

The Body in the Dock: The Aestheticism of Oscar Wilde

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Introduction

In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, Lord Henry Wotton famously, or perhaps infamously, declared that 'the only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about'.² As we can now appreciate, the words were prescient; but for Wilde, it was perhaps ultimately worse to be talked about. Yet comments such as this suggest to us how Wilde revelled in social success, yet attempted to do so on his own terms, a near-impossible task in *fin de siècle* England. During the final decades of the nineteenth century, bourgeois English society reacted to what it perceived as cultural disorder and perverse sexuality by enforcing discursive controls; this paper explores their impact on Wilde and Wildean aestheticism. The particular emphasis here is possibly the most significant events in Wilde's life: his trials and conviction. Public response to Wilde's aestheticism was always fluid; by 1895, when aestheticism had shaded first into decadence and then into homosexuality, the reaction of bourgeois society – intensified by censorious narratives in the popular press – was marked by fierce invective.

Aesthetics is a complex notion that could be most simply described as 'the religion of beauty', in which art has no purpose but to be exquisite. One of the more significant symbols was the lily – an object of precious loveliness, to be contemplated, but having no useful function. Integral to the aesthetic experience, then, is the notion that art is alienated from normal social life.³ That being the case, we could say that art is opposed to nature; it is also opposed to normative behaviour. Taking this a step further, it could be argued that the aesthetic provides a discourse in which to critique the materialist bourgeois society which engendered it. Through Oscar Wilde's re-orientation of the aesthetic into an advocacy of freedom and licence, his criticism – however implicit – of materialist culture became more pointed; at the same time, his aestheticism undermined bourgeois ideology and became more threatening to respectable middle-class English society. By affirming the value and independence of literature and asserting the notion that art with no function has a purpose of its own, it denatured and exposed what had been an unspoken, even unconscious, normative process. The practices that had been taken for granted as normal and natural

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² Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray and Other Writings by Oscar Wilde* (ed. Richard Ellmann), (New York: Bantam, 1982), p.6. Entries for the substantially consulted periodicals and newspapers from the nineteenth century are to be found as intext references.

³ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p.21.

were revealed to be artifices. Wildean aestheticism laid bare, as artificial, the construction of subjectivity.

Aestheticism therefore provided a base for the criticism of society and a refusal to conform to normative standards of behaviour. Reginia Gagnier correctly states that: ‘The aestheticism of the 1890s was an engaged protest against ... the whole middle-class desire to conform’,⁴ and by insisting that art was an end in itself, this aestheticism was disengaged from material society and the establishment; alienated from the concept of usefulness and the predominant ethos of utilitarianism. In turn, bourgeois society increasingly rejected behaviour associated with aestheticism. ‘Aesthete’ joined ‘Decadent’ as a pejorative term, connoting – among other disturbing characteristics – artificiality, egoism, ennui, exhaustion and impotence. Jerome Buckley explains: ‘Aware of their attributes and proud of their title, the Decadents suffered – or affected to suffer—the ineffable weariness of strayed revellers lost in a palace of fading illusion’.⁵

However, aesthetics is also inscribed within a framework of knowledge-power, described by Terry Eagleton, as belonging to ‘a whole apparatus of power in the field of culture.’⁶ While for Wilde, the aesthetic was a way to subvert bourgeois material culture, in many ways it had, as Eagleton points out, less to do with art than with ‘a whole programme of social, psychological and political reconstruction.’⁷ In other words, while it may have provided a platform for aesthetes to challenge the respectability of middle-class culture, aesthetics was inextricably linked with notions of hegemonic control from that same middle class. But Wilde was unaware of this until his trials.

