failure" (991) because "Life goes faster than Realism, but Romanticism is always in front of Life" (992). As he puts it in a conversation as well, "there are two worlds-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 not exist" (qtd. in Redman 56).

In sum, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a novel in which Wilde has put too much of himself. The novel questions the relation between art, life and morality through Wilde's aestheticism which advocates beauty as the only goal of art. Since the end of art is beauty, it should not imitate life with fidelity which will otherwise depict nothing else but Victorian materialism and hypocrisy as reflected through Dorian's sinful life that ruins the innocent beauty of his picture, in other words, the symbol of art as pure beauty. In the novel, the implications of the direct relationship between Wilde's homosexuality and his concept of art as acts of beauty is reflected through Basil Hallward's romantic infatuation with Dorian and the work of art he creates as the embodiment of beauty, which is pure art. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* clearly depicts the fact that Wilde is a man of morals. However, what he criticizes and rejects is the rigidity and hypocrisy of conventional Victorian morality which he considers very oppressive, and even cruel not only for the artist but for everybody. Therefore, for Wilde, art is always superior to life because it creates beauty which trains children and heals the human soul. Hence, it is the only means to teach men to live morally for Wilde.

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5

Art Criticism Veiled in Fiction: Oscar Wilde's Views on Art and Literature in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Özlem Uzundemir

“The artist is the creator of beautiful things” is the the first sentence of the preface Oscar Wilde wrote to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This epigrammatic expression on beauty depicts Wilde’s advocacy to aestheticism, a late nineteenth-century movement, which rejects didacticism and opts for beauty and pleasure in art. One of the leading figures of this movement in England, who also became a mentor for Wilde was Walter Pater. In his seminal book *The Renaissance* he fuses the concept of beauty with art for art’s sake movement, saying the greatest wisdom is “the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake [...]”. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake” (199). Another tenet of aestheticism is the autonomy of art through the denial of the well-grounded mimetic view that art mirrors nature. In his essays on art and literature written between 1889 and 1891

Wilde emphatically objects to the Victorian realist aesthetics and embraces art for art's sake with a particular focus on imagination, individuality and a challenge to morality. This chapter will examine Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a literary elaboration on his views on art discussed in his "The Decay of Lying", "Pen, Pencil and Poison", "The Critic as Artist", "The Truth of Masks" and "The Soul of Man under Socialism" to portray Wilde's notion of an anti-realist aesthetics.

Oscar Wilde in "The Decay of Lying: An Observation" published in 1889 - one year before the publication of his novel - questions realism in art in the form of a Socratic dialogue between fictive characters Vivian and Cyril, who are named after Wilde's sons. Wilde's reversal of mimesis is evoked through his preference of veil to mirror as a metaphor for art when Vivian claims: "Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror" (*Complete Works* 982). Contrary to the mimetic notion that nature creates art, Vivian claims that art does not imitate the external world and that nature is a human construct: "Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. [...] One does not see anything until one sees its beauty" (*Complete Works* 986). As is suggested in this quote artists attribute meaning to nature through their imaginative power, and force the audience to see nature as it is created in art.

Since Vivian in this essay objects to mimesis, he undermines realist novelists of the Victorian era, who imitate life, while he exalts those writers who prefer refashioning nature through imagination. The life-like characters in such fiction

seem to have suddenly lost all their vitality, all the few qualities they ever possessed. The only real people are the people who never existed, and if a novelist is base enough to go to life for his personages he should at least pretend that they are creations, and not boast of them as copies. The justification of a character in a novel is not that other persons are what they are, but that the author is what he is. Otherwise the novel is not a work of art. (*Complete Works* 975)

Imitating real people in fiction, according to Vivian, does not show the writer's talent, because "As a method, realism is a complete

failure" (*Complete Works* 979). Glorifying imagination over realism, Vivian declares "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art" (*Complete Works* 992). Richard Ellmann in his biography on the writer also posits Wilde's favor of lies, saying "Wilde praised art's rejection of sincerity and accuracy in favor of lies and masks. [...] Lying is better because it is no outpouring of the self, but a conscious effort to mislead" (*Complete Works* 285). Such act of lying and deception is at the core of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

"Pen, Pencil and Poison" (1889), which focuses on the poet, painter and forger Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, deals with the artist's renunciation of imitation and realism in painting. Denouncing the 19th century realism in a similar fashion as in the previous essay, Wilde claims "In a very ugly and sensible age, the arts borrow, not from life, but from each other" (*Complete Works* 1001). What Wilde suggests about Wainewright's art, namely "compositon, beauty and dignity of line, richness of colour, and imaginative power" (*Complete Works* 997) applies to Basil Hallward's notion of art in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as well.

In "The Critic as Artist" (1890), where he dignifies the critic for his/her ability to recreate a text, Wilde deploys his views on aestheticism indicating that the critic "rejects these obvious modes of art that have but one message to deliver, and having delivered it become dumb and sterile, and seeks rather for such modes as suggest reverie and mood, and by their imaginative beauty make all interpretations true, and no interpretation final" (*Complete Works* 1031). Emphasis on creativity is intertwined with the lack of a direct message as suggested in this quote. Once the work is completed it becomes independent of its artist and "may deliver a message far other than that which was put into its lips to say" (*Complete Works* 1029). Wilde declares that art is not created by the dictates of others, but is instead "self-conscious and deliberate" (*Complete Works* 1020). In a letter to the editor of the *Scots Observer* dated July 9, 1890, Wilde further dwells on the artist's concentration on the work and not the public opinion. He writes: "I write because it gives me the greatest possible artistic pleasure to write. If my work pleases the few, I am gratified. If it does not, it causes me no pain. As for the mob, I have no desire to be a popular novelist" (*Selected Letters* 81). As this quote underlines, Wilde prefers the pleasure principle in art to teaching a moral lesson. This discussion on pleasure in art brings the topic to art being "immoral" (*Complete Works* 1039), which he will reiterate in the preface to the novel too. Similarly, in his essay "The Truth of Masks" (1891) he states that there cannot be universal truth in art: "A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true" (Wilde

Complete Works 1078). By rejecting truth and didacticism in art Wilde foregrounds individual taste and pleasure.

Like the other aesthetes of the time, such as Pater and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in "The Critic as Artist," Wilde draws attention to the paragone between verbal and visual arts. He says:

the domain of the painter is [...] widely different from that of the poet. To the latter belongs life in its full and absolute entirety; not merely the beauty that men look at, but the beauty that men listen to also; not merely the momentary grace of form or the transient gladness of colour, but the whole sphere of feeling, the perfect cycle of thought. The painter is so far limited that it is only through mask of the body that he can show us the mystery of the soul [...]. (*Complete Works* 1030)

He further values poetry over painting, because "while the poet can be pictorial or not, as he chooses, the painter must be pictorial always. For a painter is limited, not to what he sees in nature, but to what upon canvas may be seen" (*Complete Works* 1031). Thus, compared to painting, which is restricted with visuality, Wilde believes that literature is a higher form of art as it is characterized more with imagination.

Apart from "The Critic as Artist," "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891) also emphasizes individualism in art, saying "A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament" (*Complete Works* 1090). Indeed, as in the previously discussed essay, Wilde, in this one, objects to the type of the artist who takes the public view into consideration. He says:

In England, the arts that have escaped best are the arts in which the public take no interest. Poetry is an instance of what I mean. We have been able to have fine poetry in England because the public do not read it, and consequently do not influence it [...]. In the case of the novel and the drama, arts in which the public do take an interest, the result of the exercise of popular authority has been ridiculous. No country produces such badly written fiction, such tedious, common work in the novel form, such silly, vulgar plays as England. (*Complete Works* 1091)

When the public has difficulty accepting new aesthetic forms, they either claim that “the work of art is grossly unintelligible” or that it is “immoral” (*Complete Works* 1092). For Wilde, then, public taste is of two kinds: aesthetic or ethical, and he prefers the former.

Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is replete with the principles of art he puts forth in his essays. The book underlines beauty in art, Wilde’s anti-realist viewpoint and his emphasis on imaginative power in literature, as it belongs to a genre called the “magic-portrait story” that dates back to the late 18th century. As Diana Bellonby summarizes in her dissertation, in this genre

a male artist paints a masterful portrait of a beautiful young muse who inspires him. The process corrupts both the sitter and the artist, empowering only the spectators. At first, the sitter indulges in the seductions of beauty, sin, and artistic mastery. But by story’s end, the model commits suicide, having served only the hedonism of a master and the production of a masterpiece. (Bellonby 1)

The storyline of this genre provides the quintessence of Wilde’s novel: the artist Basil Hallward’s magical portrait of his young and beautiful muse Dorian Gray brings both the tragic end of its artist as well as the sitter, while the portrait’s spectator/critic Lord Henry Wotton gains power through his manipulative words. Dorian’s desire to change places with his objectified beauty when he declares “For that – for that – I would give everything!” (*Dorian Gray* 25) turns out to be true; while the actual Dorian – or “Prince Charming” (*Dorian Gray* 53) as he is called by Lord Henry – remains unaffected by time, his image ages and becomes uglier because of his evil deeds in actual life. Indeed, with this Faustian bargain, life copies art’s stasis. This picture as “the most magical of mirrors” (*Dorian Gray* 106) becomes a sign of Dorian’s corrupting personality: the foulness reflected not on the surface but in the depths of the painting (*Dorian Gray* 157) turns it into a parody of the original as Basil thinks (*Dorian Gray* 156). In this sense Wilde takes the discussion in his “The Decay of Lying” that nature imitates art to an extreme case in which art and reality replace one another. Accordingly, Basil’s desire to exhibit his work in Paris leads Dorian to kill him due to his fear that the onlookers and especially Basil would recognize his evil deeds reflected in the painting.

Anti-realism is first voiced by Basil whose words evoke Walter Pater’s view of art and his emphasis on beauty rather than truth. To

Lord Henry, Basil says in his studio: “An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty” (*Dorian Gray* 11). The artist refers to realism in art as well as the tendency to associate the artwork with its creator. His reluctance to exhibit Dorian’s portrait immediately after he completes it results from his belief that the viewers would understand Basil’s love to Dorian. However, after he loses his source of inspiration he recognizes that an artwork is independent of its artist and that “Art is always more abstract than we fancy. Form and colour tell us of form and colour – that is all. It often seems to me that art conceals the artist far more completely than it ever reveals him” (*Dorian Gray* 115). Basil finally comes to believe in an abstract notion of art, that art does not reflect the identity of its creator, and that the audience should not look for a message but just appreciate form and colour.

