

OSCAR WILDE

The works of a conformist rebel

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Translated from the German by

DAVID HENRY WILSON

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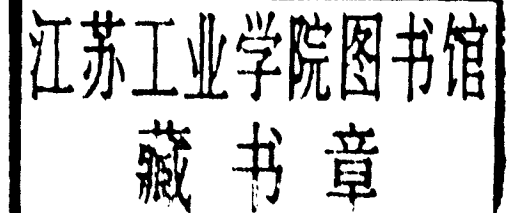
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for Willi Erzgräber

Contents

Preface	ix
Introduction	1
1 Epigonic experiments	
The early poems and plays	15
2 The selfish and the selfless	
The fairy-tales and stories	49
3 Personality and perfection	
The lectures, <i>Reviews</i> and <i>Intentions</i>	68
4 Authority and autonomy	
<i>The Soul of Man under Socialism</i>	123
5 Culture and corruption	
<i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i>	138
6 Sensuality and suggestion	
<i>Salomé</i> and <i>The Sphinx</i>	176
7 Pathos and paradox	
<i>Lady Windermere's Fan</i> , <i>A Woman of No Importance</i> , and <i>An Ideal Husband</i>	205
8 Propriety and parody	
<i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i>	255
9 Apologies and accusations	
<i>De Profundis</i> and <i>The Ballad of Reading Gaol</i>	275
10 Plans, sketches and fragments	308
Conclusion	318
List of abbreviations	327
Notes	333
Select bibliography	411
Index	427

Preface

This book was originally published in Germany in 1980 by the Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg, under the title *Oscar Wilde. Das literarische Werk zwischen Provokation und Anpassung*. For this new, English edition I have taken the opportunity to up-date the text in accordance with the latest research, but otherwise there has been only one substantial change, which concerns the bibliography. In the German edition this comprised a detailed, annotated list of some 1,800 titles, but for reasons of space it has had to be cut to the bare essentials of primary and secondary literature.

When I first began work on this study during the late 1960s, it was common practice in literary criticism to devote as much attention to the person of the author as to his work, and my approach ran directly contrary to this tendency. In interpreting Wilde's literary and critical writings, I put text analysis first, while incorporating those elements of biography and literary and social history that seemed directly relevant. This is an approach with which I still identify, and through which I hope to have achieved a clear and balanced view of Wilde's work.

During the many years of research and writing, I have incurred debts to a large number of people. First and foremost, I must thank Professor Dr Willi Erzgräber, who provided the initial inspiration for this study, and accompanied it throughout with expert counsel. Long discussions with Dr Helmut Winter, who also read through the original manuscript, had a very positive influence on its final form. Ursula Fischer's inexhaustible enthusiasm helped me to overcome many moments of despair, and she also undertook the arduous tasks of reading proofs and compiling the index for the original German edition. Ilse Dexheimer, Christine Holtz and Heidi Winter also read the German proofs, and Marie-Luise Santangelo and Christa Völcker provided an immaculate German typescript. For the original bibliography I was indebted to countless librarians, and the services of the Deutsche Bibliothek and the Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek in Frankfurt am Main, and the British Library in London, were truly indispensable. I am particularly grateful to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, whose generosity in the form of a two-year research grant as well as subsidies for travel and printing costs, provided the material basis both for the writing and the publication of the book.

For this English edition my special thanks and deep appreciation are due to David H. Wilson, not only for his meticulous and fluent translation, but also for the critical and creative talents he has brought to bear on the work, smoothing out uneven arguments, compressing Germanic long-windedness, and generally sharpening the focus: 'the artist as critic as translator'! I am also most grateful to the Cambridge University Press for commissioning the translation and including the book in their series of European Studies in English Literature. In particular my thanks go to Kevin Taylor, the Press editor, and to Christine Lyall Grant for her thoroughness in preparing the text for publication. Thanks also to Jenny Wilson, who compiled the English index.

Frankfurt am Main

N.K.

Introduction

Any critic dealing with the life and works of Oscar Wilde will realise right from the start that his subject was not only an author but, to his contemporaries and also to succeeding generations, an outstanding personality on the English cultural scene of the late nineteenth century. He was ostracised and forced into exile by the guardians of tradition, cast by the liberals in the role of the martyred artist, victimised by puritan prudes and Pharisees, dismissed by literary historians as a brilliant epigon caught between the Victorian Age and modern times, and smugly classified by the critics as a first-class representative of the second division. And yet his works are always in print, his books are bought and read, and his plays are continually being produced. All this would seem to confirm his own judgment that 'I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age.'¹ He remains a symbol of the conflict between the middle-class values of the nineteenth century and the artist's need for freedom, and his name will always be linked to the attempt to reconcile the individual's desire for self-realisation with public pressure to conform to social convention.

Seldom has any author provoked such controversy both among the critics and among the public at large. Some saw him as the champion of aesthetics against a materialism that was swiftly casting off the threadbare cloak of religion; in his fight to liberate art from its philistine bondage, he was viewed as the figurehead of the *l'art pour l'art* movement. Others, however, regarded him as a publicity-seeking poser who was not to be taken seriously, and who merely substituted artifice for art and decoration for literature. He created a kind of symbiosis of art and life in which it was often difficult to tell which of the elements was the more real and the more significant. It is a situation again best summed up by himself, in words he is said to have spoken to André Gide: 'J'ai mis mon génie dans ma vie, je n'ai mis que mon talent dans mes œuvres'² [I have put my genius into my life, and have put only my talent into my works].

Indeed this famous quotation appears to underlie the approach of a good many Wilde critics,³ whose research is directed principally towards illuminating the life and personality of this eccentric Irish Londoner. The biographies written by the generation that followed Wilde are mainly in the form of memoirs of friends or acquaintances, and are a mixture of

sympathy and antipathy, sentimentalism and sensation, sometimes offering a defence, and sometimes directly confirming his own claim that 'Every great man nowadays has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography.'⁴ This aphorism however, cannot be applied to Robert H. Sherard, who in several books – for example, *Oscar Wilde. The Story of an Unhappy Friendship* (1902), and *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (1906) – wrote with touching, almost naive fidelity (though when necessary also with aggressive determination) about the legend of this revered writer so badly misunderstood in England and so fittingly appreciated on the Continent; according to Sherard, Wilde never did anything wrong, but was 'the purest man in word and deed'.⁵ By contrast the memoirs of Lord Alfred Douglas, *Oscar Wilde and Myself* (1914),⁶ read like a manifesto, mixing attack on the 'opposition' with vain self-glorification. Most of what he says about his former friend is so shot through with inflated pride and personal justification that one can only view his account with the utmost scepticism. The same must be said of the most famous of the early Wilde biographies, despite its many reprints: this was Frank Harris's *Oscar Wilde. His Life and Confessions* (1916) which occasionally offered revealing psychological insight into Wilde's personality and into the society in which he lived, and was also written with some panache, but was for the most part a kind of improvised entertainment with very little distinction between fact and fiction.⁷ Later biographies, for example those by Hesketh Pearson (1946), Philippe Julian (1967) and H. Montgomery Hyde (1976), have helped to rid Wilde's life story of its spurious embellishments, but what has long been lacking is an account that would combine the facts with sensitive characterisation and insight into the social and historical background. The foundations for such a critical synthesis were already laid in 1962, when Rupert Hart-Davis published his excellent edition of Wilde's letters, which he followed up with a supplementary volume in 1985.