Discourses of Aestheticism

If the aesthete was characterized by affected, effeminate modes of conduct, he was also licentious and wilful, with overtones of ambiguous sexuality. Cartoons and articles alike deployed the stereotypical image of the aesthete – world-weary, effeminate, drooping and devoted to effete accessories – to further the assault on aestheticism. This world-weariness is the focus of George Du Maurier’s cartoon in *Punch*, October 15, 1892. Entitled “Post-Prandial Pessimists”, the cartoon showed two languid aesthetes or decadents, characterized by ennui and reclining in an elaborately furnished room. The caption reads:

Scene. *The smoking-room at the Decadents*

⁴ Reginia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987), p.3.

⁵ Jerome Buckley, *The Victorian Temper* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978), p.228.

⁶ Terry Eagleton, ‘The ideology of the aesthete’ in Stephen Regan (ed.), *The Politics of Pleasure: Aesthetics and Cultural Theory* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), p.17.

⁷ Terry Eagleton, ‘The ideology of the aesthete’, p.17.

First Decadent (M.A. Oxon). “After all, Smythe, what would life be like without coffee?”

Second Decadent (B.A Camb). “True, Jeohnes, True! And yet, after all, what is life *with* coffee?” (p. 174)

Du Maurier’s cartoon encapsulates the supposed idleness and cynicism of aesthetes and decadents, as did another Du Maurier character, the art tutor Maudle, who advocated that young men should just ‘exquisitely be’.

One of the most savage and sustained attacks on aestheticism came from the author Vernon Lee (the pseudonym of Violet Paget). In 1884 she published her single novel *Miss Brown*, which characterized the aesthetes Perry, Hamlin and Postlethwaite (based quite openly although loosely on Swinburne, Rossetti and Wilde) as dissolute, ignoble and degenerate. It was a far more savage indictment of aestheticism than the cartoons of *Punch* and an early example of the criticism which was to intensify, particularly in the 1890s. Violet Paget had an intimate knowledge of aesthetic groups in London and this gave credibility to her account of their decadent lifestyle. Her novel contrasted the dissolute aesthetes with the pure Miss Brown, their beautiful servant. Like Du Maurier, Lee lampooned their affected aesthetic appearance: Hamlin, she wrote, was ‘dressed in green silk, with rose garlands on his head, while Perry led a chorus of praise, dressed in indigo velveteen, with peacocks’ feathers in his buttonhole, and silver-gilt grasshoppers in his hair’.⁸ Her most unkind comments were reserved for the ‘unwieldy’ Postlethwaite, ‘a Japanese lily bobbing out of the buttonhole of his ancestral dress-coat.’⁹ However, if the intention of pejorative texts such as these was to downplay aestheticism and decadence, the attacks were counterproductive; they intensified public interest in aesthetes and publicized their movement. Although some doubts have been expressed about the existence of a cohesive ‘school’ of aesthetes at this time, many contemporary commentators were to ascribe to the aesthetes a unity of purpose sufficient to constitute a movement. As early as 1881, in his article ‘The Aesthetic Movement in England’, Walter Hamilton wrote: ‘It has been insinuated that the [Aesthetic] school has no existence, save in the brain of M. Du Maurier But the school does exist, and its leaders are men of mark, who have long been at work educating public taste.’¹⁰

⁸ ‘Vernon Lee’ [Violet Paget], *Miss Brown: A Novel* (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood and Sons, 1884), 3 vols, vol.1, p.6.

⁹ Lee, *Miss Brown*, vol.2, p.8.

¹⁰ Walter Hamilton, from *The Aesthetic Movement in England (1881)*, reprinted in Ian Small (ed.), *The Aesthetics: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p.182.

Decadence and homosexuality

Even before the trials of Oscar Wilde, which caused widespread consternation among the middle classes, homosexual scandals, including the Cleveland Street scandal of 1889-90, had led to fears of imperial decline reminiscent of Greece and Rome. In addition, the terror that resulted from the Jack the Ripper murders, where the divide between middle and lower classes seemed to have disappeared, and where there was no resolution, intensified feelings of doubt and fear. These events generated confusion and uncertainty about the legitimacy of bourgeois mores. The uncertainty that comes as a result of scandals leads to a 'sense of cultural indeterminacy', and as a result, writes Ed Cohen, 'scandals open up a liminal period during which the normative values and practices of a culture are contested'.¹¹ In Wilde's case, the scandal which engulfed him came at the end of a tired, dispirited and uncertain era. The scandal encouraged a 'closing of the ranks' and a reassertion of the established social order.