Secondly, Dorian’s affair with his fiancée Sybil Vane also illustrates the lack of a correlation between nature and art. Lying, the opposite of truth and reality as underlined in Wilde’s essay, is examined in this novel in the context of acting. Dorian falls in love with Sybil the actress who performs in various plays by Shakespeare but not the Sybil in actual life. Sybil, on the other hand, regards the characters she impersonates on stage as real, until she is promised a new life with Dorian. When her performance is considered a failure by Dorian, she defends herself against Dorian’s criticism of her performance, saying:

I was Rosalind one night, and Portia the other. The joy of Beatrice was my joy, and the sorrows of Cordelia were mine also. I believed in everything [...]. The painted scenes were my world. I knew nothing but shadows, and I thought them real. You came – oh my beautiful lover! – and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is. To-night, for the first time in my life, I saw through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which I have always played. (*Dorian Gray* 85-86)

“In this quote, Sybil, like Basil, emphasizes how art is misconceived as real. Referring to mimesis through the word shadow, Sybil puts forth the idea that art is a distortion of reality” (Uzundemir 263). Moreover, she underlines her preference of the real world to that of art, whereas for Dorian she exists only on stage: “Without your art you are nothing” (*Dorian Gray* 87) says Dorian. Seeing that her

performance has disappointed the spectator, Dorian decides to abandon her, which drives her to suicide. After her death, Lord Henry's consoling words to Dorian signify Dorian's affection for a false appearance not reality, saying:

The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died. To you [...] she was always a dream, a phantom that flitted through Shakespeare's plays and left them lovelier for its presence [...]. The moment she touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her, and so she passed away. Mourn for Ophelia, if you like. [...] But don't waste your tears over Sibyl Vane. She was less real than they are. (*Dorian Gray* 103)

As underlined with Lord Henry's words, when Sybil passes from a fake identity on stage to the real one after falling in love with Dorian, she loses her attractiveness for Dorian.

Lord Henry, who admits that "the only things that one can use in fiction are things that one has ceased to use in fact" (*Dorian Gray* 78) also abhors "vulgar realism in literature" (*Dorian Gray* 194). Contrary to puritan moral conduct, he believes that pleasure is the only principle in life to "hav[e] a theory about" (*Dorian Gray* 77). Thus, he preaches Dorian hedonism, to get utmost pleasure from life, a significant aspect of aestheticism. He suggests: "Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. [...] A new Hedonism – that is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol" (*Dorian Gray* 22). Although this search for pleasure in life might lead to moral depravity, as depicted in Dorian's situation, Lord Henry believes that Dorian is too charming to commit vulgar crime (*Dorian Gray* 213).

Wilde's comparison of the sister arts, literature and painting, in "The Critic as Artist", is at the heart of this novel, as the book is an example to notional ekphrasis, "the verbal representation of a purely fictional work of art" (Hollander 4). In such manner, Wilde displays how one form of art borrows not from life but from another one. If Wilde is to make a choice between these two forms, he sides with literature as is shown through Lord Henry's influence. While Basil's portrait is the first cause of Dorian's corruption, as he tries to acquire the permanence of art, the second cause is Lord Henry's impressive words which emphatically underline Dorian's charming beauty by comparing him to Narcissus and provoking him to resist his physical change through time. Dorian reacts against him, saying: "Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid,

and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them!" (*Dorian Gray* 19). Not only the magical power of his words but the "poisonous book" (*Dorian Gray* 125) he gives to Dorian about a young Parisian's sinful deeds also contributes to Dorian's corruption. The yellow book's power that "it presents a number of sinful acts that Dorian is impelled to imitate" (Sheehan 335) designates how literature shapes life. Basil's murder by Dorian to get rid of the first cause of his corruption as opposed to the critic/spectator Lord Henry's survival at the end of the novel could be interpreted as Wilde's glorification of the power of literature over visual arts. One other reason might be related to the significance Wilde attributes to the critic or the spectator both in his essay as well as his preface to the novel.

Dorian's destruction of the mirror that reflects his unchanged charmat the end of the novel could be interpreted as a criticism of mimesis. The next step of Dorian's devastating act is to get rid of the portrait, because it no longer gives him pleasure (*Dorian Gray* 223) with all his crimes reflected on it. "The idea that art cannot substitute life in the case of Sybil is valid for Dorian too; the figure in the framed portrait cannot replace Dorian" (Uzundemir 264). He dies as soon as "he stabs the knife, with which he killed Basil, into the canvas. The figure in the artwork [...] transfers all the sins onto the dead man lying on the floor. Thus, before it is revived to its brilliant primordial state, the corrupt ideal should be demolished" (Uzundemir 264). In this way, the work of art gains an independent existence of its creator as well as its owner, who has kept it secret from the public, once they perish.

In conclusion, as Ellmann claims, Oscar Wilde's "*Dorian Gray* is the aesthetic novel *par excellence*, not in espousing the doctrine, but in exhibiting its dangers" (Ellmann 297). Dorian's sole center in life which is utmost pleasure based on sensation brings his destruction and he becomes in Ellmann's words "aestheticism's first martyr" (Ellmann 297). After the publication of the novel, Wilde is forced to defend his novel against criticisms of immorality by saying: "My story is an essay on decorative art. It reacts against the crude brutality of plain realism. It is poisonous if you like, but you cannot deny that it is also perfect, and perfection is what we artists aim at" (qtd. in Ellmann 303). The aim of this paper, which is to clarify Oscar Wilde's maxims on art through his novel, is implied in this quote by calling the novel "an essay on decorative art". Hence Wilde suggests his anti-realist stance and his belief in the power of imagination through the interaction of different forms of art, namely literature and painting.

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6

Oscar Wilde, Colonialism and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Laurence Raw

Sometimes there are moments when one's entire view about an author and their significance in contemporary life are subject to radical revaluation. Such was the case when I watched Andrew Graham-Dixon's *The Art of Gothic* – a three-part television documentary series broadcast on BBC Four in the United Kingdom in October and November 2014. The third episode, "Gothic Goes Global," shows how Gothic fantasy horror would be outstripped by the real horrors of the First World War. The language of the Gothic – giving vent to the imagination and the deliberate subversion of so-called "civilized" conventions – came to encapsulate the injustices of the twentieth century. A Gothic narrative seemed to make more sense in the modern world than any other literary form.

Graham-Dixon applied these insights to an analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which he argued was a colonialist narrative in Gothic form. Written towards the end of the late nineteenth century, the novella's eponymous hero is someone ruthlessly exploited by

Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton, whose only form of resistance can be expressed through establishing a close – almost sexual – relationship with his portrait. Dorian himself is the classic colonial subject – a young man sans personality who becomes the object of narratives of dominance constructed by Basil and Lord Henry. To Basil he is a sexual plaything to be vicariously ogled at while the artist paints his portrait. Lord Henry likes to play Pygmalion, transforming a naïve young man into a sophisticated denizen of London society. As an Irish citizen, and an outsider himself, Wilde uses the Gothic narrative to examine his own feelings of exclusion in a novella published four years before the author's arrest, after having lost the libel case against the Marquis of Queensberry. Perhaps Wilde had a premonition of what might happen to himself, should he lose the fragile social reputation as an aesthete and wit that ensured his – temporary – acceptance in London high society.

Graham-Dixon's argument made me rethink my entire approach to Wilde. Hitherto I had considered him a political writer, but one more preoccupied with skewering the foibles of the English upper classes. I had first encountered him while at school, when I watched a television production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and enjoyed the ways in which the incessant use of epigrams exposed the basic ignorance of theatrical *grandes dames* such as Lady Bracknell. My all-time favorite film of a Wilde text is Albert Lewin's version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a magnificently lush version of the tale best remembered for George Sanders's oleaginous performance as Lord Henry, his pointed nose turned upwards in a permanent sneer as he recounted what had happened to his one-time protégé. Until I watched the Graham-Dixon program, I had always considered the film to exemplify my view of Wilde as a social satirist rather than a critic of Victorian colonialism: Sanders's Lord Henry is so preoccupied with maintaining a civilized veneer that he remains oblivious to Dorian's suffering.

The experience of the program encouraged me to turn back to Wilde's text. Even in the first chapter there are indications of the discourses of domination that will dominate the narrative as Basil asks Lord Henry to refrain from jesting about Dorian: "Don't take away from me the one person who gives to my art whatever charm it possesses; my life as an artist depends on him" (6). Two chapters Lord Henry reflects on the young man's capacity to mimic other people's intellectual views "with all the added music of passion and youth [...] there was a real joy in that - perhaps the most satisfying joy left to us in an age so limited and vulgar as our own, an age

grossly carnal in its pleasures, and grossly common in its aims" (11). Lord Henry is so captivated that he resolves to "dominate him [Dorian] – had already, indeed, half done so. He would make that wonderful spirit his own. There was something fascinating in this spirit of love and death" (11).

Ostensibly these passages reveal Lord Henry's fondness for the aesthetic movement – that movement championing pure beauty and "art for art's sake," emphasizing the visual and sensual qualities of art and design over practical, moral and narrative considerations. The sight of Dorian provides a "satisfying joy" for anyone willing to turn away from the unpleasant realities of everyday life. Yet underneath this idealizing there lurks a controlling self-interest: Basil wants to "capture" Dorian on canvas so as to sustain the artist's self-belief, while Lord Henry believes in appropriating the young man's spirit through domination. For both men Dorian has no personality of his own, but functions as a piece of matter to be reshaped according to their particular preoccupations. They might believe themselves to be "artists" or "aesthetes," but their basic ideology is as self-interested as any Victorian explorer.

Wilde is well aware of their true natures; at one point he remarks sardonically that Lord Henry "paid some attention to the management of his collieries in the Midland counties, excusing himself for this taint of industry on the ground that one of advantage of having coal was that it enabled a gentleman to afford the decency of burning wood on his own hearth" (13). Any true aesthete would recoil at the idea of being associated with something as materialistic as industry, but perhaps it is excusable for anyone wanting to keep his fireside warm (to entertain Dorian, for instance). Wilde observes: "Only England could have produced him, and he always said that the country was going to the dogs" (12).

In this kind of society, where artistic "truth" becomes a form of discourse for domination, it is inevitable that the Gothic spirit will prevail. Wilde suggests this through the ways in which the picture changes – even as early as chapter 7, Dorian notices that "the face appeared to him a little changed. One would have said there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth. It was certainly strange" (38). Nothing seems to have happened yet, but the subsequent description suggests that something unearthly is about to take place; as Dorian draws up the blind, "The bright dawn flooded the room and swept the fantastic shadows into dusky corners, where they lay shuddering" (38). The shadows assume an anthropomorphic quality, as if beyond human control. Later on Dorian tries his best to conceal

the painting from anyone's sight, but finds himself unable to deal with an object "that had a corruption of its own, worse than the corruption of death itself – something that would breed horrors and yet would never die" (50). This is a fine piece of point of view writing, pointing out the effects of colonial domination on Dorian's psyche. In an attempt to mimic Lord Henry's aestheticism, he displaces his feelings of inadequacy on to the painting (it's not the human being who has been corrupted, but the object), but the superlative ("worse than the corruption of death itself") suggests an inability to cope. No one can offer him any counsel, or any alternative visions of living – as a result, his physical and moral degeneration seems inevitable.

As the novella unfolds, so the colonized subject acquires a form of self-determination quite at odds with what Lord Henry and Basil had envisaged. In the end Dorian takes "a monstrous and terrible delight" in comparing his unspoiled visage with "the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth" of the portrait: "He would place his white hands beside the coarse bloated hands of the picture, and smile. He mocked the misshapen body and the failing limbs." On occasions Dorian reflects "on the ruin he had brought upon his soul," but rarely: "That curiosity about life in which Lord Henry had first stirred in him, as they sat together in the garden of their friend [Basil] seemed to increase with gratification. The more he knew, the more he desired to know" (56).