Interest in Wilde's dramatic life story has had its effect not only on the voluminous biographical literature but also on the methods used to approach his works. It is, in fact, a two-way approach – in the one instance, his writings are used to illuminate the personality of the author, and in the second the personality is regarded as the key to understanding the work. Such biographically orientated interpretation is based on the premise that Wilde had neither a 'negative capability' in the Keatsian sense, nor an aesthetic leaning towards the 'impersonal poetry' venerated by T. S. Eliot. Wilde himself always stressed the importance of the personality in art, and such works as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *De Profundis*, and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* seem scarcely to disguise the link between life and literature.

The biographical approach as outlined above dominated Wilde criti-

cism until the 1950s. W. W. Kenilworth (1912) set out to achieve 'an understanding of the man through a consideration of his literature',⁸ Arthur Ransome (1912) considered it necessary 'to look at books and life together as at a portrait of an artist by himself',⁹ and Boris Brasol (1938) adhered to the thesis that Wilde's genius was 'the outgrowth of his personality'.¹⁰ But when a writer's work is linked so closely with his life, and the individuality of his work is viewed only as a reflection of his singular personality and his singular way of life, the danger is bound to arise that his art itself will be relegated into the background, and his writings will be seen as fragments of a great confession¹¹ the unity of which lies not in the art but in the author. Logically such a standpoint must elevate the personality above the art, and indeed Arthur Symons's *Study of Oscar Wilde* (1930) took precisely this grave step, much in line with the comment already quoted from Wilde's conversation with André Gide. He drew a portrait of his contemporary which continues to influence people's views even today, and was to hinder more profound research into the works themselves: 'for the most part, he [Wilde] was a personality rather than an artist'.¹² In fact he went even further:

Without being a sage, he maintained the attitude of a sage; without being a poet, he maintained the attitude of a poet; without being an artist, he maintained the attitude of an artist. And it was precisely in his attitudes that he was most sincere. They represented his intentions; they stood for the better, unrealised part of himself.¹³

This damaging description of Wilde as a poser who was only credible in his poses is a delayed, rhetorically pointed and effective confirmation of the old Victorian prejudice, implying the very same insincerity that was attacked in earlier reviews of his work. Although elsewhere Symons does concede that Wilde was possessed of reason and that his wit revealed logical thinking, otherwise he sees the style of the author of *Intentions* as being merely 'a bewildering echo of Pater or of some French writer',¹⁴ the fantasy of Wilde's much-loved fairy-tales as superficial, and the poetry of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* as being almost completely without 'purely poetical quality'.¹⁵ The resultant portrait is as crude as it has proved long-lasting: less an artist than a personality, less a personality than a poser.

Such prejudices placed the biographical study of Wilde's work in a virtual cul-de-sac, which was blocked still further by the fact that certain aspects of his life – especially his homosexuality – were regarded either as a taboo subject or, at best, as a regrettable aberration caused by excessive alcohol. When the taboo was, so to speak, lifted in the 1930s, it was an important step towards a less prejudiced, less moralising approach, but the mere succession of chapters dealing first with biography and then with works, as was so often the format, could only offer an unsatisfactory and

superficial answer to the question of how real-life experiences were transmuted into literature. It was not until the 1930s and 1940s that two French authors released Wilde research from its straitjacket of apology, polemics and mystification into the area of critical analysis and interpretation. These authors were Léon Lemonnier and Robert Merle. Later scholars have tended to ignore their achievement, which above all lies in the fact that they abandoned the largely dilettante biographical method and replaced it with one that was psychologically orientated but concentrated first and foremost on the works themselves. At last Wilde's work was viewed as a whole and set in the context not only of his life but also of his art. The problems of a married Victorian who was also a homosexual are seen not as ends in themselves, but as motifs transmuted into literature.

Léon Lemonnier's monograph (1938) is certainly not a psychological study of the works in the strictest sense, but the individual chapters continually refer back to Wilde's homosexuality and the resultant feeling of guilt which Lemonnier regards as a prime impulse throughout Wilde's work. As early as 'Charmides', the most successful of the longer pieces in the *Poems* of 1881, the sterile lust of the young Greek and the link between love and death are themes that look forward to *Salomé* and *The Sphinx* and that reveal the 'sens du péché'¹⁶ which runs like a single thread throughout the canon. The many fairy-tales may reflect the 'vie conjugale et régulière'¹⁷ of the author as paterfamilias, but the relationship between the fisherman and the mermaid in 'The Fisherman and his Soul' clearly shows elements of abnormality and even perversion which might be interpreted as expressing a different *sensibilité erotica*, as well as suggesting that family life was not entirely trouble-free. In characters like Wainwright ('Pen, Pencil and Poison') and Dorian Gray, Lemonnier sees embodiments of the same 'notion ... de péché',¹⁸ expressing a growing need for public confession of what Wilde regarded as a guilty perversion. And finally Lemonnier points to the recurrent motif of the secret in the comedies, as indicating Wilde's 'impuissance à s'échapper à soi-même'.¹⁹ Wilde's work, then, is seen as a progressive, literarily coded emancipation of the personality from the repressions and restrictions of bourgeois Victorian morality, and also a hidden process of release from the torment of guilt – which, one might add, was to be followed by public atonement through trial and imprisonment. It is a thesis which in fact offers a remarkably consistent bond between a basic conflict in Wilde's life and some of the *idées obsédantes* of his work.

