

Anna Budziak

University of Wrocław

T.S. Eliot's Debt to Oscar Wilde: The Paradox of (Im)Personality

Though T.S. Eliot would never admit it, his theory of poetry shows a curious confluence with the views on criticism held by Oscar Wilde. Their intellectual kinship is often occluded by a common misconception which links Decadence solely with late Romanticism and by-passes its neo-classicist side¹: its privileging of artifice, reason and satiric wit in the place of the Romantic nature and overflowing emotion, and its fascination with the Augustan spirit, particularly strong in the 1880s. This essay emphasizes the classicist and classical aspect in Wilde by focusing on the way he had rendered the ideals of personality and modernity before Eliot turned them into the cornerstones of New Criticism, as (im)personality and historical sense. It reviews and systematizes existing criticism pointing to Wilde's and Eliot's literary-critical confluence and adds further evidence in support of their affinity of thought.

1. The shared ground

The references suggestive of Wilde's influence on Eliot are scattered throughout literary criticism, while the first clear demarcation of this line of influence appears in Richard Shusterman's essay tersely entitled "Wilde and Eliot." This study is done by a literature scholar primarily known as a philosopher, a pragmatist. Indeed, philosophy forms the ground from which Wilde's and Eliot's theories have grown. Yet, even if these theories are admittedly pragmatic in their critical application, they have also grown from Hegelian idealism. Eliot's involvement with late nineteenth-century philosophy is most apparent through the doctoral thesis, "Experience and

¹ On the affiliation of Decadence to Classicism, see Buchen (1972); on the revival of the Augustan spirit in the 1890s, see Buckley (1981: 213–215). Consider also the parodic vein of Aubrey Beardsley's drawings and of the decadent satires (e.g. as in Max Beerbohm).

the objects of knowledge in the philosophy of F.H. Bradley,” which Eliot wrote after winning the scholarship to Merton college, Oxford, the same college at which F.H. Bradley (a Hegelian) was elected a fellow in 1870. However, Bradley was not the only eminent Hegelian in Oxford at that time; he entered Merton six years after another renowned expert on Hegel, Walter Pater, had joined Brasenose. It was this don of Brasenose who, teaching Oxford Greats, gave the young Wilde his first training in dialectics.² Wilde remembered this lesson well; he captured its spirit by saying that Greats constituted “the only sphere of thought where one can be, *simultaneously*, brilliant and unreasonable, speculative and well-informed, creative as well as critical, and write with all the passion of youth about the truths which belong to the august serenity of old age” (Wilde qtd. in Shuter 2003: 259).

Thus, Wilde would understand dialectics in two ways, in an ontological and an epistemological sense: as a continuous *movement* in history and the *method* of discovering the truth through logical discourse. These two meanings resurface in Eliot: as an idealist view of history — culminating in Eliot’s idea of “the historical sense,” or the sense of the contemporaneous significance of the past — and as the dialectical tendency of criticism, with evaluation achieved by juxtaposing relevant excerpts from different authors. With these conceptual tools Eliot arrives at his concept of the literary tradition — a paradoxical Hegelian idea, a phenomenon constantly developing but also ever-present. However, Eliot’s notions of “historical sense” and “tradition” derive from a concept even more fundamental to his literary practice: that of the poet’s impersonality, an ideal which would be highly valued by a classicist but — as Eliot wrongly assumed — inconceivable to a child of depraved Romanticism, a decadent aesthete, Wilde.

When Eliot was lecturing on literature in the years 1916–1919, it became clear that what he regarded as late Romanticism, including Pater and Wilde, was not held by him in high esteem. As humorously pointed out by James E. Miller, the first series of lectures which Eliot delivered might just as well be re-titled “The Defeat of a Tawdry and Poisonous Romanticism by a Valid and Sound Classicism in Modern French Literature” (2005: 263). Eliot worked as an extension lecturer for three years, having prepared five series of lectures, whose content is revealed by the syllabi he drafted and designed as booklets for his students (reprinted in Ronald Schuchard’s *Eliot’s Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art*). The series on *Modern French Literature* features Wilde’s works next to J.-K. Huysmans’s, to provide a background and comparison to the works of Maurice Barrès and illustrate “the transition between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (Eliot qtd. in Schuchard 2001: 28). Eliot also put Wilde on the reading lists for *Modern English Literature* and *Victorian Literature*. In the series on Victorian authors, he paired Wilde with Pater under the label of “Aestheticism” and included Wilde in a group of lectures titled

² For the influence of Hegel’s philosophy on Wilde, see Smith and Helfand (1989: 17–34); for the impact of Greats, see Shuter (2003).

rather unflatteringly “Byways of Victorian Literature” (Eliot qtd. in Schuchard, 40). The relegating of Wilde and Pater from the mainstream of literature to the “byways” was part of a more extensive project. As Schuchard observes, intensive lecturing “forced [Eliot] into a three-year period of reading and selective organizing,” which eventually resulted in Eliot’s drafting of a “tradition” (Schuchard, 50) — a concept for which he produced a theoretical justification in 1919 (the year when he finished lecturing) in his “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

Though reduced in literary status to the byroads of Victorianism, Wilde still reappeared on Eliot’s list of nineteenth-century “personalities,” in a set of lectures forming a part of a redrafted series on *Modern English Literature*; Eliot’s students were recommended to read the most influential of Wilde’s critical essays — those gathered in *Intentions* (see in Schuchard, 43). Though hardly systematic, they contain Wilde’s most important views on criticism and literature: his rendering of the artist’s (im)personality and of literary tradition. Indeed, with *Intentions* Wilde went beyond what he had learnt from Matthew Arnold’s Romanticism and embraced a more radical aestheticism, that of — the otherwise ur-modernist — Pater.³ This shift in Wilde’s critical sensibility is emphasized by R.J. Green, who states that, through Arnold, Wilde had been a proper Victorian, but through Pater, he anticipated modernism (1973: 399). *Intentions* are described by Green as “proclaiming the artist/critic’s independence of consistency,” invoking Paterian impressionism, or “Paterian ‘temperament’ and ‘sensitivity,’ ” and assigning to the critic the role of a challenger of public taste and a destroyer of the public’s complacency. They are characterized “as paradigmatic of the watershed marking the end of the Victorian age of the great seers listened to by an admiring audience, and the start of the modern age, whose greatest critics — T.E. Hulme, Pound, Eliot, Leavis — reveal their dislocation and distance from a public no longer ‘theirs’ ” (400). Indeed, if this set of essays, as Green has it, “looks forward to Pound’s *ABC of Reading* rather than backwards to [Arnold’s] *Culture and Anarchy*” (402), then, emphatically, it also looks forward to Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

2. Impersonality in art

On account of his “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot is linked with the classicist tendency in literature, that which favours the relinquishing of the poet’s personality; in contrast, Wilde is linked with rampant individualism. This emblematic contrast in Wilde’s and Eliot’s literary attitudes is obviously oversimplified; its

³ Green shows that Wilde’s criticism falls between two Victorian authorities, Arnold and Pater, with whom Wilde discussed matters of style (both of whom Eliot repudiated). Wilde’s allegiance, then, is divided; his literary criticism, likewise, falls into two phases, with Wilde’s earlier journalism (almost 550 pages of reviews) re-enacting Arnoldian criticism, fostering the virtues of “fairness,” “reason,” and “sincerity,” and the critic’s role of “the educator of society” (399).

rectification is possible if *both* authors are seen as intellectually indebted for their theories to Pater — Wilde's master and teacher, and Eliot's ur-modernist predecessor.⁴ Pater's theory of style is inconsistent, but in a seminal way, thus finding its fruition in the work of two apparently contrasted authors.⁵ His prose is torn between two contradictory urges: a subjectivist tendency to self-expression and a drive towards objectivity. As indicated by F.C. McGrath, on the one hand, it involves the expressive theory inherited from the Romantics, with literary style corresponding to the author's individual vision as in "a Wordsworthian representation of fact, 'connected with soul, of a specific personality, in its preferences, its volition and power'" (Pater qtd. in McGrath 1986: 202). On the other hand, it fosters the Flaubertian principle of art's objectivity, demanding control and suppression of personality. Thus, far from univocal, "Pater gets tangled in the shifts of aesthetic orientation from the Romantic emphasis on the mind of the poet to the Modernist emphasis on the form of the work" (McGrath, 203). Indeed, Pater's contradictory appeals — for individualism and objectivity — seem to find their practical realization in the writings of both Wilde and Eliot. In the words of McGrath, Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "carries the objectification of Pater's expressive theory to its furthest point" (211). In turn, the radical individualizing of style will be commonly attributed to Wilde: such is, for instance, the view of Camilla Paglia stating that "personality is central of Wilde's literary theory where it is the measure of both artist and critic" (1990: 520).