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, members of bourgeois society increasingly perceived Wilde's aestheticism as a threat to bourgeois society. He was a focus of the engaged protest against middle-class conformity, not only through his carefully constructed persona, but also by means of his lectures, his essays and his fictional texts. Wilde consistently deployed discursive critiques of materialist bourgeois society. Take, for example, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which could be read as a parable of secret decay. Wilde's criticism of middle-class culture, in combination with his problematic choice of subject matter, provided a greater challenge for bourgeois society. While his wilfulness and his promotion of individualism caused concern, so too did his magnetic personality and his persuasive arguments. As Anthony Fothergill points out, Wilde created himself in opposition to the political and cultural establishment of the nineteenth century: 'Another name to give [Wilde's] aesthetics and its implicit politics is "transgression"... Wilde's characteristic interest is in the crossing of boundaries, the testing of limits'.¹²

Because Wilde created himself as a public spectacle he was treated as such; narratives in newspapers and journals focused as much on his public face as on his *oeuvre*—and both connoted freedom, individuality, and even licence. In the society of *fin de siècle* Britain, which functioned through surveillance and normalization, Wilde's appearance and his aesthetic philosophy were discussed, written about, and commented upon, but ultimately he fabricated his own persona. It was only during his trials in 1895 that he was finally

¹¹ Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side: Towards a Genealogy of Discourse on Male Sexualities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p.120.

¹² Anthony Fothergill, introduction to *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems* (London: J.M. Dent, 1996), p.xxx.

subjected to the technique of forces of his social order.

Although he philosophically advocated disobedience, and indeed was often transgressive in his behaviour, not all Wilde's boundaries were openly crossed. During the 1880s Wilde's life moved in two different directions. He married in 1884 and by 1887 had become the father of two sons. For two years he was editor of *Woman's World*. At the same time he was advocating an aestheticism which showed the influence of the French Decadents. Vernon Lee's novel, *Miss Brown* has been mentioned above. Lee's caricature of the languid aesthetes and decadents quickly shaded into censure. In her biting criticism of the behaviour and morals of these people she depicted a world of sin and darkness: 'this ... man to whom she owed all ... was gradually being alienated from all the noble things for which he was fit – gradually being separated from his nobler self, and dragged, stripped of all his better qualities, into a moral quagmire, a charnel, a cloaca.'¹³ (Vol 3, p. 269) Lee's novel clearly shows the elided relationship between aestheticism and a decadence which explored the dark and immoral side of life.

Not surprisingly, journalists found it difficult to separate clearly his aestheticism and his 'normative' tendencies. Observers sometimes saw Wilde as an agent of contamination and sometimes as a charming married man. Richard Ellmann highlights the bifurcated nature of Wilde's life, particularly from late 1892: 'Wilde saw his life divide more emphatically between a clandestine, illegal aspect, and an overt, declarable side. The more he consorted with rough but ready boys, in deliberate self-abandonment, the more he cultivated a public image of disinterestedness and self-possession'.¹⁴ In living this bifurcated life, Wilde was no different from the stereotypical bourgeois male – head of home and the family business – who could travel across town to the east end for illicit pleasures; but Wilde was far from being an obscure middle class male. Although scandal about Wilde was frequently insinuated in London society it was never frankly discussed until his trials. Lord Alfred Douglas, his lover, wrote: 'Long before the tongue of scandal took definite hold of his name, there were whispers that there was something wrong with him'.¹⁵ Douglas commented on the attitude of newspaper editors and in particular the opinion of Henry Labouchere, editor of *Truth*: 'While Wilde was flaunting himself about town and "going strong", Labby found it convenient to let him alone, even though "there were rumours –" and *Truth* was nothing if not an investigator of rumours'.¹⁶ There were certainly rumours, particularly throughout the 1890s, once *Dorian Gray* was published. An article in *Punch* on

¹³ 'Vernon Lee', *Miss Brown*, vol.3, p.269.

¹⁴ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p.368.

¹⁵ Lord Alfred Douglas, *Oscar Wilde and Myself* (London: John Long, 1914), p.52.

¹⁶ Douglas, *Oscar Wilde and Myself*, p.194.

November 10, 1894 entitled ‘The Decadent Guys (A Colour Study in Green Carnations)’ carried very clear allusions to both Wilde (Fustian Flutters - ‘taller, bulgier, and bulkier than his friend’) and Lord Alfred Douglas (Lord Raggie Tattersall). The satire also referred explicitly to the working-class boys Wilde consorted with: “‘See Raggie,” commented Fustian Flutters, “here come our youthful disciples! Do they not look deliciously innocent and enthusiastic? I wish, though, we could imbue them with something of our own lovely limpness – they are so atrociously lively and active.” Ominously presaging Wilde’s real life legal troubles, Lord Raggie asked, “‘Can we be going to become notorious – really notorious – at last?’”¹⁷

Wilde’s increasingly reckless private life intensified the innuendo. In this atmosphere he prosecuted the Marquess of Queensberry, the father of Lord Alfred Douglas, for libel. Queensberry had presented an insulting – and badly written – card at Wilde’s club. Ellmann cites the card as reading: ‘To Oscar Wilde posing Somdomite’ although in court Queensberry rendered the words as ‘posing as a Somdomite’, a subtle but important difference in terms of the libellous intention.¹⁸ The prosecution was unsuccessful and Wilde was subsequently arrested on 5 April 1895; in a carefully coded report the *Evening Standard* of 6 April 1895 declared on its front page that Wilde was accused of committing ‘diverse acts of gross indecency with another male person, to wit, one Charles Parker’; his first trial – from 26 April to 1 May 1895 – was inconclusive. Wilde’s second trial, which continued from 20 May until 25 May, led to a guilty verdict and a two-year conviction with hard labour. Through his doctrine of aestheticism Wilde had placed an emphasis on the individual and individualism, but from the opening day of his trials he became a ‘type’— a sodomite.

Wilde’s lifestyle had been as complex and paradoxical as his aestheticism. His associations with working-class boys, providing a reminder of the Cleveland Street scandal, had two major implications for both his lifestyle and the expression of his aestheticism. The first was his relationship with material culture. Wilde spurned it while at the same time he was a part of it. His promotion of the cult of beauty and his role as the ‘apostle of the beautiful’ were fractured by his commercial relations with the rough boys with whom he consorted; they were part of the cash nexus of bourgeois society, commodities to be paid for in a black sexual economy. The second was the manner in which his relationship with the boys facilitated movement between class boundaries. Wilde had often been motivated to some extent by a desire to *épater la bourgeoisie*. Jeffrey Weeks comments that ‘his wining

¹⁷ ‘The Decadent Guys (A Colour Study in Green Carnations),’ *Punch*, November 10, 1894, p.225.