The Christian overtones of this passage are deliberate: Dorian seeks to partake of the tree of aesthetic knowledge, without realizing that the search transforms him into a monster. The search captures the dilemma of any Romantic believing in the power of the imagination to rise above the humdrum realities of the quondam life and create new worlds of possibility. This is a laudable aim; but we have already learned that Dorian has simply mimicked what Lord Henry had told him, without developing a consciousness of his own. He might have a "curiosity about life," but we might question with justification precisely whose life the narrator is referring to. Dorian has not had a life of his own, not since he became part of London aestheticism.

The book's language acquires an overtly orientalist tinge, as the narrator describes Dorian's penchant for grotesque concerts where "grave, narrow-shawled Tunisians plucked at the strained strings of monstrous lutes, while grinning Negroes beat monotonously upon copper drums and, crouching upon scarlet mats, slim turbaned Indians blew through long pipes of reed or brass

and charmed – or feigned to charm – great hooded snakes and horrible horned adders” (57). The language in this passage, making use of repetition, alliteration and assonance, communicates the sensuousness of the experience, to be enjoyed at a nonverbal rather than a verbal level. There are overt references to the “Noble Savage,” a favorite orientalist trope representing the non-white races as tribal and fond of strange, eerie-sounding music. The fact that Dorian prefers such entertainment to the more refined pleasures of western classical music emphasizes the extent of his transformation.

What makes the new Dorian so truly frightening is that the new world of the imagination he represents threatens the stability of the Victorian world that bred – and sustains – Lord Henry: “a world in which things would have fresh shapes and colours, and he [Dorian] changed, or have other secrets, a world in which the past would have little or no place, or survive, at any rate, in no conscious form of obligation or regret, the remembrance even of joy having its bitterness and the memories of pleasure their pain” (55). Lord Henry’s aestheticism represents the outcome of a search for a better world, a scheme of values that he willingly imposes on others. Dorian’s imaginative projection renders this aestheticism obsolete; a colorless set of empty ideas that pale into insignificance beside this new world. In the western scheme of things, past, present and future are clearly delineated; colonized subjects need to learn western history to become more civilized, and thereby fulfill their subordinate roles effectively. In Dorian’s vision past, present and future merge into an immediate, visceral experience devoid of conscience or regret – an experience of the moment that should be savored on its own terms. Contemporary psychological theory values such moments as a means of cultivating mental wellbeing; by paying attention to one’s thoughts and the world that shape them, we can learn how to feel good about ourselves, and thereby learn how to adapt to new challenges (“Mindfulness for Mental Wellbeing”). In the Victorian scheme of things such spontaneity challenged the very bases on which society had been established; it suggests that anyone, irrespective of class, race and gender, can experience powerful feelings, and thereby renders the work of the upper-class aesthete redundant. Dorian becomes a genuinely subversive figure, capable of communicating and savoring a depth of feeling far exceeding that of his erstwhile friends.

In the end such a libertine vision cannot be allowed to survive, and Dorian finds himself plagued by conscience: “What sort of life would be his if, day and night, shadows of his crime were to peer at him from silent corners, to mock him from secret places, to whisper in

his ear as he sat at the feast, to wake him with icy fingers as he lay asleep!" (47). Distinctions between past and present resurface, prompting him to destroy the painting (and thereby destroy himself): "It [the act of destruction] would kill the past, and when that was dead, he would be free. It would kill the monstrous soul-life, and without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace" (73). Superficially these passages might seem to represent Dorian's re-integration into mainstream Victorian life; his rediscovery of the consequences of what he has done, and how it has destroyed him. "Redemption" is possible, but only through further destruction. Yet I think we have to be careful while reading these passages; earlier on we have seen the narrator's fondness for point of view technique, where readers are lulled into taking statements at face value. In this case, we have to consider why Dorian should experience such guilty thoughts, especially when he had previously imagined himself a representative of a brave new world in which guilt no longer really exists. The tone here is highly ambiguous; while understanding the narrator's desire to bring the story to an appropriately moral close (and thereby reassert the colonizer's understanding of the difference between right and wrong), I am prepared to question whether the description actually communicates what Dorian actually thinks. Likewise the passage from chapter 20; if he had found a world in which western-inspired distinctions between past, present and future no longer held sway, why would he worry so much about wanting to kill the past? The Gothic monster that was once an attractive young man has become too powerful—even for the narrator.

The novella ends with a *dénouement* that was memorably filmed in Lewin's 1945 adaptation with the portrait restored to its pristine brilliant, and the corpse of Dorian in front of it, "withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage" (73). The colonized subject has been destroyed – or has it? The painting remains, a macabre reminder of how Basil (and Lord Henry) consciously imposed their wills on an impressionable young man and reconstructed him in their own image. The fact that it is still there for everyone to see might encourage other impressionable people to follow Dorian's example; to follow the leads of their Victorian upper-class masters and embrace the aesthetic life. This is perhaps the most unsettling aspect of Wilde's Gothic tale, and one that renders Graham-Dixon's description of it as a colonialist morality-play so chillingly apt. Times might have changed; the Victorian era might have been superseded by more egalitarian values; but idealized pictures of adolescents remain, not only in art galleries but in other forms of media as well as online. They offer seductive images of freedom and liberty, but such qualities are illusory, as youngsters willingly subject themselves to false values.

Audrey Jaffe suggests that the value of the novella, especially to contemporary readers, lies in its depiction of the consequences of self-picturing, suggesting “the formation of cultural identity as a moralization or rationalization of aesthetic choices whose meaning might be revealed in, or might just as well be hidden by, the face one chooses” (Jaffe). Her comments suggest an active choice; Dorian, a visible symbol of the age, is a representative of a culture in the form of a person. I would suggest that, through his subjection to the colonizer’s will, he becomes a corrupt representative of a culture; and by doing so discovers the potential of a subversive culture in which concepts of moderation and restraint no longer exist. His experiences indicate the ways in which the colonized can reassert themselves in ways never envisaged by their former dominators. That is what makes the Gothic novel so enduringly powerful.

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7

Dinner Parties and Power Games in Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Zeynep Z. Atayurt Fenge

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algernon says that he “hate[s] people who are not serious about meals” (260). This statement may be regarded as a direct echo of Wilde’s famous unabashed words, “I can’t stand people who do not take food seriously”, a remark which formulated the writer’s fondness for food and culinary activities. Wilde’s extravagant lifestyle earned him the reputation of being “a connoisseur of food and wine, din[ing] in the best and most fashionable places” (Redman 165). It is interesting to note that Wilde’s expensive tastes in food and drink proved an inspiration to quite a number of restaurants in England, Europe and the United States, with several establishments¹ offering Oscar Wilde

¹ “The Oscar Wilde Bar” at Hotel Café Royal in London, “The Oscar Wilde Irish Pub” in Berlin, “Wilde Bar and Restaurant” in Chicago, “The Wilde Thistle” in Los Angeles to name a few.

themed menus and decors, and thus explicitly evincing the correlation between Wilde and food. As Redman stated, Wilde “delighted in good food and if a meal was well-cooked he would send for the chef to congratulate him” (165). Wilde’s sophisticated culinary interests were also affirmed by Lord Alfred Douglas who in his book *Oscar Wilde and Myself* referred to their “Lucullian feasts” (69) held at high quality London West End restaurants such as “Café Royal” and “the Savoy” (68), restaurants which still exist today and are still renowned for their high rankings on fine-dining. With respect to his culinary experiences with Wilde, Lord Alfred Douglas stated the following:

Wilde was an expensive sort of friend, particularly after he began to consider himself a gourmet and a man of the great world. He gave fairly expensive entertainments, and although a chop and a pint of bitter beer at some respectable inn would always have done for me, I never professed to be insensible to the charms of good cooking. (69)

Regarding the “charms of good cooking” which he joyfully shared with Wilde, Lord Douglas particularly reminisces the “delicious ortolans”, “foie gras from Strasbourg” with “Perrier Jouet”, “topped off with fifty-year-old brandy” (69).

Wilde’s refined culinary appetite had also found a resonating reflection in many of his works, where a considerable body of references to food or food-related activities may be found. In his novel *The Picture Dorian Gray* (1891), for instance, Wilde’s protagonist enjoys indulging himself extravagantly in fine continental cuisine in London. Wilde’s short story collection for children as well as for adults, entitled *A House of Pomegranates* (1881) also contains much culinary imagery with regard to his characters’ experience of various foods. However, the food imagery tends to have a more striking effect in Wilde’s dramatic works, and particularly in his later plays *A Woman of No Importance* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Perhaps, the culinary images in these plays might be attributed to Wilde’s growing interest in fine cuisine, an interest which he spared no expense to satisfy. On another level, it could be argued that culinary images tend to be represented more effectively in dramatic works due to the visual aspects of drama – food may be a device by which various sorts of actions are animated, and thus may contribute significantly to the overall effect of the performance. This said, in these two plays culinary images and activities function not only as a medium to reinforce power relations in private and public

spheres, but also as a witty element that elevates the farcical quality of the selected plays. Even though *A Woman of No Importance* tends to depict food related images on a more limited scale compared with *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it can be argued that in both plays culinary imagery represents a potent element contributing to Wilde's critique of the Victorian "upper class affluence" (Gillespie 80-81) with its preoccupation with surface appearances, a way of living which he found superficial.

Yet being born into an aristocratic family, Wilde himself was familiar with and immersed in this social environment. His father, Sir William R. Wilde, was a famous eye surgeon, and his mother Lady Jane Francesca Agnes Elgee Wilde was both a poet and noted defender of the cause of Irish nationalism. Her "fierce Irish nationalist poems were published in the Irish weekly newspaper, *The Nation*, under the pseudonym 'Speranza'"² which means hope in Italian, and these works are now considered a significant contribution to the growing sense of nationalism in Ireland during that period. Both parents were socially active, and Wilde was included in his mother's social gatherings whilst still a child, where he honed his wit from an early age, a quality which would later allow him to "sparkle at dinner parties" (Belford 134). Drawing on his familial background, it might be argued that his experience of these gatherings foreshadowed his later literary engagement with dinner parties.

Opening at the Theatre Royal in London in 1893, *A Woman of No Importance* met with a lukewarm critical reception, being described variously as "the least successful on stage" (Powell 55), "overweighted with dialogue" (Nelson 57), and "the weakest of the plays [which] Wilde wrote in the 1890s" (Ellmann 357). However, the increasing popularity of this play³ is indicative of a revived interest in this work. With its assumed thematic semblance to its predecessor *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), particularly in relation to the construction of a woman from an underprivileged social stratum with a secret past (in this case, Mrs Arbuthnot "the humble and self-sacrificing mother" (Eltis 96) who is abandoned by an upper class man with whom she has had a baby), the play deals with "hollowness of the conventional morality which treats the profligate seducer with infinitely more indulgence than the victim of his arts" (Nelson 48-49). However, through a portrayal of a strong, determined and unyielding

² See "Jane Francesca, Lady Wilde."

http://orlando.cambridge.org/public/svPeople?person_id=wildja

³ The play has been performed many times in London theatres since its opening, and is yet scheduled to be performed in autumn 2015 in The London Theatre.

female protagonist whose character belies the derogatory implications that the title seems to ascribe to her, the play offers a far more pronounced critique of gender inequality – or, as Wilde put it, “the monstrous injustice of the social code of morality” (Pearson *The Life* 251)– prevalent in the late Victorian social landscape than that portrayed in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*.