Ten years later, Robert Merle's comprehensive and highly stimulating thesis (1948)²⁰ seizes on Lemonnier's psychological-cum-literary approach, modifies it, and develops it on a broader base. Merle interprets both life and work by way of the author's neurosis, which he claims was

the result not of a '*perversion refoulée*'²¹ but, on the contrary, of a '*perversion satisfaite*'.²² Wilde's awareness of his sexual '*perversion*' in direct conflict with the established sexual morality of his time, directed his critical thinking towards negativity and nihilism, which manifested itself in an '*horreur du Réel*'²³ and makes his writings appear as a large-scale attempt to escape from the tyranny of facts by elevating form over content, thought over action, and art over life:

*C'est [sa pensée critique] une tentative cohérente pour amener la vie à se passer de l'action, la société à se passer d'organisation, la critique à se passer d'analyse, l'art à se passer du réel.*²⁴

[It (his critical thought) is a coherent attempt to make life dispense with action, society dispense with organisation, criticism dispense with analysis, art dispense with reality.]

This nihilistic attitude towards the established social and moral order, together with the anti-realism of his aesthetics, makes it very easy to understand why the paradox – as a means of undermining the validity of conventional beliefs – was one of Wilde's favourite literary devices. Furthermore, the surprising importance that Wilde attached to style, together with his endless desire for story-telling and the mythical, poetical fantasy of his tales, all point to what Merle calls '*évasion*'. At least as strong as his instinct for escape – perhaps even stronger – was his narcissistic urge for self-presentation, which in his case amounted to public confession of his feelings of guilt. Thus everything that he wrote after the '*phase de régression*' was characterised by a two-way movement, '*une tendance à l'aveu et une volonté de secret*'.²⁵ The narrow range of his themes – for example narcissism, sin, secrecy, suffering, forgiveness and death – may be taken as a sign of the influence exerted on his art by his traumatic experiences as a homosexual outsider. As he was imprisoned by his '*Moi autarcique*'²⁶ [autarchic self], which for him was the only true reality, change and novelty were only possible by means of form – as evinced by the many genres and the many styles he used – while the substance of his work remained basically the same, with its few recurrent characters, situations and motifs:

Le seul caractère que Wilde ait créé – Dorian Gray – c'est lui-même. La seule situation dramatique qu'il ait décrite – le pécheur menacé par le châtiment – c'est la sienne. La seule thèse morale qu'il ait sérieusement soutenue – la nécessité du pardon – est la seule qui intéresse son propre cas. Le seul dénouement qu'il ait prévu à son angoisse – la déchéance et la mort quasi volontaire – c'est son propre destin. D'où, dans son inspiration, *une certaine monotonie qui, assez curieusement, explique et conditionne l'extrême variété extérieure de son œuvre.*²⁷

[The only character that Wilde created – Dorian Gray – is himself. The only dramatic situation that he described – the sinner threatened by punishment – is his

own. The only moral thesis that he seriously upheld – the necessity for forgiveness – is the only one that is of interest to his own case. The only denouement that he foresaw for his anguish – downfall and quasi-voluntary death – is his own destiny. From which arises, in his inspiration, a certain monotony that curiously enough explains and conditions the extreme external variety of his work.]

This recognition of contradictory traits in Wilde's character was expanded by George Woodcock in *The Paradox of Oscar Wilde* (1949) into the thesis that the contrasts actually sprang from a 'split personality'.²⁸ Woodcock constructs a whole series of contradictory traits: paganism/Christianity; aesthetic clown/creative critic; social rebel/social snob; playboy/prophet etc., which he uses as categories for his study of the works, at the same time continually drawing on biographical facts and on statements made by Wilde's contemporaries. In his concluding chapter, he takes Wilde's individualism to be the solution: 'The Contradictions Resolved':

And, in the last analysis, when we have considered all his various acts and attitudes, it is here that Wilde's real value remains, in his consistently maintained search for the liberation of the human personality from all the trammels that society and custom have laid upon it. All the rest is intentions, the intentions of a man struggling to realise his own greatness, and finding it completely only in failure.²⁹

Woodcock believes that Wilde failed to reconcile the contrasting elements of his character and also to synthesise them in his work. For this reason, despite his talent as a conversationalist and a dramatist, he did not achieve true literary greatness. He was – in accordance with the traditional conclusion – 'a greater personality than a writer'.³⁰

The studies by Lemonnier, Merle and Woodcock all contributed a great deal to our understanding of Wilde's work and its links with his life and personality. But, like so many other critics, they did not altogether avoid the biographical fallacy. Merle's insistence that Wilde's characters, dramatic situations, conflicts and solutions merely reproduce his own central moral dilemma – his guilty feelings about his homosexuality and his longing for expiation – inevitably suggest the same misleading conclusion offered by Woodcock.

The biographical approach to interpretation, concentrating on the influence of historical reality on the composition of a work, was from the very beginning complemented by attempts to link Wilde's writings to the literary traditions that he followed. In these comparative studies, the critics were concerned both with the conventions of style and form that Wilde used, and with the origins of his aesthetic and philosophical views. A classic example of this comparative and historical approach is Bernhard Fehr's *Studien zu Oscar Wilde's Gedichten* (1918). Following the tenets

of positivism, in which the principle of cause and effect also applies to literature, Fehr saw himself as a kind of literary detective, following Wilde's tracks through the poems. Instead of focusing on the work itself and its links with the author, he set out to discover the external conditions that might have given rise to the work. Wilde himself was classified simply as 'geschickter Nachempfänger der verschiedensten Stilarten'³¹ [skilful imitator of a great variety of styles]. Thus he writes of the poem 'Humanität':

Er [Wilde] wirft rasch ein paar Blumen hin, die teilweise aus – Arnolds Garten stammen ..., lässt ein leises Shelleyisches Blumenläuten erklingen ... und betritt dann den schwierigen Weg ins Labyrinth der Ideen. Es handelt sich darum, auf schnellen Windungen Swinburne zu erreichen.³²

[He swiftly throws in a few flowers, partly taken from Arnold's garden ... lets out a soft Shelley-like tinkle of flowers ... and then steps onto the difficult path to the labyrinth of ideas. It is a matter of making quick twists and turns in order to get to Swinburne.]

Similar methods (though admittedly not always in the same vein as the above) were used by Eduard J. Bock³³ to elucidate Wilde's links with Pater, by Ernst Bendz³⁴ to trace the stylistic influence of Pater and Matthew Arnold on Wilde's prose, and by Gerda Eichbaum³⁵ to tackle the problem of Wilde's relationship with James McNeill Whistler. Kelter Hartley, *Oscar Wilde. L'Influence française dans son œuvre* (1935), seeks to establish the French connection. After that, the old style of historical study, searching for sources, became more and more rare, although as late as 1971 the attempt (unsuccessful) was made to prove that Alfred de Musset's *Il ne faut jurer de rien*³⁶ was a source for *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Such quests for source material, however, undoubtedly had their value. They showed how very closely acquainted Wilde was not only with the English but also with the French literature of his time, as well as how receptive he was to his predecessors' conventional modes of expression and aesthetic concepts, which he was able to absorb and use in his own way. It was a method that demanded an extraordinary degree of learning from the critic, and sensitivity to style together with a sharply discerning judgment. But just as the biographical approach tended to see the works as continual manifestations of vital events and traumatic psychological experiences, so the source-hunting approach ran the risk of interpreting every similarity or parallel between themes and devices as being straightforward 'influences'. Thus the creative element of the work was ceaselessly devalued, and Wilde tended to be dismissed as a mere imitator drawing on multifarious sources. The result of such studies has been the labelling of Wilde as an epigon, adorning himself with borrowed plumes.