¹⁸ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p.412.

and dining of [the boys] in expensive restaurants scandalized the court which ... saw the class barriers tumbling before its eyes.' Wilde's liaisons were, considers Weeks, motivated partly by 'a yearning to escape the stifling middle-class norms.'¹⁹

During his years as *flaneur*, dandy and aesthete, Wilde had appreciated being a 'spectacle'. After his arrest, his notoriety increased and throughout the trials he remained the object of a critical but intrigued public gaze. The report of the *Evening Standard* of 6 April 1895 revealed the extent of public fascination and confirmed the late-Victorian obsession with spectacle. Commenting that 'a large crowd had gathered in front of the court', the paper deliberately placed its report on the first page. The crowd – whether in front of the court or reading the press narratives – exhibited the English taste for voyeuristic enjoyment but at the same time it embodied outraged public virtue. For many years Wilde had fashioned himself; but during his trials it was the onlooker who now manipulated the Wildean spectacle, an event mediated by the popular press, whether in the measured tones of the *Times* or the sensationalism of the tabloids. The discursive constructions which dominated popular newspapers for many weeks were augmented by a number of visual images, notably in the *Illustrated Police News*. Day by day the *News* carried drawings of Oscar Wilde at Bow Street, Wilde in the dock, or Wilde's possessions from his house in Tite Street being sold at auction.

Throughout the years Wilde's persona had been carefully planned. During the trials, the focus on his body and his demeanour was intense. Ed Cohen comments that 'reporters quickly fixed Wilde's person as the site of signification upon which all subsequent interpretations would be inscribed.' (184) The display of Wilde as a body in the dock was marked by a fragmented, chaotic and disorderly body, an aggregation of limbs, with the focus on disparate aspects of his appearance. Wilde was no longer a complete person. The *Star* was one paper which freely interpreted this 'site of signification'. On 22 May 1895 it placed a report on its second page: 'Wilde... looked haggard and ill, and his hair, which has a slight natural wave, and is usually parted neatly from the middle, was in some disorder.' Depersonalised and incoherent, he 'anxiously gnawed his fingers, or played nervously with his suede gloves.' By 27 May the *Star* commented in an article prominently placed on its second page that 'Wilde seemed to have lost control of his limbs... The last shadow of pretence of insouciance was gone from his haggard face. He was not pale -- his face might more accurately be described as swollen and discolored -- and he looked at the jury with dead eyes'.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet Books, 1977), pp.40-41.

Before his arrest and trials, Oscar Wilde's aestheticism had been clearly articulated. It was neither static nor consistent, but it was rather challenging and subversive. During the trials, his ability to state his point of view was curtailed. Called as a witness, he was circumscribed by the rigid rules and the interpretations of the court. More ominously, his voice was effectively silenced. The *Observer* of 26 May 1895 reported that at the conclusion of his second trial, 'Wilde muttered a request to be allowed to address the judge, but this appeal did not reach the ears of his lordship, and before he could repeat his request he was taken into custody by two warders and hurried away to the cells.' (4)

Wilde as a sodomite

During the trials, Wilde's putative sodomy was revealed through carefully worded descriptions narrated in the popular press and read by a voyeuristic public. The obviously sexual character of Wilde's 'crimes' provoked a far less explicit revelation of his actions. As Cohen comments, they were 'designated by a virtually interchangeable series of euphemisms ... that directly conveyed nothing substantive about the practices in question except perhaps that they were nonnormative.'²⁰ Figurative language did, however, permit the investigation of Wilde to elaborate on the meaning and wider implications of decadence and newspaper reports carried painstaking if oblique details. A notable example concerns the physical evidence from a prestigious west end hotel, which indicated Wilde's homosexual intercourse with a rough boy. A former maid at the Savoy Hotel, Mrs Perkins, testified to seeing what were apparently fecal stains on the sheets in his bedroom. The *Pall Mall Gazette* of 23 May was restrained in reporting her evidence: 'The Savoy chambermaid who gave testimony wore eyeglasses with a gilt chain, and in cross-examination told Sir Edward Clarke, Wilde's barrister, she used them because she was very shortsighted. But she did not use them while at her work in the Savoy, and it was while at work she alleged she saw what she had stated in evidence. The witness, however, was, in parts of her story, corroborated by another chambermaid who never had to have recourse to glasses.' (7) Presented with such involved, oblique but apparently precise evidence, the English public were easily convinced that Wilde was a sodomite. As such, he was part of an abject group, defined by the 'sordid' aspects of his life – sheets with fecal stains in hotel bedrooms. In contrast to his previous existence as an aesthete and dandy, characterized by a pure white lily, he was now an oozing body, a metaphor of disease and decay, as the *Illustrated Police News* indicated as early as 20 April 1895: 'The revelations and exposure in the Wilde case ... have brought to

²⁰ Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side*, p.184.

life a canker that should at all costs be exterminated.’ (3)

Over the course of his trials, the reactions to Wilde’s perverse behaviour increased in ferocity. Wilde’s character was increasingly discursively shaped through newspaper narratives, reinforced by ‘Public Opinion’. In his biography of Wilde, Frank Harris explained and condemned the conjunction of press narratives and outraged public opinion: ‘The whole of London seemed to have broken loose in a rage of contempt and loathing which was whipped up and justified each morning by the hypocritical articles... in the daily this and the weekly that’.²¹ Wilde’s essay ‘The Critic as Artist’ incorporated his censure of ‘Public Opinion, which is an attempt to organise the ignorance of the community’²², but during his trials, ‘public opinion’ was able to censure Wilde. During his trials the public recognition of Wilde as a homosexual had significant implications; through the guarded yet widely reported evidence given in court he had also become, in the public eye, a sordid and oozing body; an exemplum of abjection.

Wilde was convicted by the jury after his second trial. His character was now discursively shaped through newspaper narratives reinforced by Public Opinion. The *Illustrated Police News* of 1 June 1895 commented: ‘We think every right-minded person will feel pleased that the notorious Oscar Wilde has, together with his companion in iniquity, met with the punishment they so richly deserved. Reasserting the importance of morality to middle-class life, the *News* continued: ‘It is useless to review all the sordid incidents of a case which has shocked the conscience and outraged the moral instincts of the community.’ (3) In the eyes of the respectable middle classes, there was no need to review the sordid incidents – they were indelibly engraved on the minds of all right-thinking citizens.

Wilde’s ‘crime’ reinforced memories of his Irishness, his aestheticism and decadence, in short, his ‘Otherness’. His position within middle-class culture had been characterized by liminality but as a result of the perversion revealed through his trials, that society was sanctioned to exclude him, granting itself absolution from any blame. The *Illustrated Police News* of 20 April placed a precise discursive construction on Wilde’s aestheticism: ‘The superfine “Art” which admits to no moral duty and laughs at the established phrases of right and wrong is the visible enemy of those ties and bonds of society – the natural affections, the domestic joys, the sanctity and sweetness of the home.’ (3) In its statement of the elided relation between ‘Art’ and immorality the *News* provided for its readers the most cogent reason for excluding the notorious Oscar Wilde. In Eagleton’s analysis of the aesthetic, the subject is subdued and remade but the operation of the aesthetic had been disrupted by

²¹ Frank Harris, *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions* (London: Panther, 1965 [1938]), p.148.

²² Oscar Wilde, ‘The Critic as Artist’, in Fothergill (ed.), *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, p.159.

Wilde; for him it was a discourse of the body, but one which affirmed freedom and rejected control. As a result of his trials, there was a very public restructuring of deviant social identity and a reaffirmation of respectable social identity. For Wilde, the reconstruction was coercive, not consensual. Hegemonic controls had been firmly – and in this case – quite overtly put into place.

Conclusion

The final decades of the century were marked by fear, confusion, and a proliferation of discursive controls. Wildean aestheticism incorporated transgressive behaviour; it was more subversive and therefore more threatening. Middle-class society reacted by turning aestheticism on its head. It became quite clearly not a way to critique materialist bourgeois society, but, as a means for that society to control the unruly body. Wilde's conviction and his exclusion from respectable society provided the basis for an affirmation of bourgeois values but at a cost to Wilde himself. After all, to be in society is merely a bore, but to be out of it is simply a tragedy.