Composed of four acts with the action situated largely indoors, *A Woman of No Importance* is classified as one of the “three society comedies” (Raby 143) written by Wilde. With its “ironical and cynical [engagement with] English high life” (Nelson 101), the comic effect emerges through the sophisticated interplay of the dialogues between various characters who are themselves somewhat exaggerated in their manners, and the dinner or tea parties form a highly suitable backdrop for Wilde to construct these dialogic exchanges. As Sarah Sceats has argued, “writers use feeding, feasting, cooking and starving for more than simple mimetic effect” (“Eating” 118). Drawing upon this observation, it could be stated that culinary images bear numerous implications with regard to the dynamics of society and interpersonal relations. That is to say, food may function as a way to critique the idiosyncrasies of a culture, or as a medium through which power relations are surfaced.

Culinary activities, as Sceats has further pointed out, are often interpreted “as the locus of love, aggression, pleasure, anxiety, frustration and desire for control. In other words, the ingredients of power relations” (“Eating” 118). In fact, what Sceats suggests here is that both consumption and repression of food could be studied within the frame of power relations on the basis of private and public interactions. For instance, in early infancy, the mother’s milk is a human being’s first and foremost elixir of life, and from a psychoanalytic perspective it is a baby’s first interaction with its mother, an experience which translates into the primordial experience of joy or resentment towards the mother. In this respect, the mother is the person “who gratifies or frustrates as she offers or withholds the satisfactions of the breast as the source of food and comfort” (Waugh 64), an idea which has found a stimulating psychoanalytic ground in feminist literary criticism⁴.

In addition to this, food also serves the function of increasing endorphins (i.e. the brain’s ‘feel-good chemicals’) bringing a sense of peace and comfort to the consumer. Culinary activities such as

⁴ Particularly in *l’écriture féminine* which has further explored maternal functions of the female body within a poststructuralist critical frame.

comfort eating, and compulsive eating in particular, might be motivated by this desire to experience a euphoria induced by the consumption to excess of certain foods, an experience which could also be explored as a subversive reaction against personal discontentment. In the light of these various implications of culinary activities, it can clearly be stated that food “constitutes a practical and symbolic discourse” (Magid xi). In other words, while food can “symbolize bodily and sexual experience”, it may also “signif[y] language and voice, a symbolism drawing on the dual association of the mouth with both eating and speaking” (Heller and Moran 2). In fact, it is this duality that tends to be forefronted in Wilde’s selected plays: on the one hand it is the mouth by means of which hunger is satisfied culminating in a peaceful mood of contentment, whilst, it is also the mouth that utters the most unpleasant, hurtful remarks as a strategy to rise above others. In this regard, the power dynamics are often conveyed through the “eating words” (Gilbert xv) of the characters, a performance which allows for an exploration of social and personal relations.

From a cultural perspective, food and drinks most often accompany moments of shared joy, distress, and sadness, functioning as a symbolic medium to show sympathy, gratitude, love, anger, frustration, etc. Yet, food operates at a position of conflict, since, as Gilbert states “we love our dinners but don’t want to become dishes on the cosmic menu. [...] We savor festive meals, yet resolve to renounce gluttony” (xvi). Thus, it is these complex enunciations of food that prompts a critical exploration of various implications of culinary activities. For instance, food has been viewed as an indicator of social class, or one’s identity as to one’s personal and political affiliations, an outlook arguably encapsulated in the ambiguous popular phrase “you are what you eat”. On a broader level, as Farb and Armelagos have argued, “to know what, where, how, when, and with whom people eat is the character of their society” (211). Politically, food may function as a medium through which the ruling class exercises power over the subordinate as in the cases of the Corn Laws in Britain during the early and mid-19th century, and the circumstances surrounding the Great Famine of 1845. Although it was nearly 50 years since the Great Famine when this play was written, the lingering resentment of the English aristocracy’s indifference to the sufferings of the poor arguably remained an issue that rested in the collective conscious. Furthermore, as Pearson has stated, the Great Famine was a topic that might have been talked about in the household of Oscar Wilde, since Wilde’s father William “conducted a statistical survey of the diseases that were afflicting the Irish population after years of the Great Famine” (“Life and Wit” 6). Interestingly, Oscar Wilde’s mother

Jane “met William Wilde during a political rally related to the lack of food, notably the effects of famine on the Irish peasantry” (“Life and Wit” 9). It could be argued that the fact that Oscar Wilde was born into a highly politicized household might have awakened in him a political insight into the relations between food and power, a relation which Wilde critically engages with in his works in his construction of dinner and tea parties.

Although there is no physical appearance of food in *A Woman of No Importance*, there are several references to dinner and tea parties in the play, references through which Wilde voices his witty criticisms of the upper crust’s way of living in his social landscape. The first reference to food takes place in Act I when Lord George Illingworth, the man who abandoned Mrs Arbuthnot and their baby, disdainfully voices his opinion about the English country gentlemen, stating “The English country gentlemen galloping after a fox – the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable” (106). It is significant to note here that Lord Illingworth succeeded to the title of lord after the death of his older brother Arthur who was “killed in the hunting field” (123). Given this, Lord Illingworth’s condescending attitude towards the English country gentlemen who, according to him, are preoccupied with futile endeavours, is a remark that displays Wilde’s satirical take on the “decadent aristocrats” (Powell 63) in the House of Lords in that period whom, as Lord Illingworth states, “are never in touch with public opinion. That makes us a civilized body” (106). Here, Lord Illingworth’s reference to hunting, and the culinary imagery evoked by the word “uneatable” tends to indicate two viewpoints: on a political level, the analogy implies the power relations prevalent between the two political chambers, whilst on a personal level, it hints at Lord Illingworth’s ferocious ambition and appetite for power. Thus, throughout the play Wilde juxtaposes Lord Illingworth’s preoccupation with surface values with the Puritanical ideals of Hester Worsley, a young American woman visiting Lady Hunstanton. Unlike the other characters in the play, Hester is not interested in “London dinner-parties” (110) which she finds rather superficial. However, Lord Illingworth adores these activities which he calls “simple pleasures” (112), and as the first act is about to close, Lord Illingworth is depicted flirting with Mrs Allonby as they get ready for tea, saying “The Book of Life begins with a man and woman in a garden” (112). Here, Lord Illingworth alludes to the Biblical tale of the fall from Eden, with Mrs Allonby assuming the role of Eve, and the forbidden fruit, in this case, is the afternoon tea.

English afternoon tea is a Victorian tradition that came into being in 1840 with the initiative of Anna Maria Stanhope, the

seventh Duchess of Bedford (1788-1861), and consisted mainly of “tea and sandwiches”⁵, designed to bridge the gap between the two main meals of that period – breakfast and dinner. As Sceats has stated, food and eating “are inseparable from both physical and psychic appetites and power relations” (“Eating” 118). Here, Wilde’s reference to afternoon tea tends to point to these two appetites: afternoon tea obviously indicates the satisfaction of hunger, and thus of physical appetite; but also gestures towards the satisfaction of sexual desires, an unconscious disposition which seems to lurk beneath Lord Illingworth’s playful allure – as Sceats has argued, “what underlies insatiability of appetite [...] is an impetus towards incorporation” (*Food* 38). Here, the notion of incorporation not only implies a desire to be a member of a corporate body, but also suggests an inclination to form an indistinguishable whole, invoking a libidinal instinct towards the desired object over whose body power could be exercised to attain a sense of satisfaction.

The correlation between food and power relations is another theme that emerges during the course of the play. In Act II, an act which is largely centred around the dialogue of five women (Mrs Allonby, Lady Stutfield, Lady Hunstanton, Lady Caroline, Hester), we see the characters partaking of after-dinner coffee whilst voicing their opposing ideas about the social codes regarding relationships. For Lady Caroline, playful bachelors should be compelled to marry the girl they are seeing within twelve months, but Lady Stutfield questions the validity of Lady Caroline’s idea, and as she refuses to drink coffee, a conduct which corresponds to her objection to Lady Stutfield’s view, she states that one should also think about those who are “in love with someone [...] tied to another” (113). Mrs Allonby fervently states that “all men are married women’s property” (113) whilst women “do not belong to anyone” (114), a statement which, arguably, represents Wilde’s liberating outlook on women. In this long dialogue about relationships, Mrs Allonby points out that her husband Ernest – a name which Wilde later fully develops into a parodic character in *The Importance of Being Earnest* – “had never loved anyone before in the whole course of his life” (115), a situation which troubles Mrs Allonby since she would rather be “a man’s last romance” (115). As the women continue to converse, Hester speaks her mind on the matter with an outsider’s perspective, stating:

You rich people you don’t know how you are living.
How could you know? You shut out from your society
the gentle and the good. You laugh at the simple and

⁵ See <http://www.afternoontea.co.uk/information/history-of-afternoon-tea/>

the poor. [...] Oh, your English society seems to me shallow, selfish, foolish. (119)

Here, through Hester, Wilde seems to voice his insight into the hypocritical tendencies of the Victorian morality regarding not only gender issues⁶ as to “the unequal division of suffering between men and women” (Powell 67), but also class distinctions, an idea which is further highlighted as the play proceeds, particularly through the construction of Lord Illingworth who is represented as a man of shallow character, steeped in surface appearances and values. During his earlier conversations with his son Gerald (who at this point does not know that Lord Illingworth is his father), it is clear that Gerald looks up to Lord Illingworth as a “successful” and “fashionable man” (141), a man whom he is excited at the prospect of working for. Lord Illingworth, in turn, points out to his protégé that “to get into the best society, one has either to feed people, amuse people, or shock people” (132). As he engages in giving useful advice to his prospective secretary, he utters his most notable remark, a remark that has become a cultural landmark: “a man who can dominate a London dinner-table can dominate the world” (132). In fact, this statement explicitly articulates the significance of culinary affairs in power relations, since in these gatherings food becomes a medium through which a socially ambitious individual may strive to put himself or herself in the best possible light in order to have a respectable place in his/her society. Viewed in this context, Lord Illingworth with all his wealth and dandy looks has an admired status in his society, yet he fails to exercise the same level of power on Mrs Arbuthnot who refuses to marry him despite her son’s persistence. Thus, the last act of the play, situated again in a familiar garden setting, offers a reversal of the ending of Act I, replacing Lord Illingworth’s derogatory remark – “a woman of no importance” with Mrs Arbuthnot’s allusion to Lord Illingworth as “a man of no importance” (157).