More recent critics have abandoned the point-for-point comparative study of influences, and instead have sought to interpret the substance of the work in accordance with specific aesthetic and philosophical traditions. Edouard Roditi's monograph of 1947 set out 'to indicate the central position that Wilde's works and ideas occupy in the thought and art of his age, and in the shift of English and American literature from established and aging romanticism to what we now call modernism'.³⁷ Roditi sees Wilde as a precursor of modernism, exercising profound influence on such authors as Gide, Stefan George and Hofmannsthal. This influence consisted less in matters of literary form than in the vitality of his aesthetics and his theory of individualism. Roditi even goes so far as to place Wilde's critical writings on a par with those of S. T. Coleridge and Matthew Arnold. He sees Wilde's moral, aesthetic and political ideas as being united in the philosophy of dandyism, exemplified in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which he calls an 'Erziehungsroman of dandyism',³⁸ though its hero was 'a fallen dandy'³⁹ who falsified Lord Henry's 'philosophy of inaction'⁴⁰ and therefore had to fail.

It is disputable whether Wilde himself came anywhere near the ideal of the dandy, as embodied by Beau Brummell and depicted by Baudelaire. The early ostentatiousness of his 'aesthetic garb', and his constant self-advertisement, scarcely fit in with the refined elegance and unobtrusive dignity so essential to the true dandy. The search for the perfect form, stress on the autonomous personality, intellectual detachment from reality, the conviction that art was superior to nature – all these were not so much basic principles of Wilde's philosophy of life as norms applicable to his theory of art, a theory developed in his essays and given fictional form in *Dorian Gray* and in the comedies. It is well known that his aesthetic opposition to the Victorian bourgeoisie was indebted both to the French movement of *l'art pour l'art* and to English aestheticism, especially that of Swinburne, Pater and Whistler. It must therefore have seemed a promising avenue of exploration to trace the links between Wilde's aestheticism and these movements, and thereby determine more precisely his position in the history of ideas. As early as the 1930s Albert J. Farmer and Louise Rosenblatt wrote detailed studies – at virtually the same time – laying the base for a better understanding of the Aesthetic Movement and its literary-historical roots.⁴¹ Then in the mid 1950s Aatos Ojala made aestheticism the cornerstone of his two-part book on *Aestheticism and Oscar Wilde* (1954/55). His aim was 'to show how far aestheticism underlies his personality, penetrates his philosophy, determines his art, and gives his style its colour and cadence'.⁴² Ojala follows up Merle's thesis of 1948 with a psychological interpretation based on Wilde's narcissism, which he regards as a source of Wilde's homosexuality and which he also sees as underlying Wilde's art, which in turn is 'self-express-

sion in the truest and the most subjective sense of the word'.⁴³ His study of Wilde's style is undoubtedly more productive; he uses a vast amount of statistical material to prove the extent to which Wilde's aesthetic philosophy imprinted itself on his use of language.

Ojala's detailed study of Wilde's style pointed the way to a change of direction which was apparent in the 1950s and, more especially, in the 1960s. After all the preceding biographical, historical, aesthetic and philosophical studies, the need was now for closer inspection of the individual works and the artistic methods that Wilde had used. The hope was that by concentrating on the texts, one might be able to reach a more objective judgment both of the works and of Wilde's literary status,⁴⁴ which had hitherto been unfairly affected by the findings indicated earlier. It is somewhat surprising to note that very little progress was made in this respect by German critics, for next to Shakespeare, Byron and Shaw, Wilde is one of the best known of English authors in Germany. Apart from Peter Funke's meritorious introduction *Oscar Wilde in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (1969), there was a long gap from the 1920s onwards – indeed after the studies by Felix Paul Greve (1903), Carl Hagemann (1904, rev. 1925), Hedwig Lachmann (1905), and Philipp Aronstein (1922).

The change in critical focus during the 1950s and 1960s – particularly noticeable in the growing number of work-orientated essays published in literary journals – made its presence felt above all in the reception of the comedies. Apart from a few exceptions, such as Maximilian Rieger's dissertation⁴⁵ in the 1920s, the plays were only dealt with in monographs or in histories of drama (and then only cursorily). Examples of the new development are to be seen in the essays of Alan Harris (1954),⁴⁶ Arthur F. Ganz (1957),⁴⁷ Ian Gregor (1966),⁴⁸ Hélène Catsiapis (1978),⁴⁹ and Regenia Gagnier (1982)⁵⁰ on the comedies in general, and Cleanth Brooks's and Robert B. Heilman's structural analysis of *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1948),⁵¹ as well as different studies of *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Richard Foster (1956),⁵² E. B. Partridge (1958),⁵³ Arthur Ganz (1963),⁵⁴ Harold Toliver (1963),⁵⁵ and David Parker (1974).⁵⁶ Interest grew not only in the literary work but also in the critical, as evinced by publications edited by Richard Ellmann (1968)⁵⁷ and Stanley Weintraub (1968),⁵⁸ and studies by Guido Glur (1957),⁵⁹ Hilda Schiff (1960),⁶⁰ Robert E. Rhodes (1964),⁶¹ Richard Ellmann (1966),⁶² Wendell V. Harris (1971),⁶³ Herbert Sussman (1973),⁶⁴ and Michael S. Helfand and Philip E. Smith II (1978).⁶⁵

Not until 1967 did a critic – Epifanio San Juan, Jr – dare to take on the task of reinterpreting Wilde's work in its entirety. Unlike most of his predecessors, his approach was orientated by text analysis, his starting-point being the following correct appraisal of the critical situation:

What is needed above all is a critical scrutiny of the individual works and an appreciation of the vision of truth embodied in forms which are significant and enduring. This study is written with that aim in mind.⁶⁶

