

# Rupkatha Journal

## On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

An Online Open Access Journal  
ISSN 0975-2935  
[www.rupkatha.com](http://www.rupkatha.com)

Volume V, Number 3, 2013

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# The Importance of Being Postmodern: Oscar Wilde and the Untimely

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“It is to criticism that the future belongs.”– Oscar Wilde<sup>1</sup>

“In protesting the independence of criticism,

Wilde sounds like an ancestral ...Roland Barthes”– Richard Ellmann<sup>2</sup>

“Postmodern is not to be taken in the periodizing sense.”– Jean-François Lyotard<sup>3</sup>

The above three quotations delineate the typography of a particular trajectory within literary theory which covers more or less the entire span of the twentieth century. Wilde’s prediction in 1891 seems to find its answer in Lyotard’s claim less than a hundred years later that postmodernism must not in any way be understood as a temporal marker, but rather as an aesthetic attitude or position. For, if we are ‘in’ the postmodern we are in it precisely because we always already inhabit the possibility of its recognition, presentation or expression. As such, texts or artworks that predate the critical emergence of the term can nevertheless be understood to be postmodern - and usefully so. For it gives us permission to name, once again, though differently, perhaps, a particular phenomenon, or a particular convergence of phenomena; one we most typically name the avant garde. In this essay I would like to use the above three quotations as markers for the trajectory of my argument. In this sense, I will be using Wilde and Lyotard as both meetings points and end points for an arc that loops around to create a circuit, or a band, upon which – or within which – we might usefully place the concept of the postmodern/avant garde in ways which will shed light upon the notion of the untimely. I would suggest that the postmodern and the untimely are, in short, other ways of naming and apprehending the avant garde as that which emerges without consensus, but which contains within it the criteria for its own assessment. As Ellmann comments, Wilde seems, in his formulation of a new kind of art-criticism, to express something that Roland Barthes would develop sixty odd years later<sup>4</sup>: the self-sufficiency of criticism as an end in itself, or as a new form of aesthetic expression. In this sense, Wilde’s work will be understood as posthumous, or untimely.<sup>5</sup> That is, avant garde.

The essay will, as such, work with three specific ideas or suggestions:

1. That Wilde’s writing, particularly the critical essays, can be considered postmodern in this non-periodizing sense;
2. That the postmodern can, perhaps must, be considered in this sense, if it to be at all useful (though usefulness, as we know from Wilde, cannot be taken as a criterion for value judgments);

3. That this untimely or posthumous sense of the postmodern raises ethico-political and aesthetic questions that it must subsequently refuse or find impossible to answer if it is to remain, in any meaningful sense, postmodern.

In this essay I will be expounding a specific understanding of the confused and confusing critical term postmodernism. For this I will draw on the writings of Foucault and Lyotard. The latter's understanding of postmodernism, as an essentially inventive and critical form of experimentation in the field of art, will strongly inform my own thinking here. I will also be drawing on Wilde's collection of essays published in 1891, *Intentions*, in order to argue that these essays delineate a critical position, or series of positions, that have much in common with Lyotard's postmodernism, or at least allows the two positions to have some dialogue so that we may eavesdrop on what they say. In declaring that the future belongs to the critic-as-artist, Wilde is arguably prefiguring, even predicting, the important role a certain form of criticism would go on to have in the late twentieth century. Throughout this essay, the term postmodern must be understood as being synonymous with the term avant garde. How these two concepts relate to the other guiding concept of this thinking – the untimely, or posthumous – will hopefully be made clear as the essay progresses. In a very real sense, I aim to blend the temporality of 'post' with the spatiality of 'avant'. The postmodern/avant garde becomes a spatio-temporal methodology or pathway. As such, untimeliness refers not just to being out of time but also, and importantly, out of place.<sup>6</sup>

### ***The lightning of possible storms***

At the beginning of *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault famously refers to his writing as a labyrinth, a place "in which I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again." I understand this here to refer to the relation between writer and reader – specifically, to the anonymity of the latter versus the knowability of the former. As such, the author, represented by this organizing principle named 'author', is in some sense *known*, or at least presumed to be known, and therefore, as a consequence, becomes saddled with a certain self-consciousness - an accountability, of sorts - for that which s/he presents to the world to be read. Such self-consciousness, however, is problematic, and Foucault admits to his desire for authorial anonymity - an anonymity provided, here, for him (paradoxically), by the act of writing:

I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write.<sup>7</sup>

In this short passage, we not only find many of the central tenets of postmodern thinking, but those tenets are also resonant of the basic aesthetic positions outlined by Oscar Wilde almost eighty years previously in his collection of essays, *Intentions* (1891): the multiplicity of the speaking 'I', the instability of the subject, the performativity of language, the immunity of the artist from morality, the elusiveness and mutability of

identity, the valuing of insincerity or inauthenticity concerning claims to truth, the troubling anonymity of the reader and the desired anonymity of the writer, the knowledge that a name often makes reading too easy, together with the notion that anonymity, or the mask that writing provides, articulates something nearer the truth (whatever that might be). “Give a man a mask”, Wilde proclaimed, “and he will tell you the truth”.