First performed at St. James Theatre in London in 1895, and considered Wilde’s “most successful play” (Raby 161), *The Importance of Being Earnest* is another play where culinary references function as a way of enunciating power relations, but this time with a distinctly farcical edge, with the consumption of food serving as a vehicle for Wilde to wittily explore various interpersonal relations – in

⁶ Wilde’s feminism has been found controversial: on the one hand, he is regarded as a writer who has sympathy for women’s issues, whilst on the other, he is criticized for the misogynistic implications in his works. See Margaret Diane Stetz’s essay “Oscar Wilde and Feminist Criticism” in *Palgrave Studies in Oscar Wilde Studies*. Ed. Frederick S. Roden. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 224-245.

fact, the play had initially come out with a subtitle "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People" (Nelson 142). Composed of three acts, it is a play of mistaken identities based on dualities, and the brilliant pun is facilitated by the word "earnest": Jack is located mainly in the country with his cousin Cecily, but he has created an imaginary brother called "Ernest" as a gateway to the tempting life in the city, the irony, of course, lying in the circumstance of his assuming the identity of his imaginary brother Ernest when he is at his least earnest. The counterpart of Jack is Algernon, who is located in the city with his cousin Gwendolen. Like Jack, Algernon has invented a character – a sickly friend called Bunbury – whom he uses as an excuse to escape to the country. Thus, the comedy arises from the complications that emerge due to the double identity of these characters. With this farcical comedy, Wilde created "a bright bubble of nonsense which mocked every principle, law, and custom, of the society he lived in" (Eltis 171). The culinary images in the play add a further comic dimension as they are introduced at particularly critical moments, undermining the serious tone of the characters, prioritizing sensual desires, and thus "dramatiz[ing] the individual's rejection of custom and authority" (Powell 78).

It is significant to note that the food imagery appears early in the play – in fact the first act of the play opens with afternoon tea on the table, with Algernon overindulging himself on "cucumber sandwiches" (253) which are cut for his aunt Lady Bracknell who has a good appetite for this particular kind of sandwich, a tendency which is revealed during Lady Bracknell's visit to her nephew, stating that she would like to have a cup of tea and a "nice cucumber sandwich" (260). But when Algernon realises that there is no sandwich left to serve to his aunt since he has eaten up all of them, Lady Bracknell responds calmly and rather indifferently saying, she "had some crumpets with Lady Harbury" who, as Lady Bracknell further indicates seems to be "living entirely for pleasure" (261). From Lady Bracknell's attitude, some associations of food with wealth and satisfaction could be inferred. That is to say, Lady Bracknell's mention of her visit to Lady Harbury's where she had some crumpets, is immediately followed by her statement about Lady Harbury's way of living which is, to Lady Bracknell, solely motivated by pleasure. Here, the notion of pleasure could be attributed to the idea of consumption and the sense of satisfaction it entails both physically and psychologically for Lady Harbury obviously has got the financial power to satisfy her culinary affairs.

In a similar fashion, Lady Bracknell's passion for cucumber sandwiches could be interpreted in relation to the issue of class: due

to its “little nutritional value” and its incapacity to fully satisfy hunger, cucumbers, which found a marketable place only in the late 1800s, did not appeal to the working classes who “preferred not to waste energy on something with so little protein”. However, “putting them in a sandwich (which is a very much British invention) became popular among the upper classes as a pre-dinner snack”⁷, thus for the upper classes, cucumber sandwiches “served as a sign of one’s status.”⁸

Viewed in this context, Lady Bracknell’s fondness for cucumber sandwiches reaffirms her affiliation with the pretentious and superficial upper class, a correlation which Jack also touches upon when he inquires into the presence of cucumber sandwiches on the table, asking: “Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young?” (254)–statements which further bring forth the farcical connection between this dish and social class. Besides, the whole scene tends to portray the dynamics of power embedded in interpersonal encounters. For instance, while Algernon takes the liberty of helping himself to all of the cucumber sandwiches that had been “specially ordered for his aunt” (255), he does not let Jack touch them, and furthermore says to his aunt unabashedly that there were no cucumbers in the market “not even for ready money” (261). In so doing, Algernon not only satisfies his craving for food, but also enjoys his exertion of power over Jack and his aunt. In fact, Algernon’s insatiable appetite for food, combined with his tendency to escape from his aunt into restaurants, could be interpreted as a manifestation of his unruly and playful disposition which prompts him to indulge in fine dining with Jack when he is in the city. Interestingly, here Wilde refers to “Willis’s” (258) Rooms, “a fashionable restaurant” (then located at King’s Street in St. James’s), a place where Wilde and Lord Douglas often dined (359), and also a place which is frequented by Algernon in the play, serving as a getaway from his aunt’s meddling nature.

The dynamics of power is also made manifest in the relationship between Gwendolen and Cecily in Act II. Cecily in this act uses food as a way of exerting her power during the verbal fight that she holds with Gwendolen over Ernest whom, due to a misunderstanding, appears to be the man that both women are attracted to. This scene begins with Gwendolen paying a visit to

⁷ See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/9494932/As-cool-as-a-cucumber-sandwich.html>

⁸ See <http://1890swriters.blogspot.com.tr/2013/08/the-rise-and-fall-of-cucumber-sandwich.html>

Jack's country house with the prospect of seeing him. Since Jack went to see the Rectory, it is Jack's ward Cecily who welcomes Gwendolen. Early in their conversation Cecily states that Mr Worthington is her "guardian" (287). Concerned to hear about Cecily's relation with Mr Worthington, Gwendolen declares that she is frustrated to see a young woman such as Cecily being looked after by Mr Worthington, since even though Mr "Ernest" Worthington is, as Gwendolen puts it, "the very soul of truth and honour" (287) (a statement which increases the comic effect as it later turns out that both Ernests were ironically truthful in their deception, since both Jack and Algernon were christened Ernest and they are in fact brothers), she is of the opinion that "even men of the most possible moral character are extremely susceptible to the physical charms of others" (287). Hearing the name "Ernest", Cecily, defensively, points out that it is Mr Worthington's elder brother who is her guardian, and Gwendolen, confused, replies that she did not know that Ernest had a younger brother. Here, the reader/viewer realises the essence of the complication: that is Algernon introduced himself to Cecily as Ernest, Jack's invented brother in the city, whilst Jack was Ernest in the city, and he assumed his persona when he saw Gwendolen. Oblivious of this situation, Cecily and Gwendolen are certain in their own ways that they are both engaged to be married to Ernest, and they start to argue about which one of them is to marry Ernest, since Ernest, to the best of their knowledge, seems to have proposed to them both – Gwendolen first, and then to Cecily.

The comic effect produced by this misunderstanding is heightened as both Cecily and Gwendolen continue to preserve their 'ladyship', and it is at this point when the ceremonious afternoon tea turns into a battleground, for both women begin to drop "the shallow mask of manners" (288), leading to another instance where food is rendered a comic function of intensifying the power dynamic. In this scene Cecily asks Gwendolen if she would like to have some tea, and Gwendolen "with elaborate politeness" (289) thanks her, but they can hardly keep up with the pretense, and respond to this ironic façade of manners in their own ways – Gwendolen, moving aside, calls Cecily "detestable girl" (289), and Cecily serves just the opposite of what Gwendolen likes for her afternoon tea. The exchange between the two is significant in terms of highlighting the role of food in the exercise of power:

Cecily (*sweetly*): Sugar?

Gwendolen (*superciliously*): No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable any more. (*Cecily looks angrily at her, takes up the tongs and puts four lumps of sugar into the cup*)

Cecily (*severely*): Cake or bread and butter?

Gwendolen: (*in a bored manner*) Bread and butter, please. Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays.

Cecily (*cuts a very large slice of cake and puts it on the tray*)

(289-90)

This dialogue between Gwendolen and Cecily indicates the ways in which food can be situated in the realm of hatred. Here, while Cecily strives to reinforce her power through the use of food, Gwendolen turns this episode into a class issue by displaying a condescending attitude to Cecily's country life.

The role of food in the assertion of power is also made manifest in the dialogue between Algernon and Jack following the revelation that they were both christened Ernest. During the course of their argument, Jack picks up the muffin dish, and this incident infuriates Algernon who is very partial to muffins, and responds to this stating: "Jack, you are at muffins again! I wish you wouldn't. There are only two left. (Takes them) I told you I was particularly fond of muffins" (294). Not pleased with Algernon's outburst of anger, Jack asks him to leave, but Algernon, rather arrogantly, states that he is not leaving since he "ha[s] not quite finished his tea [...] and there is still one muffin left" (294), a disposition which might be attributed to his sense of power over Jack based on his seemingly higher social status. Here, the use of food obviously creates a comic effect since the act closes with Algernon continuing eating, yet the food also functions as a way of suppressing discontentment. Both characters tend to take refuge in food, but for Algernon in particular, the act of eating seems to eradicate his feelings of discontentment.

Thus, Algernon's "gustatory business" (Powell 78) increasingly produces a comic effect in the play, and particularly in Act II, since it is in this act where Algernon's desire to appease his appetite is distinctively brought to the fore. In this act, Algernon nonchalantly eats muffins while explaining to Jack the improbability of Jack's wished for union with Gwendolen. As Algernon sits "calmly eating muffins" (293), a conduct which seems to trivialise the seriousness of Jack's situation, Jack calls Algernon "perfectly heartless" (293), and Algernon responds to this accusation saying:

When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me. Indeed, when I am in really great trouble, as anyone who knows me intimately will tell you, I

refuse everything except food and drink. At the present moment I am eating muffins because I am unhappy. Besides, I am particularly fond of muffins. (293)

Here, Algernon's constant consumption of food may be attributed to his way of suppressing his anxiety, since as the play reaches its climax, complications arising from Jack and Algernon's duplicitous use of invented characters lead to further complications concerning their relationships with Gwendolen and Cecily respectively. Thus, Algernon takes refuge in comfort eating, overindulging himself in muffins which he seems to consume excessively, and the act closes with Algernon, in Jack's words, "devour[ing] every single muffin" (300). There is yet another reference to muffins in the last act of the play when Gwendolen and Cecily converse about their loved ones and their invented personas. Gwendolen is pleased that Jack and Algernon did not follow them into the house, and Cecily responds to this by stating in a somewhat ambivalently absurd manner, "they have been eating muffins" (295), an activity which Cecily regards as a manifestation of "repentance" (295). Compared with the earlier implications of food in the play, where food served mainly as a medium through which power relations are exposed, the satisfaction that comes from the consumption of "muffins" in this act emerges as an accompaniment to the feeling of contentment in the aftermath of resolution of conflicts. Yet, it also indicates the ways in which the earlier power-related implications of muffins have been trivialized, a disposition which also tends to fit the contextual inferences of the plot with regard to upper-class Victorian mannerisms.

To conclude, as these two plays display, Wilde depicted culinary activities in the selected works not only as a satisfaction of physical appetite, but also as a complex construct situated at the heart of power relations in various different social, economic and private contexts. Whilst the references to food seem to imply a criticism of the upper class and a way of exerting power over one another in both plays, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde uses food imagery also as a medium to heighten the sense of farce embedded in his play. His constant reference to cucumber sandwiches as a metaphor for the superficiality of the late Victorian upper class has found life outside of the play, and even today the cucumber sandwich eating upper class "dandy" seems to exist as a recognizable stereotype within British culture.