San Juan analyses the poems, *Dorian Gray*, the aesthetic and literary criticism, the plays and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. He traces a development in the poems from the early epigonic style through the voluptuous sensuality of *The Sphinx* to the plain and simple expressiveness of the *Ballad*. One must perhaps regard as questionable his assertion that Wilde sought to depict 'complex experience in a mode of lyrical intensity that would successfully unify multiple ways of feeling and thinking in a meaningful totality',⁶⁷ for there can be no doubt that few of the early poems were inspired by personal experience or by a profound involvement in intellectual problems. The *Dorian Gray* chapter is altogether more convincing. San Juan is one of the first critics to note the importance of space and time in the structure of the novel, the main problem of which is to depict the hero's 'lucidity of discrimination'⁶⁸ in his search for 'unity of self'.⁶⁹ San Juan sees the comedies as a mixture of the 'comedy of manners'⁷⁰ and the 'sentimental comedy',⁷¹ with the former tending to be predominant. The thematic structure of the plays is determined mainly by the problem of identity, the motif of self-knowledge, and the conflict of 'feeling *versus* logic'.⁷² The concluding interpretation of the *Ballad* also points to the theme of identity, and San Juan regards the poem as 'a mode of understanding the value of experience in the effort to realize one's identity'.⁷³ The value of this study lies in the detailed individual analyses, particularly of *Salomé*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, though there is no unifying standpoint to link the various divergent interpretations together.

Wilde research during the 1970s reinforced the text-orientated approach, although attempts were still made to interpret the works as before from a biographical or historical point of view. Christopher S. Nassaar based his *Into the Demon Universe. A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde* (1974) on the following thesis:

Conscious of his place at the end of the century, he [Wilde] elevated the demonic to the status of a religion and tried to terminate the nineteenth century with a religion of evil, an unholy worship of evil beauty.⁷⁴

No matter how sceptical one may be over such a thesis, one cannot deny that the author drew attention to an aspect of Wilde's work that had hitherto been badly neglected. But by dogmatically insisting on this valuable point as the keynote of his thesis, Nassaar forces all the works into the procrustean bed of his own concepts. Karl Beckson, in reviewing Nassaar's book, rightly suggests that the thesis of a 'demon universe' would be more suitably applied to such authors as Poe, Baudelaire and

Dostoevsky, who all set a completely different value on evil.⁷⁵ What Nassaar considers to be a metaphysical category is often no more than a literary convention – for instance, the *femme fatale* in *Salomé*. An interpretation of Wilde's work solely in moral terms such as 'innocence', 'evil' or 'demonic' can only lead to distortion and imbalance.

Apart from various introductory volumes,⁷⁶ Nassaar's study has been joined by three monographs which, from different standpoints, have greatly enriched our understanding of Wilde and his work. Rodney Shewan's *Oscar Wilde. Art and Egotism* (1977) concentrates on 'Wilde's relationship with literature'.⁷⁷ Shewan interprets Wilde's writings in terms of the tension between his personal need for expression and his aesthetic search for the perfect form. In the close link between art and life that was characteristic of Wilde, there are clear conflicts between emotion and intellect, self-fulfilment and the expectations of society, artistic design and the artist's own ideals, and these conflicts find expression in the 'patterns of self-projection and self-objectification'⁷⁸ within his work. These patterns can be seen in the three main characters of *Dorian Gray* – here Shewan refers to the well-known identification of Wilde with Basil, Lord Henry and Dorian – and also in the contrast between the individualism of the dandies and the moral conformity of the female 'Puritans' in the comedies. The inclusion of new material gleaned from manuscripts in the Clark Library, the many cross-references with which Shewan seeks to evaluate the position of each text within the canon and in literary tradition as a whole, and the generally convincing tone of the arguments enable this study to offer many penetrating insights into Wilde's literary art. This judgment is not affected by certain reservations that many readers and critics have expressed concerning the somewhat unbalanced emphasis⁷⁹ – for instance, Shewan devoted twelve pages to 'The Portrait of Mr W.H.', but little more than six to *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

J. E. Chamberlin, in his *Ripe Was the Drowsy Hour. The Age of Oscar Wilde* (1977), aimed at 'a clearer assessment of Wilde's career, of its place in the nineteenth-century scheme of things, and of the art and intellectual life of the period itself'.⁸⁰ His concern is therefore not with social history, but with the history of ideas, and he examines various philosophical and aesthetic concepts alluded to by Wilde or incorporated into his works. Chamberlin interprets decadence, aestheticism and symbolism as forms of the artist's alienation from his social environment. Only in art or in an aesthetically glamorised life was it still possible for him to create an identity for himself beyond the bourgeois code of values. The link between beauty and death or decay, between joy and suffering, was perhaps 'the major theme of the age of Oscar Wilde'.⁸¹

Philip K. Cohen, in *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde* (1978), starts out from the belief that Wilde's work was 'a process of self-creation'⁸² which

fictionalised and reflected the development of the author's morally orientated view of reality. He argues that Wilde's lasting reputation is based neither on his aestheticism nor on his dandyism but – surprising as it may sound – his 'morality'. Sin and atonement, and the contrast between Old Testament severity and New Testament love of one's neighbour – these mark the parameters of Wilde's subject-matter. They find expression through the conflict between the sinner – loaded down with guilt – and the self-righteous puritan, between the individual's quest for self-realisation and the moral norms that so often block his path. The preferred solution to the problem lies not in punishing the guilty, but in the possibility of Christian forgiveness. If one accepts this moral perspective – which should in no way be confused with literary criteria – then Cohen's argument that the real or radical individualists are not the 'rebellious experimenters with evil', but the 'regenerate sinners',⁸³ seems plausible. The critical reader may, however, already entertain some doubts about this thesis, and when one takes into account the sentimentality with which Wilde depicts in particular the fallen women of his comedies, the doubts are sure to grow, especially when this thesis leads Cohen to conclude that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is nothing but 'an attempt to escape moral considerations through the trivialization of experience'.⁸⁴ Cohen's almost incidental treatment of Wilde's best play throws into question the methodological validity of his approach, for he seems to take a single (though admittedly important) aspect of Wilde's writing and make it the focal point for his interpretation of all Wilde's work. Notwithstanding these objections, however, Cohen's book forms a noteworthy complement to Shewan's study.

In addition to these comprehensive, thesis-orientated monographs, the 1970s and 1980s have produced several studies of individual works or groups of works. Alan Bird, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde* (1977), and Katharine Worth, *Oscar Wilde* (1983), both deal with the plays, while Manfred Pfister has written an excellent introduction to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1986).⁸⁵ Alan Bird, in the introduction to his book, states that 'Wilde's life is less important and less absorbing than his work',⁸⁶ and this rejection of previous trends in Wildean research is symptomatic of a new critical approach. Of course the shift of focus onto the texts themselves has not always been advantageous to individual works. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and the critical writings have earned the greatest esteem, whereas *Salomé* is now deemed to have been overestimated, and interest has waned in *De Profundis*. Wilde's personality still fascinates, and so do the drama of his life and the atmosphere of his time, as is evident from the various biographies written in the 1970s and 1980s,⁸⁷ but in general there is now a far more sober and objective view of his literary qualities and of his artistic position at the

crossroads between Victorian and modern times. But despite this welcome proliferation of work-orientated studies – a clear indication of the seriousness with which Wilde's writing is now taken – a major gap in Wildean research still waits to be filled: a critical edition of his works.