In an interview with Foucault that was published anonymously at his request, he describes his ideal form of criticism:

I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an *oeuvre*, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would

light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes –all the better. All the better. Criticism that hands down sentences sends me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms<sup>8</sup>

In employing a poetic register of speech to describe this ideal criticism, Foucault (almost certainly knowingly) performs, or performatively manifests, the kind of criticism of which he dreams; his language dances to the tune of a new idea, sings in order to demonstrate exactly what is at stake here: not the dry evaluation (judgment) of the artwork, but an attempt to match it in creativity, or an engagement with it that deepens its mystery, rather than solving its supposed riddle. In short, he is dreaming of the critic as artist, to use the title of one of Wilde's essays.

The twentieth century, in terms of art, has most characteristically been one in which criticism, or theory, has taken on vast artistic importance. When Wilde declares that, “Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all, worthy of the name”, and that, “It is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms”<sup>9</sup>, he is clearly expressing an attitude that was out of time with the prevailing Victorian values<sup>10</sup>, an attitude more in tune with theories that were to take root and emerge in the following century. Wilde's intertextuality, his experimentation with the essay form, his blending of critical and creative energies, his insistence on their inseparability, his transvaluation of values, all prefigure and resonate with some of the central critical insights of the so-called postmodernists. Whilst much has been said about the similarities between Wilde's and Nietzsche's thinking, and much has been made of Nietzsche's pre-figuring of what we now call – however problematically – postmodernism<sup>11</sup>, little has been made so far of the postmodernism to be found in Wilde's work. Deleuze, Foucault, Klossowski, Derrida, all champion Nietzsche's postmodernism, but Wilde was equally radical in his critique of the *status quo* and his development of a certain avant garde aesthetic. Jonathan Dollimore, for one, has commented on Wilde's “exclusion from cultural criticism and literary theory”<sup>12</sup>, and repeats Ellmann's claim that Wilde “laid the basis for many critical positions which are still debated in much the same terms, and which we like to attribute

to more ponderous names”.<sup>13</sup> Dollimore recognizes that what he calls Wilde’s ‘transgressive aesthetic’ “relates to contemporary theoretical debates”, linking Wilde’s paradoxical positions to Derrida’s deconstruction, and arguing that Wilde’s ‘inversion’ is not only sexual but also political, an inversion of morality or rethinking of aesthetics that is equally anti-systematic. “One of the many reasons why people were terrified by Wilde”, Dollimore argues, “was because of a perceived connection between his aesthetic transgression and his sexual transgression”.<sup>14</sup> More recently, Wilde’s postmodernism has been proclaimed in terms that often seem to take for granted what is meant by the term ‘postmodern’ - as if now we know what it means and no further enquiry is necessary. We are in danger, at such times, of overlooking or forgetting the radical or avant garde qualities of the term. The term has become too smooth, too slick. But as Wilde announces, “All ideas are dangerous”.

William A. Cohen offers an impressive reading of Wilde’s *Portrait of Mr. W.H.*, in which Wilde’s aesthetic emerges as “a conception of indeterminate, interpretable writing”; furthermore, this indeterminacy is “determinate and permanent”; an indeterminacy, that is, which can never be forced to determine, for it seeks instead “to ensure that meanings remain unfixable”.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Lawrence Danson has claimed: “[Wilde’s] own paradoxes, after all, also perform the decentring, of meaning and its authorizing agencies, which presages the postmodernist author-as-text”.<sup>16</sup> Danson does a fantastic job of excavating Wilde’s *Intentions* and showing how dangerous a writer he was, how fiercely pitched against the critical and aesthetic orthodoxies of his day. According to Danson, “Wilde tried to rename the world in order to avoid for himself the categorizing which makes us exemplars of the already constructed”.<sup>17</sup> This shares with Nietzsche the idea that in order to reshape the world we need to rethink it, or rewrite it.