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8

The Subverted Nature of Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales

Neslihan Ekmekçioğlu

The fairy tale “is a dramatic projection in symbolic images of the life of the psyche” according to W.H. Auden (203). Freud and Jung have described the fairy tales as “fundamentally not different from dreams” because they speak with the same symbolic language just like dreams (qtd. in Dieckmann 2). Jeannette Winterson evaluates the fairy tales of Oscar Wilde as sources of delight and as perfect examples of how important human imagination is, though these magical stories for children have often been dismissed as lesser works of art (Winterson). Jack Zipes evaluates the fairy tales for children as “universal, ageless, therapeutic, miraculous, having a certain magical power and beautiful (*Victorian Fairy Tales* 1). Whereas Fredric Jameson in his approach to the essence of that kind of literary creation seeks to explore the political unconscious and regards it as a socially symbolic act (qtd. in *Victorian Fairy Tales* 2). Jack Zipes states that the fairy tale discourse is “a dynamic part of the historical civilising process, with each symbolic act viewed as an intervention in socialization in the public sphere” (*Victorian Fairy Tales* 11). According to Zipes, Wilde’s purpose of writing his fairy tales was “subversion”. Zipes notes that Wilde wrote subversively to

undermine stereotypical Victorian values. Carol Tattersall acknowledges that "Wilde subverts the accepted function of that genre, offering a different and paradoxically, more pragmatic approach to the use of fantasy as a didactic mode" (Tattersall 136). This Chapter will deal with the subverted nature of Wilde's *Fairy Tales* in their bizarre endings and their ironical approaches to the Victorian society.

As a devoted father Oscar Wilde started writing the fairy tales immediately after the birth of his two sons, Cyril and Vyvyan. Wilde liked to tell his sons all his written fairy tales. Once Cyril asked him why he had tears in his eyes when he told them the story of "The Selfish Giant." He replied that really beautiful things always made him cry (qtd. in Pearce 219). Oscar Wilde wrote two collections of Fairy Tales, the first being *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* in 1888 and secondly, *A House of Pomegranates* in 1891. The first collection was dedicated to Carlos Blacker and comprised five stories: "The Happy Prince", "The Nightingale and the Rose", "The Selfish Giant, The Devoted Friend" and "The Remarkable Rocket". The second collection of fairies was dedicated to his wife, Constance Mary Wilde and comprised four stories: "The Young King", "The Birthday of the Infanta", "The Fisherman and his Soul" and lastly "The Star-Child". Some of his tales reflect certain personal notions concerning art and morality as well as aesthetical appreciation and religious obligation which mostly reveal an instinct for social criticism that goes beyond Wilde's clever aphorisms and self-indulgent paradoxes. In his correspondence with G. H. Kersley in June 1988 Wilde said that these fairy tales were "meant partly for children, partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy, who find in simplicity a subtle strangeness" (*Letters* 219, qtd. in Snider). In his private letter to Amelie Rives Chanler in 1889, Wilde admits the fact that the tales were written "not for children, but for childlike people from eighteen to eighty" (qtd. in Holland and Hart-Davis 388). These stories advocate a consistently moral point of view. Each tale is designed to reveal the ugliness of a particular vice or the beauty of a particular virtue. Certain vices like vanity in "The Remarkable Rocket" and "The Star-Child"; selfishness in "The Devoted Friend", "The Selfish Giant", "The Nightingale and the Rose"; heartlessness in "The Birthday of the Infanta" and "The Fisherman and his Soul" as well as self-indulgence in "The Young King" are all shown to be wrong and damaging for the soul. According to Wilde, there is no mystery so great and marvelous as suffering. Wilde who has discovered the truth about human suffering refers to himself as "the man of sorrows" and underlines the importance of the figure of Christ also in *De Profundis* (*Collected Works* 1085). Wilde's reference

to God whose name is Love is described as virtue and pain. In *De Profundis* Wilde remembers his Oxford years during which he could not understand Dante saying that “sorrow remarries us to God” (*Collected Works* 1076). In *De Profundis* Wilde confesses his emotions as follows:

I now see that sorrow, being the supreme emotion of which man is capable is at once the type and test of all great art. What the artist is always looking for is the mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible: in which the outward is expressive of the inward [...] Pain, unlike pleasure, wears no mask [...] Truth in art is the unity of a thing with itself: the outward rendered expressive of the inward: the soul made incarnate: the body instinct with spirit [...] For the secret of life is suffering. It is what is hidden behind everything. (1078)

Within the fairy tales the themes concerning love is mostly based upon sacrifice and death. Walter Pater’s notion of pleasure and the education of the sensual child was most influential in Oscar Wilde’s *Fairy Tales*. According to Pater, the physical, material component of the Socratic eros is essential to education: education “must begin in sensuous impressions” (Dowling 98). Wood in her article entitled “Creating the Sensual Child: Paterian Aesthetics, Pederasty and Oscar Wilde’s *Fairy Tales*” states that:

The epoch was already infatuated with the idea of childhood: Inheritors of a Wordsworthian Romantic tradition that privileged childhood over adulthood and innocence over experience, fin- de- siècle authors produced a newly sensual Romantic child [...] Eschewing the didactic texts which taught children the values and ideals that would enable them to become rational, pious, and thrifty adults, these writers adjured children to be “childlike” – to repudiate adult values in favor of fantasy, play and joyous anarchy. (Wood 159)

Wilde provocatively insists upon his child readers experience Paterian “stirring of the senses with strange dyes, strange colors” (Pater 237). Wilde emphasizes the sensual pleasure rather than the moral of the tale, as the story appeals to the curious, the alien and the pagan in the mind of the child (Wood 163). In *De Profundis* Wilde

mentions the influence of Walter Pater's work *The Renaissance* in his youth at Oxford and confesses as follows:

I remember when I was at Oxford saying to one of my friends as we were strolling round Magdalen's narrow bird- haunted walks one morning in the year before I took my degree, that I wanted to eat of the fruit of all the trees in the garden of the world, and that I was going out into the world with that passion in my soul [...] My only mistake was that I confined myself exclusively to the trees of what seemed to me the sunlit side of the garden, and shunned the other side for its shadow and its gloom [...] There was no pleasure I did not experience. I threw the pearl of my soul into a cup of wine [...] The other half of the garden had its secrets for me also. Of course all this is foreshadowed and prefigured in my books. Some of it is in 'The Happy Prince', some of it in 'The Young King', notably in the passage where the bishop says to the kneeling boy, 'Is not He, who made misery wiser than thou art?'... The image of the 'pleasure that liveth for a moment' has to make the image of the 'Sorrow that abideth for ever' [...] (*De Profundis* 1080)

In his fairy tales Oscar Wilde criticizes the Victorian society and displays the unfairness of its social institutions, its inhumane practices. Oscar Wilde deliberately describes with intensified emotion the hopelessness and poverty of the lower class characters while the upper class characters remain cruelly oblivious to the problems of others. Wilde deals with such themes as aesthetic beauty of emotion versus egoistical meanness of man, cruelty versus sensitivity towards humane matters, indulgence versus poverty, selfish desires versus sacrificial love. In "The Birthday of the Infanta", the dwarf is mocked and despised by the Infanta because of his grotesque appearance. When the dwarf sees his ugly image in the mirror and dies tragically with a broken heart, the Infanta orders in disdain: "For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts!" (*Collected Works* 272). The same kind of indifference and cruelty can be seen in "The Nightingale and the Rose". When the Nightingale gives its life's blood to create a red rose for the superficial student, while sacrificing its own blood for others' happiness like Jesus Christ, at the end of the tale the student throws away that red rose into the gutter.

In contrast with the traditional fairy- tale endings with a happy marriage, a newly gained kingdom and a brilliant future lived 'happily

ever after', Wilde's fairy tales culminate in strikingly beautiful, but often painful climaxes with ironic endings. His tales never have a truly happy ending. Most of them come to a close with a sad ending culminating in death. They reflect a pessimistic point of view concerning the society and its artificial values. Wilde's heroes in these fairy tales are usually aesthetes who love beauty and suffer from lack of humanity or human touch or tenderness. Wilde offers a vision of love and beauty that urges a different aesthetic and moral relationship to the world of experience. Wilde's tales are lyrical in tone and rich in imagery. He sometimes makes use of Biblical imagery as well as Greek myths such as those of Persephone and Narcissus are employed. He mostly relies upon the fairy-tale conventions, he personifies abstractions and objects, antropomorphizes animals and gives allegorical names to his settings. His father, Sir William was also interested in the Irish folk tales and was fond of telling tales of "charms" concerning Irish folklore during his life time. Just like Sir William, Oscar also enjoyed telling stories to his friends. "The Happy Prince" was first created orally in one of his voyages to Cambridge with some of his students and friends on the train.

Oscar Wilde's fairy tales rhetorically create a new sensual child by enacting Walter Pater's aesthetics. Walter Pater asserts that sensory experience not morality ought to be the goal of life. Wilde insists his readers experience Paterian idea of "stirring of the senses with strange dyes, strange colours" and give themselves over to a sensual pleasure by appealing to the curious, the alien and the pagan. As seen in Pater's philosophy, Wilde emphasizes physical sensation as an integral part of the spiritual and moral aspects of humankind. He sometimes creates images of the mystique Orient and the remote past. From Plato, Oscar Wilde derived his dialectic technique of the paradox, posing and counterposing utterances in order to demonstrate a new paradoxical understanding of the truth. Wilde encountered the fairy tale and folklore traditions through an Irish lense. His father, Sir William was an important folklorist who had a collection entitled *Irish Popular Superstitions* published in 1852. His book was composed of stories and traditions which he had picked up in the West of Ireland, both as a child in County Roscommon and also as a doctor of medicine in Moytura House and Illanroe Cottage where he offered medical help in exchange for stories in the cottages of peasantry. Oscar's mother, Lady Esperanza collected her husband's notes after his death and published *Ancient Legends* in 1882 and *Irish Charms* in 1890.