The present study sets out to integrate the various approaches of the past – biography, source-history, and history of ideas – in an overall interpretation of the works based first and foremost on analysis of the texts. The aim is to attain an understanding of their literary and artistic substance, and unlike most previous studies, it focuses squarely upon the individuality of the work and not upon that of the author. We must, however, bear in mind the fact that, in Arnold Hauser's words, 'für das Kunstwerk ausserkünstlerische Anregungen von entscheidender Bedeutung sind'⁸⁸ [for the work of art, stimuli from outside the world of art are of vital importance], and art can only be explained as the product of contrasting, non-artistic data from the real material and social world processed by formal, aesthetic, 'spontanen und durchaus schöpferischen Bewusstseinsakten'⁸⁹ [spontaneous and totally creative acts of consciousness]. Therefore even an interpretation based on textual analysis must incorporate the literary traditions inherited by the author, and the social reality in which he lived and to which he reacted. We shall be concerned with the themes, motifs, and conventions of form and style that Wilde took over from the past, and the ways in which he changed or renewed them. We shall also examine the links between his own concepts of art and those of the romantics and the Victorians, and we shall see what influence his ideas had on the literature of the modern age. In assessing the links with traditions, we shall not be imposing any positivistic concept of art that might set the individual work within a chain of cause and effect, and so reduce aesthetic and historical complexity to an empirically measurable and explicable system. We shall proceed, rather, from the idea of productive reception, for an artist's absorption of tradition will result in creative adaptation, setting in motion a process of renewal which in turn will bring about different aesthetic forms and contexts. With the split identity of Dorian Gray, for instance, Wilde took a familiar theme from romantic literary tradition and gave it a totally new slant by using it as a means of expressing the conflict between art and morality. In the past Wilde was all too often denigrated as a mere imitator, shamelessly pretending that the ideas of his predecessors were his own, but such a view ignores the productive and creative processing of those ideas, and one need only think of the style of his comedies and his critical essays to realise the degree of originality with which he transmuted whatever material he had inherited.

Just as it is impossible to exclude literary traditions from a text-orientated analysis, so too must we keep in mind the fact that the artist's

individuality cannot be separated from consideration of his social existence. It would be as wrong to ignore the biographical background as it was to make it the sole focal point. Dorian Gray's split identity, the upper-class ambience of the comedies, and the ballad on the execution of a soldier are certainly not unrelated to Wilde's own *doppelgänger* existence, his snobbery, and his humiliating experiences in Reading Gaol – although they must not be regarded as the inevitable consequences of his real life. If we were to adopt an historical approach such as New Criticism, or Russian Formalism, or the German 'Werkinterpretation', and refrain from all reference to the author's biography or to his attitudes towards the social reality of his time, we should be forced to exclude whole dimensions of the works themselves.

The structure of this book is chronological, and follows the main literary developments of the author from the early poems and plays through to *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. There are, however, individual sections – for instance, that on Wilde's aesthetics – where it is necessary to refer back to earlier phases of his concepts of art and literature. When either form or content seemed to warrant it, works have been dealt with together in a single chapter, even if they are of different genres. There are, for instance, close formal and thematic links between *Salomé* and *The Sphinx*, as well as between *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, both of which are reactions to Wilde's social downfall. In order to avoid repetition, the individual comedies are also dealt with *en bloc* in accordance with their various themes and characters, but *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which must have pride of place amongst Wilde's plays, has a chapter all to itself.

Postscript: The wheels of academic research never cease to turn. Since the completion of this edition, more studies of Oscar Wilde have appeared, most notably Richard Ellmann's biography. Regrettably it was no longer possible to include a discussion of this masterly work.

1 Epigonic experiments. The early poems and plays

Poems (1881)

Wilde's literary career began during his student days in Oxford with the metric translation of various Greek choruses. He translated the chorus of cloud maidens from Aristophanes' *Nephelai*, the chorus of the captured Trojan women from Euripides' *Hecuba*, and a passage from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* in which Cassandra ominously speaks of the forthcoming death of the Greek prince. Later he occasionally published poems in various magazines such as *The World*, *The Irish Monthly*, *Dublin University Magazine*, and *Kottabos*. In 1881 he put together most of these published poems along with several that had not been published, and they were printed by David Bogue in London in a single volume called simply *Poems*. Wilde paid for the publication himself. The letter that he wrote in May 1881, trying to interest the publisher in his juvenilia and ending with the self-confident claim that 'Possibly my name requires no introduction',¹ apparently did not have the desired effect, since it did not deter Bogue from soberly calculating the commercial possibilities. The success of the book, however, which went to almost five editions in a single year, appeared to confirm the audacious self-advertisement of its author; the purchasers may well have been attracted less by the quality of the contents than by curiosity about the first poetic utterances of this exponent of the Aesthetic Movement.

This view is strengthened by the fact that the comparatively encouraging sales of *Poems* were in grotesque contrast to the negative reception by the press. The author was criticised for having no 'distinct message'² and no 'genuine lyrical feeling',³ his language was said to be 'inflated and insincere'⁴ and his poems were full of 'profuse and careless imagery'.⁵ Particularly galling was the rejection of a copy of *Poems* that Wilde sent to the library of the Oxford Union. Normally little attention was paid to such gifts, and they would certainly not be refused, but on this occasion there was a veritable explosion. Oliver Elton, who was later to make a name for himself as a literary historian, was already, at the age of twenty, so well read as a student that he was able to identify the innumerable allusions in Wilde's poems to earlier literary works, and he protested vigorously against acceptance of the volume. He based his objections on

the argument that Wilde was not the real author, but that the poems had been written by Shakespeare, Sidney, Donne, Byron, Morris, Swinburne 'and by sixty more'.⁶ As a result, the book was rejected and sent back to the author.

As depressing as the rejection of *Poems* by his Alma Mater was the satirical review that appeared in *Punch* on 23 July 1881, contrasting the aesthetically appealing appearance of the book with its miserable content. Under the heading of 'Swinburne and Water', it reads:

The cover is consummate, the paper is distinctly precious, the binding is beautiful, and the type is utterly too. *Poems by Oscar Wilde*, that is the title of the book of the aesthetic singer, which comes to us arrayed in white vellum and gold. 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. This is a volume of echoes – it is SWINBURNE and water, while here and there we note that the author has been reminiscent of Mr ROSSETTI and Mrs BROWNING.