Lyotard declares Joyce to be postmodern, but not Proust; the essay (Montaigne), but not the fragment (*The Atheneum*). Whilst postmodernism remains a highly contested area and concept, its very condition of contestability or ambiguity is what allows for applications or understandings that still carry the spirit of a radical politics. Far from identifying in postmodernism a spirit of apolitical irony or distantiation, or, worse, a neo-conservatism, he gives the name postmodernism to a very specific politics of resistance:

The real political task today, at least in so far as it is also concerned with the cultural...is to carry forward the resistance that writing offers to established thought, to what has already been done, to what everybody thinks, to what is well known, to what is widely recognized, to what is ‘readable’, to everything which can change its form and make itself acceptable to opinion in general...The name most often given to this is postmodernism.<sup>18</sup>

In naming as postmodern a form of writing that challenges established aesthetic norms (in other words, the avant garde), Lyotard presents us with a concept – the postmodern – that can be applied to any art form that contains such a critique of discursive hegemony, or that can present thought in such a way. This retroactive application of postmodernism allows it to name and represent – or rather gesture to the impossibility of naming or

representing -something unnameable, something un(re)presentable. We are caught between the obligation to judge and the impossibility of judging. The postmodern, in other words, is that which provides in itself the criteria for its own judgment; confronted with the postmodern we cannot rely on pre-established criteria, for “the artist and the writer...are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done”.<sup>19</sup> For Lyotard, the postmodern is similar to Kant’s sublime, or Nietzsche’s nihilism, and understood this way it “is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant”.<sup>20</sup> In other words, we are always already postmodern, always already prepared to articulate the impossibility of presenting the unrepresentable. Whether we know it or not; whether we like it or not.

### *Attitude is everything*

Within this formulation, postmodernism emerges as something close to an attitude rather than a temporal marker such as ‘that which comes after modernism’. The difference between modernism and postmodernism, then, seems to be one of degree rather than kind; both, in other words, are expressions of a similar critical attitude. Postmodernism - for Lyotard at least (and this is the idea of postmodernism I wish to work with here) - is marked by its critical attitude to the conditions of form, together with a sensitivity to the unrepresentability or unsayability of a certain condition of form. Lyotardian Postmodernism is distinguished by the absence of a consensus between writer and reader, and a refusal to rely on pre-established criteria for judgment. Postmodernism is a form of the unbidden. We are in the presence of something that, if we are to judge it, requires us to unpack or decipher the critical criteria that the object/text itself contains. There is no assigned addressee or regulating ideal in the postmodern work.<sup>21</sup> The reader or audience, at least, if not always the author/artist, can lay claim to a certain anonymity, a certain unknowability. Elsewhere, Lyotard also gives this concept the name ‘pagan’. When Lawrence Danson asks of Wilde’s *Intentions*: “...is there a genre for such a book?” he is evoking this spirit of postmodernism as the unclassifiable, the new, the genre-less; that which constructs by its very existence the possibility of a different genre or criteria.

As Wilde himself puts it:

The true critic will, indeed, always be sincere in his devotion to the principle of beauty, but he will never suffer himself to be limited to any settled custom of thought, or stereotyped mode of looking at things. He will realize himself in many forms, and by a thousand different ways, and will ever be curious of new sensations and fresh points of view. Through constant change, and through constant change alone, he will find his true unity. He will not consent to be the slave of his own opinions.<sup>22</sup>

The principles involved here are clearly not in line with the thinking of Wilde’s day, and he is, in characteristically provocative fashion, going into battle with the established attitudes of late Victorian culture. He takes Matthew Arnold’s maxim, “the aim of criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is” and turns it around, claiming

the exact opposite: that criticism should rather strive to see the object as in itself it really is *not*. He refuses the authentic, and offers critical engagement as a space of imagination and creativity. At the end of his 1891 essay 'The Truth of Masks', Wilde performs a critical *volte face* that reneges on the promise of what has gone before, betraying the carefully crafted argument that precedes it. He writes:

Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism, attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can apprehend the platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can realize Hegel's theory of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truth of masks.<sup>23</sup>

What is most startling about this passage is not that Wilde seems to distance himself from his own words, but that in doing so he introduces a radical doubt about any position.<sup>24</sup> If "A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true", how can we trust any statement on art, including this one? How are we to believe that in this passage the 'truth' is being spoken? Could it be another lie? Furthermore, accustomed as we are to reading essays to access the author's 'truth', how can we trust what we have read? We have entered, through the portal of this passage, a universe of radical uncertainty, a postmodern space in which language is unbalanced and truth unstable and multiple – making it deeply contradictory. Given that this essay is the last of the four offered in his collection *Intentions*, are we to surmise that this disclaimer covers the entire work, and these essays are not, in fact, as their collective title suggests, this author's intentions at all, but simply statements whose contradictory is also true? I would like to suggest that, in coining this new term 'art-criticism', Wilde does not yoke those two words together in a relationship that leaves both words unchanged, but blends them into something utterly new.<sup>25</sup> The hyphen, I would suggest, is not simply a convenient method for yoking those two words, but of creating a compound word, a new word or concept. Art-criticism, in other words, is what the artist as critic practices, or the art-critic. Not a critic of art, but a practitioner of a new methodology for exploring, entering, discovering the hidden treasures of a text, even if that means inventing them some times ("All the better").