Towards the second part of the nineteenth century a new trend became visible in England in the discourse on socialization through fairy tales. This new approach to children's stories reflected

sharp criticism of the established traditional child-rearing and the rationalized means of discipline to make children into good and responsible future citizens. Zipes mentions that Oscar Wilde like George MacDonald and Frank Baum used the genre of fairy tales "as a radical mirror to reflect what was wrong with the general discourse on manners, mores and norms in society" (*Victorian Fairy Tales* 99). In the nineteenth century the fairy tale and the mirror cracked into sharp-edged, radical parts but they no longer reflected the cosmetic bourgeois standards of beauty and virtue. There was more social dynamite in the contents of the tales, as well as more subtlety and artistic touch. The fairy tales are mostly multi-layered and operate with a high level of both occult symbolism and allegorical inflection. In Oxford, Wilde advanced very quickly in the Freemasons, a training for occult knowledge which prepared him well for the theosophists. Masonic imagery pervades his writing and the Rose-Cross which is the symbol of female sexuality combined with the phallus in Masonic iconography, could even be seen in the explanation of the rose in "The Nightingale and the Rose". Concerning the essence of fairy tales, Michel Butor compared them to "a world inverted" which is indeed an exemplary world containing the "criticism of ossified reality" (qtd. in *Victorian Fairy Tales* 99). Pointing to the subversive capacity of fairy tales, Rosemary Jackson stated that the subversive fantasies mostly attempted to transform the relations of the imaginary and the symbolic (Jackson 91). The fairy tales, instead of transgressing the values of the "real" world, questioned them in allegorical terms. They presented the stark realities of power politics without disguising the violence and brutality of certain facts of the contemporary world such as starvation of children, ruthless exploitation and cruel punishment as well as inhuman negligence and indifference to sordid reality. The writing of the literary fairy tale as a symbolic act comprised a certain level of consciousness and understanding as well as conscience. Oscar Wilde's approach in his fairy tales was shaped by his commitment to Christian socialism based upon individualism and art, whereas his contemporary MacDonald reflected the influence of Christian mysticism. Wilde used the figure of Christ to show the need to subvert the traditional Christian message. Zipes mentions that his interpretation of Christianity demonstrated the malpractice of the Church and questioned the compromising way the church leaders used Christianity to curb the pleasure instincts and rationalize a socio-economic system of exploitation (*Victorian Fairy Tales* 114). The central idea of Wilde's essay on *The Soul of Man under Socialism* which depends upon Christ as its theoretical construct finds its voice in all his fairy tales which evince the same sentiments. According to Wilde, socialism could lead to individualism in a humanitarian sense. He states: "The

true perfection of man lies not in what he has, but in what man is" (*Collected Works* 1045).

Actually Wilde used the figure of Christ to show the need to subvert the traditional Christian message. "The Happy Prince" is a good example of how he placed the Christlike figure in a context which aimed at altering the conventional fairy tale discourse and at provoking readers to contemplate upon social change. Quite ironically the happiness of the Happy Prince was based upon ignorance, because he never realized how much his people suffered. The Happy Prince resolves to make up for his past negligence and egocentrism by bidding a devoted swallow to distribute the jewels to a poor seamstress, an artist and a match-girl. Eventually the swallow dies because of the cold winter, and the statue is melted because it is no longer beautiful and useful to the Mayor and counsellors without its precious jewels. The crucified Prince is Christlike and the swallow a kind of his apostle. The Prince overcomes an art for art sake's position and thereby reveals the social essence of all beauty. Wilde underlines the fact that the individual actions of a Christlike person could not put an end to poverty, injustice and exploitation. Though the Prince and the swallow are blessed by God in the end, the Mayor and the counsellors remain in total control of the city. The philanthropic actions of the Prince will go for naught. Wilde suggests that the beauty of the Prince cannot be appreciated in a capitalistic society which favors greed and pomp. The discourse on manners and values in "The Happy Prince" shows how deeply disturbed Wilde was by the hypocrisy of the English upper class and bourgeoisie. All his fairy tales were artistic endeavours to expose their wanton and cruel ways by juxtaposing Christ-like figures to the norms reinforced by the civilising process. This figure was Wilde's aesthetic artefact, employed as a device to reveal social conflicts and contradictions. Philip Cohen claims that the story of "The Happy Prince" "looks outward on human suffering and ponders the problems of economic inequality and injustice" (Cohen 81). Wilde sets up a disruption of the "real" London, revealing the Victorian facts of poverty in an imaginative form and he also unveils the utilitarianism and the gospel of success as disguises for egotism. His tale is populated with "Charity Children", destitute seamstresses, poor artists and the huge masses who congregate in the back alleys and lanes. Historically it is known that between 1841 and 1911 over one million Irish immigrants took up residence in England. Many of these Irish immigrants arrived in London with nothing and were sent to the least attractive areas, living and working in difficult conditions. Of the female Irish immigrants seventeen percent of them became seamstresses and dominated the trade in London at very low rates.

In "The Happy Prince" Wilde singles out the seamstress as a being in particular need and describes her as follows: "Her face is thin and worn, and she has coarse, red hands all pricked with needle [...] She is embroidering passion-flowers on a satin gown for the loveliest of the queen's maids-of-honour to wear at the next court-ball" (*Collected Works* 318).

Most Irish immigrants lived in the districts of Whitechapel, St. George's and St. Giles region. In "The Happy Prince" Wilde mentions that the poor reside in "dark lanes" and "black streets". The swallow takes the rare blue sapphires of the happy prince's eyes and gives them to the poor artist and the match-girl who are in need of money. The poor artist is described as a young man living in a garret and leaning upon a desk covered with papers and a bunch of withered violets. Wilde portrays him very attractive like the figure of Jokanaan in his play *Salome*: "His hair is brown and crisp, and his lips are red as pomegranate, and has large and dreamy eyes. He is trying to finish a play for the director of the theatre, but he is too cold to write any more. There is no fire in the grate, and hunger has made him faint" (*Collected Works* 320). The other sapphire eye of the happy prince is brought by the swallow to a match-girl who is mostly beaten by her father if she does not bring money to the house. The match-girl is described as "having no shoes or stockings" (*Collected Works* 321). Her example is also typical of child labour the Irish were forced into in order to survive in a foreign city. The swallow's persistent evocation of Egypt and its exotic and imaginative landscape reflects the desire of the imperial England for the Oriental exotic and the Oriental spirituality seen in the Victorian society.

Some critics found certain autobiographical signs behind the story of "The Happy Prince". John Charles Duffy believes that the relationship between the Prince and the swallow is best evaluated as a "patently non-sexual" but "spiritually transforming" same-sex passion mirroring the intense friendships favoured by Oxford Platonism' (qtd. in Killeen 21). Richard Ellman claimed that the story turned "on the contrast [...] of an older, taller lover with a younger, smaller beloved" (Ellmann 253) and thus mirrored Wilde's first known homoerotic relationship with the young Canadian Robert Ross, whom Wilde met in 1886. Robert Martin argued that "a good deal of Oscar's experience with Constance informs the relationship between the swallow and the Reed in the story, since Constance 'though attractive, was hardly literary and was intellectually incapable of sharing her husband's life'" (qtd. in Killeen 21). Gary Schmidgall configured the story "as a miniature" upon the moving "celebration of love that dared not speak its name", displaying "a

melancholy evocation of gay experience in a frosty, inclement, threatening society” (Schmidgall 156).

In “The Nightingale and the Rose” Wilde again starts off with Christian imagery but ends firmly in the artistic rather than the religious world. Reminding the story of Philomela and Procne in Ovidius’ *Metamorphoses*, the fairy tale again depicts a character who gives its own life for others’ happiness, just like the happy prince. The Nightingale dies in self-sacrifice, while singing continuously and crushing its breast against a thorn so that a red rose, nourished by the blood will grow and the young student will have a red rose to give to the girl he is in love with. The Nightingale promises: “I will build it out of music by moonlight and stain it with my own heart’s blood” and believes that “Love is wiser than philosophy” (*Collected Works* 329). But the story ends with the indifference of the girl who rejects the rose gained by the Nightingale’s blood because it will not suit her dress. The bitter ending of the tale points to selfishness and futility of the aesthetic sacrifice of the Nightingale. Wilde describes the death of the Nightingale as follows: “When the moon shone in the heavens the nightingale flew to the rose tree and set her breast against the thorn. All night long she sang, with her breast against the thorn... and the thorn went deeper and deeper into her breast, and her lifeblood ebbed away from her” (*Collected Works* 329). Guy Willoughby points out that the self-immolation of the Nightingale on the rose-tree’s thorn could be read as a version of the crucifixion of Christ (Willoughby 28). Whereas Philip Cohen argues that God has deserted the world of the Nightingale and believes that the story exposes love of the Nightingale “as a mere delusion” (Cohen 89-90). According to Clifton Snider, God is totally and simply absent in the interpretation of the Nightingale’s dramatic sacrifice. The beautiful death of the Nightingale appears pointless and God does not intervene at the end to justify the sacrifice.

“The Devoted Friend” also points at the selfishness, insensitivity and cruelty of human beings. The miller sends Hans to death by exploiting their friendship and remaining indifferent to the misery of his friend. “The Remarkable Rocket” can easily be read as a self-parody as the rocket bears a striking resemblance to Wilde, the aesthete, the braggadocio, the sensation of the season, the preeminent artificer, who is aware of his own posing and who is capable of making fun of himself. “The Remarkable Rocket” seems to be the most comic among his fairy tales. The rocket boasts about his parentage and superiority before a group of fireworks, he even tries to prove that he can wet his powder and still go off. But unfortunately he fails to ignite and falls into a ditch, where he

encounters a frog, a dragon fly and a duck. None of them is impressed by his claims of fiery artifice. When two boys toss him into a fire, he lights up and shrieks: "What a success I am!" (*Collected Works* 361) and finally explodes. Unfortunately no one sees his explosion. He falls upon a goose's back as a burnt shaft. In dismay the goose utters: "Good Heavens! It is going to rain sticks" (*Collected Works* 361). Quite ironically the story ends with the rocket saying: "I knew I should create a great sensation" (*Collected Works* 361).

The second collection of his fairy tales is given the title of *A House of Pomegranates*. The image of the pomegranate represents a fertile but dangerous descent into the occult knowledge required by both Theosophy and folk fairy lore. The naming of *Pomegranates* is quite significant in its context as the Greek myth tells the story of Persephone who has been kidnapped by Hades into the underworld. When her mother Demeter finds out about the kidnapping, she pleads with Zeus for help. Zeus tells that Persephone's return can be realized on one condition which is that she should not have eaten anything in the underworld. But Persephone has eaten seven seeds of the pomegranate. So she can return to the earth only for a short period of time which symbolizes the time of fertility and renewal of nature. In contrast to the Happy Prince crucified despite his philanthropic deeds, Wilde's first story in *A House of Pomegranates* entitled "The Young King" points a way to a certain utopia by setting a model of behaviour which he hopes everyone will recognize and appreciate its worth. Basically he demonstrates that the beautiful appearance of the civilized world merely serves to conceal barbaric working conditions. The young King's rejection of robe, crown and sceptre is indeed a rejection of private property, ornamentation, and unjust power. By refusing the elaborate clothes of the King and by dressing in his original and simple clothes, he becomes both an individual and equal among men. The beauty of his deed derives from a compassion for mankind and a realization that his own potential depends on whether people are truly free. Most of Wilde's stories depict how hypocritical social conventions and double standards serve to maintain unjust rule. The result comes out as pain and suffering and the plots of these tales deny a happy ending because despite the attempts of the Christ-like figures, property relations and social characters are never altered.