However, one should be careful not to oversimplify the issue since the reverse holds equally true: the condition of a powerful personality underpins the poetry of Eliot, and the appreciation of impersonality is hardly absent in Wilde. Wilde openly admits that technique is all important. Although he insists on individuality, he warns that there is nothing as repetitious as naturalness and that the only way of rendering personality in art is by making it artificial. In "The Critic as Artist," he refutes the myth of naturalness in self-expression: "No poet sings because he must sing. At least, no great poet does;" the work of art always involves "self-consciousness," no matter how "natural and simple" it may seem (CC, 1118)⁶. It is the curbing form, not the brimming content — or the Romantic overflowing of emotions — that matters. Art develops not through the discovery of new feelings, but through technical discoveries — "the discovery of Parian marble," "of oil pigments," and of "new instruments" (Wilde qtd. in Ellmann 1987: 165) — or, in the words of Richard Ellmann, through "the capacity to render, not the capacity to feel" (165).

⁴ On the relationship between Pater's and Wilde's theories of aesthetics, see, e.g., Danson, (1997: 83–89). For a review of the links between Pater and Eliot, see, e.g., Budziak (2008b).

⁵ Jonathan Freedman claims that this ambivalence — as well as a lack of a stable referent or parentage in literary tradition — made aestheticism attractive to American deconstructivist criticism, albeit it produced in aestheticism and deconstruction a different effect: for deconstruction, the lack of a referent was a liberating experience while for aestheticism, it was unsettling (1990: 27–35).

⁶ For page references in parentheses, *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (1999) is abbreviated as CC.

Wilde is acutely aware that even biography, apparently a revelation of personality, is only an aesthetic design — not *the truth*. That he tended to see his life as inscribed into some recognizable pattern is noted by Julia Prewitt-Brown when she quotes an episode from his travels in Greece (which Wilde recounted to Gustave le Rouge on his release from prison). She observes that Wilde himself would render this Mediterranean moment as a bitter anecdote of his failed attempt to appease the gods of ill fortune by throwing a diamond ring into the sea (1999: 5). The precious offering was evidently not accepted since, in his later life, the wheels of fortune turned for him like a treadmill in Reading Gaol. Wilde also aestheticized his relationship with Alfred Douglas, thus making the personal ache less acute. As observed by Prewitt-Brown, first, their bond is compared to the ancient Greek, and also Paterian, ideal of male comradeship: as “the ‘hearer/inspirer’ dynamic of Platonic love.” However, in *De Profundis*, Bosie’s role changes: he is described as resembling Stevenson’s Doppelgänger from *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (12–13). Significantly, on both accounts Wilde rendered the vicissitudes of his life through mythology and literature so that they would be depersonalized and universalized.

This put him in a position which would be a mirror reflection — that is, a reversed image — of Eliot’s. A curious parallelism arises: whereas Wilde recommends the masking of personality with art, Eliot would treat his work as a veiled intellectual and spiritual autobiography. Richard Shusterman makes the point that each of them fostered a theory of impersonality to cope with a personality which was very strong. Indeed, in his famous “Tradition” Eliot concludes that “only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things” (1976: 21), but, at the same time, this powerful personality and emotions — artfully disguised — gave force to his writing. Shusterman corrects the misunderstanding which results in linking Wilde with naïve individualism and Eliot with impersonality by highlighting, on the one hand, Eliot’s insistence on the “need for a powerful and unified personality to give power and conviction to a work of art” (1990: 137) and, on the other hand, Wilde’s emphasis on the technique which “is really personality” (Wilde qtd. in Shusterman, 137). For Wilde, the integrity of character shows itself in stylistic harmony: “for there is no art where there is no style, and no style where there is no unity, and unity is of the individual” (Wilde qtd. in Shusterman, 137). For Eliot, the unity of personality is a condition of great art; so, deficiencies in personality would result in artistic shortcomings. So, even if in his theoretical pronouncements Eliot advises a poet to suppress his personality, in his critical evaluations of other authors he does use the category of personality as a touchstone of value. For instance, explaining Philip Massinger’s artistic failing, Eliot attributes it to “a defect of personality,” stating that “his personality hardly exists” (Eliot qtd. in Shusterman, 137–138).⁷

⁷ In his comparison of Wilde’s and Eliot’s theories of impersonality, Shusterman argues for a greater consistency of Wilde’s. He claims that Eliot’s notion of impersonality is not univocal, that, in fact, it comprises two notions: the consensual impersonality and this type of impersonality

3. Personality in criticism

To Eliot and Wilde, the personality standard matters not only in the work of a poet but also in literary criticism. Eliot is adamant that critics are *not* disinterested, that they always bring their personality into critical evaluations. In that, he challenges the Arnoldian ideal of critic's objectivity. As noted by P.G. Ellis, in "Imperfect Critics" Eliot agrees with Paul Elmer More that the Arnoldian "disinterestedness" is "a weakness" (1972: 292). Eliot goes even further than endorsing More: he claims that such "disinterestedness" is an impossibility, a contradiction: it is "the personal ideal, an ideal for oneself — and an ideal for oneself is not disinterested" (Eliot, 43). Notably, the Arnoldian idea of critical disinterestedness had been refuted a lot earlier (that is, before More and Eliot did it), by Pater and Wilde who effectively asserted the critic's domination over the work of art. In the words of Ellmann, whereas Arnold "put the critic on his knees before the work he was discussing," Pater "shift[ed] the centre of attention from the rock of the object to the rivulets of the perception. It made the critic's own work more important as well as more subjective." Wilde radicalizes even that: he "wants to free critics from subordination, to grant them a larger share in the production of literature." Thus, the idea of the critic's relation with the art object underwent an evolution: it developed from Arnold's "The Function of Criticism," through Pater's Preface to *The Renaissance*, to Wilde's "The Critic as Artist." Effectively, Arnold's instruction to the critic "to see the *object* in itself as it *really is*" received a qualification in Pater, who explained that "seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's *impression* as it really is." Wilde, as Ellmann has it, "outdid Pater" by challenging the critic to view the artifact "as it really is *not*" (326–327; emphasis added).

Indeed, in his "Critic as Artist," by specifying "the primary aim of the critic" (CC, 1128) as seeing in the object *what there is not*, Ernest — Wilde's imaginary

which equals a complete, almost mystic, extinction of the self. Shusterman describes the consensual model of impersonality as the condition of "not being governed or distorted by narrowly individual, private, or personal prejudices or viewpoints, but rather conforming (deliberately or not) to the accepted more-than-personal norms, criteria, or methods of viewing things of the given sort in the given culture." The other model, which demands a complete eradication of individuality, is described as the state in which the poet has to "[sacrifice] or [annihilate] personality altogether so that the poet's vision can perfectly correspond to and capture reality as it really is and not merely as it is personally perceived, even commonly and traditionally taken to be."

Shusterman claims that Wilde promotes the first of the two models: that of the consensual kind. (Though historians of literature might raise doubts as to this claim, given the rebellious character of Wilde's dark decadent phase and his lack of any true literary allegiance: eventually, he became critical of Pater and kept his distance from the Rhymers' Club.) Eliot, in turn, embodies a contradiction. While promoting consensual impersonality, he strongly inclines to the mystic extinction of personality, which not only contradicts Eliot's advice for the poet to cultivate the faculty of critical consciousness, but also opens a path for impressionistic criticism about which Eliot was so disdainful (138–140). Thus, on the force of this argument, in Eliot the tendency to mystic impersonality would cancel out the demand for critical rigour.

spokesman and his ideal critic — heightens the element of subjectivity in art interpretation and reverses the rule which had been asserted by Pater.⁸ This paradoxical principle of criticism — to show what there is not — finds its practical, though also humorous, realization in Wilde's *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, where three critics endeavour to interpret the meaning of Shakespeare's sonnets and of Shakespeare's enigmatic dedication to a mysterious Mr. W. H.⁹ Eventually, one of them, Cyril, arrives at what Mr. W. H. was *not*: so, Mr. W. H. was not an aristocrat, neither the Earl of Pembroke, nor the Earl of Southam (CC, 306); the anagram "W. H." was not a misspelling of "W. S.," nor an abbreviation for Hall Hathaway, Henry Willobie, or "Mr. William Himself" (CC, 307). Mr. W. H. was not an allegorical figure; teasingly, the fact that his name is not on the list of Elizabethan actors only proves that Mr. W. H. *did* exist, having "abandoned Shakespeare's company to play at a rival theatre" (CC, 308). Cyril's friend (and the story's narrator) confirms Cyril's conclusions. Even more persuasive than Cyril, he derives his force of argumentation from a broad range of references comprising Montaigne, Philip Sidney, Ben Jonson, John Fletcher, Pico Mirandola, and Walter Pater (CC, 316–317), as well as Plato's *Symposium*, Ficino's commentary, and the works of Boethius. He also notes the impact these works had on Edward Blount and Francis Bacon and invokes the idea of male friendship in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Cecchino Bracci (CC, 324–325). However, having constructed a flawless interpretation — albeit concocted from his personal intellectual concerns — he completely loses interest in this erudite show. In the end, he shrugs his shoulders, rejects it without any compunction, and distances himself from his creation — as Joyce and Eliot will from theirs.

The story is rather puzzling. It pictures the practice of criticism as a mere hoax. But it also allegorizes the personality/impersonality paradox; and, what is more, it anticipates the critical practice which would be typical of Eliot: that of viewing a poem against a broad background of literary and philosophical tradition. In Eliot's case, the function of such a practice was to uphold the myth of united Europe founded on the Aristotelian and Thomistic basis and embedded in the Dantean moral universe — a fiction which was a very personal construct in the service of his conservative political and social views. The tradition outlined by the Wildean critic, likewise, serves a personal need: admittedly, the literary and philosophical *disiecta membra* assembled by the story's narrator uphold his conclusions about Shakespeare and Mr. W. H., but they also strengthen his own position in art history: a position which, on the one hand, comprises fascination with Renaissance sensuality and learning, and on the other hand, the ancient validation of homoeroticism. This way he provides a historical validation for the position assumed by a decadent aesthete. Definitely, this type of criticism is not disinterested: by drafting a particular line of tradition, the critic also asserts his own modernity.

⁸ For Pater's statement on the function of criticism, see his *Renainssance*, chapter 29.

⁹ An extended interpretation of this story is included in Budziak (2008a: 189–217).

4. “Modernity” and “the historical sense”

What Wilde called “modernity” Eliot would term as the “historical sense.” The Wildean meaning of modernity — and the way it anticipates Eliot’s “historical sense” — is particularly clear in the review which he wrote of Pater’s *Appreciations*. This review tells us as much about the reviewer as about the reviewed book. Wilde stresses that Pater’s essays — for all their diversity, and despite ranging from “almost Greek in their purity ... of form” to “medieval in their strangeness of suggestion” — are united through their “modernity.”

Appreciations ... is an exquisite collection of exquisite essays ... all of them absolutely modern, in the true meaning of the term modernity. For he to whom the present is the only thing that is present, knows nothing of the age in which he lives. To realise the nineteenth century, one must realise every century that has preceded it, and that has contributed to its making. To know anything about oneself, one must know all about others. (1890: 233)

This recommendation is repeated without alteration in “The Critic as Artist” which was published in the same year, and which advises critics to stay aware of their past if they want to know their present (CC, 1137). An awareness of one’s position in history — or “the historical sense” — in turn, enables the critic to make a selection and judge. So, if Wilde advises the critic to “intensify his own personality” (CC, 1131), in fact, he urges the critic to strengthen “his” present point of view and “his” own historical position from which evaluation is exercised.

Through their emphasis on the contemporary relevance of the past, these pronouncements from Wilde’s review and from his *Intentions* pre-date Eliot’s understanding of the literary tradition as expounded in his famous 1919 essay, where Eliot says that “we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of [the poet’s] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.” The openness to such an influence depends on the poet’s “historical sense” which

involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in this bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (14)

Certainly, the phrasing of Wilde’s and Eliot’s criticism differs: while Eliot insists that the poet should see the “presence” of the past, Wilde requires the critic to “[show] us the work of art in some new relation to our age” (CC, 1132). However, for both of them, the past matters insofar as it has a contemporary relevance. Wilde, just like Eliot, denies Arnoldian “disinterestedness” for a good reason, claiming that the critic must choose from the literary store-house what is vital for his age. The past must live rather than linger there. It must be a continuing process, not a *stasis*, or even more worryingly, stagnation. With the latter the Eliot of the modernist avant-garde would not disagree.

While Eliot was certainly familiar with the highlights of Wilde's critical and literary oeuvre, the analogies between their critical beliefs — even if Wilde and Eliot used different, sometimes opposite, terminology — mean that Wilde's *Intentions* was the unacknowledged source of Eliot's inspiration. These echoes from Wilde also encourage viewing Eliot's theory of impersonality in the context of a wider critical tradition comprising Arnold and Pater. Bequeathed from Arnold, to Pater, to Wilde, and finally to Eliot, the idea of a critic has evolved: the critic has been constantly growing in significance, whereas his virtue of disinterestedness would steadily wane. The emphasis has changed from the complete disinterestedness in Arnold to the utter subjectivism in Pater, and, after that, the stress was placed on the critic's duty to act in the interest of his age. The critic had to assert his "modernity," as postulated by Wilde, or develop the faculty which Eliot termed "the historical sense." This evolution — from the disinterested to the necessarily biased — progressed in a linear way. But there is also an aspect for which the idea of a critic took a more convoluted route: it started from Paterian impressionism, but then it revived the Arnoldian regard for tradition and authority as in the criticism of Wilde, the classicist aesthete, and as in the work of Eliot, the classicist modernist.

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