Furthermore, this position of Wilde's - whether genuinely believed by him or not hardly matters - prefigures in interesting ways the 'paraesthetics' of Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard, particularly the latter. I borrow the term paraesthetics from David Carroll, whose book of the same name defines it, in its subtitle, as, 'the displacement of theory and the questioning of art'. It is, he explains, an

aesthetics turned against itself or pushed beyond or beside itself, a faulty, irregular, disordered, improper aesthetics – one not content to remain within the area defined by the aesthetic. Paraesthetics describes a critical approach to aesthetics for which art is a question not a given, an aesthetics in which art does not have a determined place or a fixed definition.<sup>26</sup>

This paraesthetics, embedded in Wilde's claim that, "in aesthetic criticism, attitude is everything", removes the subjectivity of the particular author and replaces it with language, insisting that only within the stylized rubric of a particular 'writing' will any individuality be found. But this individuality must not be understood as in any sense either 'true' or 'unique', not if contradiction is to have maximum impact. Hasn't he already provided us with such a contradictory statement when he writes elsewhere, "In all unimportant matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential. In all important matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential"<sup>27</sup> Hasn't he already told us already that "The first duty of life is to be as artificial as possible"; and that "Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style"? In foregrounding the critical (in any sense you care to imagine the word) function of language, Wilde's (para)aesthetics prefigure much of the important theory from which a critical interpretation of postmodernism derives.

### ***Not reconciliation, but droning on and on***

Wilde insists on the division of aesthetics and morals. In Wilde's view, the work of the critic is superior to the work of the artist, has a purity resulting from its greater distance from any exterior reality –is itself a work of art. As Ellmann observes, Wilde seems like an ancestral Roland Barthes, so much does he prefigure dominant strands of mid-to-late twentieth century literary theory. And, as William A. Cohen has also noted,

Chief among Wilde's claims about literature, and the one that has become paramount in twentieth-century ideas of the literary, is its susceptibility to interpretation. In these essays, Wilde seeks to prove the superiority of art to nature and of criticism to art, demonstrating that art is constituted by interpretation.<sup>28</sup>

Wilde makes both art and criticism dependent upon processes of interpretation, but he favours the latter due to its double remove, a mediation of a mediation. There is, in other words, something metacritical within Wilde's position, it is a discourse of a discourse, or a writing about writing. As Wilde himself puts it, in 'The Critic As Artist':

The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticizes as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought. He does not even require for the perfection of his art the finest materials...I would say that the highest criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing ....Certainly, it is never trammelled by any shackles of verisimilitude. No ignoble considerations of probability, that cowardly concession to the tedious repetitions of domestic or public life, affect it ever.<sup>29</sup>

Not so much Art for Art's sake, then, as Theory for Theory's sake, theory being, in this formulation, a higher form of Art, a praxis of a poesis. And the most important reason for this superiority is clearly its self-reflexive treatment. Cohen takes Wilde's story *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* as the greatest example of this critical-creative hybrid, blending as it does an analysis of Shakespeare's Sonnets with a homoerotic love story involving forged



paintings and scandalous suicides. For Peter Ackroyd, “The entire story creates a game of indeterminacy and ambiguity, not unlike a short story by Borges or a play by Tom Stoppard”.<sup>30</sup> This metaphysical framing device of Wilde is an example of “discourse having been slyly folded back upon itself”, or “language getting as far away from itself as possible”, a manoeuvre sufficient, Foucault claims, to put “the whole of modern fiction to the test”.<sup>31</sup> Thought about thought, an entire tradition wider than philosophy, has taught us that thought leads us to the deepest interiority, something Foucault locates within contemporary Western fiction and describes as “neutral space”.<sup>32</sup>

To negate one’s own discourse...is to cast it ceaselessly outside of itself, to deprive it at every moment not only of what it has just said, but of the very ability to speak.<sup>33</sup>

To find a language faithful to what Foucault calls ‘the thought from outside’ is not easy, for it cannot be a language of pure reflection nor one that is purely fictional, for both run the risk of returning us to easy assumptions about the myth of interiority. What is needed is the vertiginous language of uncertainty, a hybrid discourse, a place of open, raw contradiction:

Not reflection, but forgetting; not reconciliation, but droning on and on; not mind in laborious conquest of its unity, but the endless erosion of the outside; not truth finally shedding light on itself, but the streaming and distress of a language that has always already begun.<sup>34</sup>

For, as Wilde emphasizes, “A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true”. And whilst Foucault’s formulations around this thought from outside emerge through his reading of Blanchot’s writing, he could equally be describing *The Portrait of Mr. W. H* when he writes

Thus patient reflection, always directed outside itself, and a fiction that cancels itself out in the void where it undoes its forms intersect to form a discourse appearing with no conclusion and no image, with no truth and no theatre, with no proof, no mask, no affirmation, free of anycentre, unfettered to any native soil; a discourse that constitutes its own space as the outside toward which, and outside of which, it speaks.<sup>35</sup>

What Wilde is essentially hoping for, he states at the end of the essay, is that our critics cultivate a sense of beauty, dreaming, perhaps, of a discourse that is neither one thing nor the other, but a self-conscious celebration of its hybrid and indeterminate status. “Only in art-criticism”, he insists, can we “realize Hegel’s system of contraries”.<sup>36</sup> Jean-François Lyotard’s name for this textual or conceptual indeterminacy is ‘pagan’, or postmodern.