"The Selfish Giant" is perhaps Wilde's most consummate statement on capitalist property relations and the need to restructure society along with socialist lines. In the first part of the tale the Giant as a landowner banishes the children from his beautiful garden and in order to stop them from entering his

property builds a wall around the garden. The second part shows how his garden turns out to be an empty and desolate place like a winter garden and the stage involves the epiphany when the giant recognizes his selfishness on seeing a young boy miserable and decides to share his wealth and his garden with others. The final part of the story depicts the transformation of the garden into a paradise for children as the Giant shares his property with everyone and their joy fills the garden with voices of happy children. As the giant searches for the little boy, he could not find him until the moment before his death. He realizes that the boy was the incarnation of Christ. Wilde insisted that this love is the type of humane compassion which was necessary for the building of socialism. Wilde wanted his heroes to grasp the roots of existence based upon a moral and aesthetic sensibility for social action in order to change the society. Jarlath Killeen states that "The Selfish Giant" can be evaluated "as a compelling cultural attempt by the Victorians to seek forgiveness for their bad treatment of children" in a century known for its terrible conditions of "child labour, poverty and prostitution" (Killeen 63).

The most interesting of the fairy tales is "The Fisherman and His Soul" told in a manner reminiscent of the *Holy Bible* and the *Arabian Nights*. Wilde uses a colourfully rich language replete with maritime and sensuous imagery. The episodes possess the quality of the arcane as well as the mysterious with the symbols of magic and witchcraft. One day the young fisherman catches something extraordinary instead of fish in his fish net. The fisherman recognizes in the meshes of his net a little mermaid lying fast asleep:

Her hair was as a wet fleece of gold, and each separate hair as a thread of fine gold in a cup of glass. Her body was as white as ivory, and her tail was of silver and pearl. Silver and pearl was her tail, and the green weeds of the sea coiled round it; and like seashells were her ears and her lips were like sea-coral. The cold waves dashed over her cold breasts, and the salt glistened upon her eye lids. So beautiful was she [...] And when he touched her she gave a cry like a startled seagull and woke, and looked at him in terror with her mauve-amethyst eyes [...] (*Collected Works* 275)

The fisherman falls in love with the mermaid and does not want to separate from her. The little mermaid pleads with him to free her promising him to come each day to sing her beautiful songs to him. The fisherman cannot join her unless he becomes like the seafolk, that is, a being without a soul. So the fisherman elicits the help of

the netherworld to separate his soul from his body in order to unite with the mermaid. First, he asks the advice of the priest, he replies that the seafolk are "as beasts of the field that know not good from evil" (*Collected Works* 277). He also warns the young fisherman that "the love of the body is vile." And "the soul is the noblest part of man, and was given to us by God that we should nobly use it. There is no precious thing than a human soul" (*Collected Works* 277). Like Doctor Faustus, the young fisherman wants to sell his soul to the Merchant who gives it "a clipped piece of silver" (*Collected Works* 278). Wilde ironically remarks the bewilderment of the young fisherman: "How strange a thing this is! The priest telleth me that the soul is worth all the gold in the world, and the merchants say that it is not worth a clipped piece of silver" (*Collected Works* 278). The fisherman goes through a Satanic ritual in order to get rid of his soul so that he can join the mermaid. For three years the soul wanders about gaining wisdom, riches and an appreciation of sensuality in three separate and highly allegorical adventures. The witch promises to help him and invites him to a whirling dance during which owls with sulphurous eyes watch them in moonlight. "Before him lay his shadow which was the body of his soul, and behind him hung the moon in the honey-coloured air. And his soul said to him, "If indeed thou must drive me from thee, send me forth without a heart. The world is cruel, give me thy heart to take with me" (*Collected Works* 283). The young fisherman states that his heart belongs to the mermaid and tries to cut away the shadow of his soul with his knife. Wilde is keen in using the *doppelgänger* motive here. The soul wants to re-enter the heart of the fisherman, but none of his temptations proves captivating save the last which is a dazzling dancing girl. The soul entices the fisherman to steal, to strike a child and to murder a Merchant. The fisherman and his soul are bound to each other by the evil deeds. In the meantime the mermaid dies of loneliness and despair. The fisherman leaps into the sea to join her. His heart breaks and at the last moment the soul gains entry into his broken heart. The bodies of the fisherman and the mermaid wash unto the beach and much to everyone's amazement, gorgeous white flowers spring from the unmarked grave. Love triumphs albeit death despite the disapproval of the society. The white flowers seem to be symbolical of the innocence of their love and demonstrate God's sanction in a way. The tale implies that the body cannot live or exist in a blissful state without the assistance of the soul. In his attempt to separate himself from his soul, the fisherman makes life with the seafolk possible, but he becomes soulless as well as incapable of experiencing sin and repentance. Wilde usually held the idea that the body and the soul must live in harmony with one another. In his

view of life style, the Tanhauser motive and the theological concept of *a felix culpa* had a strong impact upon Wilde's imagination.

As a conclusion Oscar Wilde tried to build a moral and aesthetic sensibility for social action which created the basic root of his fairy tales. Wilde insisted upon his heroes' humane attempts to change the society, while putting the emphasis upon love and sacrifice as a form of liberation as well as the type of humane compassion necessary for the building of socialism. Wilde criticizes materialism but praises the spiritual realm of human experience and reminds his readers of the utmost importance of the soul. Some of the tales reflect significant personal tensions regarding art and morality, in other words, aesthetic appreciation and religious obligation which also appear throughout Wilde's entire work. The tensions reveal a critical instinct which goes beyond his clever aphorisms and self-indulgent paradoxes. One should not hesitate to see the real Oscar underneath the masks and poses. There exists behind all these, a Victorian gentleman with artistic, aesthetic and humanistic sensibility and a Satanic talent who even could not escape from being moralistic. Wilde's approach was based on an invitation to selfhood, an advocacy of individualism and an aesthetic sensibility. As Kingston states, the stories in the collection are "literary expressions of the tragic sense of life, probing the nature of man and illumining dark facets of experience" (Kingston 168).

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Notes on Contributors

N. Berrin Aksoy Received her BA(1980) MA(1982) and PhD(1988) from the Department of English Language and Literature Hacettepe University . She worked in the Department of Translation and Interpretation of Hacettepe University. She is currently a senior lecturer and Chair at the Department of Translation/Interpretation, Atılım University, Ankara. Her research interests and publications include Translation Theory, Literary Translation, Comparative Literature, Turkish Literature and English Literature. Among her publications on various aspects of translation has also a book titled *Geçmişten Günümüze Yazın Çevirisi* (2002) İmge.

Zeynep Z. Atayurt Fenge received her BA and MA degrees in English Language and Literature from Ankara University in Turkey. In 2002 she was granted a scholarship by the Turkish government for postgraduate study abroad. She earned her second MA degree in Twentieth Century Literature in 2003 at Leeds University where she went on to do a PhD in English. In 2008 she was awarded her PhD. She has written various reviews and essays on modern and contemporary British Literature. She is currently working as an assistant professor at the Department of English Language and Literature at Ankara University.

Neslihan Ekmekcioğlu is a *Shakespeare* scholar, an art instructor and a lecturer. She is also a musician, playing the piano and the cello. She has received her MA from Hacettepe University with her thesis titled “The Concept of Time in Joyce’s Work”. She received her Ph D from Hacettepe University, and the title of her dissertation is “The Theme of Ambition and the Implied Counterpoints in Shakespeare’s Plays”. She has attended the International

Shakespeare Summer Course at the Shakespeare Institute. She has been a member of the International Shakespeare Association, ISA since 2000. She is also a member of Société Française Shakespeare SFS, European Shakespeare Research Association ESRA She has Lectured on Shakespeare and British Drama at the Department of English Language and Literature at Hacettepe University since 2003 as part-time lecturer. She has also worked at the Theatre Department of the State Conservatoire for many years. At present she is working as assistant professor at Çankaya University. Her published essays are on Samuel Beckett, Peter Shaffer, Fowles, Lawrence, Murdoch, Sylvia Plath, Oscar Wilde and Shakespeare.

Lerzan Gültekin received her BA(1975) in English Language and Literature from Hacettepe University and her PhD(1981) from the same Department. She taught and was and held administrative positions in the Department of English Language and Literature Department at Cumhuriyet University. At present she is an associate professor and the chair in the Department of English Language and Literature Department at Atılım University and the Director of the Centre for Research and Application for Women's Issues. Her publication and research interests are the English Novel, Literary Theory, Womens Studies.

Laurence Raw received his PhD in 1989 from the University of Sussex in Renaissance Studies and Comparative Literature. From 1992 to 1999 he was affiliated with the British Council as a London appointed British Studies Manager based in Ankara with the responsibility of creating new cultural and screen studies curricula in the universities in Central and Eastern Europe. In this period, he also taught courses at the under and post graduate levels in English and Media Studies at universities in Ankara, İstanbul and İzmir. He has teaching experience all over Europe including Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Georgia, Romania and Bulgaria. He taught at the Department of English Language and Literature at Hacettepe University from 1990 to 1999, during which he was one of the key persons in the development of the British Cultural Studies Programme in the Department. He has published numerous articles and books in the field of Cultural Studies and Screen Studies. In addition to the many volumes he edited or co-edited he also serves on the editorial board of prestigious international journals in these fields. Currently he is teaching at Başkent University.

Huriye Reis is professor of English at Hacettepe University, Department of English Language and Literature, Ankara. She received her BA and MA (“Chaucer’s Use of His Persona in His Dream Poems *The Book of The Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls* and The Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*”) from the Department of English Language and Literature, Hacettepe University and her PhD from Liverpool University with her dissertation titled “Icons of Art: Chaucer’s Representation of Women in His Dream Poems”. She is the author of two books *Ademin Bilmediği Havvanın Gör Dediği: Ortaçağda Türk ve İngiliz Kadın Yazarlar*, 2005 (*What Eve Demands and Adam Knows Not: Turkish and English Women Writers in the Middle Ages*) and *Chaucer and The Representation of Old Age* (2013). Her research interests include Medieval English Literature, Chaucer, Contemporary British Poetry, Literary and Cultural Theories, and Representations of Women in Literature.

Özlem Uzundemir is an associate professor at the Department of English Language and Literature, Çankaya University. She graduated from the Department of English Language and Literature, Boğaziçi University and completed her MA and PhD in the same field at Bilkent University. Her book *İmgeyi Konuşturmak: İngiliz Yazınında Görsel Sanatlar* was published by Boğaziçi University Press in 2010. She has articles on women’s fiction as well as the relationship between visual and verbal arts.

Julia Rosenthal is a fifth generation antiquarian book and manuscript dealer and proprietor of A. Rosenthal Ltd. and Otto Haas, the oldest music antiquariat worldwide, founded in 1886. She is a trustee of the Nietzsche House, Sils Maria, Switzerland. In addition to her being a patron of Oscar Wilde Center for Irish Writing at the School of English, Trinity College Dublin; as a rare book dealer Ms. Rosenthal also holds a special Oscar Wilde collection at Trinity College Library, which includes Victorian-era publications, German translations of Wilde’s works, and contemporary scholarship on the famed playwright and poet.

the rich odour of roses, and
light summer wind stirred amidst
the trees of the garden, there came through
the open door the heavy scent of the
lilac, or the more delicate perfume of
the pink stone,

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