The sharpness of this judgment perhaps requires further explanation. It is clear that neither *Punch* nor the various other journals would have taken much notice of the poems – or they would at least have excused the excesses as a *péché de jeunesse* – had their author been unknown. But Wilde, with his eccentric appearance – long hair and 'aesthetic garb' – and the provocative radicalism of his gospel of beauty, had already drawn attention to himself as a leading figure in the Aesthetic Movement. Just a few months before the publication of the poems, in February 1881, a comedy called *The Colonel*, written by F. C. Burnand, the editor of *Punch*, had parodied this movement, and it was followed on 23 April by the première of Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera *Patience; or Bunthorne's Bride*, whose main characters Archibald Grosvenor and Reginald Bunthorne were also caricatures of the aesthetes. In addition to these satires, there were George du Maurier's cartoons in *Punch*, which treated this very current and very controversial movement in such a negative light that they were bound to instil prejudices into a reading public which was already, by and large, somewhat negatively disposed towards the aesthetic cult. It must also be borne in mind that memories of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* (1866) and D. G. Rossetti's *Poems* (1870) – both of which had been condemned by the critics as blasphemous, immoral and obscene – were still fresh. Even if the *Punch* reaction to Wilde's poems was not quite as vicious as its reception of *Poems and Ballads* – the suggestion was made that Swinburne should change his name to 'SWINE-BORN'⁷ – and there was no equivalent to Robert Buchanan's notorious article 'The Fleshly School of Poetry', nevertheless the association with this tradition of poetry was sufficient to re-awaken old prejudices.

There can be no denying that the extra publicity enjoyed by the

'Professor of Aesthetics and Art Critic' (as he dubbed himself), and which he now sought to exploit, was not justified by the quality of his writings. This gulf between pretensions and achievements had disastrous consequences, for it strengthened the suspicion that the 'upstart crow' was nothing but a poser. The impression was subsequently reinforced and resulted in the image of the insincere 'showman' so frequently to be found in twentieth-century criticism of Wilde.

The accusation of imitation and plagiarism permeated the reviews and most later studies, which then devoted themselves to corroborating this often justified reproach by means of detailed comparisons.⁸ This narrowing of the perspective to a simple hunt for 'influences' often led to over-emphasis on the imitative traits, and neglect of other aspects. A typical example of this tendency is Bernhard Fehr's historical survey of Wilde's sources, *Studien zu Oscar Wilde's Gedichten* (1918). For instance, he summarises the many literary allusions in the poem 'Humanitad' with the following 'equation':

Humanitad = Matthew Arnold + Shelleys Sensitive Plant + Paters Schlusswort [Conclusion] + Swinburnes Dolores + Hesperia + Eve of Revolution + A Song of Italy + Siena + Halt before Rome + Super Flumina Babylonis + Perinde ac Cadaver + Morris' Anti Scrape Society + Paters Winckelmann + Swinburnes before a Crucifix + The Hymn of Man + Hertha + Baudelaires Héautontimorouménos. Damit hat man alles gesagt.⁹ [That's all there is to say.]

Whether that really is 'all' is very dubious. This extreme example of a poem being reduced to a sort of mathematical formula is based on the positivistic view of literature, which masquerades as scientific objectivism, claims that all phenomena are absolutely explainable, and so looks on poetry as one more link in the chain of cause and effect, as if literature can be analysed in exactly the same way as the natural sciences analyse objects in the everyday world.

Fehr's book, for all its distortion and one-sidedness, confirms that imitation is one of the most striking features of Wilde's poems. If this observation is pertinent to and detracts from the artistic quality of the *Poems*, then there may well seem to be little point in a 'study of the poems as formal aesthetic objects'¹⁰, as Epifanio San Juan described his own approach, for what could there be to gain from detailed analysis of the aesthetic structure of second- or third-rate poems? The study that follows, however, has a completely different starting-point. Without in any way denying the epigonic and eclectic nature of these poetic juvenilia, its central question concerns the themes Wilde dealt with in his poems, their relation to his own life – as revealed in his letters – and to contemporary conditions, and any thematic and stylistic links with his later writings. First and foremost, the analysis will deal with the attitude of the poet to his subject, and although formal elements such as language

and metre will not be totally ignored, they will only be of secondary importance.

Themes and construction

The list of contents in the 1881 edition of *Poems* as well as in the Methuen edition of 1908 shows that the poems are grouped in sections of different sizes. If we follow the heading 'The Fourth Movement',¹¹ we may conclude that there are four parts to the volume. With the *transposition d'art* so popular since Théophile Gautier's *Symphonie en Blanc Majeur*, Wilde evidently wished to indicate that his book was structured along musical lines – that is, the four movements of a symphony. The individual movements are held together by the more or less similar nature of the poems they contain. 'Eleutheria' deals with political subjects, 'Rosa Mystica' with religious. The third group is itself divided into three: 'Wind Flowers', 'Flowers of Gold', and 'Impressions de Théâtre', combining bucolic motifs with a markedly impressionistic technique of construction. 'The Fourth Movement' brings together passion and a mood of *taedium vitae*. In between these thematically very different groups are five longer poems: 'The Garden of Eros', 'The Burden of Itys', 'Charmides', 'Panthea', and 'Humanitad'. The collection begins with the poem 'Hélas', and concludes with 'Glykyprikos Eros'.

It would be quite wrong to take the sequence of these sections as reflecting the different phases of the poet's spiritual development, especially since the division was not chronological. The poems in the 'Eleutheria' group are relatively late – between 1880 and 1881 – while the next section, 'Rosa Mystica', can be dated between 1876 and 1879. In many cases, Wilde actually split up some of his longer poems, revised individual parts of them, gave them new titles and put them in different sections.¹² 'Lotus Leaves' is one example: it originally appeared in *Irish Monthly* in 1877; Part 2 became 'Impression – Le Réveillon' in 'The Fourth Movement', Part 3 became 'Impressions: 2 La Fuite de la Lune' in the third group, and the remainder, under the same title, was left out of the 1881 edition altogether. Clearly, then, there is little significance in the division and the sequence.