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a strong sense of the unrepresentable.<sup>37</sup>

I would argue that Wilde's critical work, and particularly this radical unraveling of any truth the essay might claim to name, constitutes such a postmodern presentation of the unrepresentable. I have already spent some time dwelling on Lyotard's atemporal understanding of the postmodern in order to explore and expand this claim. When Lyotard claims that "it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented"<sup>38</sup>, he is offering a description of the critical enterprise not dissimilar to that of Wilde. Both insist on the removal of reality from the artistic-critical gaze. In *Mr W.H.*, Wilde would seem to be experimenting with a new form of fiction, one relying on the undermining of both theory and literature in its emergence.

### *Phrases in Dispute for the Use of the Young*

I would like, in this section, to explore the connection between Wilde and Lyotard via the concept of the phrase. Linking Lyotard's *The Differend* (subtitled 'Phrases in Dispute') with Wilde's 'Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young', I will develop further the posthumous and untimely notion of the postmodern as a critical tool which embraces, celebrates and prioritizes inconsistency, conflict and contradiction as an aesthetic device.

If we read Wilde's statement that the truth of metaphysics is the truth of masks to mean that all of Being is revealed candidly only through disguise, through lies, through what, at the same time, conceals, we have a Wildean paradox that works actively to keep the contradiction open and vibrant, to prevent its synthesis into some complete, unequivocal and non-contradictory truth. Wilde's intentions, as defined in this essay, would seem to be to offer criticism to the future as a form of art, as an imaginative (and critical) engagement with art that claims –or strives for– the same status as art. To recall his essay title, the critic is an artist, and criticism, as he envisioned and practiced it, was art. As I have been arguing, this notion foreshadows Lyotardian postmodernism, and as such Wilde is 'untimely', he preceded his time. As Curtis Cate defines Nietzsche's use of the phrase 'untimely', it is "in the sense of inopportune, out-of-step, anti-fashionable".<sup>39</sup> Or, as Wilde himself puts it, "To be premature is to be perfect".

Wilde's phrases are in dispute not only with each other but also with themselves. Contradiction, in its most playful and open sense, underpins these statements, allowing them to stand irreconcilably, as aesthetic claims, or what Lyotard calls "A notebook of sketches".<sup>40</sup> These phrases 'happen' without reference to a regimen. They provide, in a very real sense, their own criteria: they are postmodern. That is, they present the unrepresentable in the only way it can be presented; paradoxically, as a gesture towards the unsayable that threatens to destabilize and destroy that which we so lightly call 'truth'. Or, as Lyotard puts it, "The paradox rests on the faculty a phrase has to take itself as its referent...It is not decidable in terms of its truth value".<sup>41</sup> Such undecidability marks the postmodern, refuting as it does the claims of all metanarratives to know what truth is. Denying the solace of good forms, this notebook of sketches presents the reader with an impossibly complex set of 'truths'; for, as it itself claims, "A truth ceases to be true when

more than one person believes in it”, and such multiplicity of truths is very much at the heart of postmodernism as perceived and defined by Lyotard.

We could say that the postmodern (or the pagan) is a phenomenon, or force, or effect, by which multiplicities of truths corrode or challenge the metanarrative’s claim to a singular and absolute truth.<sup>42</sup> Equally, these truths, or the fragmentation and problematization of the univocal ‘truth’, serve to generate a new conception of aesthetics which refuses to hierarchize art and criticism in a way that would leave the latter as a secondary and parasitical commentary on the former, and instead insisting on a certain equality of status which elevates criticism, providing it doesn’t settle for passing sentence but instead strives to create something else; in short, the critic is an artist. Furthermore, the artist, in this formulation, must also –always, already –be a critic. Wilde, as such, was foreseeing, or conceiving, a time when criticism could take on the mantle of art, and art could inhabit a theoretical, self-reflexive, even self-destructive, terrain. “Truth is independent of facts always, inventing or selecting them at pleasure”.<sup>43</sup>

To understand fully what is at stake here it is necessary to keep in mind that the signifiers ‘artist’ and ‘critic’ are here being used in a way that is far removed from their common currency. They are being used as synonyms, in order to reinvigorate in both a new spirit that combines creativity and critique in a manner that, whilst it may well have its precedent, is nevertheless ultimately, and importantly, resistant to assimilation within any aesthetic norm. Lyotard calls it a differend and defines it thus: “The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be”.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, this re-definition, or paradoxical definition of ‘art-criticism’ is precisely what makes Wilde untimely. To be untimely, in other words, is to be critical, to eviscerate words in order to fill them up with strange new meanings in order to provoke thinking in a manner that is creative. Put yet another way, the postmodern is always untimely due to the manner in which it expresses or represents, and insists on expressing or representing, that which cannot, as yet, carry meaning, but which will, given time, perhaps, and a certain vigilance, unpack its secrets. The temporality of the postmodern is deliberately discontinuous and discrete. It is absolutely imperative that the postmodern be at odds with its time, in the same way that it is absolutely imperative that we rethink, after Wilde, what it means to be a critic and an artist; what it means to practice criticism at all; ultimately, to ask the question: What is Art? That question, along with any answer that may offer us some insight, will always be untimely.

Wilde is perfectly at ease arguing that, on the one hand there is a universal concept of taste and beauty, whilst on the other, insisting that all truths are subjective. And we would be wrong in attempting to reconcile the contradiction, or in accusing him of bad logic or woolly thinking. As I have tried to show, if Wilde can be called postmodern (and he is, I would argue, at his most postmodern – his most untimely – in *Intentions* and the writings that satellite it<sup>45</sup>) it is precisely because he leaves open, in all its gorgeous contradiction, the paradox that links these two statements. Or, as Lyotard claims, the only consistency within art is its inconsistency. Or to return to Wilde as cited above, “A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true”.<sup>46</sup> Like time, beauty is both

absolute and relative, universal and particular.<sup>47</sup> This does not, I need hardly say, mean that postmodernism –as some critics maintain– permits *anything* in a kind of relative, promiscuous intellectual and aesthetic *laissez-faire*. Far from it. Postmodernism as Lyotard understands and promotes it, and as I understand and promote it in this essay, and as Wilde prefigures it in his concept of art-criticism, carries forward (and I repeat), “the resistance that writing offers to established thought, to what has already been done, to what everybody thinks, to what is well known, to what is widely recognized, to what is ‘readable’, to everything which can change its form and make itself acceptable to opinion”.<sup>48</sup> And this, Lyotard reminds us, is “the real political task today”. This task is untimely, though always, at the same time, timely, in or of its time by the very fact of being critically pitched against it. And it goes by the name postmodern.

In Nietzsche’s parable of the madman proclaiming the death of God, the madman’s explanation for the poor reception his news receives is that he is “not of his time”. Lawrence Danson suggests that the unenthusiastic contemporary response to *Intentions* was due to an inability to read Wilde correctly, or perhaps to read him correctly but not ‘get’ it, not grasp or apprehend the full import of his dangerous ideas (insufficient criteria for judgment, first characteristic of the postmodern). Danson writes:

The contemporary responses suggest a fractured image of Wilde, with the fracture self-evidently or tautologically a flaw. But fracture is, I believe, what Wilde intended his audience to see: a discontinuity (by contemporary standards), for instance between seriousness and frivolity, which would correspond at the level of the work to the discontinuities Wilde finds at the level of the ‘personality’. The critics’ difficulty in seeing Wilde as in himself they presumed he was – objectively (like themselves) continuous, intelligible, and present – served his strategic purposes. Fracturing presumably stable social, aesthetic, and even sexual categories would create the space for his own stand<sup>49</sup>

*Intentions* did not sell well, and the critical response was luke warm.<sup>50</sup> Primarily, it seems to be Wilde’s perceived frivolity that, in an age of moral seriousness, disqualified him from being taken seriously, by either the left or the right.<sup>51</sup> It would take a century for Wilde’s ideas to be received and understood and celebrated, for his frivolity to be taken seriously. It would, in other words, take the emergence and critical prominence of postmodernism for Wilde’s dangerous ideas to become timely.

### ***Innovation, not Orthodoxy***

So what exactly was so dangerous about Wilde’s ideas? I would like to conclude by focusing on the second part of the essay ‘The Critic As Artist’, particularly the ideas proposed by Gilbert, the Wildean mouthpiece. I would like, in this sense, to give the last word to Wilde. Through Gilbert, Wilde elaborates the theory of the art-criticism with which this essay has been concerned, that is as a postmodern or avant garde practice that takes art as its ‘material’ for creating something else, something dangerous – what Nietzsche called philosophizing with a hammer. These ideas are dangerous not only to

aesthetic norms or established values, and not only to society more broadly in the sense that the status quo is being rethought or challenged, but also, and importantly, dangerous to the theory itself. In a similar manner to deconstruction – famously described by Jonathan Culler as the act of sawing off the branch on which one is sitting – this Wildean art-criticism entails a thinking so vertiginous that the ground from which it makes its declarations is also undermined. And deliberately so. For,

It is Criticism that, recognizing no position as final, and refusing to bind itself by the shallow shibboleths of any sect or school, creates that serene philosophic temper which loves truth for its own sake, and loves it not the less because it knows it to be unattainable<sup>52</sup>

This unattainability of truth is due to the fact that the contradiction of any truth is also true. This non-synthesizable dialectic resists consolation, insisting instead on the messy, non-identical truth of masks. “The artistic critic, like the mystic, is an antinomian always”.<sup>53</sup> Art-criticism is lawless, existing outside the regulations of any school of thought for it provides within its presence its own laws, though these are, in a very real sense, contradictory and undecidable. Contradictoriness and undecidability are the nearest we come within this terrain of art-criticism to any laws. It is for this reason, Wilde argues, that aesthetics is higher than ethics. Wilde insists on the separation of art-criticism from life, and on the superiority of the former.

By its deliberate rejection of Nature as the ideal of beauty, as well as of the imitative method of the ordinary painter, decorative art not merely prepares the soul for the reception of true imaginative work, but develops in it that sense of form which is the basis of creative no less than of critical achievement. For the real artist is he who proceeds, not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion ....Whatever actually occurs is spoiled for art<sup>54</sup>

The aesthetics that Wilde promotes is thus one of innovation, invention, and not of orthodoxy. Art-criticism, as he imagines it and practices it, dreams of new ways of offering some form of commentary. And it is here, in the closing remarks of ‘The Critic As Artist’, that Wilde gestures towards the kind of criticism that Foucault will also long for, and practice, nearly a century later. Wilde has Gilbert declare, “Yes: I am a dreamer. For a dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world”.<sup>55</sup> The art-critic is a dreamer, conjuring new ways of seeing the world, new ways of being in the world, and for this s/he is always untimely.<sup>56</sup> The essay/dialogue ends with dawn and the invocation of dawn, and with the weary claim from Gilbert “I am tired of thought”. With thought’s exhaustion comes a new dawn, the start of another thought, another institution, one without precedent. The importance of being postmodern, ultimately, is to keep alive and alert a certain critical faculty which resists institutionalization. To risk, to experiment, to court incomprehension, evade domestication and retain one’s claws. As Wilde himself said, “I live in fear of not being misunderstood”.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Wilde, Oscar, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Volume IV, Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, edited by Josephine M. Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 228.

<sup>2</sup> Ellman, Richard (ed), *The Artist As Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Random House, 1968), x.

<sup>3</sup> Lyotard, J-F, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 82.

<sup>4</sup> “A critic should be taught to criticize a work of art without making any reference to the personality of the author”, in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, edited by Rupert Hart-Davis, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc). 260.

<sup>5</sup> “Like Stendhal, Wilde thought of himself as a voice of the age to be, rather than of the one that was fading”, Ellman, *Artist As Critic*,.xi.

<sup>6</sup> Lyotard’s engagement with and defense of avant garde art is central to his development of the concept of the postmodern.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, Michel, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1972), 17.

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, Michel, *Essential Works 1954-84: Volume 1, Ethics*, translated by Robert Hurley and others (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), 323.

<sup>9</sup> Wilde, *Complete Works Volume IV*, 142, 144.

<sup>10</sup> David Weir calls Wilde’s work “the negation of Victorian consciousness”, in *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, (University of Massachusetts Press), 69. Lawrence Danson elaborates: “If the idea of modernity as backwardness challenges the Victorian idea of progress, the idea of personality as multiplicity and surface challenges the earnest Victorian ideal of the singular and self-contained individual”, in *Wilde’s Intentions: The Artist in His Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 17.

<sup>11</sup> David Carroll begins *Paraesthetics* with a chapter on Nietzsche “in order to introduce the problem of the complex relation between the aesthetic and the theoretical in certain currents of contemporary theory”(London & New York: Methuen, 1987), xv. I would argue that Wilde’s work could equally be used to demonstrate such a relation. See also, Dave Robinson, *Nietzsche and the Postmodernists* (New York: Icon Books, 1999); Clayton Koelb (ed), *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: Essays Pro and Contra* (SUNY, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, 4n.

<sup>13</sup> Ellmann *Artist As Critic*, x.

<sup>14</sup> Dollimore *Sexual Dissidence*, 67. For this reason Wilde can be seen to set in motion the specifically postmodern combination of erotics and theory that goes by the name of Queer Theory, and which also gains much of its critical energy from deconstructive principles.

<sup>15</sup> Cohen William A, *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction*, (Durham: Duke University Press.1996), 193, 214. Similarly, Josephine M. Guy has noted how Wilde changed his mind about

the exact genre for *Mr. W H*, initially referring to it as a 'story', but then later considering it to be an 'essay'. (Guy 2007, xvi). Similarly, how might we categorize 'De Profundis'? As a letter? Or amongst his literary works? On this see Ian Small's introduction to *Wilde's Complete Works Volume II: De Profundis*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005), p.3-4.

<sup>16</sup> Danson, *Wilde's Intentions*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Danson *Wilde's Intentions*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Lyotard J-F, an interview with Willem Van Reijen and Dick Veerman *Theory Culture Society* Vol.5, (London Newbury Park Beverley Hills New Delhi: Sage, 1988), 277-309; here 302.

<sup>19</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 81.

<sup>20</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 79.

<sup>21</sup> Lyotard, J-F and Thébaud, J-L, *Just Gaming* translated by Wlad Godzich, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.1996), 16n.

<sup>22</sup> Wilde, *Complete Works Volume IV*, 143.

<sup>23</sup> Wilde *Complete Works Volume IV*, 228.

<sup>24</sup> As Lawrence Danson notes, Wilde added this paragraph six years after the first appearance of the essay, when the collection was made for *Intentions*, in order that it reflect more closely his current thinking on art-criticism.

<sup>25</sup> Danson claims that "Wilde defamiliarizes words in order to defamiliarize the world they supposedly represent" (*Wilde's Intentions*, 151).

<sup>26</sup> Carroll *Paraesthetics*, xiv.

<sup>27</sup> Wilde *Complete Works Volume IV*, 145

<sup>28</sup> Cohen *Sex Scandal*, 193.

<sup>29</sup> Wilde *Complete Works Volume IV*, 229.

<sup>30</sup> Ackroyd Peter Introduction to *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* (London: Hesperus, 2003), x.

<sup>31</sup> Foucault, Michel, 'The Thought From Outside' in *Essential Works 1954-1984*

*Volume 2: Aesthetics*, translated by Robert Hurley and others, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), 147-170; here 147.

<sup>32</sup> Foucault, 'Thought From Outside', 12.

<sup>33</sup> Foucault, 'Thought From Outside', 22.

<sup>34</sup> Foucault, 'Thought From Outside', 22.

<sup>35</sup> Foucault, 'Thought From Outside', 24-5.

<sup>36</sup> Wilde, *Complete Works Volume IV*, 230.

<sup>37</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 81.

<sup>38</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 81.

<sup>39</sup> Cate, Curtis, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (Woodstock & New York: The Overlook Press, 2005), 175.

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<sup>40</sup> Lyotard, J-F, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, translated by Georges Van Den Abbeele, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), xiv.

<sup>41</sup> Lyotard *The Differend*, 6.

<sup>42</sup> See J-F Lyotard, 'On What Is "Art"' in *Toward the Postmodern*, edited by Robert Harvey and Mark S. Roberts, trans. by R. Harvey, New Jersey, London: Humanities Press, 1993, 164-175.

<sup>43</sup> Wilde *Complete Works Volume IV*, 220.

<sup>44</sup> Lyotard *The Differend*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> I'm thinking here of 'A Portrait of Mr. W. H.' and 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' which, whilst not included in the collection, were articulating similar dangerous ideas and were written around the same time.

<sup>46</sup> Wilde, *Complete Works Volume IV*, 228.

<sup>47</sup> The relationship between time and beauty is played out provocatively in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian – or perhaps, more accurately, Dorian's experience, Dorian's portrait – is untimely.

<sup>48</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, 302.

<sup>49</sup> Danson, *Wilde's Intentions*, 20.

<sup>50</sup> See Josephine M. Guy's excellent introduction to the critical writings (2007), especially lxx-lxxvi. The first edition sold so poorly that the second 'cheap' edition was not issued until three years later, in 1894. The one exception seems to have been Arthur Symons, whose review in the *Speaker* suggests a definite enchantment with the enigma Wilde represented. (Reprinted in Karl Beckson (ed), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 94-96). See also Ann Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde* (London & NY: Longman, 1998), 59-62.

<sup>51</sup> As Danson notes, "Wilde had to respond to attacks from the philistine right at the same time that he had to respond to attacks from the aesthetic left" (ibid, 130).

<sup>52</sup> Wilde, *Complete Works Volume IV*, 203-4.

<sup>53</sup> Wilde, *Complete Works Volume IV*, 204-5.

<sup>54</sup> Wilde, *Complete Works Volume IV*, 195.

<sup>55</sup> Wilde, *Complete Works Volume IV*, 205.

<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Derrida confesses in an interview with Derek Attridge, "I dream of a writing that would be neither philosophy nor literature, nor even contaminated by one or the other, while still keeping – I have no desire to abandon this – the memory of literature and philosophy. I am certainly not the only one to have this dream, the dream of a new institution to be precise, of an institution without precedent, without pre-institution" (*Acts of Literature*, edited by Derek Attridge, Various translators, (London and New York: Routledge 1992), 73.