The variety of motifs to be found in the poems corresponds to the speaker's fluctuating attitudes towards his subject-matter. This ambivalence can be sensed in the 'Eleutheria' poems, particularly the 'Sonnet to Liberty'. In the battle for freedom from oppression and tyranny, there is less emphasis on the revolutionary goal – namely, the establishment of democracy – than on the release of unbridled passion. The spirit of revolution in terror and anarchy is experienced as a reflection of the speaker's own rebellious soul:

... the roar of thy Democracies.
Thy reigns of Terror, thy great Anarchies,
Mirror my wildest passions like the sea
And give my rage a brother – ! Liberty!¹³

Thus the idea of liberty is largely de-politicised, and enjoyed as the private emotion of the 'discreet soul'.¹⁴ The speaker is untouched when despots destroy their subjects' rights with 'bloody knout' or 'treacherous cannonades',¹⁵ and he has only limited sympathies with:

These Christs that die upon the barricades,
God knows it I am with them, in some things.¹⁶

He withdraws from any moral responsibility for the development of the common good, renounces any active participation in the struggle, and retreats into his own private sphere of experience. His dissatisfaction with the existing political order thus leads him logically to escapism and isolationism. In a mood of nostalgia he contrasts Cromwell's republic ('To Milton') with the modern, materialistic state which can no longer fulfil its function as imperial protector of the oppressed ('Quantum Mutata'). Presumably there is an allusion here to the attitude of Disraeli towards the Bulgarian freedom-fighters who rose up against the Turks in May 1876. The rebellion was savagely crushed by Turkish troops, who then massacred the civilian population.¹⁷ These atrocities were initially played down by Disraeli, partly through ignorance of the facts and partly for political considerations, but in due course they became public knowledge through reports in the English press and through Gladstone's famous pamphlet *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* (1876). Wilde reacted with his 'Sonnet on the Massacre of the Christians in Bulgaria', which was inspired by Milton's sonnet 'On the Late Massacher in Piemont'. But even this poem lacks the revolutionary fervour which, for instance, is to be found in the militant essays and patriotic verses of his mother, who in the 1840s had written under the name 'Speranza', vehemently propagating the aims of the Irish Liberation Movement. Wilde is content to invoke a *deus absconditus*, who in the face of the evil in the world should at last reveal himself, 'Lest Mahomet be crowned instead of Thee!'¹⁸

The isolation of the poetic self from social development, and his refusal to try to change things, leads finally to a withdrawal into the ivory tower of art, though Wilde himself was certainly 'a man of the ivory megaphone rather than of the Ivory Tower'¹⁹:

Come out of it, my Soul, thou art not fit
For this vile traffic-house, where day by day
Wisdom and reverence are sold at mart,
And the rude people rage with ignorant cries

Against an heritage of centuries.
 It mars my calm: wherefore in dreams of Art
 And loftiest culture I would stand apart,
 Neither for God, nor for his enemies.²⁰

It is worth noting that his discontent with the present does not arise solely from the increasing commercialisation of the age, as in 'Quantum Mutata', but is also caused by 'rude people' raging against the 'heritage of centuries'. How is one to reconcile this distrust of the *vulgus profanum* with the democratic sentiments that mark the end of 'Louis Napoleon' and 'Ave Imperatrix'? One can sense the same reservations about the revolutionary potential of the proletariat as is to be found in Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. But while Arnold is at pains to overcome anarchic tendencies by establishing a new and classless principle of authority, Wilde is lacking both in serious political involvement and in any reformist zeal to find alternative solutions. The speaker's ambivalent attitude, preaching democracy and yet using its possible consequences as grounds for rejecting it ('Libertatis Sacra Fames'), may arise from the fact that Wilde was basically conservative with aristocratic ambitions, feigning a republican disposition that had no emotional roots whatsoever but was grounded in the uncommittedness of a modish intellectualism. The term 'freedom' in the 'Eleutheria' poems does not denote the freedom of the people and their self-determination, but the freedom of the unpolitical individual, the *theoretikos*, from state restrictions and social responsibilities, so that he can devote himself undisturbed to his 'dreams of Art / And loftiest culture'.²¹

These verses reveal a political passiveness that typifies late romantic aestheticism and Wilde's own personal attitude. Awareness of belonging to an elite cultural minority is combined with arrogance towards the lower classes and a rejection of the narrow-minded materialism of the middle classes, and together these make up a protest that denotes resignation rather than a desire to bring about reform. The anti-bourgeois revolt is lacking in revolutionary fervour. In this position of the *theoretikos*, compensating for his lack of social and political influence through his 'dreams of Art / And loftiest culture', and glorifying his rejection of practical engagement by assuming the role of the misunderstood guardian of cultural traditions in a time of philistinism, there were never any basic changes even in Wilde's later work. The greater emphasis he was to lay on hedonistic principles does not denote any fundamental change of direction, but can simply be seen as a degeneration of the aesthetic, with the sensual form of art taking over from its ideal content. The feeling that art has no social value, predominant in the poem 'Theoretikos', and forcing the wounded self to play the part of the self-sacrificing outsider, does not evolve into any form of aggressive opposition, but instead leads to an

ideology of hedonistic self-fulfilment *sub specie artis*, the failure of which is brought to vivid life in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The attempt to make life merely a substratum of aesthetic emotions proves to be impossible, for it produces a split in the individual, whose identity is thus fatally undermined. The ethic of aesthetic hedonism in *Dorian Gray* has its political counterpart in the anarchic liberalism that Wilde offered as his contribution to social reform under the misleading title *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. Typically in this tract Wilde's solution to the problem lies not in curtailing the interests of the individual for the benefit of the community, but on the contrary in promoting the individual's interests above those of society.

Wilde's detachment from contemporary commercial and utilitarian norms, interlinked with his dismay at the devaluation of art in the public consciousness, reaches a peak in the long intermediate poem 'The Garden of Eros'; here he questions the progress of civilisation, which he holds responsible for the fact that the nymphs run weeping from the trees, and the naiads can no longer find refuge 'mid English reeds'²²:

Methinks these new Actæons boast too soon
 That they have spied on beauty; what if we
 Have analysed the rainbow, robbed the moon
 Of her most ancient, chastest mystery,
 Shall I, the last Endymion, lose all hope
 Because rude eyes peer at my mistress through a telescope!

What profit if this scientific age
 Burst through our gates with all its retinue
 Of modern miracle! Can it assuage
 One lover's breaking heart? what can it do
 To make one life more beautiful, one day
 More godlike in its period ...²³

The poet's fear that the world will lose its myths and hence its poetry in the face of scientific and technological progress – a favourite theme of the romantics – has its historical roots in the eighteenth century with Rousseau, who warned against the corrupting influence of civilisation on the *vie simple*. The mention of the rainbow in the first verse quoted above may hark back to Keats, in whose poem *Lamia* the demystification of the rainbow exemplifies the irreconcilability of poetic and scientific observation:

Do not all charms fly
 At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
 There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
 We know her woof, her texture; she is given
 In the dull catalogue of common things.
 Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings