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“The Self and the Mask:
Constructions of Individual and Cultural
Identities in Selected Works of
W.B. Yeats and Oscar Wilde”

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Introduction: Asking the Cheshire Cat for Directions

An ancient Asian tale tells of the devil who would like to play a trick on the villagers so he exchanges all their souls over night. To his dismay the plan fails: when the villagers awake on the next morning there is no confusion whatsoever but everyone continues their life as if nothing had happened. The story shows that we are all made of the same stuff so that one soul and another are like two peas in a pod that may be exchanged freely.

Within a Western philosophical context Beelzebub's plan would very likely have been much more successful. No matter whether we are believers or not Westerners traditionally tend to have a firm belief in the individual unchangeable essence or "soul" of a person. The idea as presented in the story that we all share exactly the same spirit, and are therefore interchangeable, radically undermines our Western understanding of the individual's uniqueness which is the basis of our social order and mores. It is this belief in a unique "real" self on which the Western common understanding of "truth" and "sincerity" have been based for a long time. Assuming that there only exists one true version of ourselves we can simply check all statements concerning our emotions, ideas and actions against this one true self in order to verify or falsify them; if we have sufficient information about someone else we assume we can do the same service for them. This discourse revolving around "unique essence" and "truth" traditionally deals with conflicting or contradictory versions of our personality and experience by branding them as "poses" and "lies".

In short, there is not only a strict distinction between what we perceive as "essence" and "appearance" but also a straightforward hierarchy between the two. Thus, "essence" or the "truth" associated with the one unique self and one unique God have a positive connotation while "appearance" or "lies" associated with a false version of ourselves and the two-faced devil have a negative connotation.

These associations go back in time beyond Christian civilization at least to Greek antiquity and Plato's highly influential Allegory of the Cave, in which the divine sun is the origin of truth and reality while we ordinary humans are but prisoners in a cave looking on the shadows of reflections of reality. Only the "philosophers" among the humans understand that they are being deceived and dare to leave the cave in search for the "truth" being the sun as the unique origin of the real

ideal world of which the objects and ideas in our sensible world are but second- or third-rate copies. In Christian religion God is equally posed as the one origin of reality, good and the truth while his antagonist the two-faced devil is constantly disguising himself in an attempt to deceive us and tempt us with his charms.

At least within a Western context theology and science for a long time served the same purpose of transcending the world of “appearance” to uncover the “essence” or “truth” behind it. In the nineteenth century Darwinism as well as new findings in science and geology brought about a paradigm shift by suggesting that appearances, or physical phenomena, far from being deceiving may actually be revealing. Thus, new insight into the evolution of our planet and the human race (as well as all other races) fundamentally questioned the idea of a unique creator as well as of a unique place or time of creation. This in turn seriously questioned the traditional notion of us being endowed with a unique god-given self or soul that we might “realize” by shedding all the layers of self-deception and deception of others and reveal our “true selves”.

Identity turned into a much more fluid concept than it had been before creation was deemed a process propelled by a constant fight for survival causing the image of a benign creator or indeed of any creator to retreat into the distance. Once the idea of man and creation as a gift of god got called into question things started looking more complex as man perceived himself more and more as the product of genetics, the forces of history and his particular cultural and social background.

Amidst frantic searching for new forms of spirituality and new definitions of the self, modern, fractured man was born. While many experienced this paradigm shift as deeply unsettling others recognized its liberating potential. If we could no longer be sure whether we were a product of divine creation and no longer wanted to be merely a product of and reaction to human civilization, if we truly wanted to be self-determined free subjects it was about time we created ourselves.

To anyone who has read *Frankenstein* this may sound like the epitome of human hubris but in fact the wish to create our own identity exonerates god and society from taking the blame for who we are; instead, by consciously creating images for ourselves we take responsibility for who we are turning from a position of passive suffering to one of active creation.

The assumption that there is no stable self may be unsettling at first and many Victorians must have felt like Alice falling down the rabbit hole, who in the course of her adventures in Wonderland, gets confronted with different confusing versions of herself not knowing which one to pick. But in a world that appears to have been turned upside down the wisest thing is to follow the Cheshire Cat's advice, who, upon Alice's asking it for the right way, tells her that the answer to this question depended a good deal on where she wanted to get to.¹

In the modern world the discourse of "true essence" versus "false appearance" loses its meaning since our "true" identity is no longer something we have to find within us but something we have the opportunity to create from within us. In other words, in the modern world Alice no longer needs to seek her true self nor is there a predetermined "right place in life" awaiting her but she may choose for herself who she would like to be and which goals to pursue. While the need to take complete responsibility for one's own actions may be frightening at first it actually has great liberating potential.

Both Anglo-Irish Victorian writers Oscar Wilde and William Butler Yeats adamantly believed in this modern constructivist approach to identity and independently of each other came to develop their personal theory of the "mask". Thus, while Western philosophy up until modern times usually viewed the mask as a symbol of deception, hiding the "true" face behind it, Wilde and Yeats conceived of it as a tool of liberation since by choosing our own "mask" we may create our own identity.

Anticipating Bakhtin's analysis of the "carnavalesque" Wilde's and Yeats's "masks" are means by which we may express and explore aspects of our personality which are usually silenced by social expectations towards ourselves. Their identity theories also show that in quite a modern fashion both authors already conceived of personality as a performance. Thus, Wilde famously wrote in his play *An Ideal Husband* that '[b]eing natural is such a difficult pose to keep up' while Yeats stated in his play *The Player Queen* that '[s]eeming that goes on for a lifetime is no different from reality' (qtd. in Ellmann *M&M* 173). Moreover, the mask is an emblem of both

¹ See *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* chapter VI: 'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?' 'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.'

authors' belief in the power of the imagination in its fight against the materialism, utilitarianism and philistinism of imperialist industrialist Victorian Britain.

In my paper I intend to demonstrate that explicitly as well as implicitly the concept of the "mask" is at the heart of both writers' work where it signifies identity as an actively chosen construct as opposed to the "self" or "face" signifying identity as the passive product of outside factors. I shall do so by juxtaposing these two authors' at first glance very different works in order to let them enter into a dialogue highlighting the similarities and differences in their approaches to the "mask". Their common Anglo-Irish Victorian background, yet difference in temperament as well as socio-political and spiritual outlook, should render such a dialogue particularly productive.

The study is divided into three large sections. The first part of the first chapter introduces Yeats's core concept of the "anti-self", largely synonymous with the "mask", as well as his concept of "tragic joy", a sentiment akin to the Sublime. I trace back the origins of these concepts to the author's admiration for William Blake, the Nietzschean "Superman" and the idea of "eternal recurrence". I also show how they are connected to Yeats's intense lifelong study of magic and theosophy, in particular within the context of *The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*, of which the poet was a member. As source materials I use Yeats's philosophical esoteric book *A Vision* as well as assorted essays and poems featuring allusions to the anti-self.

In the second part of the first chapter I then relate my findings to Wilde's work, in particular to his critical work including *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, *The Decay of Lying* as well as *The Critic as Artist* but also to his short story *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* and his only novel *Dorian Gray*. The most important themes I am going to discuss within the larger context of the anti-self are "Individualism" (*SOM*), "the Liar" (*DOL*), the dandy as Superman (*Dorian Gray*) and the relationship between fact and fiction (*CAA*, *DOL*). I then combine Yeats's and Wilde's thoughts in an analysis of the Nietzschean echoes to be found in both their works as well as their subversion of received notions of truth and reason.

The second chapter focuses on Yeats's and Wilde's Irish background. Positioning the "mask" or "anti-self" as the kind of personality we would like to construct not merely for ourselves but for an entire nation or even all nations the

“mask” becomes the symbol of a political, cultural and spiritual Utopia. Within the discourse of the “real”, that is the status quo, and the “ideal”, industrialist, imperialist, materialist, philistine Britain comes to signify the “real” whose values Yeats’s and Wilde’s work subverted by creating either explicitly Irish, or at least Irish-made Utopias.

In the first part of the second chapter concerned with “Otherworlds” I identify both authors’ intellectual return to pre-Christian pagan times, ancient Greece and ancient Ireland respectively, as a symptom of their opposition to mainstream British culture and values. In this context I focus on the anti-imperialist subtext in Wilde’s breakthrough poem “Ravenna” and Yeats’s breakthrough poem “The Wanderings of Oisín” highlighting those thematic elements that implicitly or explicitly criticise mainstream British culture or construct an (Irish) alternative to it, such as Wilde’s “New Hellenism”. Moreover, I venture upon an analysis of the poem “Easter, 1916” on the Irish Easter Rising being arguably Yeats’s strongest contribution to Irish nationalist myth-making.

In the second part of the second chapter I consider Wilde’s and Yeats’s anti-British/anti-mainstream construction of “Otherworlds” within a larger historical context demonstrating how in his treatise *On the Study of Celtic Literature* the Victorian cultural critic Matthew Arnold constructed the stereotype of the emotional imaginative Celt in opposition to the rational philistine Anglo-Saxon.

Interpreting Arnold’s opposition of practical-minded “Hebraism” versus contemplative “Hellenism” as laid out in *Culture and Anarchy* in terms of an implicit critique of 19th century materialist Britain the third part of the second chapter explores Yeats’s and Wilde’s social visions (for Ireland) and the ways in which they constructed them as a negative response to, or “mirror image” of, Victorian society. Taking into account both artists’ connection to William Morris, a socialist and associate of the Arts and Crafts movement, I discuss the anti-industrialist, anti-utilitarian stance Yeats and Wilde take in their work. Furthermore, I demonstrate how Wilde’s endorsement of socialist Individualism in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* resonates with Morris’s Fabian version of socialism as presented in his treatise *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*. Another focus is on Wilde’s and Yeats’s defence of the

imagination in an increasingly philistine secular society with particular reference to *A Vision* and *The Critic as Artist*.

The third and final chapter recapitulates and reflects on the importance of the theme of the split self in Yeats's and Wilde's work in particular within the context of the self as split into an active and a passive part, an "actor" and a "spectator". Examples from selected works show that while both authors favoured a Superman- or indeed dandy-like contemplative attitude towards life their work also draws attention to the immanent dangers of such a detached and at times inhuman mindset.

CHAPTER 1: YEATS AND WILDE

CHAPTER 1.1: W. B. YEATS

‘I find in an old diary: ‘I think all happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask of some other life, on a re-birth as something not one’s self, something created in a moment and perpetually renewed [...]’ (Yeats, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*)

‘Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.’ (Wilde, *The Critic as Artist*)

At first glance the similarities between Oscar Wilde and William Butler Yeats appear to be obvious yet rather limited. Both of them were highly influential Anglo-Irish writers and dramatists born and raised in artistic Dublin families around the middle of the nineteenth century – with Yeats outliving his senior by 38 years. Both of them were strikingly tall and in their way attractive men who spent most of their lives as expatriates in London. And both of them produced highly original pieces of literature treating fundamental questions of identity, nationality, morality, politics, spirituality and sexuality.

Personality-wise, however, these two writers were as different as day and night. Thus, Wilde, on the one hand was permanently acting as his own PR-manager and became famous for stylizing himself as a witty, light-hearted and hedonistic lounge lizard who declared that life was far too serious an affair to be taken seriously. In keeping with his reputation as a great conversationalist it is Wilde’s comedies of manners which he will always be remembered for best, while some of his darker, more overtly “serious” and subversive work – with the exception of *Dorian Gray* – tends to attract mostly minority interest.

Yeats, on the other hand, has always been a far less popular, readily likeable and legendary figure than his fellow Irishman. This is arguably due to the fact that he was a highly self-conscious, pensive man with a marked preference for esoteric hermetic ideas and societies, on the whole favouring a serious tone in his work. Consequently, while most of Yeats’s works hold an immediate aesthetic appeal they are usually thematically as well as stylistically less easily accessible than Wilde’s – particularly to a modern audience.

Yet, in spite of the fact that Wilde's genius tended to be comic, targeted at a popular audience, while Yeats's tended to be dramatic, targeted at a somewhat more highbrow audience, they were both preoccupied with similar questions and – what is more surprising – often came to similar conclusions. A point in case is their attitude towards individual identity. Unusual for their time and age both writers believed that personality, far from being a static god-given entity, is in a constant state of flux as well as being at least partly man-made. In other words, they regarded identity as an ongoing *process of becoming* as opposed to a *state of being*. And what is more, they believed that we are able to make a conscious decision about which way we want to develop, that is what kind of personality we would like to acquire.

Whenever Yeats explicitly refers to this imaginatively constructed and/or consciously acquired ego-persona he calls it the *mask* or the *anti-self* while Wilde alternately talks about the *mask* and the *pose*. Both writers examine the idea of personality as consciously acquired and/or constructed in a variety of texts. Thereby they address the issue of *personality as an artifice* or a *work of art* both explicitly as well as implicitly.

In the following I will first give an introduction to some of Wilde's and Yeats's prose works dealing with the matter. I will then try to establish what ideas concerning the issue of the 'consciously constructed personality' the two writers had in common using this material as a basis for the analysis of selected works by both authors.

Starting with Yeats I would like to have a closer look at one of his essays, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, published in 1917, as well as his cosmogenic esoteric book of revelation, *A Vision*, first published in 1926 and again in a revised and extended edition in 1937.

1.1.1. *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* and *A Vision*: Introducing the anti-self

Per Amica Silentia Lunae

To any student of Yeats it will come as no surprise that he was not only a highly talented poet but also an extremely complex and idiosyncratic personality. Yet if it is sometimes difficult for the reader to come to grips with the writer's ideas it is helpful to keep in mind that it was always difficult for the writer to come to grips with himself. In other words, Yeats was continuously at war with what he himself considered to be his 'doubting, conscientious and timid' (Yeats qtd. in *Poems* 585)² nature, forever striving to overcome it. In fact, according to Yeats himself it was this very 'quarrel with himself' that inspired his poetry. Thus, he famously observes in his essay *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* that 'We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry' (*PASL* 331). However, in Yeats's imagination this struggle between two opposing selves remained by no means confined to his individual psyche but he believed it to be the archetypal dynamics of *all* individual psyches - whether dead or alive. Moreover, he took this movement generated by the attraction and repulsion between two oppositional poles to be at the heart of a kind of "psychodynamics" of history and even the dynamics of the universe as a whole.

Like many of his contemporaries Yeats was fundamentally dissatisfied with what Christian religion and its eurocentric world view had to offer on a spiritual level as well as an attempt to explain the world and its inhabitants. Yet, unimpressed by the received version of Christianity Yeats was equally unwilling to join the ranks of strictly materialist Darwinists; for from an early age on – inspired by the faerie stories he heard in his mother's home town Sligo, encounters he had there with people reputed to have second sight and the ethereal quality of the Western Irish landscape – he developed a great affinity with and interest in the supernatural world. Feeling a deep spiritual yearning which orthodox religion could not satisfy, Yeats eventually became a great champion of spiritualism, esotericism and occultism.

In the course of his search for truth the young Yeats attended numerous séances and became an active member of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society whose teachings were mostly concerned with Indian and Tibetan Buddhism as well as

² Daniel Albright quotes from the *Yeats Annual* I [1982]: 13.

the Cabbalah and the Hindu Upanishads. Later on the young poet joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn which taught a mixture of hermeticism, Rosicrucianism, the Cabbala, astrology, tarot as well as practical magic. From 1895 onwards, following his various syncretistic studies, Yeats was even busily trying to establish his own Celtic Mystical Order which, however, never came to anything. In addition to his deep involvement in occult teachings Yeats took great interest in the writings of William Blake and in the early 1890s helped to edit *The Works of William Blake*.

Naturally Yeats's various spiritual and literary studies did not fail to have an effect on his poetry in terms of themes and imagery. In particular, as mentioned above, he grew more and more convinced that sphericity and cyclicity govern individual as well as historical genesis and imagined them to be either the result of a unification of complementary opposites or a constant oscillation between opposites created by either or both sides of the spectrum striving towards the other.

However, Yeats did not confine himself to expressing his new-found ideas in poetry alone but for the first time explicitly elaborated on these issues at some length in his essay *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*. Thus it is in this piece of writing that he explains his idea of the anti-self, the mask, the Daimon and the *anima mundi* for the first time.

In the first part of the essay, entitled *Anima Hominis*, Yeats starts out with the assumption that his everyday-self is nothing but a bundle of alternately positive and negative reactions towards his fellow human beings and, therefore, lacks a sense of unity and purpose. He then goes on to explain that it is only when he is on his own working that he can explore his true self as then his ideas will no longer be a mere counter-reaction to his environment and, consequently, 'there must be no reaction, action only'. It is only under such ideal conditions, Yeats insists, when he manages to 'put in rhyme what [he has] found' that he believes to have found himself and not his 'anti-self'. (PASL 325)

In an ironic twist he then adds that it is only his initial habitual 'shrinking from toil' – the toil of writing poetry – which convinces him that in this happy moment of creation when for once he was 'all virtue and confidence' he had in fact *overcome* himself and was no more himself 'than is the cat the medicinal grass it is eating in the garden'. Indeed he claims that at the precise moment when he had felt most himself

he had in reality mistaken 'an heroic condition' for himself. For in reality, he claims, all inspiration that 'comes as complete, as minutely organised' as the images that appear before him in this state of artistic trance 'between sleeping and waking' is too great in detail to have originated within himself but 'must come from above me and beyond me'. (PASL 325-26)

In short, in this passage Yeats characterises the anti-self as a kind of 'heroic condition' quintessential to artistic creation that can only be attained in a visionary trance which permits the artist to gain access to a storehouse of images. This storehouse featuring the conglomerate experience of the human race Yeats later on identifies as the *Anima Mundi*. It turns out to be the main subject of the second part of the essay, which is accordingly entitled *Anima Mundi*. Moreover, it is worth noticing that to Yeats the apparently passive state of awaiting and receiving inspiration far from the madding crowd is far more active than the process of engaging with said crowd which he believes to be governed by mere passive 'reaction'. Bearing in mind that Yeats greatly valued action over reaction it becomes more understandable why he put such emphasis on the distinction between 'rhetoric' and 'poetry', the one being in his opinion worthless as it is but a mere reflex originating in 'the quarrel with others', while the latter has a sublime quality to it as it originates in 'the quarrel with ourselves' (PASL 331).

It is, in a way, typical of Yeats to state that a seemingly passive and calm activity, such as waiting for inspiration and writing poetry, is in fact a highly active one, while a seemingly active and agitated activity, such as talking to people, is really passive. In fact, the very title of Yeats's essay – *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* – alludes to a kind of oxymoronic literary image which by the power of association combines at the same time ideas of excessive calm and excessive violence. For the title is part of a passage in Virgil's *Aeneid* which describes the moment when the Greeks, having tricked the Trojans into believing that they have given up their 10-year siege by sailing away and presenting them with the Trojan horse, supposedly as a token of their capitulation, are in fact on their way back to Troy where their fellow soldiers will creep out of the horse and open the city gates for them. Thus, the Greek ships are sailing 'a Tenedo tacitae per amica silentia lunae / litora nota petens' (book II, chapter 11, 255-56) - 'from Tenedos, / their only light the silent favouring moon, / on to the

well-known strand'³. Shortly after this peaceful scene the Greeks attack Troy and hell breaks loose.

In other words, in the same way the author – and any other individual – always carries his anti-self or “inspiration” with him (even though it is not always accessible) any historical moment carries the seeds of its exact opposite in it. Thus an apparently peaceful moment such as the moonlit scene described in the *Aeneid* may be intrinsically connected to a violent one, much as the tip of the iceberg hides its more dangerous underbelly. Along these lines, equalling in hermetic fashion microcosm to macrocosm, the course of man to the course of history, Yeats argues that the work of ‘any great poetical writer of the past [...] is the man’s flight from his entire horoscope’ (*PASL* 328) while each *Daimon*, a kind of ghost-version of the anti-self, ‘is drawn to whatever man, or if its nature is more general, to whatever nation it most differs from [shaping] into its own image the antithetical dream of man or nation’ (*ibid.* 362).

In this context it is worth remembering that *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* was written early in 1917, shortly after the 1916 Easter Rising. The sudden fervour of the uprising had come as a complete surprise to Yeats who up to this point had believed that Irish would-be revolutionaries ‘[b]ut lived where motley is worn’ (“Easter, 1916” 14) - that is, were as harmless as jesters - and would never actually bring themselves to take action. And while the poem “Ego Dominus Tuus”, serving as an introduction to *Per Amica*, attests that already in 1915 Yeats was preoccupied with the idea of an individual anti-self it is safe to assume that the, in Yeats’s own words, ‘terrible beauty’ (16) of the Easter Rising further strengthened the poet’s belief in the existence of an anti-self both of individuals and of nations. If even the seemingly complacent Irish including a ‘drunken, vainglorious lout’ (32) such as Major John MacBride (Maud Gonne’s violent husband, who was one of the leaders of the Rising) could be ‘transformed utterly’ (39) and find their heroic anti-selves by participating in revolution, then surely everyone could. (“Easter, 1916”)

Indeed it is an important aspect of the anti-self that in one way or another we have to fight to attain it. John MacBride, for example, did not simply wake up one morning to find himself a hero. Yet he was able to “magically” transform his, to

³ See *The Aeneid* by Virgil, translated by Theodore C. Williams, Book II, chapter 11: The Greeks enter Troy, see www.romansonline.com/Src_Frame.asp?DocID=Vrg_ae02_11.

Yeats's mind, vulgar everyday-personality because he was ready to face his fears and challenge himself by trying what seemed almost impossible – to establish an Irish Republic against British will. As Richard Ellmann points out in his study *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (217):

All [i.e. MacBride, Pearse, Connolly] had seemed to him ordinary people, but they had suddenly found their heroic opposites, not like Yeats by effort and discipline, but by the sudden violence of a great action.

Thus, in one section of *Anima Hominis* Yeats explains that we shall only find that 'dazzling, unforeseen, wing-footed wanderer' of inspiration who enables us to 'create the greatest imaginable beauty' in art as well as in life once we have 'endured all imaginable pangs' and have 'seen and foreseen what we dread' (*PASL* 332). Indeed Yeats believes that inspiration is that which is 'of all things not impossible the most difficult' and anything that 'comes easily can never be a portion of our being' (*ibid.*). In other words, anything worth having is difficult to get. And, more interestingly, anything worth having is always already a part of us.

Hence Yeats argues that the Hermes-like inspirational anti-self is not like the traditional Muse exterior to the self, bridging the gap between the divine and the human world, but is in a paradoxical way part of us; it is 'in some sense of our being, and yet of our being but as water with fire, a noise with silence' (*ibid.*). Basically, in order to enter upon the desirable visionary state of the anti-self which permits us to transcend our everyday self and get into contact with God, some greater truth or the collective mind of the *Anima Mundi* our 'passion' has got to be 'reality' (*ibid.* 331) and we have to become the opposite – a kind of 'photographic negative' (see *Notes in Poems* 585) - of ourselves. Given the immensity of the task Yeats concedes that only saint and hero ever manage to leave behind entirely their 'heterogeneous selves' in order to always 'resemble the antithetical self' (*PASL* 333). At one point Yeats explicitly identifies this antithetical self with 'ecstasy' (*ibid.* 331) leaving no doubt that he believed inspiration to come whenever the individual by means of trance and meditation can 'stand outside of himself ("*ek-stasis*") serving as a receptacle for transcendent visions' in the same way as the Platonic 'visionary poet'⁴ did. To put it

⁴ See Kearney 415 for a description of Plato's concept of the visionary poet's 'ecstatic' imagination: 'In some of the later mystical dialogues such as the *Phaedrus* or *Timaeus*, however, Plato acknowledged a radically different kind of imagination which he called 'ecstatic'. This imagination was attributed to the visionary poet or holy seer. It did not invent images but received them from a

in Yeats's words, the cat has to become the 'medicinal grass it is eating in the garden' (*PASL* 325).

Discussing the concept of the mask, which is basically the same as the anti-self⁵, Levine comments:

It [the mask] is [...] a means of disciplining the ego to accept a multiplicity of selves. Through the mask of an anti-self the poet comes to terms with everything that is outside the self, with everything that has long remained hidden from daily view, with everything that puts him in touch with a collective mind greater than his own [i.e. the *Anima Mundi*]. (Herbert Levine qtd. in Malone 253)

The mask thus radically questions our received notion of individuality as an indivisible entity - for Yeats claims that it is the *in-dividual*, the self, which is in fact 'heterogeneous and confused' (*PASL* 335), in other words 'made up of different kinds', and, therefore, highly divisible. It is precisely this chaotic multitude of conflicting synchronous desires, reactions and ideas making up our everyday selves which the poet needs to leave behind in order to be inspired and produce a coherent passionate work of art. It is for this reason that he "puts on the mask" and becomes his anti-self by identifying with everything he is not. As Yeats explains in *A General Introduction for my Work*:

[E]ven when the poet seems most himself [...] he is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete. (*E&I* 509)

In this way the mask or anti-self works as a kind of filter manufacturing, as Daniel Albright points out, the poet's persona 'by taking the Universe minus himself' (*Poems* 584). Thus, once the "wavelength" of the poet's everyday self has been blanked out by the mask the same way in which a camera filter may blank out one specific colour the image of the world becomes much clearer as the remaining colours of the spectrum stand out much more sharply, highlighting the shapes and contours of all objects. As a result not only the poet himself identifying with the anti-self feels much more "pure" – 'intended, complete' – but also "his" vision becomes much more precise as images such as 'elaborate, brightly lighted buildings and sceneries' appear

sacred source beyond human experience. It was termed 'ecstatic' because it permitted man to stand outside of himself (*ek-stasis*) serving as a receptacle for transcendent visions.'

⁵ On this I agree with Richard Ellmann's statement on the mask and the anti-self: 'The 'anti-self' is intended to serve as a more theoretical and abstract term than the symbolical 'mask,' but it does not really clarify matters very much.' (*Yeats: The Man and the Masks* 198)

before him in a flash, already ‘complete’ and ‘minutely organised’ (PASL 325-6) as they all originate in the Anima Mundi.

Paradoxically the relinquishing of the everyday self by the wearing of the mask, according to Yeats, not only creates an intensified sense of personal unity expressed in superior art and superior conduct in life – such as the saint’s and the hero’s – but the “masquerade” is also attended by a heightened sense of personal freedom. Thus Yeats argues that ‘all happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask of some other life, on a re-birth as something not one’s self’ for in ‘playing a game like that of a child’ and putting on ‘a grotesque or solemn painted face’ ‘one loses the infinite pain of self-realisation’ (PASL 334).

In a similar vein Yeats argues that ‘our culture with its doctrine of sincerity and self-realisation [has] made us gentle and passive’ (ibid. 333). Given Yeats’s modernist concept of the individual as heterogeneous and “dividable” rather than homogenous and “undividable” it is understandable why he disliked such a culture and doctrine. After all, if our everyday self, depending on what company we are in or whether we are in company at all, is already made up of conflicting ideas and attitudes – or “selves”, then which of these many selves is it we are supposed to realise? How can we ever be “sincere”, that is true to “our self” (in the singular!), if there is no conceivable way of knowing which of these many selves, if any, is more real than the others?

At this point we have to acknowledge that “truth” in Yeats’s sense is not universal, irreducible and static but that he believed the individual creates his or her own truth which may change over time. Thus in an epilogue to Yeats’s early play *The Island of Statues* (qtd. in Ellmann *M&M* 36-38) a Satyr gives the following warning (my italics):

Nor seek – for this is also sooth - / To hunger fiercely after truth, / Lest all thy
toiling only breeds / New dreams, new dreams; *there is no truth / Saving in
thine own heart.*

For this reason he also advises us not to get lost in endless self-reflection in search of a “true” self - that may or may not exist - but to transform ourselves into ‘overmastering, creative persons by turning from the mirror to meditation upon a mask’ – the mask being a spiritual or secular personality-ideal such as ‘Christ’ or

‘some classic hero’ (*PASL* 333-34) that we may wish to emulate; for after all – as Richard Ellmann points out – Yeats himself wrote in his play *The Player Queen* that ‘To be great we must seem so. Seeming that goes on for a lifetime is no different from reality’ (qtd. in *M&M* 173).

In many respects the establishment of the concept of the mask can be regarded as the timid poet’s attempt to pull himself up by his bootstraps and leave behind his uncertainties and inhibitions in order to become a decisive personality capable of taking action, both in matters of art and of life. The mask was a way of self-empowerment for a man who still at the age of 45 (in 1910) argued in a letter that he was so thoroughly governed by reason he felt he had ‘no [more] instincts in personal life’ and that he had consequently been trying hard for years ‘to recreate practical instinct in [himself]’ but could only ‘conceive of it as a kind of acting’ (Yeats qtd. in *M&M* 174-75) – as Oscar Wilde would say ‘To be natural is the most difficult pose to keep up’. In any case, at this stage Yeats definitely already conceived of his ideal personality as a theatrical construct – an idea he reiterates in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* where he writes of the necessity to actively ‘imagine ourselves as different from what we are’ instead of passively accepting our “innate” personalities: ‘Active virtue, as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a code, is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask’ (*PASL* 334).

Thus, in many ways *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, just like *A Vision* in which Yeats greatly expands on matters already touched upon in the much shorter essay, is ultimately a defence of the imagination and non-denominational spirituality in an age that he believed to be threatened by reductionist materialism and – in the case of Ireland – religious sectarianism. Accordingly, defending his intense study of magic in a letter to the Irish nationalist poet John O’Leary in 1892, Yeats declares that ‘The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write’ and goes on to announce himself ‘a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance [sic] – the revolt of the soul against the intellect – now beginning in the world’ (qtd. in *M&M* 94-5). In fact, all of Yeats’s writing and all of his public activities – such as his involvement with the nationalist movement, the Abbey Theatre and later his work as Senator of the Irish Free State – have to be regarded within the context of this ‘greater renaissance’ in which the poet endeavoured not only to transform himself into his own personality-ideal but also to shape an Irish national character according to his ideals.

These ideals were, anti-materialist (often in an anti-British way), pro-spiritual, pro-imagination as well as anti-industrialist in favour of a return to a heroic feudal society.

In a speech held in April 1898 in honour of the failed 1798 Irish Rebellion and its leader Wolfe Tone, Yeats goes so far as to project his 'revolt of the soul against the intellect' onto the struggle between two nations, implicitly setting up his vision of a perennially rural Ireland as industrial England's anti-self, years before he actually formulated the concept. Thus, Yeats posits rural Ireland as industrial England's ego-ideal or anti-self by declaring that any 'contest between two peoples, two nations [...] is really a war between two civilizations, two ideals of life'. He then goes on to argue that while England may contain 'whole districts blackened with smoke' 'Ireland will always be in the main an agricultural country'. Equally, while imperialist England appears to be forever driven by its 'hurry to become rich' and 'delight in mere bigness' Irish people hate 'the materialisms of England [...] because they are evil'. The Irish nation, by contrast, 'shall be moved by noble purposes and to noble ends' and 'there will be an imaginative culture and power to understand imaginative and spiritual things distributed among the people'. All of this, Yeats argues, will help 'to preserve an ancient ideal of life' where even the masses of relatively poor people, such as those living on the West coast, will not be as philistine as the majority of English people but shall continue to be 'a race of gentlemen, keeping alive the ideals of a great time when men sang the heroic life with drawn sword in their hands'. (Yeats's Wolfe Tone banquet speech and N.Y. speech qtd. in *M&M* 111-14)

Disregarding for the moment the potential political implications of such a reactionary rural ideal of Ireland this speech goes to show again what characteristics – whether of an individual or a nation – Yeats valued the most: spirituality, imagination, and individualism (as opposed to the adherence to the mass or hegemonic culture).

All of this should be kept in mind when we now turn to discuss aspects of what Yeats possibly considered to be his most important work and critics generally consider to be his most eccentric and puzzling work: *A Vision*.

A Vision

On a basic level *A Vision* is something like the extended version of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*. Thus, both texts are mainly preoccupied with the evolution of the soul in life and death, the world soul and the notion of complementariness, notably in the context

of the self and the anti-self or the mask. Both are equally part of Yeats's larger project of letting the imagination reign supreme and creating in Blakean fashion his own system so as not to be 'enslav'd by another Man's' (Blake *Jerusalem*).

However, as opposed to *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* Yeats's prophetic book, based on his wife's communications with various spirits, not only deals with the individual's cycle of conception, birth and death but also with that of entire historical eras. Thus, based on the hermetic belief "as down here so above" which correlates microcosm to macrocosm, the material to the spiritual world, Yeats goes on to project the concept of the anti-self onto historical evolution by establishing a model of two alternating diametrically opposed yet interdependent historical eras. Arguing that just as individuals experience phases in which they are either striving to stress their individuality (the subjective impulse) or lose their ego in an endeavour to merge with the masses or the divine (the objective impulse), Yeats puts forward the idea that history is a process characterised by the movement of two interlocking rotating cones or gyres embodying the transitory predominance of either of these two impulses. As Yeats himself puts it in *Pages from a Diary in 1930* equating microcosm to macrocosm, the individual to the course of history:

I am always, in all I do, driven to a moment which is the realisation of myself as unique and free, or to a moment which is the surrender to God of all that I am. I think there are historical cycles wherein one or the other predominates, and that a cycle approaches where all shall [be] as particular and concrete as human intensity permits. (*Explorations* 305)

These two historical cycles or "cones", each lasting for about two thousand years, are perpetually 'Dying each other's life, living each other's death' (*Vision* 68) so that as the "objective" gyre loses momentum and "dies" the "subjective" gyre reaches its greatest expansion and is "born". They are essentially each other's anti-selves perennially drawn to each other and existentially dependent on each other as they can only be defined in opposition to the other. Just as self and anti-self are paradoxically at the same time "the same" and "not the same" – the anti-self being 'in some sense of our being, and yet of our being but as water with fire, a noise with silence' (*PASL* 332) - thus the two gyres belong to each other yet are completely different from each other. In order to illustrate this point, Yeats likens the two cones to the mythical eggs of Leda from which, among others, Helen was born, who was so beautiful that Paris fell in love with her and abducted her, thereby bringing about the Trojan war. In such

a way, as Yeats points out, opposites are intrinsically linked just as ‘Love and War came from the eggs of Leda’ (V 67). In correspondence with the Greek myth Yeats takes the two cones to represent just these two conflicting emotions for the objective impulse ‘brings us back to the mass where we begin’ producing “Concord” while the subjective impulse ‘tends to separate man from man’ bringing about “Discord” (V 72).

Using the story of Leda’s eggs Yeats stresses the idea that the two alternating historical cycles as well as self and anti-self are each other’s inverted doubles or twins that are of the same origin, belong to each other, resemble each other as one egg another and yet are as seemingly different from each other as Love and War. Yeats addresses this paradox in his poem “Ego Dominus Tuus” (which serves as a prelude to *PASL*) when he invokes his own anti-self as

[...] the mysterious one who yet
Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream
And look most like me, being indeed my double,
And prove of all imaginable things
The most unlike, being my anti-self (70-74)

Interestingly the image of the anti-self walking ‘the wet sands by the edge of the stream’ conjures up the idea that the anti-self will be able to see his own reflection which being his inverted image is bound to look exactly like the self. The implied image of the self as the anti-self’s reflection emphasizes the idea that as man and his shadow, object and subject, the two are inextricably linked to each other even if they can never directly touch each other – one being material, the other immaterial. And as anyone who has heard of Peter Pan or read vampire stories knows very well, once we give up our shadow, that is, our “soul” or mortality, we will stop to develop, we will stop to be truly alive. It is the tension between opposites which keeps the world going round just as a negatively charged and a positively charged pole is needed in a battery to get the energy flowing. As Yeats remarks about the relationship between the subjective and the objective impulse in the individual and history:

Could those two impulses, one as much a part of truth as the other, be reconciled, or if one or the other could prevail, all life would cease.
(*Pages from a Diary in 1930 in Explorations* 305)

Thus, as Hazard Adams points out in *The Book of Yeats's Vision*, '[a] fundamental principle of *A Vision* and of all Yeats's work is conflict' (ibid. 12) and in this view Yeats was strongly influenced by Blake whom he had been reading avidly as he states in *A Vision* (72): 'I had never read Hegel, but my mind had been full of Blake from boyhood up and I saw the world as a conflict [...]'.

However, as opposed to our common understanding of conflict 'Yeatsian [as well as Blakean] conflict is not a disintegrating principle but paradoxically the Heraclitean form of order itself' as 'it is both order and disorder at the same time and the same place' (Adams 12). In other words, in Yeats's opinion the only stable and predictable continuous event in the universe is change from one extreme to the other brought about by conflict.

This also helps to understand Yeats's fascination with moments of crisis and destruction that he repeatedly celebrates in his poetry, perhaps most famously in "Easter, 1916" and "The Gyres". Both poems depict a moment in time when the currently reigning "primary" era characterised by objectivity begins to collapse into the new "antithetical" era bringing about increased subjectivity. Such a transition, according to Yeats, is always accompanied by a major conflict when the antipodal energies of history clash in a struggle for dominance.

Thus, already in his poem "Easter, 1916" Yeats ambiguously declares that through the violence of the Easter Rising, which he considered to be the labour pains of a new era, '[a] terrible beauty is born' (16) indicating that while such bloodshed may be terrifying at first glance there is an intrinsic beauty to the violence of revolution as it is a manifestation of the youthful vitality of the new era it helps to bring about. Similarly in "The Gyres", which describes the death of the old era and the birth of a new one in more abstract terms than "Easter, 1916", the spectators watching the attendant conflict with its '[i]rrational streams of blood [that] are staining earth' (5) are at the same time sad about the destruction they are witnessing and aloofly joyful at the spectacle as they know that it is all part of a cycle in which '[t]hings thought too long can be no longer thought' (2) and, consequently, have to be replaced by something else. Believing that the current chaotic and violent situation is part of a universal order governed by the eternal alternation of subjective and objective phases the spectators in the poem adopt a kind of purpose-led optimism not

merely accepting what is inevitable but even rejoicing in it: 'We that look on but laugh in tragic joy' (8). Thus, by means of adopting the attitude of "tragic joy" the individual not being able to stop the death of an old era and the birth of a new one once more pulls him/herself up by his/her bootstraps by turning from passive suffering from fate to active celebration of fate.

This is somewhat reminiscent of the strategy of the self actively seeking to emulate its anti-self in order to escape from its confusingly heterogeneous everyday personality. For in the end the purpose of both tragic joy and the appropriation of the mask or anti-self is self-empowerment by means of a greater clarity of vision. Accordingly, by putting on the mask the self becomes a more homogenous and therefore a more decisive personality both in art and in life. Similarly, by understanding the workings of the gyres of history we can attain the condition of "tragic joy" and escape from the position of passive suffering by inwardly adopting the point of view of a spectator of life who has made his peace with violent historical events knowing that they are all part of the perpetual struggle between primary and antithetical impulses. Thus we shall become like the old Chinamen in Yeats's poem "Lapis Lazuli" sitting on top of the mountain staring down on '[a]ll the tragic scene' (52) not indifferently but with 'gay' (56) eyes knowing that '[a]ll things fall and are built again / And those that build them again are gay' (35-36). Or as Yeats put it even more succinctly in the galley proofs of *A Vision*: 'every act of war is an act of creation' (qtd. in *A Critical Edition of Yeats's A Vision*, Notes 66).

1.1.2. "Tragic Joy" and the Sublime

Bearing in mind Yeats's controversial flirtation with fascism some commentators have been disconcerted by Yeats's apparent endorsement of indifference towards, or open celebration of violent forces while others have emphasized the close proximity of the concept of "tragic joy" to that of "the sublime". As R. Jahan Ramazani points out in his essay 'Yeats: Tragic Joy and the Sublime' (164):

"Tragic joy" expresses as well as any other formulation in the history of criticism the emotive structure and ambivalence of the sublime, since the sublime involves the conversion of affects from defeat and terror to freedom and joy. [...] In the first full discussion of the psychological sublime, Edmund

Burke creates a comparable oxymoron: “delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime”. (see Burke 73)

And undeniably, to the reader of Yeats Burke’s phrase “delightful horror” does sound exceedingly familiar immediately bringing to mind the ‘terrible beauty’ of “Easter, 1916”. However, where does this ‘delightful horror’ of the Romantic sublime come from?

Essentially it is triggered off by the contemplation of and awareness of being overwhelmed by something vaster than the self. Thus, as Ramazani indicates, Yeats who ‘rarely uses the word *sublime*’ (ibid. 163) claims that the poet’s “ecstasy” arises ‘from the contemplation of things vaster than the individual and imperfectly seen’ (*Autobiography* 319). Naturally such an ecstatic condition is at the same time delightful, constituting a transcendence of the self, while also being frightening, as the freedom of transcending the self can only be attained by relinquishing the self, by a loss of identity.

Indeed, as mentioned before, Yeats believed that whenever an artist is inspired such an “unnatural” expansion of vision takes place as the artist identifies with his anti-self, that is, with everything he is not thereby even gaining access to the beyond, the *Anima Mundi* – Yeats’s “Great Memory” which, similar to C.G. Jung’s “collective unconscious”, is the memory of all memories. However, the poet’s “ecstasy” brought about by the assumption of the mask seems relatively tame in comparison to what the Yeatsian hero experiences at the confrontation with his ultimate anti-self: his own death. Thus, if even the mere contemplation of death and destruction as described in “The Gyres” provokes the spectators to ‘laugh in tragic joy’ (8) this is nothing compared to the transcendental exaltation of the hero at the coming of his own death which Yeats repeatedly describes, most notably in “Lapis Lazuli”.

1.1.3. The anti-self and death

Written in 1936 towards the end of Yeats’s life, the poem “Lapis Lazuli” emblematically discusses people’s different responses to a coming war and makes it clear that Yeats prefers a stoic and even joyful attitude towards war and (one’s own potentially imminent) death to the attitude of ‘hysterical women’ (1) who would like to prevent war and (self-) destruction altogether. In opposition to these women who

are 'sick [...] / of poets that are always gay' (3) apparently not realising 'that if nothing drastic is done' (5) war is nigh, Yeats posits Shakespeare's Hamlet and Lear as role models who at the moment of their imminent death, when '[t]he great stage curtain [is] about to drop' (13), do not despair and 'break up their lines to weep' (15). Instead they face their own destruction - the 'black out' when '[h]eaven [is] blazing into the head' (19) - with a 'gaiety transfiguring all that dread' (17).

But where is this gaiety of Hamlet and Lear coming from? Why do they not panic as the "hysterical women" do? For one thing Hamlet and Lear are obviously the heroes of two of Shakespeare's plays and being "heroes", as Yeats explains in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, they are bound to find their mask – a positive sense of completeness - in defeat:

The poet finds and makes his mask in disappointment, the hero in defeat. The desire that is satisfied is not a great desire, nor has the shoulder used all its might that an unbreakable gate has never strained. (*PASL* 337)

Thus, in Yeats's definition only those people are "heroes" and "saints" who, as opposed to everyone else (including artists), will not merely occasionally be in contact with their anti-selves and then 'become their heterogeneous selves' again, but 'would always, if they could, resemble the antithetical self' (*ibid.* 333). Nevertheless, it is only at the moment of absolute "defeat" – at the moment of death – that the hero no longer strives to *resemble* the mask but will actually *merge* with his mask. The joyfulness generated by identification with the ultimate anti-self, which in the case of any living human being is death – explains why at the moment of death 'Hamlet and Lear are gay' ("Lapis Lazuli" 16).

But why should it make anyone happy to identify with death?

From a psychological point of view the paradoxical gaiety of the hero at the approach of death is partly due to what Ramazani calls 'the temporal structure of the sublime' in which 'the anticipation of death gives rise to a counterassertion of life' (164). In other words, as anyone who has ever done extreme sports will know people tend to feel most alive when their life is acutely in danger. And, apart from the adrenaline rush they get from it, the reason why some people enjoy getting into potentially life-threatening situations is that those give them an opportunity to prove to themselves that their will is stronger than their fear – or as Yeats put it in his

Autobiography (132): ‘only the greatest obstacle that can be contemplated without despair rouses the will to full intensity’. Consequently, in order to be able to actually rejoice in death and the destruction of the self it is necessary not to be afraid of death anymore – to be ‘without despair’. And what better way is there of beating the monster than by becoming the monster oneself? Thus, ‘the hero [...] surmount[s] the threat of the destructive father through identification with him’ (Ramazani 164), through identification with death.

And this is precisely what happens when at the approach of death the Yeatsian hero identifies with his anti-self, death itself, and consequently is not afraid of it anymore instead experiencing ‘gaiety’ (17) and ecstasy when finally ‘Heaven [is] blazing into the head’ (“Lapis Lazuli” 19). Considering its amazing ability to transform terror into joy the hero’s identification with death thus constitutes the ultimate sublime moment.

If Yeats’s sublime, as Ramazani suggests, is merely a ‘momentary illusion that translates hearer into orator, son into father’ (ibid. 165), then it at least seems to be a beneficial one in a world where there appears to be no more personal God to console the poet but merely a cycle of history and rebirth characterised by eternal recurrence which the soul may one day overcome by passing into what Yeats calls the “Thirteenth cycle”, a kind of Nirvana. Nevertheless, critics have noted that Yeats’s ideal of merging with the anti-self sometimes verges on a dangerous identification with the death drive leading to a blind endorsement of violence and destruction⁶.

By full identification with the anti-self/death we become the spectators of our own lives and deaths – a feat Yeats clearly admired as shown in the following statement on fellow Irish dramatist J.M. Synge:

[...] he can see himself as but a part of the spectacle of the world and mix into all he sees that flavour of extravagance, or of humour, or of philosophy, that makes one understand that he contemplates even his own death as if it were another’s and finds in his own destiny but, as it were, a projection through a burning-glass of that general to men. There is in the creative joy an acceptance of what life brings, because we have understood the beauty of what it brings, or a hatred of death for what it takes away, which arouses within us, through some sympathy perhaps with all other men, an energy so noble, so powerful, that we laugh aloud

⁶ See Ramazani 165: ‘This illusion [of the sublime’s faculty to translate hearer into orator, son into father] is sometimes dangerously complete in Yeats’s lyrics of tragic joy, where the poet may seem to cast too cold an eye on death and to inure himself to violence.’

and mock, in the terror or the sweetness of our exaltation, at death and oblivion.
(‘J.M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time’ in *E&I* 322)

Thus, Yeats’s ideal human is someone who is so indifferent towards his own death that he can even mock it and laugh about it. This is an idea that we also find prominently in the poem “Under Ben Bulbin” (1939) where Yeats controversially glorifies the war-hero who only when ‘fighting mad’ and confronted with death ‘completes his partial mind’ – that is, identifies with death as his ultimate anti-self – and consequently feels so ecstatically complete that he ‘laughs aloud, his heart at peace’ (canto III 4-8).

In this ideal of the man who only becomes a hero when he is able to face and overcome his fears and laugh even in the face of his own death Yeats is very close to Nietzsche whose idea of the man who becomes the “Superman” when he is able to rejoice in his fate of “eternal recurrence” resonates very strongly with Yeats’s concept of the anti-self/the mask and tragic joy as well as his conception of a perpetual cycle of reincarnation in which the soul vacillates between extreme objectivity and extreme subjectivity and a similar cycle of alternating historical eras.

1.1.4. Major Influences on Yeats: Blake, Nietzsche and The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn

Obviously, Nietzsche is not the only one who had an influence on the creation of Yeats’s major philosophical concepts. Before him, as mentioned previously, Blake in particular left a huge impression on Yeats. Thus, a lot of Yeats’s thinking on the individual and history is based on the idea that all creative energy is generated by the vacillation between or “marriage” of opposites – self and anti-self, subjective impulses and objective ones – an idea that harks back to Blake’s famous assertion in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that ‘[w]ithout Contraries is no progression’ and that ‘Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence’ (ibid. *The Proverbs of Hell*)⁷.

A similar ideology was also put forward by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a secret occult society of which, since 1890, Yeats was an eager member and

⁷ See *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. In: The Library of Congress – Internet Archive. <http://archive.org/stream/marriageofheaven00blak#page/n3/mode/2up>.

in which his chosen order name was tellingly *Demon est Deus Inversus* – “a demon is an inverted god”. As can be deduced from Yeats’s extravagant secret name the Hermetic Order was just as much interested in the marriage of opposites as Blake had been. Fittingly, one of the order’s central Rosicrucian symbols - that of the conjunction of rose and cross, referred to by adepts as a ‘mystic marriage’ – is mainly preoccupied with a Blake-like rejuvenating conjunction of opposites. The blossoming rose on the cross thus emblematises, in Richard Ellmann’s words,

[...] the transfiguring ecstasy which occurs when the adept, after the long pain and self-sacrifice of the quest in this world, *a world in which opposites are forever quarrelling*, finds his cross – the symbol of that struggle and opposition – suddenly blossom with the rose of love, harmony, and beauty. (*The Identity of Yeats* 64 my italics)

Besides, Ellmann suggests that Yeats would have known that the rose and the cross may also represent the union of the opposing spiritual principles of Christianity and paganism (‘pagan beauty’) as well as the merging of the masculine and the feminine principle (see *ibid.* 66).

However, not all of the order’s ambitions come across quite as tame as this. Thus, aspects of the order’s aspired spiritual rebirth of the self, which no doubt contributed to Yeats’s ideal of the merging with the anti-self or mask, make it sound like the rebirth as a Nietzschean Superman. Indeed, in an oath that Yeats took within the order it becomes apparent that the adept’s envisaged experience of enlightenment or “golden dawn” was not supposed to turn him or her merely into a *better* human being but into a *super*-human being, a kind of Superman. In other words, as in an ‘alchemical transmutation of base metal into gold’ (Ellmann, *M&M* 96), which the “golden dawn” alludes to, the individual’s very *essence* will change and s/he will have super-human powers which s/he must not abuse. All of this is to be achieved ‘through magical practice and training’ (*ibid.* 96). Ever eager to transcend himself the diligent student *Demon Est Deus Inversus* took the following oath:

[...] I further solemnly promise and swear that with the Divine permission I will from this day forward apply myself unto the GREAT WORK which is to purify and exalt my spiritual nature that with the Divine Aid I may at length attain *to be more than human* and thus gradually raise and unite myself to my Magus and Divine Genius, and that in this event I will not abuse the great power entrusted to me. (*ibid.* my italics)

Reading this statement it appears that it takes only one thing to turn the enlightened ‘more than human’ student of the Golden Dawn into the Nietzschean Superman: God must die. For while both strive to be ‘more than human’, the student of the Golden Dawn evokes ‘Divine Aid’, whereas in the universe of the German philosopher ‘God is dead’ and consequently there can be no such thing as ‘Divine permission’ or ‘Divine Aid’.

Otherwise, the Golden Dawn’s ideal of the spiritually transformed superhuman individual, who has been changed as from ordinary metal into gold, does have a lot in common with Nietzsche’s Superman who is equally supposed to be a different and better species altogether achieved through the transcendence of man by man. Thus, Nietzsche envisages the Superman to be in relation to contemporary man what contemporary man is in relation to the ape⁸. As Nietzsche puts it in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*:

Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman – a rope over an abyss. A dangerous crossing, a dangerous wayfaring, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous trembling and halting.⁹

Indeed, now that man has “killed God”, assuming that there is no more place for him in enlightened thinking, all moral codes originating in a religious world view lose their validity too. This is why, in order not to fall prey to anarchy and disorientation, man has to climb over that “abyss”, surpass himself and become his own “god”, his own source of meaning, the *Übermensch*. As, according to Nietzsche, god is nothing but a “speculation” and man’s “creative will” is not powerful enough to actually create a god man has to discard all gods and create himself anew instead¹⁰. Thus, anyone who is able to become his or her own creator by means of sheer will power or “will to power”, which Nietzsche believed to be the main driving force of our psyche, will, in a sense, replace god. But how could one surpass oneself and thereby give birth to a new self?

⁸ See Hans-Martin Schönherr-Mann’s comment in *Friedrich Nietzsche* (80): ‘So fern wie der Mensch dem Affen ist, soweit weg befindet sich der *Übermensch* vom Menschen.’

⁹ See *Zarathustra*’s Prologue, part 4

¹⁰ See *Zarathustra*, part 2, 24, “In the Happy Isles”: ‘Once did people say God, when they looked out upon distant seas; now, however, have I taught you to say, Superman. God is a conjecture: but I do not wish your conjecturing to reach beyond your creating will. Could ye CREATE a God? / Then, I pray you, be silent about all Gods! But ye could well create the Superman.’

Above all Nietzsche believed that we have to accept the “death” of god and the non-existence of any ‘metaphysical comfort’ and learn to live without any ‘consolation’ or ‘hope’ while still managing not to reject the world but rather to ‘appreciate the worth of life’ as such¹¹. The Superman is focused on this earth and this earthly life exclusively. As the worship of vitality (replacing the Christian worship of pain) is his highest virtue he condemns everyone who is still promising people ‘supernatural rewards’ calling them ‘poisoners’ and ‘spurners of life’¹². Since there is no supernatural consolation we have to learn not merely to *accept* our fate but the true Superman would *love* his fate with all its positive and negative aspects. As Nietzsche puts it in *Ecce Homo* (section 10 “Why I am So Wise”):

My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be other than it is, not in the future, not in the past, not in all eternity. Not merely to endure that which happens of necessity, still less to dissemble it – all idealism is untruthfulness in the face of necessity – but to love it.

Given that (at the latest) from 1902 onwards Yeats, according to his own account, was reading Nietzsche – that ‘strong enchanter’ – so much that he was hurting his eyes¹³, it becomes apparent that his above comment on Synge (written in 1910) has a strong Nietzschean subtext. Thus, he actually casts Synge as a Superman who possessing both *amor fati* or ‘an acceptance of what life brings’ as well as ‘creative joy’, that is, life-affirming qualities, is able to ‘laugh aloud and mock, in the terror or the sweetness of our exaltation, at death and oblivion’.

Indeed, both the concept of *amor fati* and that of the Superman are, with some alterations, very prominent in Yeats’s work. However, since Yeats, as opposed to Nietzsche, was never an atheist – even though he is very careful not to talk of “god” in *A Vision* – his version of the Superman is a spiritual one. So while identification with the anti-self or mask is also a way of overcoming and surpassing oneself it is not

¹¹ See Schönherr-Mann’s comment on the Superman (79): ‘Nietzsche oder sein Zarathustra weisen daher den Menschen den Weg aus der Sackgasse der Gattung Mensch. Letztlich braucht es dazu einen Menschen, der in der Lage ist ohne metaphysischen Komfort, ohne Gott, ohne Trost, ohne Hoffnung zu leben und der die Welt nicht ablehnt, der vielmehr die Werthhaftigkeit des Lebens begreift.’

¹² My translation. See Nietzsche *Zarathustra* 14 in Schönherr-Mann 81: ‘Ich beschwöre euch, meine Brüder, *bleibt der Erde treu* und glaubt denen nicht, welche euch von überirdischen Hoffnungen reden! Giftmischer sind es, ob sie es wissen oder nicht. / Verächter des Lebens sind es [...]’

¹³ See Yeats’s letter to Lady Gregory quoted in Ellmann *ID* 92: ‘Dear friend, I have written to you little and badly of late I am afraid, for the truth is you have a rival in Nietzsche, that strong enchanter. I have read him so much that I have made my eyes bad again. [...]’

necessarily a concept that is designed to substitute a belief in the metaphysical altogether. For after all, according to Yeats, the heroic state of the mask or anti-self is what helps us to get into contact with the *Spiritus Mundi* – definitely a metaphysical concept. Moreover, the poet believed that a spirit whose essence is the exact opposite of our own, may become our mask or ‘daimon’ – Yeats’s own (with whom he communicated via automatic writing) being called Leo Africanus.

In any case the theme of self-engenderment, being a decisive part of the concept of the Superman, never ceased to fascinate Yeats who would continue all his life to go looking for the face he had before the world was made wishing he could be ‘self-born, born anew’ (“Stream and Sun at Glendalough” 15).

Nevertheless, even though the concept of the Superman is an essentially atheist one while the concept of the mask is a spiritual one they both serve a similar purpose which is on the one hand to transcend the self and thereby auto-create a new self and, on the other hand, to identify with death in an effort to overcome the threat of death. While *amor fati* is the brainchild of an atheist and *tragic joy* that of a spiritualist, they are both targeted at the sublimation of death and destruction. Thus, both terms describe an attitude based on the conversion of ‘affects from defeat and terror to freedom and joy’ (Ramazani 164). By learning to love our fate we ‘learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things’ so that one day we will hopefully be ‘only a Yes-sayer’ who no longer ‘wage[s] war against what is ugly’ (Nietzsche “Why I am So Wise” in *Ecce Homo* section 10). Indeed, if we learn to say “yes” to death, destruction and all things unpleasant we will one day arrive at that great joy which comes from having transcended all fear, hatred and suffering. Thus, according to Nietzsche joy and laughter are based on the capacity for great suffering and ‘he [i.e. man] alone suffers so deeply that he *had* to invent laughter’ (*The Will to Power* 30) in order to overcome this suffering.

Nietzsche irrevocably marries pleasure to pain in the same vein when writing in *The Birth of Tragedy* about the ‘Dionysian celebrants’ arguing that ‘[f]rom the most sublime joy echoes the cry of horror or the longingly plaintive lament over an irreparable loss’ (ibid. part 2). Thus, in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche argues that when watching tragedy we are actually happy about the destruction of the ‘hero, highest manifestation of the will’ as he impersonates the ‘principium individuationis’

(principle of individuation) and his defeat reminds us of the fact that life goes on without the individual who is but 'an illusion' and that 'the eternal life of the will is not disturbed by his destruction'. In other words, the 'metaphysical joy in the tragic' that Nietzsche asserts is in fact the result of Dionysian victory over Apollonian individuality, an affirmation that there is a kind of indestructible collective "will to life" that goes beyond the individual's "will to live". Therefore the spectators' 'joy in the destruction of the individual' is actually an affirmation of the eternal energy inherent in the individual that, obeying the law of conservation of energy, survives his or her destruction. As Nietzsche puts it himself: 'the eternal phenomenon of the Dionysian art [...] brings into expression [...] the eternal life beyond all appearances and in spite of all destruction'. (*The Birth of Tragedy* part 16)

It is important to note that this "eternal life" is that of a purely abstract a-spiritual never-ending energy which, based on the assumption that there is infinite time yet a finite number of possible events, is bound sooner or later to reproduce exactly the same events in a cycle of "eternal recurrence". To be able to say "yes" to the eternal recurrence of everything, not only to be ready but to be eager to relive every single moment, the good as well as the bad, requires *amor fati* and constitutes the ultimate proof of the aspiring superman's life-affirming capacity. For in Nietzsche's view eternal recurrence - which he calls 'the heaviest weight' (*The Gay Science* book IV section 341) - is the biggest threat his atheist universe has to offer as it signifies eternal suffering without any hope of redemption.

Just like Nietzsche Yeats believed that tragedy should be a Dionysian affirmation of life in which the principle of individuation, the "Apollonian" subjective impulse, loses against a breaking down of all boundaries between self and Other resulting in the triumph of the objective impulse which emphasises our being part of the collective mass. Thus he writes in his essay *The Tragic Theatre* (1910) that 'tragedy must always be a drowning and breaking of the dykes that separate man from man' (in *E&I* 241).

Moreover, in a successful tragedy the heroes would be personifications of humanity as such so that their fate is not perceived to be that of an individual but rather that of the collective. Consequently, talking about Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* and *Cleopatra*, Yeats remarks that 'their words move us because their sorrow

is not their own at tomb or asp, but for all men's fate' (*Poetry and Tradition in E&I* 255) – in other words, they move us because in Dionysian fashion they break the dykes that separate us from each other.

Similar to Nietzsche Yeats also detects a certain tragic joy in the destruction of the individual on stage as well as in real life. Thus, on the one hand, Yeats repeatedly states in his work that at the moment of their death Shakespeare's characters experience sublime ecstasy brought about by a combination of Dionysian 'self-surrender of sorrow' and Apollonian self-affirmation through 'the last playing and mockery of the victorious sword before the defeated world' (ibid. 254). However, the hero's death is not only a (tragic) joy because it brings together the 'perfection of personality, [and] the perfection of its surrender' (ibid. 255) thereby achieving the much sought-for Yeatsian "Unity of Being" by combining the characteristics of self and anti-self; but there is also a suspicion that 'Hamlet and Lear are gay' ("Lapis Lazuli" 16) at the moment of their destruction because they believe in eternal recurrence and know that '[a]ll things fall and are built again' (35). They know that in this world '[a]ll perform their tragic play' so that each one of us has his part: 'There struts Hamlet, there is Lear, / That's Ophelia, that Cordelia' (9-11). In other words, the metaphor of the Shakespearean plays in "Lapis Lazuli" suggests that by means of eternal recurrence the tragedy of our life has just like *Hamlet* and *King Lear* been enacted a thousand times before by a thousand different people and is again going to be enacted an infinite amount of times by an infinite amount of people. As Zarathustra's animals declare:

Behold, we know what thou teachest: that all things eternally return, and ourselves with them, and that we have already existed times without number, and all things with us. (*Zarathustra* 256)

It is this thought that cheers up the dying Hamlets and Lears of this world for they know that before them '[a]ll men have aimed at, found and lost' (18) and that no matter how much they rage the tragedy of their lives 'wrought to its uttermost [...] cannot grow by an inch or an ounce' (20-24) because it always follows the same script. Thus, while the attitude of Yeats who believed that one 'cannot see reality anywhere but in the soul itself' (*The Irish Dramatic Movement* 170) was completely different to that of the German philosopher who emphatically stressed that one should believe in nothing but the material world the poet still ended up adopting Nietzschean

eternal recurrence as one of his core themes. Time and again Yeats's poetic voices say "yes" to this infinite repetition, for instance, when he declares in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" that he would be 'content to live it all again / And yet again' (17-18) even if life means 'to pitch / Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch, / A blind man battering blind men' (18-20) and far from considering such a prospect horrifying concludes with an invitation to Nietzschean transcendent laughter: 'We must laugh and we must sing / We are blest by everything / Everything we look upon is blest' (30-32).

Such is Yeats's endorsement of the principle of eternal recurrence that he even asserts that death itself is but an invention of mankind when he writes in "Death": 'He knows death to the bone - / Man has created death' (11-12). By this, of course, he does not mean that the act of dying as such does not really exist. Instead, following the theory of eternal recurrence according to which our lives will, one way or another, be lived over and over again into infinity, Yeats suggests that our conception of death as the final curtain after which either nothing or heaven or hell awaits us is incorrect. Indeed, Yeats had very specific ideas about death and dying which he explains in great detail in *A Vision*, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* and various poems such as "Cuchulain Comforted".

Thus, no doubt inspired by the Indian concept of karma popular with spiritists, he believed that while it is the 'toil of the living to free themselves from an endless sequence of objects' it is 'that of the dead to free themselves from an endless sequence of thought' (*PASL* 353-4). Consequently, shortly after death not yet knowing that it is dead the Spirit would enter a phase called "Dreaming Back" where it would be 'compelled to live over and over again the events that had most moved it' (*V* 226) as 'passion desires its own recurrence more than any event' (*PASL* 354).

Then the Spirit would experience 'a reversal of the old life' (*V* 232), virtually living its anti-self's life and thereby getting rid of all its unfulfilled desire until it is 'free from good and evil' (*V* 232). After having passed through this and a couple of other stages we would eventually become part of the undifferentiated crowd of dead souls who 'all must together do' ("Cuchulain Comforted" 17) before eventually being reborn as a different personality having moved over one place in the Great Wheel of 28 incarnations at whose extreme points can be found superhuman and, therefore,

non-incarnated extreme objectivity and subjectivity. In short, death is in so far a human invention as the Wheel of incarnations on the whole is assumed to last for about 2000 years so that the spirit obviously spends a great deal more time being dead than being alive. Hence, paradoxically, death is not only a huge part of life but by far the bigger one.

CHAPTER 1.2: OSCAR WILDE

As Wilde is best known for his social comedies that have become classics as well as for his only novel *Dorian Gray* (also known as the only French novel written in the English language) it is often overlooked that he also wrote a considerable number of critical prose works on aesthetics, arts and philosophy, including the essayistic dialogues *The Critic as Artist* and *The Decay of Lying*. Moreover, he even wrote a piece of political agitation entitled *The Soul of Man under Socialism* in which he suggests that non-authoritarian socialism, featuring the abolition of private property, would help to liberate mankind by bringing about the ‘true Individualism’. All of these writings quite explicitly explain Wilde’s idea of identity in general and ideal personality in particular.

In the following I would like to investigate in how far Wilde’s ideas, particularly as expressed in the above-mentioned works, correspond with or respond to some of Yeats’s core concepts and preoccupations as outlined in the first part of this chapter.

1.2.1. The anti-self: ‘The quarrel with ourselves’

As mentioned before, throughout his youth and up until middle age, Yeats struggled immensely to come to terms with what he perceived to be his timid personality as well as the discrepancies between his creative and his ‘real’ day-to-day life. Disappointed by conventional religion yet of a deeply spiritual disposition he would become a highly dedicated adept of occultism, spiritualism and magical practice finding within the Order of the Golden Dawn a place where he could indulge in his need of hierarchy and ritual as well as explore and further develop a world of esoteric symbolism that would saturate large parts of his literary work. With the help of his

much younger wife Georgie Hyde-Lees, who purportedly had a talent for “automatic writing”, he would eventually create his personal book of spiritual revelation *A Vision*, establishing as a middle-aged man his own detailed idiosyncratic syncretistic cosmogony in which the concept of the anti-self and the mask play a crucial part.

Paradoxically Yeats ultimately believed that the contradictions within his own psyche were one of his main sources of inspiration, famously stating that while ‘the quarrel with others’ usually only results in mere ‘rhetoric’ it is out of ‘the quarrel with ourselves’ that poetry springs (*PASL* 331).

Similar to Yeats Wilde was fascinated by the often contradictory aspects of the human - including his own - psyche and even went so far as to elevate self-contradiction and inconsistency to a preferred way of being. Thus, in his essay *The Relation of Dress to Art* Wilde emblematically declares that he had always believed that consistency was ‘the last refuge of the unimaginative’ (7); similarly in *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young* Wilde states that while the well-bred contradict other people ‘[t]he wise contradict themselves’.

In fact, Wilde believed that ‘[t]he only thing [...] one really knows about human nature is that it changes’ and that consequently ‘[t]he systems that fail are those that rely on the permanency of human nature, and not on its growth and development’ (*Soul of Man* 155). Whether in civilian or in political life it is therefore crucial not to stick stubbornly to one’s (former) opinions but to be open to new ideas and approaches. Hence, discussing the nature of the ‘true critic’, a kind of ego-ideal, in *The Critic as Artist* Wilde, in the guise of ‘Gilbert’, claims that the true critic ‘will not consent to be the slave of his own opinions’ and that it is ‘through constant change alone’ that he will find his ‘true unity’ (*CAA* 264). Rather provocatively Gilbert adds that ‘[t]he essence of thought, as the essence of life, is growth’ and that consequently ‘[w]hat people call insincerity is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities’ (*ibid.*). Such multiplication, Wilde seems to suggest, is always desirable.

Indeed, just like Yeats’s ‘self’ that thrives on the tension of its striving for its ‘anti-self’ Wilde’s ideal personality is heterogeneous – the result of a ‘mosaic’ rather than a ‘melting pot’ of characteristics. This also explains why, according to Wilde, ‘We are never more true to ourselves than when we are inconsistent’ (*CAA* 263).

What Wilde calls ‘inconsistency’ in this context in fact correlates with the idea of the ‘mask’ being a very prominent feature of his own as well as Yeats’s work, where, as I have mentioned before, it is largely synonymous with the ‘anti-self’. Talking about the ‘mask’, Yeats states that by ‘[assuming] the mask of some other life [...] one loses the infinite pain of self-realisation’ (*PASL* 334) while Wilde suggests that ‘[m]an is least himself when he talks in his own person’ so that he will only ‘tell you the truth’ if you ‘give him a mask’ (*CAA* 261). Thus, both imply that the putting on of a metaphorical ‘mask’ relieves us as it liberates us from the perceived need to conform to one specific socially acceptable version of our personality.

Similarly, again using the metaphor of liberating disguise in *The Critic as Artist* Gilbert/Wilde argues that in order ‘[t]o arrive at what one really believes, one must speak through lips different from one’s own’ or, in other words, ‘[t]o know the truth one must imagine myriads of falsehoods’, always assuming that the ‘truth’ in the realm of art is ‘one’s last mood’ (*CAA* 263).

In other words, to arrive at any kind of ‘truth’ about oneself, one’s emotions and one’s perception of the objective world is exceedingly difficult and the results will always be subjective in any case. Yeats agrees with this notion when he writes in an epilogue to his plays *The Island of Statues* and *The Seeker* that it is futile to ‘hunger fiercely after truth’ since ‘there is no truth / Saving in thine own heart’ (qtd. in *M&M* 36-38). In Wilde’s social comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest* the character Algernon Moncrieff expresses the same basic idea somewhat more prosaically when he says:

The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility. (Act 1)

As if to prove this point Wilde cast two pieces of critical prose, namely *The Decay of Lying* as well as *The Critic as Artist*, in dialogue form giving an - albeit not entirely - equal voice to both thesis and anti-thesis in a manner that resembles the discourse of self and anti-self in some of Yeats’s work, most notably in his poem “A Dialogue of Self and Soul”.

To sum up at this point, it can be said that both writers shared a tremendous disdain for the common notions of ‘truth’ and ‘sincerity’ or, in Wildean terms, ‘truth’ and ‘earnestness’ or ‘consistency’. Thus, Yeats believes that ‘our culture with its

doctrine of sincerity and self-realisation [has] made us gentle and passive' (*PASL* 333) and that we should instead actively fashion ourselves into Nietzschean Supermen given that '[s]eeming that goes on for a lifetime is no different from reality' (*The Player Queen*). Both Wilde and Yeats hold 'truth' to be subjective and they agree that the common idea of 'self-realisation' is problematic and even potentially painful as it poses the difficult question which of our many facets we should realise, eclipsing the possibility for a pluri-vocal creative "democratic" self by pinning us down to a mono-vocal "fascist" self. Given the assumption that all human identity is per se 'pluri-vocal' it makes perfect sense for Wilde to state that '[o]nly the shallow know themselves' (*Phrases and Philosophies*) since presumably only they would display fewer 'layers' of identity and/or only they would be too dumb to be aware of the existence of more than one layer.

Indeed, practically all of Wilde's more sophisticated characters, regardless of whether they act in a predominately "good" or "bad" way, show signs of a schism within themselves. Generally positioned on the positive side of the spectrum of Wildean characters is the dandy who in his various male and female guises is a staple character of the writer's literary universe. While almost all of Wilde's characters experience a schism within themselves, the dandy is distinguished by his or her intense awareness of embodying at least two people at the same time, of being the constant subject as well as object of his or her thoughts and emotions. This partly explains the dandy's intense narcissist nature culminating in the dandy's comical yet sincerely felt love for him/herself delightfully expressed by the character Lord Goring who, in *An Ideal Husband*, famously remarks that '[t]o love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance' (Act 3).

Apart from this primary split within him/herself the dandy is likewise characterised by his/her intense awareness of the split generated by social expectations, that is, the difference between the 'private' persona and the 'public' persona s/he is expected to generate or the 'mask' s/he is expected to wear. What moreover distinguishes the dandy from other characters in this context is that his/her public persona or mask in fact corresponds perfectly with his/her psychological reality. In other words, the dandy's seemingly overwhelmingly artificial pose effectively suits him/her best and is therefore quite effortless and 'natural' to him. Paradoxically, to affect any pose commonly deemed more 'natural' would demand an

enormous effort of him/her. After all, to be natural, as Mrs Cheveley very aptly puts it in *An Ideal Husband*, is 'such a very difficult pose to keep up'.

In general, the schism between 'real' and 'ideal' self corresponding to Yeats's strife of the imperfect, heterogeneous 'self' for unification with the ideal 'anti-self', as well as confusion over what is 'real' and what is 'ideal' in the first place, are recurring themes in most of Wilde's work, notably in *An Ideal Husband*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Dorian Gray*. Thus, in *An Ideal Husband* the seemingly ideal husband turns out to be far from ideal as it transpires that he owes his stellar political career to an act of corruption committed in his youth. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* the 'bunburying' Algernon pretends to be an ideal philanthropist, supposedly looking after his sick friend 'Bunbury' in the countryside, when in reality he is only looking for his own pleasure (in the shape of Ms Cecily Cardew, his best friend Jack's ward). Both he and his friend Jack carry two different names and identities, one in town and one in the countryside, while both endeavour to be baptized 'Earnest' in order to fulfil their beloveds' ideal, which is only to marry a man called Earnest (the irony being that unknowingly the adopted Jack is in fact called Earnest by birth).

On a more sinister note, Dorian Gray in order to preserve his ideal outward beauty grows less than ideal inwardly, the 'ugliness' of his real soul showing only on his 'double', the portrait, which becomes an emblem of the potential dangers of a Faustian division of the self, conscience or the 'soul' from the body. In a reversal of the Yeatsian dynamics of the imperfect self aspiring to merge with the ideal anti-self, Dorian transforms into a negative anti-self of his former 'ideal' self.

Strikingly in all of these cases there is no static monolithic self. Instead characters keep fluctuating between different versions of themselves, in particular in an attempt to emulate their ideal anti-self or, in the case of Dorian and the ideal husband Sir Robert Chiltern, in order to preserve the external image of their ideal former selves which have become the opposite of their new corrupt selves.

In other words, the motif of the double as well as the dynamics of psychological change and inconstancy are integral parts of both Wilde's and Yeats's poetic universe founded not only, as mentioned before, on a new heterogeneous and carnivalesque conception of personality but also on a new conception of ideal personality. Thus, in an intellectual shift from passive acceptance of supposed fate to

active self-creation neither of the writers cares for who we supposedly are but only for who we might imagine ourselves to be and may potentially become. Thus, by virtue of performance and repetition the affected self becomes the real self – ‘reality’ and ‘performance’ become one and the same; as a character in Yeats’s play *The Player Queen* affirms: ‘To be great we must seem so. Seeming that goes on for a lifetime is no different from reality’.

Within the context of this discourse on ‘essence and appearance’ or ‘nature versus nurture’ Wilde, on the other hand, argues that ‘we are all made out of the same stuff’ (*The Decay of Lying* 169) anyway so that we differ ‘purely in accidentals’ such as our consciously created or chosen ‘dress, manner, tone of voice, religious opinions, personal appearance, tricks of habit’ (ibid. 170). Thus, Wilde’s notion of identity is a very modern one suggesting that from a cultural point of view we are basically blank canvases that specific social influences have left their mark on so that what we believe distinguishes us, such as our ‘religious opinions’, far from being personal, inherent and constant are as interchangeable and about as significant as our ‘dress’ (which is by no means demeaning towards religion as Wilde was an avid dress reformer believing that dress was exceedingly important).

To sum up, in Wilde’s view we are ultimately all made out of ‘that dreadful universal thing called human nature’ so that ‘what is interesting about people in good society [...] is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that lies behind the mask’ (ibid. 169). In quite a Yeatsian turn of thought Wilde further argues that ‘[i]n Falstaff there is something of Hamlet, in Hamlet there is not a little of Falstaff’ (ibid.) reminding us of Yeats’s dialectic conception of personality and history featuring the essential unity of opposites, of self and anti-self as well as the inter-dependence of alternating interlocking ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ gyres constituting antithetical historical eras.

Having said that, it is remarkable that at least at some point in their respective careers Wilde and Yeats came up with a similar ideal of (artistic) personality, advocating a personality whose ideas and actions are not mere - positive or negative – counter reactions towards the ideas and actions of others.

Thus, in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* Yeats explains that whenever he has a conversation with someone he gets irritated with himself since everything he says

appears to him to be but an excessively negative or positive reaction to his interlocutor's opinions and not what he truly believes in. Hence on the negative side he believes to be prone to overstating things out of 'hostility' while on the positive side 'all [his] natural thoughts' tend to be 'drowned by an undisciplined sympathy'¹⁴. In either case he feels as if he had not done justice to himself. Hence whenever he is on his own writing he must assure that his art is not a (knee-jerk) reaction to other people's differing thoughts and feelings: 'now there must be no reaction, action only, and the world must move my heart but to the heart's discovery of itself'. When his Muse arrives Yeats eventually finds himself in a pleasant state in which he feels brave, confident and at ease: 'I begin to dream of eyelids that do not quiver before the bayonet: all my thoughts have ease and joy, I am all virtue and confidence'. (PASL 325)

Paradoxically, however, Yeats states that this ease and joy, this 'heroic condition' he enters upon when inspired is far from being the consequence of his finally being "himself". On the contrary, it is because he is in tune with his anti-self - which in turn is in tune with the *Anima Mundi*, storehouse of images of mankind's collective unconscious, source of artistic creation - that he feels so relieved. In other words, contrary to popular belief the ideal *artistic* personality at any rate is imagined to be the one that is *least* itself and not the one that realizes itself.

In his essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* Wilde takes Yeats's argument against "knee-jerk art", applying it, as Yeats also did, to life as a whole asserting that 'the note of the perfect personality is not rebellion but peace'. Thus, just like the Yeatsian artist when kissed by the Muse Wilde's 'perfect man' featuring 'the true personality of man' will never be motivated by conflict as he 'will not be at discord'. For contrary to most personalities, such as Byron and Shelley, who have been 'obliged to be rebels' given the 'stupidity, [...] hypocrisy, and Philistinism' of (English) society, the perfect man will develop 'under perfect conditions' (134). These will be created, among other things, by the abolition of 'personal property', since the important thing is 'to be' and not 'to have' (132). As a consequence of the

¹⁴ See PASL 325: *Anima Hominis I*: 'When I come home after meeting men who are strange to me, and sometimes even after talking to women, I go over all I have said in gloom and disappointment. Perhaps I have overstated everything from a desire to vex or startle, from hostility that is but fear; or all my natural thoughts have been drowned by an undisciplined sympathy.'

abolition of 'private property' '[n]obody will waste his life in accumulating things and the symbols for things'. Instead people shall 'live'¹⁵ and not merely 'exist' (133) as 'the slavery of the machine' putting an end to 'human slavery' (141) will hopefully ensure that everyone and not only the select few will be able to lead a life suited to their inclinations and talent.

Once, Wilde predicts, such perfect conditions have - with or without the assistance of Christianity - been established the 'true personality of man' will be able to unfold 'flower-like' (134) and 'Individualism' will spread in the world. The paradisiacal circumstances of Wilde's utopian society will be characterised by anti-materialism, tolerance and peace. Consequently, the perfect man will no longer have to prove or defend his intellectual faculties and material riches. Moreover he will love and accept what is different overcoming the prevalent dualist notion of 'the Other' as a thing unacceptable in its difference and therefore in need of assimilation. In Wilde's own words:

It will be a marvellous thing - the true personality of man - when we see it. It will grow naturally and simply, flower like, or as a tree grows. It will not be at discord. It will never argue or dispute. It will not prove things. It will know everything. And yet it will not busy itself about knowledge. It will have wisdom. Its value will not be measured by material things. It will have nothing. And yet it will have everything, and whatever one takes from it, it will still have, so rich will it be. It will not be always meddling with others, or asking them to be like itself. It will love them because they will be different. And yet while it will not meddle with others it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is. The personality of man will be very wonderful. It will be as wonderful as the personality of a child. (*SOM* 134)

This reads as an almost hippiesque vision of the return to a "childlike" state of nature, love and peace. In order to find our true 'Individualism', Wilde suggests, we have to free ourselves from the arbitrary shackles society has imposed on us - those 'accidentals' of religious opinion, dress and the like - and return to an unprejudiced child-like perspective, attaining a pre-cultural 'flower-like' state. A child, Wilde seems to imply, having a different level of consciousness than an adult exists in a state of being characterised by intuitive 'wisdom', instead of consciously acquired

¹⁵ See *SOM* 133: 'With the abolition of private property, then, we shall have true, beautiful, healthy Individualism. Nobody will waste his life in accumulating things and the symbols for things. One will live. To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.'

knowledge. In keeping with this idea Wilde argues that 'Be Thyself' should be the motto of the 'new world' in contrast to the Socratic 'Know Thyself' of the 'antique world' (SOM 135). The child, embodying the 'perfect man' simply is in a live-and-let-live-way, loving other people's difference instead of constantly fighting it by 'meddling' with them. 'Having nothing', thus unburdened by the responsibilities of property whose 'duties make it unbearable' (ibid. 130) the anti-materialist perfect personality will not be inclined to '[confuse] a man with what he possesses' (ibid. 132). Man's perfection does not lie in 'accumulating or possessing [external] things' but it lies within himself, in the development and growth of his personality – as Wilde puts it: 'Your perfection is inside of you' (ibid. 135).

To conclude, Wilde is saying that ideally our personality should not be merely a reaction to or consequence of external factors such as our culture or wealth, instead we should discover and develop who we are independent of such factors. In Yeatsian terms this means that when 'looking for the face I had before the world was made' ("Before the World was made" 7-8) 'there must be no reaction, action only, and the world must move my heart but to the heart's discovery of itself' (PASL 325).

1.2.2. Nietzschean Echoes: The Dandy as Superman

As explained in the first part of this chapter Nietzsche, whom Yeats in a letter to his friend and patron Lady Gregory called 'that strong enchanter' who 'completes Blake and has the same roots'¹⁶, had an immense influence on Yeats. In particular the Nietzschean concepts of the superhuman 'Superman', 'eternal recurrence' as well as 'amor fati' inspired and contributed to Yeats's philosophy of self and anti-self or mask, his cyclical view of life and history as well as his idea of 'tragic joy'.

While in general Wildean characters are more interested in realizing themselves than in transcending themselves it is true that considering the dandy's detached attitude towards life and other people there is an element of the Superman about him. This is particularly evident in the attitude of Lord Henry Wotton and Dorian Gray, two Wildean dandies featured in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. With their irresponsible hedonistic behaviour and indifference towards other people's feelings both characters mar the lives of everyone who is intimately acquainted with them. By living in accordance with Lord Henry's motto that 'to become the spectator of one's own life

¹⁶ See Yeats's letter to Lady Gregory quoted in Ellmann *ID* 92.

[...] is to escape the suffering of life' (128) and by treating all of life as if it was only a play that should not be taken too seriously, the two dandies may have become Supermen yet Wilde definitely does not cast them as role models.

Thus, by identifying with the death drive and choosing to remain forever young while his portrait grows old and ugly in his stead, Dorian literally becomes a spectator of his own (secret) life; as it says in the novel: 'This portrait would be to him the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul' (124). Yet similar to having been transformed into a vampire Dorian may live forever but will never be truly alive again. In addition to the gruesome character of some of Dorian's deeds, his horrible death suggests that ultimately Wilde believed such identification with the death drive to be neither beneficial nor advisable (or at least he believed it to be unadvisable to suggest such a thing to his audience).

This is in stark contrast with Nietzsche's (and Yeats's) view of things. Thus, at the end of the day the Wildean dandy's Superman-like indifference or detachment is really an expression of his quite un-Nietzschean weakness since it is not born out of the strength of character needed to say 'yes' to everything, including the horrors of an atheist eternal recurrence, but it is in fact the result of fear of pain and an attempt to 'escape the suffering of life'. However, from a positive point of view it could be argued that the detached dandy, just like the Wildean 'Individualist' and Yeats the writer, is merely trying to be active rather than passively re-active, the master of his fate rather than its prey. For the imaginative vantage point the dandy adopts looking down on his own experience enables him to create the illusion that he is the puppet player of his own life, the one pulling the strings of fate instead of being the puppet that others play upon. Yet, as the story of Dorian Gray and his portrait shows such a self-created schism which turns oneself into the object as well as the subject of one's experience may have fatal consequences both for oneself and for others – as the tragic tale of Sibyl Vane, Dorian Gray's first love, shows.

Indeed Sibyl Vane's fate illustrates that in the end Dorian, who has deliberately become the spectator of his own life, is no longer able to deal with real people and emotions given that he leaves Sibyl when as a consequence of having fallen in love for real she no longer confuses the action on stage with real life and, therefore, loses her formerly exceptional acting skills. Dorian's attitude is ultimately destructive since

it literally only allows for other people to be puppets in a play so that Sibyl, who has no more life either on or off stage, commits suicide thereby returning to the realm of inanimate objects she has come from; as Lord Henry Wotton cold-bloodedly explains to Dorian in a curious attempt at consolation: 'The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died' (120).

On the whole Yeats casts Superman-like detachment in a much more favourable light than Wilde does. Those who are dignified players on the stage of life, "Lapis Lazuli" suggests, remain calm even in the face of their potentially imminent death so that when 'the great stage curtain [is] about to drop' (13) they '[d]o not break up their lines to weep' (15) knowing that eternal recurrence will see to it that '[a]ll things fall and are built again / And those that build them again are gay' (35-36). As opposed to Wilde who does not glorify Dorian's choice to identify with death (via the inanimate portrait) and remain forever young Yeats implicitly endorses identification with death, the ultimate anti-self, based on the Nietzschean notion that 'only the greatest obstacle that can be contemplated without despair rouses the will to full intensity' (*Autobiography* 132).

In other words, according to Yeats emotional detachment generating tragic joy is by no means the result of fear and weakness but a sign of highly desirable mental strength. Indeed, this 'superhuman' detachment from one's own as well as other's destiny brings us on a level with literally 'superhuman', namely spiritual, beings which makes it all the more desirable in Yeats's view. Invoking the image of 'superhuman' (6) immortal 'horsemen' (5) at the beginning of the poem "Under Ben Bulbin" Yeats's rhetorical address to them in his own epitaph at the end of the poem can be read as the poet's note to himself to keep up the superhumanly dispassionate and detached attitude he aspires for: 'Cast a cold eye / On life, on death. / Horseman, pass by!' (canto VI 8-10).

Thus, while Dorian Gray's negatively connoted detachment of his body from his soul or conscience is a consequence of his fear of physical deterioration and dying Yeats endorses such imaginative detachment determined to overcome such fear. Yeats's thinking is grounded in his declared belief that even though our 'heart [...] [is] fastened to a dying animal' (canto III 5-6) our creative energy will nevertheless triumph over our ageing bodies if only our 'Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder

sing / For every tatter in its mortal dress' ("Sailing to Byzantium" canto II 3-4). Death, Yeats argues, is after all a human invention: 'Man has created death' ("Death" 12), for 'In so far [...] as Time and Space are deduced from our sense-data we are the creators of Time and Space' (W.B Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: *Their Correspondance* 82 qtd. in *Poems* 640).

While this comment looks rather solipsistic at first glance it actually goes to show that Yeats's belief in reincarnation was not only based on spiritualist insights (which Yeats would in all likelihood have considered to be 'scientific') but apparently also on fairly modern scientific ideas of relativity. Thus, the above statement seems to allude to the interconnectedness of time and space and the insight that observing an incident (or experiment) may affect its outcome. It also poses the ancient philosophical question whether anything would exist if we weren't here to observe it – certainly not the way we perceive it to be, Yeats's statement seems to reply.

Indeed the whole idea of the Superman has its roots in the discourse of scientific progress, in particular in evolutionary theory attended by the 'death of God', as endorsed by Nietzsche, and the unprecedented spread of an essentially atheist scientific worldview in the Western hemisphere. Naturally previous generations equally pondered the possibility of transcending the human condition yet such hubris as that of Icarus and Prometheus used to be promptly followed by severe divine punishment. Born into a Darwinist materialist and rather agnostic age that worships the image of beauty more than anything else Dorian, the modern Icarus, remains unpunished by the gods - unless his preternatural beauty as such is interpreted as a subtle kind of divine punishment. Contrary to his mythical counterpart he is even encouraged (by Lord Henry) to "fly too close to the sun", that is, to take full advantage of his beauty and use it as an entrance ticket to as well as a cover for a life of debauchery and hedonistic excess.

In keeping with the dawning age of psychoanalysis the final negative reaction to Dorian's decadent immoral life no longer originates in an external source, such as a god, but has been internalised. Thus, in the end it is Dorian himself who clips his wings when his own bad conscience, incarnate in the diabolic spectacle of his changing portrait, overwhelms him so much that in an attempt to rid himself of this last remaining sign of his humanity he attacks the portrait thereby killing himself.

What Wilde is saying is that like Dorian we may well aspire to become superhuman and one day we might actually achieve to become (near-)immortals like him. However, we should be wary of what we are wishing for, for along the way to superhuman perfection we will inevitably lose our humanity. As the character Mr. Dumby in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (Act 3) remarks: 'In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it. The last is much the worst, the last is a real tragedy!'

Yeats, on the other hand, would by no means have considered it a tragedy to get what he wanted and for a man who suffered for most of his life from chronic indecisiveness with regard to his private life he could show remarkable conviction when it came to certain subjects. One of these subjects was eugenics. As early as autumn 1936 Yeats joined the Eugenics Society and would even flirt dangerously with fascism writing in 1933 the poem "Three songs to the same tune" (later rewritten as "Three marching songs") for the Irish Catholic Fascist movement called the 'Blueshirts'.

However, even before this date the poet was gradually getting more and more convinced that an improved, eventually 'superhuman', humanity under 'the rule of educated and able men'¹⁷ was the way forward and that selective breeding would be conducive to such a goal. This wish was motivated by Yeats's aristocratic-style intellectual elitism going hand in hand with his fear of the proletarian masses, the fear that as described in "The Second Coming" 'mere anarchy is loosed upon the world' (4) given that 'the best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity' (7-8). Systematic breeding, Yeats believed, was an efficient way of restoring the vitality of 'the best'. Appalled by the political and social turmoil of his age Yeats wrote - in quite drastic language - in *On the Boiler* (published posthumously in 1939): 'Since about 1900 the better stocks have not been replacing their numbers, while the stupider and less healthy have been more than replacing

¹⁷ Commenting on his decision to compose 'Three Songs to the Same Tune'/'Three Marching Songs' for the Blueshirts Yeats wrote: 'In politics I have but one passion and one thought, rancour against all who, except under the most dire necessity, disturb public order, a conviction that public order cannot long persist without **the rule of educated and able men**...Some months ago that passion laid hold upon me...While the mood lasted, it seemed that our growing disorder, the fanaticism that inflamed it like some old bullet imbedded in the flesh, was about to turn our noble history into an ignoble farce. For the first time in my life I wanted to write what some crowd in the street might understand and sing' (*The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, 1957, 543; emphasis added).

theirs' (*Explorations* 423). The Swedes, Yeats added, appeared to have found a solution to the 'problem' given that 'in Stockholm all families are small; but the greater the intelligence the larger the family' (424).

As ever Yeats was convinced that the Irish would have a significant part to play in the solution to what he believed to constitute a growing social problem. Ever faithful in the transformational power of the arts he believed in particular that Irish artists by choosing the right style and subject matter for their work would help to create or support the 'right' sort of people and the 'right' sort of society. Thus, in "Under Ben Bulbin", one of his *Last Poems*, Yeats orders the 'Irish poets' to '[s]ing whatever is well made' while to '[s]corn the sort now growing up / All out of shape from toe to top, / Their unremembering heart and heads / Base-born products of base beds' (canto V 1-6). The poets should ignore the contemporary ill-formed philistines and instead 'cast [their] mind[s] on other days' (14), glorifying in their poetry an idealized past feudal society featuring the 'peasantry', 'hard-riding country gentlemen' and 'the holiness of monks' (7-9). In this passage Yeats clearly conflates intellectual and spiritual with physical beauty (or alternatively ugliness) along eugenicist lines suggesting that only if Irish artists follow his advice and do not forget about a (mythical) heroic Irish past will the unique noble identity of the Irish and of Ireland as a whole have any chance of survival and influence: 'Cast your mind on other days / That we in coming days may be / Still the indomitable Irishry [sic]' (canto V 14-16).

CHAPTER 1.3: TRUE LIES

Nietzsche, Yeats and Wilde all share a pronounced disdain of received notions of "reason" and "truth". In particular they criticise the idea that "truth" is automatically morally superior to and therefore to be preferred to so-called "lies". All three authors agree, as would indeed Blake, that "lies", which society usually labels as bad, are by far more creative, more individualist and, therefore, more desirable than the received "truth".

Thus, radically re-evaluating traditional Christian notions of 'good' and 'evil' in *The Proverbs of Hell*, a section of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake

announces that ‘Good is the passive that obeys Reason’ while ‘Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell’. By stating that ‘the lie – and *not* the truth – is divine’ (*Will to Power* qtd. in *Yeats and Nietzsche* 69) Nietzsche, who greatly inspired Yeats, equally relates the divine power of creation to the lie, traditionally bearing negative connotations. The philosopher even goes so far as to claim that ‘Truth [...] is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live’ (ibid. 67). And according to him Truth is characterised by the rather neurotic ‘will to be master over the multiplicity of sensations: to classify phenomena into definite categories’ (*WP* in ibid. 68). While Blake gives new meaning to the notions of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ Nietzsche criticises the popular idea that what is true is also necessarily morally ‘good’ when questioning our belief in the fundamental possibility of acquiring objective knowledge by means of rational reasoning:

trust in reason – why not mistrust? the ‘true world’ is supposed to be the good world – why? appearance, change, contradiction, struggle devalued as immoral; desire for a world in which these things are missing...dialectic a way to virtue (in Plato and Socrates) (*WP* in ibid. 69)

Yeats likewise mistrusted current notions of ‘reason’ yet as mentioned before his dislike expressed itself in radically different ways from that of the atheist philosopher. Thus, Yeats’s life-long passion for occultism and mysticism shows that ‘in an age when science made extravagant claims’ the poet desperately sought ‘to secure proof that experimental science was limited in its results’ and that ‘the current faith in reason and in logic ignored a far more important human faculty, the imagination’ (Ellmann *ID* 3). In a complex way, however, ‘truth’ was always at the heart of the poet’s endeavours. In a 1914 letter to his father Yeats writes:

I think with you that the poet seeks truth, not abstract truth, but a kind of vision of reality which satisfies the whole being. Henry Moore, the seventeenth century Platonist [...], argues from the goodness and omnipotence of God that all our deep desires must be satisfied, and that we should reject a philosophy that does not satisfy them. I think the poet reveals truth by revealing those desires. (qtd. in *ID* 242).

In other words, Yeats argues in this passage that there exists at least an individual kind of cognizable truth referring to the individual’s unique psychological landscape dominated by particular wishes and desires which it is the poet’s duty to reveal and render faithfully. Yeats’s “poetical” truth is therefore a highly individual/personal one

as characterised by him in *The Island of Statues*: ‘There is no truth / saving in thine own heart’.

This, however, does by no means signify that Yeats was not looking for some kind of absolute truth to absolve him from his seemingly credulous yet at the same time sceptical nature. Particularly as he got older he appears to have felt a strong urge to unveil an all-encompassing “objective” system governing reality that would explain to him the world and ‘was die Welt / im Innersten zusammenhält’¹⁸ (Goethe *Faust I* 382-3) for good. The most comprehensive tangible result of this spiritual quest was the poet’s highly idiosyncratic system as laid out in *A Vision*. Nonetheless it remains unclear whether or not Yeats ever really regarded the system presented in his book of revelation as objective truth for, as Hazard Adams points out, ‘*A Vision* is a book of stories presided over by someone who is constantly calling attention to his own act of arrangement and of telling, which is often meditating’ (*The Book of Yeats’s Vision* 149). In other words, particularly in *A Vision* Yeats repeatedly draws attention to the fact that all stories (including his own), whether we believe them to be “true” or not, are necessarily constructs born of our imagination which constantly invents and reassembles ideas and events.

In a letter to Lady Elizabeth Pelham, written a few days before he died, Yeats, no doubt trying to prepare himself for impending death, muses:

When I try to put it all into a phrase I say “Man can embody truth but he cannot know it”. I must embody it in the completion of my life. (qtd. in *ID* 214).

While this comment may express little more than the wishful thinking of a dying man hoping for a sense of sublime completion when ‘heaven [would finally be] blazing into the head’ (“Lapis Lazuli” 19) it definitely refers to one of Yeats’s core beliefs namely the idea that there is a transcendental ‘objective’ realm which in special, particularly in liminal, moments – at the moment of inspiration, trance and death – we may connect to via the anti-self or, as in the case of the making of *A Vision*, via a medium. Ironically, however, according to Yeats’s philosophy this ‘Anima Mundi’ or ‘heaven’ we connect to in such instances constitutes only part of reality and, therefore, only part of a more complex ‘truth’. All history and all individuals as well

¹⁸ ‘That I may know what the world contains / □ In its innermost’ (English translation by Charles T. Brooks, in: <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/14460/pg14460.html>)

as all (artistic) creation is based on the conflict generated by the alternating objective (primary) and subjective (antithetical) impulses between the two gyres of history, man and woman, self and anti-self. In a sense, conflict is equal to the energy flowing between the two poles of a giant transcendental battery that keeps the universe going.

What is relatively innovative about this idea in the context of Western philosophy is that the two oppositional poles do not negate but complement each other. They are complementary opposites not unlike the Chinese concepts of yin and yang. Indeed, Yeats claims that one could not exist without the other: 'Could those two impulses, one as much a part of truth as the other, be reconciled, or if one or the other could prevail, all life would cease' (*Pages from a Diary* 305). In other words, the 'truth' about reality including the nature of history and individuals is imagined as an inclusive concept as opposed to the traditional Western exclusive definition of truth, based on the dualist distinction between "truth" and "lie", "good" and "bad". In Blakean terms the Yeatsian truth therefore qualifies as a so-called 'contrary', 'a third term that opposes a two-term negation' yet 'does not seek to suppress the opposite, but to answer it intelligently' (Adams 12). Yeats himself affirms in *A Vision* that he has been inspired by Blake's philosophy claiming that his mind had been 'full of Blake from boyhood up' and that he could 'distinguish between a contrary and a negation' the former being 'positive' the other not (V 72).

However, while both Blake's and Yeats's philosophical systems transcend dichotomous morally qualifying definitions of good and evil, Yeats personally always remained partial to the subjective, aristocratic impulse and era as opposed to the objective, democratic one. Fearing the arrival of the communist as well as - in the case of the newly founded Irish Free State - Catholic masses as a decisive factor in (world) politics which would further diminish the rule of elites in general and marginalize the Anglo-Irish intelligentsia in particular, Yeats clung to his esoteric system which helped him to half-accept what he did not have the power to change or avert anyway. Additionally, believing in his system had the major advantage of reassuring him that no matter how grim the state of the world might be different - and hopefully better - times lay ahead for:

After an age of necessity, truth, goodness, mechanism, science, democracy, abstraction, peace, comes an age of freedom, fiction, evil, kindred, art, aristocracy, particularity, war. (V 52)

While Yeats would dream of the return of feudal individualist society, no doubt under the rule of the 'better stocks' (*On the Boiler*), Wilde had an entirely different leader of society in mind, one that Yeats might also have approved of.

Thus, just like his fellow Irishman Wilde was appalled by the way in which materialism was gradually taking over Anglophone culture thereby allowing that 'facts' were 'vulgarizing mankind' and 'usurping the domain of Fancy, [having] invaded the kingdom of Romance' (*The Decay of Lying* 176). The origin of such evil influence Wilde located partly in 'the crude commercialism of America', a country whose 'materializing spirit', 'indifference to the poetical side of things', 'lack of imagination and of high unattainable ideals' he believed to be 'due to that country having adopted for its national hero a man [i.e. George Washington], who according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie' (176-7). Such blatant earnestness as well as crude philistine commercialism obviously called for someone to put Utopia back on the map. After all, as Wilde comments in his essay *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, without Utopia on our mental maps there can be no progress:

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias. (141)

Consequently, materialistic lack of imagination within a society condemns it to stagnation since its members will never dare to dream of anything innovative deviating from or transcending the norm of their immediate reality. Thus, in order to keep the dream alive and Utopia on the map Wilde, alias 'Vivian', argues that given that everyone is '[b]ored by the tedious and improving conversation of those who have neither the wit to exaggerate nor the genius to romance' 'some change will take place before this century has drawn to its close' meaning that '[s]ociety sooner or later must return to its lost leader, the cultured and fascinating liar' (*DOL* 177). In this sense, Wilde, just like his younger colleague Yeats, is heralding the dawn of a new era. However, Wilde's equivalent to the "Second Coming" does not involve the gruesome spectacle of a 'rough beast [slouching] towards Bethlehem to be born' (21-22) but is rather based on a *retour en arrière* to pre-Christian antique times. Wilde's Liar may in many respects be the anti-Christ just as much as Yeats's destruction-bringing beast yet the Age of the Liar Wilde summons as opposed to the end of the

Christian “primary” era as perceived by Yeats is not so much characterised by the end of peace and imitations of world chaos than by the resurrection of Hellenistic hedonistic imaginative times.

Thus, Wilde believes the Liar, whom he considers to have been ‘the true founder of social intercourse’, to be of such crucial importance to society at large simply because of his talent for offering refined entertainment:

For the aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure. He is the very basis of civilized society, and without him a dinner party, even at the mansions of the great, is as dull as a lecture at the Royal Society [...].
(DOL 177)

Obviously, “lying” in Wilde’s sense is not the same as “ordinary” lying as practised daily by politicians and other people around the world. “Lying” is not simply the deliberate bending, concealing, inverting or negating of facts but a form of imaginative story-telling that bears no direct relation to external reality, a disinterested creative process whose chief aim is to delight. Bored by ‘the intelligent person whose reminiscences are always based upon memory’ and ‘whose statements are invariably limited by probability’ society is craving, Wilde believes, for ‘its lost leader, the cultured and fascinating liar’. Possessing true creativity he was the first who already at the dawn of humanity ‘without ever having gone out to the rude chase, told the wondering cavemen at sunset how he had [...] slain the Mammoth in single combat’ (DOL 177). In other words, in Wilde’s view, the liar is the world’s first true artist for his story-telling breaks free from the so-called “truth” that is a mere (biased) repetition of facts ‘based upon memory’ and sails for an imaginative Utopia where Art ‘has flowers that no forests know of, birds that no woodland possesses’ (178).

Indeed, Wilde proposes, as his alter-ego Vivian suggests, that ‘Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life’ (179) so that imitative Life is essentially dependent on creative Art for fresh innovative input. Such a radical inversion of the doctrine of Realism stating that ‘Art mirrors Life’ anticipates the modernist preoccupation with the essential – physical as well as psychological - bias of our perception of the world entailing our inability of knowing external “reality” and “truth” as such; as Wilde points out ‘Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life’ (184). However, in this context it is important to bear in mind that while Wilde rejects the “mirror” of Realism, he does not embrace

the “lamp” of Romanticism (see M.H. Abrams) either, stating that ‘[art] is a veil, rather than a mirror’ by which he means that ‘she is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance’ (178). According to Wilde Art thus has a threefold effect on us:

Firstly, she emphasizes the intensely subjective and susceptible nature of our perception. As Wilde points out, Art has a strong influence on our perception:

Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the arts that have influenced us. [...] At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. (184)

Secondly, ‘Life imitates Art’. Wilde regards Art as creative and Life as ‘imitative’ so that a gifted painter, such as Rossetti, will invent a certain type of ideal beauty and subsequently Life (or indeed living people) will try to recreate it: ‘A great artist invents a type and Life tries to copy it’, ‘Life with her keen imitative faculty sets herself to supply the master [i.e. the painter] with models’ (179). In today’s media and commercials-governed star-worshipping society the effects of this imitative impulse are everywhere to be seen in the way fans eagerly copy their favourite celebrities’ attitude and style.

Thirdly, Wilde claims that Art (re)producing ‘the great archetypes of which things that have existence are but unfinished copies’ is more closely connected to an ideal Platonic origin of “reality”, similar to Yeats’s “Anima Mundi”, than everyday “reality” could ever be. In this sense, Art producing ““forms more real than living man”” (178) is indeed, as Lord Henry remarks about the art of acting, ‘so much more real than life’ (see *Dorian Gray* chapter VI).

Within this context the liar represents the archetypal supreme artist functioning at the same time as his own muse by transferring archetypal images from the ideal Platonic realm to the ‘real’ world as we experience it, as well as creator of idiosyncratic Utopias. Via the creative process Wilde’s liar, similar to the Yeatsian artist, has access to a transcendental realm of ideal images (being the Platonic truth or reality) ensuring that his ideas are always fresh as well as intuitively effective.

To repeat, the true Liar as portrayed by Wilde in *The Decay of Lying* is firstly an artist who acts utterly disinterestedly, merely for pleasure and without having his own

or anyone else's potential advantage or instruction in mind: 'The only form of lying that is absolutely beyond reproach is Lying for its own sake, and the highest development of this is [...] Lying in Art.' (190). Secondly, his lies will be of a "non-imitative" nature, meaning that they are not simply exaggerated, inverted or distorted versions of facts but are innovative artistic creations unrelated to reality as we know it. In order to be able to tell such innovative lies the liar, just like any other artist, needs a lot of practice which leads Wilde to assert that there is no "born liar" just as there is no "born poet". In both cases 'practice must precede perfection' given that

Lying and poetry are arts – arts, as Plato saw, not unconnected with each other – and they require the most careful study, the most disinterested devotion. (166)

In other words, lying is not an amateur-sport but a profession.

Talking about lying and the liar it is of interest to consider Wilde's overall attitude towards the truth. What is most remarkable in this context is that the author defines truth in terms of a highly individual concept. Thus, he rather provocatively claims that 'A truth ceases to be true when more than one person believes in it' (*Phrases and Philosophies*), thereby reversing the popular notion, particularly widespread with respect to religions and ideologies, that the more people believe in something the truer and the more valid it must be¹⁹. As a logical consequence Wilde was also adamantly opposed to the idea of martyrdom (even though tragically he would later be turned into and stylize himself as a kind of martyr). Thus, in his short story *The Portrait of Mr W.H.*, in which two men supposedly commit suicide (one of whom later turns out to have died of natural causes) in order to prove the unverifiable theory that Shakespeare originally addressed his sonnets to the (imaginary) boy actor "Willie Hughes", the main character comments in the end:

Martyrdom was to me merely a tragic form of scepticism, an attempt to realize by fire what one had failed to do by faith. No man dies for what he knows to be true. Men die for what they want to be true, for what some terror in their hearts tells them is not true. (ibid. 100)

What this story aims to show is that any attempt at turning a personal truth into a generally accepted truth or dogma is potentially "lethal" since this will freeze the idea

¹⁹ See Zelter 221: 'Commonplaces are constituted by majority views. It is often suggested that these views are true because many people believe in them. Wilde also turns this topos on its head: "A truth ceases to be true when more than one person believes in it." ' [*Phrases and Philosophies*]

as well as its holder at a certain stage of growth leaving no room for further intellectual and imaginative development. In Wilde's opinion what we call the truth far from being universal is anyway relative to historical developments as well as emotions and, consequently, transient; the character Gilbert illustrates this idea when he explains in *The Critic as Artist* what truth really is: 'In matters of religion, it is simply the opinion that has survived. In matters of science, it is the ultimate sensation. In matters of art it is one's last mood' (263).

Being aware of this we should be wary of promoting our personal 'truths' as universal 'facts' for once a majority has accepted it as such the idea in question is no longer intellectually mobile but has been reduced to the state of a fetish that people mindlessly accept and idolise simply because everybody else does; as Wilde states in *A Few Maxims*: 'The English are always degrading truths into facts. When a truth becomes a fact it loses all its intellectual value'. In this context Zelter comments that Wilde disliked 'all those instances conspiring to the stagnation and ossification of creative knowledge: public opinion, verified facts, closed reasonings, proven certainties'. In other words he 'does not value firmly established 'truths' as a source of pleasure but [...] considers them as the graveyard of human understanding'. (Zelter 221)

Thus, in opposition to religions that rely on faith to consolidate spiritual certainties Wilde celebrates creative uncertainty as the basis of intellectual and imaginative vitality even going so far as to argue that 'religions die when they are proved to be true' so that '[s]cience is the record of dead religions' (*Phrases and Philosophies*). Whenever this happens 'fiction', that is, belief, has turned into 'fact', that is, science. Such oscillation between fact and fiction where 'truth and fiction are no longer exclusive opposites' but 'one is continually preceded or succeeded by the other' (226) is, as Zelter points out, characteristic of Wilde's work and, in particular, of *The Portrait of Mr W.H.* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Indeed in *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* purported "facts" are repeatedly being unmasked as fictions: hence firstly the portrait of the boy-actor Willie Hughes turns out to be a forgery, custom-made so as to give more clout to the theory of Shakespeare's boy actor, while secondly it transpires that an ardent supporter of the

theory had not as he had claimed in his suicide note ‘died by [his] own hand for Willie Hughes’ sake’ (98) but had died somewhat more prosaically of consumption.

Given that the title of the story highlights a forged object central to the narrative it is obvious that the nature of fiction(s) is the main theme of *The Portrait of Mr W.H.* However, Wilde’s story does not simply make an ironic comment on the state of the world arguing that people are constantly creating fictions (such as the portrait) which they then present as ‘truths’ in order to prove their own theories.

Clearly Wilde states that this is what is happening. Yet he suggests that we should not fall into a careless habit of categorically condemning those people or their findings. Merely because someone is lying about evidence for his theory or even forges that evidence does not mean that the theory is incorrect or worthless. ‘Logically speaking’, as Zelter points out (quoting Wilde’s story), there is no reason to think so since ‘these fictions [i.e. the forged portrait and the pretended suicide] do not “in the slightest degree invalidate the truth of the theory” itself, nor is it “necessarily true because a man dies for it”’. In short, Wilde’s story implies that: ‘Fictions have the potential to assert truths, and truths are always in danger of being revealed as fictions’ (ibid. 225). However, what Wilde does object to is people’s ‘eagerness to verify’ which, as mentioned above, proves “lethal” given that within the logic of the narrative it ‘even concurs with the death of two characters’ (ibid. 224-225) – one who actually commits suicide in order to prove the theory and one who “pretends” to commit suicide for the same reason.

Wilde does not desire to silence a discourse by finding a conclusion to it, that is, by “finding the truth”. Yet this does not mean that he endorses discourse as a kind of nonsensical Alice-like “Caucus Race” that keeps revolving around itself with no progress or variation at all. As Zelter highlights the fictions within the story ‘stimulate the actual process of research’ leading to an increase of knowledge on the subject in support of the theory so that ultimately Popper-like ‘falsification does not put an end to inquiry but permits new beginnings and further progressions’ (225). Thus, fittingly the story ends with the hint at a new beginning when the narrator who so far has doubted the theory declares that sometimes when looking at the portrait he thinks that ‘there is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare’s Sonnets’. With its rhetorical return to the beginning as well as its constant fluctuation

between refutation and affirmation of the theory the story exhibits a narrative movement akin to that of Yeats's interlocking gyres of history signifying the collapse of (historical) thesis into antithesis, such as the collapse of Christianity at its highest point into (capitalist) materialism.

Considering, moreover, the emphasis Wilde's story puts on the importance of falsification within the evolution of a theory as well as the irony with which it demonstrates that a theory can never be truly verified it is fair to say that, as Zelter argues, Wilde prefigures Popper's philosophy of science which states that 'all scientific knowledge is always hypothetical'²⁰.

In this context the physical portrait as such which lies at the heart of some of Wilde's narratives, most prominently of *The Portrait of Mr W.H.* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, can also be read as a symbolic 'hypothesis' in the sense that it reflects the painter's knowledge of and attitude towards the depicted person at a certain moment in time. The portrait per se does not reflect a 'universal truth' of either the sitter's looks or the painter's attitude towards him or her as they are both subject to change. Thus, using a kind of gothic-style dramatic irony Wilde emphasizes this point when in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for once a portrait actually does adapt to its model's latest character development showing the moral 'ugliness' of the perennially beautiful Dorian's true corrupted character. Likewise learning about Dorian's terrible deeds destroys the painter Basil's idealised 'hypothesis' of Dorian as a pure innocent creature replacing this image by the new 'theory' of a morally deprived Dorian who ought to repent.

In *The Portrait of Mr W.H.* the portrait is a startlingly modern symbol given that within the narrative it is a signifier pointing towards a signified, Mr W.H., who even within the fiction probably never existed. He is merely a manifestation of some characters' desire to prove their hypothesis of Shakespeare's sonnets. In a way this dynamics can be regarded as an almost perfect illustration of Lacanian linguistic theory; thus, firstly, the signifier "Willie Hughes" points towards the portrait, the 'signified', which having been forged ultimately refers to *nothing* (or more

²⁰ My translation. See K. Popper (qtd. in Zelter 225), 'Erkenntnis und Gestaltung der Wirklichkeit,' in: *Auf der Suche nach einer besseren Welt*, 13: 'Die wissenschaftliche Erkenntnis, das wissenschaftliche Wissen ist also immer hypothetisch: Es ist *Vermutungswissen*. Und die Methode der wissenschaftlichen Erkenntnis ist die *kritische Methode*: die Methode der Fehlersuche und der Fehlerelimination [...].'

specifically no one); secondly, the whole process of signification is motivated by a *desire* to pass off the theory of Shakespeare's male muse as the Truth which in its absolute inalterability corresponds to what Lacan describes as the desire for the symbolic 'phallus', the quasi-divine origin and stabilizer of all meaning that all expression constantly points towards but can never reach; finally, on a somewhat different note within the context of the – in Victorian Britain – publicly 'silenced' discourse of homosexual love²¹ (famously described by Lord Alfred Douglas as 'The Love that dare not speak its name') the invention of Mr W.H. within the symbolic realms of writing and painting signifies the male protagonists' desire to express an emotion which lacks signification within the current social climate, an emotion for whose continuous historical existence evidence consequently needs to be created if it is ever to enter public consciousness.

In a similar vein the deformation of the picture of Dorian Gray can also be read as an emblem of how homosexual love (in this case represented by Basil's unspoken adoration of Dorian) in virtue of being forbidden and literally stowed away from the public eye²² is discursively being turned into something as ugly, depraved and monstrous as Dorian's portrait. However, Dorian cannot come 'out of the closet' and show this aspect of his true personality, of which the portrait is a symbol, to the public - a predicament illustrated by the fact that he has to kill the deeply shocked Basil once he has seen the altered portrait; an attempt to purge this hidden part of himself by stabbing the portrait equally fails with fatal consequences demonstrating that Dorian cannot kill this part of himself without killing all of himself.

As Oscar Wilde himself would experience homosexuals - as well as other people deviating from the norm - only have a place in society if they wear a respectable mask and at least partly live a lie.

²¹ Or indeed the silenced discourse of any other form of desire deemed 'illegitimate' during this period.

²² In fact, Basil doesn't want to exhibit the portrait since he is afraid that by looking at it the public would be able to guess at his unusually strong feelings for Dorian – as he says himself: 'I really can't exhibit it. I have put too much of myself into it' (Chapter 1). Dorian, of course, has his own reason for wanting no one to even have a glance at it.

CHAPTER 2: THE IRISH CONTEXT

Introduction

Defining the discourse of the self and the mask as the discourse of the relationship between the “real”, that is, the status quo, and the “ideal”, that is, some kind of Utopia, we can read Yeats’s and Wilde’s work within the context of the creation of Utopias that oppose mainstream culture. Given that the mainstream culture which dominated Ireland and much of the world at the time was British, imperialist, materialist and Christian, Wilde’s and Yeats’s idealisation of Greek and Irish antiquity in their first major successful poems entitled “Ravenna” and “The Wanderings of Oisín” signifies the creation of an Irish-made “mask” or ideal Otherworld characterised by anti-imperialism, anti-materialism and paganism.

Taking the poems “Ravenna” and “The Wanderings of Oisín” as a starting point I will demonstrate how Wilde and Yeats create ideal anti-selves or “masks” for 19th-century British mainstream culture in their work and how these ideals are connected to both authors’ Anglo-Irish background.

CHAPTER 2.1: OTHERWORLDS

‘We walk home. What we know is this□
(and this is all we know): We are now□
And we will always be from now on –□
for all I know we have always been –

exiles in our own country.’ (Eavan Boland, “In Our Own Country”)

At least ever since Richard Ellmann’s biography *Four Dubliners* was published in 1987 Oscar Wilde, William Butler Yeats, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett are regarded as the quartet of (Anglo-)Irish writers of the late Victorian to early-modern period whose work left a particularly lasting impression both on modern Irish literature as well as on the ongoing discourse on Irish identity. Focusing as I do in this thesis on the two earlier writers, Wilde and Yeats, I would argue that Wilde’s legendary flamboyant personality and wit, masterly at display in his social comedies as well as in his life, in particular his two legendary and fatal court cases, are still shining through the ages provoking a considerable amount of hero-worshipping and turning him into a popular icon in particular of the gay community. Yeats’s legacy on the other hand – that of a man whose personality was by no means less original than

that of his colleague and compatriot – has been far more marked by his Anglo-Irish identity than by his personality as such.

Obviously this is due to the fact that Yeats's active involvement in Irish identity-building, nation-building and politics - notably as a widely read poet commenting on the state of Ireland (and the world) and later in life as a Senator of the young Irish Free State, co-designer of the Free State's coins as well as a laureate of the Noble Prize of literature - is far more striking and direct than Wilde's ever was. In particular I would argue that Irish themes and (political) concerns are much more obvious in Yeats's writing than in Wilde's where they tend to be approached in a more indirect way. Even if we leave aside their later careers and consider only the works that brought about their respective break-throughs as writers this difference is already noticeable. Yet in fact both Wilde's poem "Ravenna" as well as Yeats's poem "The Wanderings of Oisín" treat of "national", that is Irish-British, as well as international concerns. In order to identify these tendencies let us now have a close look at both these poems.

The long poem "Ravenna" is the work that Wilde first became known for when he was still an Oxford student as it won him the prestigious Oxford Newdigate Prize. The poem renders Wilde's impressions of the ancient Italian city Ravenna, the prescribed topic of the poem. Rather conveniently the poet had visited this city the year before with an Oxford professor which undoubtedly gave him some competitive advantage over many of the other contesters.

While Wilde's first masterpiece treats of an ancient Italian city reflecting his lifelong passion for southern, in particular classical and Renaissance Italian and Greek culture, Yeats's breakthrough poem "The Wanderings of Oisín" appears in comparison almost ostentatiously Irish in subject matter and location. Written at the high point of Yeats's early 'Celtic Twilight'-period the long poem dives into the mists of Irish culture to bring to life a mythical pre-Christian Celtic society by retelling the adventures of the bard Oisín in the Gaelic Otherworld, a kind of pagan paradise.

By juxtaposing the character of the dying pagan hero Oisín with the well-known figurehead of the Christianisation of Ireland, St. Patrick, to whom Oisín relates (or confesses) the story of his extraordinary life with the goddess Niamh, Yeats evokes a theme which will preoccupy him throughout his entire career: the idea of a

perpetual cycle of diametrically opposed historical impulses in which the death of one era announces and implies the birth of its inversion. Yeats would later treat this theme extensively yet the most epigrammatic poem that was to come of it is without doubt “The Second Coming”.

Implicitly the “Wandering of Oisín”’s ample treatment of pagan mythology and relative neglect of St. Patrick’s opinions (he gets comparatively little talking time) reflects on Yeats’s unwavering preference for what he defined as the pagan individualistic “antithetical” impulse as opposed to the Christian altruistic “primary” one. Moreover it points towards Yeats’s latent reactionary wish to establish a quasi-pagan feudal agricultural society in Ireland thereby also achieving the abolishment of the sectarian divisions whose consequences had already then been plaguing the island for so long.

Yeats’s preference of the pagan over the Christian element is brought home emphatically towards the very end of the poem when Oisín who has been advised by Patrick to repent and pray for his soul tainted by ‘the demon love of its youth’ (216, i.e. his escapades with his faery wife Naomh in the Otherworld) concludes that he would rather roast in hell with his Fenian friends - who at least know how to enjoy themselves - than to be alone in a dull Christian heaven: ‘It were sad to gaze on the blessed and no man I loved of old there; / [...] I will go to Caoilte, and Conan, and Bran, Sceolan, Lomair, / And dwell in the house of the Fenians, be they in flames or at feast’ (Book III 221-224).

Upon first reading “The Wanderings of Oisín” and “Ravenna” alongside each other it may seem as if Wilde was mainly interested in international themes while Yeats appears blatantly interested in national or rather “nationalist” themes – bearing in mind that in 1889 at the time of writing the Irish Free State remained yet to be created. And indeed Yeats’s work does have a national(ist) agenda of sorts. However the Irish “folklore” elements featured in the poem are not merely a gesture towards a great partly eroded cultural heritage that should be revived following the agenda of the “Irish Renaissance” but they also evoke contemporary (inter)national as well as universal issues.

Upon closer inspection Wilde’s poem on an ancient Italian city and Yeats’s poem on Oisín’s adventures on the three islands of the Irish Otherworld share quite a

few concerns. In particular they are both anti-imperialist and thus arguably - at least indirectly - “pro-Irish” in a number of ways.

First of all, the settings of both poems, that is Ravenna and the Irish Otherworld, are being depicted as the homes of anti-mainstream and in the last consequence of anti-imperialist culture.

Thus, Yeats’s hero gets lured away to the Otherworld, a world which by definition exists parallel to and independently of the mainstream world, which in the case of 19th century Ireland was a world dominated by British imperialism. The original Irish name for this place is “Tír na n-óg” which translates as “the Land of the Young”. Indeed, the Irish Otherworld is not comparable to, for instance the Christian heaven, as it is not a place where people go when they die but it is an earthly paradise which even the living may visit under specific circumstances and from which they may return alive, as Oisín’s example shows.

Remarkably, Yeats does not depict the Otherworld as a perfectly serene place which is an attitude illustrated by his own statement that the three offshore islands on which it is based do not represent a shelter from desire but ‘the three incompatible things which man is always seeking – infinite feeling, infinite battle, infinite repose’ (*The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats* Vol. I qtd. in *Poems* 398). Yet in some ways the Otherworld is nevertheless imagined as a kind of Celtic paradise in which the old ways survive throughout the ages and in which the Christian god of suffering has never reigned: ‘But here there is nor law nor rule, / Nor have hands held a weary tool; / And here there is nor Change nor Death, / But only kind and merry breath, / For joy is god and god is joy’ (Book I 282-286). Oisín’s anti-Christian attitude is further emphasized when he tells Patrick that ‘For a hundred years / The gentle Niamh was my wife; / But now two things devour my life; / The things that most of all I hate: / Fasting and prayers’ (ibid. 356-360).

Moreover, the name “the Land of the Young” implies that on the one hand the Otherworld is a realm whose inhabitants are immortal and will never grow old while also suggesting that the land itself remains forever “young” and untouched or “virginal” in the sense that it cannot be reached let alone “colonized” by unwanted intruders. In this sense Yeats evokes the Celtic Otherworld as a kind of stronghold against cultural imperialism in general and Christian imperialism in particular.

Yeats's Tír na n-Óg could ultimately be described as an alternative world of residual Irishness, comparable in the material world to the three Aran islands off the Western coast of Ireland that at the time (and at least linguistically until today) remained relatively unscathed by what Yeats considered to be the destructive globalising influence of materialist, aspiritual, acultural, industrial Britain. In contrast to what to Yeats was dystopian Britain the Otherworld features aspects of Yeats's ideal society. Thus, it is a magical and spiritual place existing independently of time and reigned over by gods and goddesses such as Niamh the daughter of Manannán mac Lir, the Irish god of the seas and guardian of the Otherworld. It is a feudal non-industrial pastoral world in which Niamh features as one of the "queens" of the Otherworld.

In comparison to the mythical Tír na n-Óg the city and landscapes of Ravenna are obviously slightly less ethereal places. However, it can be argued that the kind of pastoral Greek idyll Wilde depicts in some passages of "Ravenna" qualifies as much for a paradisiacal 'Otherworld' and place of return to the pagan world as Yeats's Celtic Otherworld. Clearly the poetic self experiences the Greek forests as an invigorating place of liberation from the usual restraints of the outside world:

O waving trees O forest liberty! / Within your haunts at least a man is free, /
And half forgets the weary world of strife: / The blood flows hotter and a
sense of life / Wakes i' the quickening veins' ("Ravenna" canto V)

Crucially, as in Yeats's poem this paradisiacal light-hearted state is associated with a spiritual return to paganism; thus the line continues 'while once again / The woods are filled with gods we fancied slain' and the speaker subsequently expresses his hope to catch a glimpse of Pan, a Dryad or even 'Queen Dian' herself (ibid.).

As in "The Wanderings of Oisín" where St. Patrick heralds the death of a more heroic pagan world that Oisín would like to return to Christianity is introduced as a disruptive element. Thus, when 'the convent's vesper bell' rings the speaker of "Ravenna" is woken from his 'fond Hellenic dream' only to remark that the time spent in the Greek groves has been so enjoyable it made him completely forget about Christianity and its darker associations: 'Alas! alas! these sweet and honied hours / Had whelmed my heart like some encroaching sea, / And drowned all thoughts of black Gethsemane' (canto V). In short, in the speaker's perception his momentary dream of Hellenic paganism featuring a return to nature is harshly interrupted by the

dark reality of Christianity in whose philosophy man and nature are cruelly divorced from each other and nature archetypically features as the prime site of human betrayal of god: Eve's betrayal takes place in the Garden of Eden, Judas's betrayal in the garden of Gethsemane. Thus, while within the 'haunts' of the 'forest liberty' 'at least a man is free, / And half forgets the weary world of strife' the 'melancholy rise and swell' of church bells recovers 'thoughts of black Gethsemane' (ibid.). Clearly, in Wilde's, as in Yeats's, poem paganism is depicted as producing far more pleasing sensations than Christianity does.

However, the Greek forests are not the only spiritual realm depicted in "Ravenna". In fact, while the woods are a spiritual place in a quasi-religious sense Wilde portrays the city of Ravenna as a spiritual place in a cultural sense. Wilde's Ravenna, just like Yeats's Otherworld, qualifies as an anti-materialist "spiritual" place in so far as Wilde takes great care to emphasize the ancient city's immense cultural heritage, stressing her links with great artists, honouring the 'noble dead' (canto III) buried there and their great artistic achievements. In particular he dwells on the fact that both his literary heroes Dante and Lord Byron worked and lived there. While it is obvious that Wilde admired both these author's work and presumably adored the audaciousness of the libertine and most likely bisexual Lord Byron the two writers are equally linked by the fact that they were both exiles. Thus, Wilde addresses the first poet of the Italian language as the 'mightiest exile' and vividly evokes Dante's painful perpetual exile from his home city of Florence: 'Alas! my Dante! Thou hast known the pain / Of meaner lives, -- the exile's galling chain' (canto III). Wilde likewise glorifies the fate of the exiled Lord Byron who 'dwelt here [i.e. Ravenna] in love and revelry / For two long years' and dared to fight like a 'knight' for Greek liberty eventually falling 'bravely on ensanguined field / Borne like a Spartan back upon his shield' (canto IV).

Thus, indirectly the theme of anti-imperialism which also resonates with Yeats's depiction of the Otherworld is touched upon as Wilde depicts Lord Byron in the pose of an "anti-imperialist freedom fighter" who went so far as to give his life for the struggle to liberate Greece from the imperialist Ottoman Empire.

Wilde concludes that just as Florence finally honoured her exiled son Dante by building a tomb for him (that would remain empty) England will eventually come to

her senses and honour her genius son Byron who went into a sort of self-chosen exile to escape from judgmental English society and would die fighting for Greek liberty from the Ottoman Empire:

And England, too, shall glory in her son,
Her warrior-poet, first in song and fight.
No longer now shall Slander's venom'd spite
Crawl like a snake across his perfect name,
Or mar the lordly scutcheon of his fame. (canto IV)

Both in the case of Dante as well as in the case of Lord Byron Wilde believes that these exiles should be honoured by their city and country of origin. This is a poignant point to be made by the young Wilde who would later himself flee into French exile having been imprisoned and shunned by hypocritical English society due to his Otherness regarding his sexuality, his subversive work and, arguably, even his Irish origins. On a side note, both 'pariahs' Wilde and Lord Byron would eventually get Britain's official recognition for their remarkable artistic achievements, albeit with considerable delay. Thus, Lord Byron who had been shunned mainly for his alleged incestuous relationship with his half-sister finally got a memorial in Westminster Abbey in 1969, 145 years after his death, while the 'sodomite' Wilde got his 95 years after his death in 1995.

Returning to the above-quoted lines from "Ravenna" it can moreover be argued that an implicit comparison is being made between on the one hand mental or moral and on the other hand political liberty. Thus, Wilde hints at English society's violent reaction towards Lord Byron's libertine ways (in particular regarding his alleged incestual relations with his half-sister) when he writes that '[s]lander's venom'd spite / [is] Crawl[ing] like a snake across his perfect name' (canto IV), thereby highlighting the fact that from a moral perspective even in his home country Byron was not a free man which is partly what drove him into exile. Wilde suggests that Byron ultimately transformed into a 'warrior-poet' – incidentally a typically Irish/Gaelic ideal best incorporated by Oisín who was a great warrior AND poet – who fought for Greek freedom from the Ottoman Empire because he himself had experienced the stifling restrictive moral power of a different imperialist power, namely that of England. Indeed English hypocrisy linked to English Philistinism, English society's incapability of appreciating a great work of art independently of its

supposed moral value (or the supposed moral rectitude of its author) was to become a major theme running through both Wilde's work and life, in particular with regard to his fight against the censoring on religious grounds of his play *Salomé* and his legendary court room defence of his only novel *Dorian Gray*.

Obviously in "Ravenna" the debate on hypocrisy and the lack of political and personal freedoms is thematically closely related to the idea of exile. Within this thematic context it is important to recall that Yeats's hero Oisín is likewise an – albeit voluntary – exile from society living in a safe haven shut off from the new "colonising" influence of the Catholic faith represented in the poem by the voice of the world-famous missionary St. Patrick. As regards "Ravenna", it can furthermore be argued that Lord Byron and Dante are not the only 'exiled' characters featured in the poem. Thus, the epiphanic moment of imagined pagan reunion with nature that the speaker experiences in the Greek woods is equally characterised by a sort of momentary mental and physical 'exile' from Christian culture, a blissful oblivion of it only to be revoked by the sound of church bells ringing.

It is hardly a coincidence that two Anglo-Irish authors would show such an interest in exiled characters given that both Yeats and Wilde were living in England for much of their lives where they would culturally never entirely belong while at the same time being outsiders or "exiles" from the Irish Catholic majority culture back home. Indeed, perhaps Wilde's lifelong fascination with and final conversion to Catholicism could not only be regarded as a symptom of a general crisis of faith haunting the Church of England and Ireland at the time or as a cultural phenomenon belonging to the 19th century British homosexual experience but also as an attempt on the part of the son of a spirited Irish nationalist poetess (Lady Wilde publishing under the penname "Speranza") to assert his Otherness and Irishness vis à vis British majority culture.

With regard to the theme of exile in Yeats's "The Wanderings of Oisín" it is noticeable that, whether the poet was aware of it or not, the fact that Oisín returning from the Otherworld on Niamh's magical horse is not allowed to touch the ground as this would instantly kill him by turning him into his true age metaphorically illustrates the alienated state not only of the Anglo-Irish at home but also of Irish exiles abroad who are literally neither "in touch" with their original home culture(s) nor with the

host culture(s) of their adopted homes. Since the Great Famine yet particularly during the twentieth century this condition was to become an integral part of the Irish experience for while '[e]migration in pre-Famine Ireland was an important, even striking feature of that society [...] post-Famine Ireland was an *emigrant society*, i.e. a society constructed around the necessity to remove huge numbers of its population' (Bartlett 289 my italics). Oisín's story shows that even if you live in "paradise" abroad, that is, even if you are content being in exile, there will always be a part of you pulling you back to the home that just like the world of Oisín's lost warrior society does not exist anymore.

Indeed, historically this strong bond with the lost home and the lost home country existed and exists on an intellectual/political as much as on an economic level. Thus, while, as Bartlett points out, most Irish emigrants to the United States never returned home being 'of all European emigrants to the United States [...] the least likely to make the return journey', they nevertheless 'took an abiding interest in Irish politics and developments' (292). Within an economic context this bond materialised in enormous amounts of remittances being sent from emigrants to their families back home as well on a darker note in Irish-American financial support of Irish paramilitary groups, in particular the IRA.²³

As mentioned above, within the context of Irish emigration Oisín's fate is comparable to that of a returning exile. Oisín discovers that in his absence his culture has been "colonized" by a foreign power in this case not the British Empire but the Catholic church symbolized by St. Patrick subduing the pagan customs of Oisín's Fenian companions who have become but a distant memory. This power shift results in his feeling of not "belonging" anymore at his former home. Oisín returning home after 300 years spent in the Otherworld is but a figment of a past version of Ireland, unable and unwilling to get in touch with modern (colonized) Christian Ireland. The fact that Yeats depicts St. Patrick as a new, intrusive element into the 'original' Irish

²³Bartlett 292: '[...] between 1860 and 1880, some \$30 million – two-fifths of which was in the form of prepaid tickets - was sent to relatives in Ireland by Irish emigrants in the United States, and as late as the 1950s emigrant remittances constituted some 2 per cent of southern Ireland's gross national product.'

culture goes to show that Yeats's allegiance with pagan Ireland is at least partly borne out of anti-Christian and, in particular, anti-Catholic feelings. Remarkably, while at this early stage in his career Yeats apparently considered Catholicism a threat to his project of reviving pre-Christian Celtic times Yeats would later consider it more explicitly a threat to his own dwindling Anglo-Irish cultural heritage.

Yet before the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 not only the Anglo-Irish but even the majority of the Catholic Irish at home were living – if for somewhat different reasons - in a constant state of alienation from their country and government which had been ruled over by the British Empire for so many centuries. Oisín's death illustrates the phenomenon that whether as an Anglo-Irishman or as a Catholic Irishman, whether living on “mainland” Britain or in Ireland one would, just like Oisín returning from the Otherworld, never really belong to the hegemonic culture in whose discourse one would be so marginalized, misrepresented and silenced as to be virtually “dead”.

Indeed, most Irish people of Gaelic speaking, Catholic descent were apparently so used to and subdued by this intrinsic alienation from their ancestors' native Irish language and culture as well as “their” (British) government that it is no wonder the forceful suddenness of the 1916 Easter Rising took Yeats so much by surprise, causing him to experience a turmoil of conflicting emotions to which he gave sublime expression in perhaps his most famous poem “Easter, 1916”. Yeats was so shocked by the sublime and meanwhile notorious ‘terrible beauty’ (16) of the uprising and the barbarity of the ensuing execution of most of its leaders by the British state that in a letter to Lady Gregory announcing his plans to write a poem on those executed leaders he states that he ‘had no idea that any public event could so deeply move’ him and that he felt as if ‘all the work of years had been overturned’ (see *The Letters of W.B. Yeats* 613 qtd. in *Poems* 609). Until then Yeats had been certain to live in a politically half-paralyzed country ‘where motley is worn’ (“Easter, 1916” 14), peopled by complacent jesters whose gab is bigger than their guts. In 1916 he was petrified and at the same time awed to find that under the constraints of history even a clown could ‘[resign] his part / In the casual comedy’ and be ‘transformed’ (36-39) into an awe-inspiring hero.

In “Easter, 1916” Yeats suggests that the desire to be free to create one’s own nation and thereby be oneself ‘transformed’ or created new was at the heart of the Easter Rising. This preoccupation with the theme of liberty is equally apparent in “The Wanderings of Oisín”, where the Otherworld is depicted as a place of freedom representing on the spiritual plane a sanctuary for pagan Irish culture free of outside “colonial” influences (such as that of the Catholic church) and on the physical plane a place where everyone is free from the shackles of death and disease.

Moreover, Yeats’s reference to Oisín’s warrior colleagues the Fenians whom Oisín would rather join in hell than go solo to tedious Christian heaven would for many contemporary readers have had nationalist overtones as they would have associated it with the Fenian Irish nationalist movement which was fighting for Irish independence from Great Britain. Founded in the USA in the mid 19th-century the Fenians just like the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) strove to establish an independent Irish Republic by means of an armed rebellion. Interestingly the Fenians also have at least an etymological connection with the theme of “exile” as the name derives from the Gaelic word “Fianna” denoting a kind of young men’s mercenary or reserve army living apart from society in times of peace.

As mentioned before, in Wilde’s ‘Ravenna’ there is also an underlying theme of liberty on the spiritual plane associated with a return to pagan Hellenism on the political plane associated with more or less enforced exile.

Yet while there is no overt nationalist propaganda of any kind to be found in Wilde’s poem it could be argued that there is something stereotypically “Irish” about Wilde’s rather histrionic depiction of Lord Byron as a martyr who fell fighting for the freedom of a nation when in reality the aristocrat died of a fever before he could even go into battle. Indeed, given the long history of failed Irish insurrections Irish nationalists, no doubt inspired by the Catholic cult of martyrs which most of them had imbibed from childhood on, had little choice but to imaginatively transform failed revolutionaries fallen in battle into heroes.

Ironically, even the 1916 Easter Rising, commemorated as the most significant of Irish uprisings as it eventually led to the creation of the Irish Free State, was from a military point of view a failure. Moreover, public opinion had not been

overwhelmingly in favour of the revolutionaries until the British government committed the cardinal mistake of transforming “ordinary” revolutionaries into martyrs by executing them.²⁴ Particularly the barbaric execution of the Marxist politician James Connolly who due to his wounds could not stand upright and therefore had to be shot being tied to a chair caused great outrage and helped to turn the tide of public opinion in favour of the revolutionaries and their cause. Yeats’s famous poem “Easter, 1916” speaks volumes on the way in which in the eyes of most of the Irish public ordinary individuals were mystically transformed by becoming martyrs for their country, much in the way in which an ordinary oblate and wine are believed to be mystically transformed into Christ’s flesh and blood during Catholic mass.

The quasi-redemption in Yeats’s eyes of Major John MacBride, the much hated and envied husband of Yeats’s longstanding muse Maud Gonne, is a curious case in point. Thus, the culturally transsubstantiatory power of execution by a British firing squad was apparently so strong that Yeats grudgingly depicted even this hated man as a hero even though the Major had not only snatched his beloved muse from him (Yeats had himself repeatedly proposed to her) but reportedly abused her as well as her daughter Isolde (Maud’s offspring from a previous relationship whom Yeats would equally propose to in 1916). Given this background knowledge the following lines of “Easter, 1916” make for almost excessive praise of MacBride on Yeats’s behalf:

This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vainglorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number him in the song;
He, too, has resigned his part
In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born. (31-40)

²⁴ See Bartlett 391-93: ‘Initial reactions to the rising were mixed, appear to have been rather class-specific and changed markedly over the week. [...] However, as fighting continued initial outrage was succeeded by a kind of grudging respect for the courage of the rebels. [...] And, in its turn, this qualified admiration was replaced by further outrage, but this time at the British military authorities for their cover-up of the killing of Sheehy-Skeffington and the others and for their execution of the rebel leaders.’

Only a great discontent with the political and cultural status quo combined with great hopes for an independent future of Ireland that would return to her Gaelic spiritual roots having been freed from the shackles of British materialism and cultural imperialism could explain Yeats's decision to sanctify a man he despised to the core.

Sadly Wilde never lived to see the Easter Rising and the formation of the Irish Free State and we can therefore only speculate on what he might have thought about these radical political changes in his home country. However, it is surprising to find that Wilde - who lives in the common imagination more as the king of witty conversation and contemplation than as a man of action - principally declared himself in favour of violent revolution. Thus, in *The Soul of Man under Socialism* he describes a similar kind of 'terrible beauty' as Yeats does when he argues that '[t]he very violence of a revolution may make the public grand and splendid for a moment' and that '[b]ehind the barricade there may be much that is noble and heroic' (147). Juxtaposing this 'physical force of the public' to the 'public's opinion' and its main instrument of aggression, the press, he professes to much preferring the former over the latter as journalism habitually produces 'prejudice, stupidity, cant and twaddle' (ibid.) stultifying the general public by providing information on 'everything, except what is worth knowing' (148). In short, Wilde concludes, '[i]t was a fatal day when the public discovered that the pen is mightier than the paving-stone, and can be made as offensive as the brickbat' (147).

Apart from Wilde's - somewhat surprising - endorsement and glorification of popular uprisings he also shared Yeats's great dislike of Britain's supposedly materialist and philistine culture. This dislike may indeed have contributed to Wilde's fervent endorsement of Greek culture already hinted at in 'Ravenna' in his adulation of Lord Byron as a champion of future Hellenic liberty. True, a certain reverence for Greek culture was highly en vogue at the time yet Wilde's intense love of it surpassed by any standards the symptoms of a fashionable fad. Indeed, as will be demonstrated in greater detail in the following chapter, Wilde himself was just as much taken with 'Greece and Liberty' as he suggests his peer Lord Byron had been whose love for the Hellenic cause he likens to: 'a flame-bearded beacon seen from afar / By mariners upon a storm-tossed sea, -- / Such was his love for Greece and Liberty!' ("Ravenna" canto IV).

In fact, Wilde who studied classics at Trinity College Dublin and Oxford University had been greatly influenced by the ideas of classics scholars, wits and aestheticists teaching him - in particular John Pentland Mahaffy, John Ruskin and Walter Pater – and would later ceaselessly propagate the creation of a ‘new Hellenism’. Thus, in his critical essay on social and cultural politics *The Soul of Man under Socialism* he declares that ‘The new Individualism is the new Hellenism’ and that this ‘Individualism’ attained through ‘Socialism’ will be ‘perfect harmony’ (SOM 160). But what did this socialist neoclassical renaissance Wilde envisaged entail? tied with his criticism of English culture? And how is the author’s championing of a neoclassical ‘hellenist’ renaissance connec

In the following parts of this chapter I shall explore these as well as other questions within the context of the British 19th century stereotypical view of Ireland and the general crisis of faith. In particular I shall further explore Wilde’s and Yeats’s attitude towards Ireland and England, the two writers’ anti-materialist ideals, how these ideals relate to stereotypical notions of “Irishness” and how they can be analysed as a reaction to the gospel according to what was in their view materialist Philistine English society.

CHAPTER 2.2: REASON & IMAGINATION

2.2.1. Introduction

In the first part of this chapter I pointed out that even though the subject matter of Yeats’s breakthrough poem was blatantly Irish and that of Wilde’s blatantly wasn’t both authors were at the beginning of their careers preoccupied with similar issues related to their personal “Irish” experience. Themes with an Irish connection addressed in both their “breakthrough” poems include exile and emigration, imperialism (Christian, represented by St. Patrick, and Ottoman, hinted at via Lord Byron’s involvement in the Greek Revolution), anti-materialist alternative worlds (the Celtic Otherworld and the mythological world of Greek antiquity), a preference for paganism (the Celtic and the Hellenic variety) over Christianity as well as the glorification of anti-mainstream revolutionaries (the Fenians, Lord Byron, Dante Aligheri). As I have argued, many of these themes are not only born out of typically

“Irish” preoccupations but more broadly lend themselves to being considered within an “anti-imperialist” or “anti-British” context.

In the present chapter I would now like to look at Wilde’s and Yeats’s political and philosophical ideas within the wider context of Irish studies. In particular I will use the treatise *On the Study of Celtic Literature* by the influential Victorian poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold as a basis for exploring how 19th century cultural stereotypes of the Celts, including the Irish, connect with and/or are subverted by Wilde’s and Yeats’s philosophical, cultural and social visions. I will furthermore investigate the construction of Celtic Ireland as (mostly) Anglo-Saxon England’s Other (and vice versa), a notion consciously or unconsciously heavily employed by Arnold, and in some respects adopted by Yeats who used it for his own (culture)nationalist agenda.

Another objective of this chapter is to contrast the insiders’ view with the outsider’s view of the Irish mental state in Victorian times and to show how Yeats’s and Wilde’s at times seemingly ‘neutral’ or ‘international’ philosophical ideas may be reconsidered within an Irish cultural context itself frequently characterised by its deliberate opposition to mainstream British culture.

2.2.2. The Celts as England’s Anti-Self

‘Sentimental, – always ready to react against the despotism of fact; that is the description a great friend^{25*} of the Celt gives of him; and it is not a bad description of the sentimental temperament; it lets us into the secret of its dangers and of its habitual want of success.’ (Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, 102)

‘If the Censor refuses Salome, I shall leave England to settle in France where I shall take out letters of naturalization. I will not consent to call myself a citizen of a country that shows such narrowness in artistic judgment. I am not English. I am Irish, which is quite another thing.’ (O. Wilde in an interview for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, qtd. in Ellmann *ID* 351-2)

In an age when European imperialism was at its height it became “the white man’s burden” not only to justify his alleged superiority over the black man and the relatively recent annexation of much of his territory but also over the white man and

²⁵ [i.e. *‘Monsieur Henri Martin, whose chapters on the Celts, in his *Histoire de France*, are full of information and interest’]

territory acquired long ago. While to argue for racist superiority vis-à-vis a geographically distant people whose appearance and cultural heritage are markedly different from the colonisers' might be a pushover the same cannot be said of a geographically close people of relatively similar appearance and cultural heritage. It becomes even more difficult to justify the upholding of the firm governing hand of colonialism if the people governed by it, as in the case of the 19th century Irish people, have been colonised for so long that their language and culture have been drastically assimilated to the coloniser's.

Yet while such an enterprise may be more demanding it is by no means impossible. Thus, in his study *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, as its title hints at, is mainly concerned with the promotion of the study of Celtic literature at British universities, Matthew Arnold demonstrates exemplarily how a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down and how even a white neighbouring people may be shown to be in high demand of some well-meaning British, or rather English, guidance. In a fairly flattering fashion Arnold enumerates the many positive qualities of the Celtic people and in passing mentions more than just a few ills of the English people. However, he concludes that while the Celt is on average of a more charming, imaginative and spiritual disposition than the average dull Saxon - who luckily for him, as Arnold points out, often has a bit of Celtic heritage himself²⁶, both cultural and genetic - it is just those at first glance positive qualities which also make the Celt unfit for governing himself.

Looking at the seemingly complimentary part of Arnold's argument it is remarkable how many stereotypes of "the Celt" that Arnold presents have survived unto this day. It is equally remarkable how double-edged their nature is and how well Arnold manages to characterise the Celt in opposition to the English as 'the Other', ascribing to him a multitude of qualities explaining indirectly why it is the Englishman's duty to intervene in the Celt's affairs.

²⁶ Arnold 95-96: M. Arnold states that it is not 'vain to search for Celtic elements in any modern Englishman. But it is not only by the tests of physiology and language that we can try this matter. As there are for physiology physical marks, such as the square heads of the German, the round head of the Gael, the oval head of the Cymri, which determine the type of a people, so for criticism there are spiritual marks which determine the type, and make us speak of the Greek genius, the Teutonic genius, the Celtic genius, and so on.' Since English wit cannot be disconnected from the Celtic one they must be related: 'I say that there is a Celtic element in the English nature, as well as Germanic element, and that this element manifests itself in our spirit and literature.'

Starting with a positive characteristic of the Celt Arnold acknowledges that the Celt truly has splendid imagination, the famous gift of the gab, that ‘lively Celtic wit’ (96). However, even though ‘the Celt has shown genius, indeed, splendid genius’ he supposedly does not have the ‘patience’ to produce ‘great works, such as the Agamemnon’ since he is lacking the ability to structure his ideas, a quality Arnold dubs the ‘architectonicé’ (104). Consequently Arnold concludes that ‘[t]he Celt has not produced great poetical works, he has only produced poetry with an air of greatness’ (ibid.). We may infer that this lack of structuring powers also explains why the Celt is in need of political guidance by outsiders.

Indeed, Arnold repeatedly makes the point that one of the Celt’s major shortcomings is the over-emphasis in his nature on emotion and passion rather than reason and logic. Ultimately his supposed lack of success in the high arts, high culture and politics has to be ascribed to his lack of ‘balance, measure and patience’ (102).

In short, according to Arnold the Celt is clearly more emotional than rational. While his anti-rational streak or ‘rebellion against fact’ Arnold claims has ‘lamed the Celt even in his spiritual work’ the critic goes on to wonder at ‘how much more [it must] have lamed him in the world of business and politics!’ (105). Indeed Arnold asserts that ‘[t]he skilful and resolute appliance of means to ends which is needed both to make progress in material civilization, and also to form powerful states, is just what the Celt has least turn for’ (ibid.). In other words, according to Arnold it is really due to the Celt’s failure to construct himself ‘powerful states’ (ibid.) - presumably being by definition political entities that have managed to build an empire as Britain and Rome have – that Britain had to incorporate them.

At this point Arnold emphasizes once more that the Celt, unlike the Saxon, is not first and foremost a rational animal but ‘sensual [...] or at least sensuous’ thus reminding the reader of why the assimilation of the Celtic peoples into the British Empire was not only a logical but also a sensible step. Adding an insult to a compliment Arnold goes on to conclude that in their love of ‘bright colours, company and pleasure’ the Celts resemble ‘the Greek and Latin races’; however, he immediately contrasts the latter’s refined civilizations with Celtic culture which lacking the Greek’s sense of measure has allegedly failed ‘to reach any material

civilisation sound and satisfying, and not out at elbows, poor, slovenly, and half-barbarous'. (105)

While Arnold's curious mention of the Celt's supposed love of 'bright colours' (ibid.) may either refer to the famously colourful Celtic (-inspired) designs featured in 'the comparatively petty art of ornamentation' in which the Celt has 'done just enough to show his delicacy of taste' (103) or serve to discredit the Celt by suggesting that he is a bit brash (or worse, an effeminate Aesthete) it is obvious that Arnold uses the conqueror's all-time favourite excuse for subduing a foreign people which is to argue that they are "barbarous". Granted, in the original sense of the word, roughly denoting a foreigner speaking an unintelligible language, the Celts surely were "barbarians" to English-speakers (a fact to which badly anglicised Irish, Welsh and Scottish place names bear ample testimony). However, the term "barbarous" as used by Arnold is really coloniser-talk for "wild and uncivilised and therefore in need of our culture's benevolent civilizing influence".

Considering Arnold's overall attitude it is not surprising that he depicts the 'impressionable Celt' as an entertaining yet unstable manic-depressive who 'soon up and soon down, is [...] sociable, hospitable, eloquent, admired, figuring away brilliantly' yet easily becomes 'audacious, overcrowding, full of fanfaronade' (101). To sum up, according to Arnold, the Celt is over-emotional, a bit of a hysteric and overall bears many of the chief characteristics often ascribed to women and children, that is the social 'Other' at the time. Arnold makes the Celt's alleged affinity with femininity explicit when he points out that many consider the Celt's 'sensibility' - by no means negative if only he were 'more master of it' - to be at the root 'out of which chivalry and romance and the glorification of a feminine ideal spring'. Arnold furthermore confirms that 'the Celtic nature, its nervous exaltation, have something feminine in them' and that the Celt therefore has an 'affinity' to 'feminine idiosyncrasy [...] is not far from its secret'. Moreover he argues that he has 'a peculiarly near and intimate feeling of nature' which in turn means that he is close to 'natural magic'. (107-108)

By identifying the Celt with femininity, nature, imagination, spirituality and magic he is made to represent the irrational feminine type of man in opposition to the rational 'steady-going Saxon' (111) masculine man. Indeed, it can be argued that by branding the Celt as feminine Arnold genders and naturalizes the political union

between the English and the Celts in terms of a “marriage” between a rational masculine and an irrational feminine partner. For the Celt’s ‘genius’ characterised by its ‘chafing against the despotism of fact, its perpetual straining after mere emotion’ (103) and by extension the Celtic people are clearly in want of a political partner more sensible than themselves who can take good care of them. As professor Ronan McDonald points out: ‘to Arnold the fact that Ireland had all these ‘feminine’ virtues meant that the union between Ireland and England to him represented something like the ideal Victorian marriage where there was no question as to who was dominant’ (see McDonald, online lecture).

The family-metaphor continues with somewhat changed roles when Arnold indirectly defines the English as the “children” of the Celts and the Saxons claiming that ‘if commingling there is in our race, [there] are two very unlike elements to commingle; the steady-going Saxon temperament and the sentimental Celtic temperament’ (111). The argument goes that while the Celts are over-emotional and the Saxons possess too much rational ‘steadiness’ for their own or anybody’s good the English people are culturally and genetically the love-child of those two influences (with a dash of Norman business acumen thrown into the mix) and thus ideally combine intellect with emotion – ‘the Saxon’s phlegm’ with ‘the Celt’s sentiment’ (110). In the family tree featuring Saxons and Celts as the parental generation the English represent the next and “improved” generation for by combining two extremes, one rational one irrational, they embody a near-perfect equilibrium. In short, possessing both heart and mind the English are obviously made to govern those who are not entirely in control of one or the other.

To top it all off Arnold implicitly justifies the political union between the English and the Celts once more in dualist genetic terms by claiming that the Celts are servile by nature while the Anglo-Saxons are leaders by nature (109):

The Celt, undisciplinable, anarchical, and turbulent by nature, but out of affection and admiration giving himself body and soul to some leader, that is not a promising political temperament, it is just the opposite of the Anglo-Saxon temperament, disciplinable and steadily obedient within certain limits, but retaining an inalienable part of freedom and self-dependence; but it is a temperament for which one has a kind of sympathy notwithstanding.

In other words, just like the wildness and liveliness of children the Celt’s ‘anarchical’ streak may be appealing yet nevertheless requires the guidance of a rational (Anglo-

Saxon) paternal figure. For if the Celtic people got into the wrong hands, Arnold implies, their ‘turbulent’ nature and unquestioning dedication to their leader might cause them to bring unthinkable destruction over others.

Notwithstanding, Arnold’s vision is subtle and critical enough to concede that while the Celts may be overly emotional the English deplorably tend to succumb to the philistine part of their nature, which he identifies as the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ one (complementing the Norman and the Celtic element). Thus, Arnold argues that the English will ‘ride one force of [their] nature to death’ as they ‘will be nothing but Anglo-Saxons in the Old World or in the New’ (175). This Anglo-Saxon streak he in turn identifies with commercialism and materialism in general by citing two archetypal British commercial centres when he declares that his ‘race has built Bond Street, Liverpool and has pronounced it very good’ (176). Yet Arnold urges his compatriots not to fall into the pitfall of humdrum materialism and above all ‘Philistinism’, that ‘plant of essentially Germanic growth’ (110), reminding them that ‘true Anglo-Saxons, simply and sincerely rooted in the German nature, we are not and cannot be’ (176). They should reject this ‘onesidedness’ which is allegedly turning the English into ‘something eccentric, unattractive, and inharmonious’ (ibid.) and instead recognise and master *all* facets of their culturally and genetically composite nature. For, as Arnold puts it, ‘So long as this mixed constitution of our nature possesses us, we pay it tribute and serve it; so soon as we possess it, it pays us tribute and serves us’ (174). Only by growing aware of their composite nature and by learning how to master it, rejecting the negative characteristics and using the positive ones to their advantage, the English ‘may have the good of [their] German part, the good of [their] Latin part, the good of [their] Celtic part’ (175).

Clearly Arnold’s characterisation of “the one” character or “genius”, as he calls it, of a people is deeply essentialist and racist. However, at least in his description of the English character he deploys an unusual kind of racism basically arguing that the “Shepherd’s pie of Englishness” is a mix of German sauerkraut, French onions and Irish lamb. Contrary to other forms of racism advocating the supposed “purity” of a group of people Arnold’s racism allows for a certain amount of cultural and genetic pluralism.

Even his racist attitude towards the Germans gains in complexity and is (deliberately) toned down by his respect for German scientific achievements. Thus, on the one hand the critic bluntly claims that ‘the humdrum, the plain and ugly, the ignoble: in a word, das Gemeine, die Gemeinheit’ constitutes ‘that curse of Germany’ (98) while on the other hand he concedes that it would do the English good to make use of that ‘German faithfulness to Nature to give [them] science and to free [them] from insolence and self-will’ (175). Along similar lines Arnold argues that the English people’s Celtic strain, tending on the negative side towards the erratic, might if mastered properly save them from their worst sin which the critic, as mentioned above, identifies as Philistinism; in Arnold’s words: ‘we may use the Celtic quickness of perception to give us delicacy, and to free us from hardness and Philistinism’ (175).

While Arnold’s avoidance of a racist discourse based on the concept of purity is laudable his emphasizing the English people’s mixed heritage also serves the potentially less noble purpose of justifying the political union between England and its immediate neighbours by naturalizing it. Due to their close “family ties” with all the other people of the British Isles and their natural leadership qualities of rationality, moderation and independent thought – as opposed to the Celt’s irrationality, exuberance and fanatic obedience – they are born to lead the others, Arnold argues. He once more makes his point of the supposed naturalness of the union by stating that Lord Lyndhurst’s assertion that the Celts were ‘Aliens in speech, in religion, in blood!’ has been proven wrong by ‘philologists’ and ‘physiologists’ alike and that in fact ‘a Celtic fibre’ ‘lives and works’ within the English (177)²⁷. Arnold even goes so far as to claim that since, with the exception of Brittany, all the ‘remains of this great primitive [Celtic] race’ being ‘Ireland, the Scotch Highlands, Wales, the Isle of Man, Cornwall’ ‘[belong] to the English empire’ this signifies that these remains are ‘a part of ourselves’ (177-178), a part of English culture. This is ultimately the reason why Arnold demands that a ‘chair of Celtic’ (178) be introduced at English universities.

No matter to what degree Arnold’s argument is motivated by a genuine interest in Celtic cultures or rather by his rejection of most aspects of Germanic

²⁷ See Arnold 177: ‘in the spiritual frame of us English ourselves, a Celtic fibre, little as we may have ever thought of tracing it, lives and works. *Aliens in speech, in religion, in blood!* said Lord Lyndhurst; the philologists have set him right about the speech, the physiologists about the blood.’

“Anglo-Saxon” culture he definitely does his utmost to argue that Celtic culture is in fact a “natural” part of English culture and as such deserves more attention by the English.

By presenting Celtic cultures as a part of English culture Arnold obviously appropriates them for the English. His rhetorical attempt at inclusion of the Celtic cultures into English culture is thus a mixed blessing since it demands more study and symbolic representation of Celtic cultures, overall a good thing, yet only under the condition that these be considered a part of English culture.

Arnold’s attitude towards the relationship between English and Celtic cultures therefore stands in stark contrast to that of Wilde and Yeats who both regarded and constructed Irish culture and identity as something quite distinct from English identity. Thus, Wilde, who was after all the son of an Irish nationalist poet and her surgeon-gone-Irish-archaeologist-and-folklorist husband, definitely considered the Irish to be a people with a cultural identity quite distinct from the English. This is evident in such sayings as the quote introducing this chapter taken from an interview with Wilde’s friend and presumably erstwhile lover Robert Ross; publicly contemplating French exile and the adoption of French citizenship should his play *Salomé* be censored in England (which it was on the grounds that it featured Biblical characters), Wilde not only asserts his Irish identity by stating that he is ‘not English’ but ‘Irish, which is quite another thing’ but at the same time indirectly derides the English as philistines living in ‘a country that shows such narrowness in artistic judgment’ (see *Pall Mall Gazette* interview qtd. in *ID* 351-2).

We may imply that given that in Wilde’s view “being Irish” essentially means “not being English”, it follows that as the English are philistines, the Irish are not. Moreover, considering Mrs. Cheveley’s statement in act three of *An Ideal Husband* in which she claims that ‘If one could only teach the English how to talk, and the Irish how to listen, society here would be quite civilized’, and assuming that this largely expresses Wilde’s personal opinion, it transpires that Wilde represents the English and the Irish (or “Celts”) along the same dualist lines as Arnold does: the Irish are witty conversationalists while the English are dull philistines.

Thus, both Arnold and Wilde characterize the two people as each other’s cultural ‘Other’ or opposite. However, as pointed out before, Arnold would claim this

Celtic ‘Other’ as a part of English heritage, while Wilde would hardly have returned the compliment by claiming the English ‘Other’ as part of Irish heritage. Another main difference between them is obviously that Wilde would never have arrived at Arnold’s indirect conclusion that the English should naturally rule over the Irish, given that the latter have no talent for forming ‘powerful states’ (Arnold 105). It is more likely Wilde considered British rule over Ireland, similar to the tyranny of man over woman, to be yet another instance of ‘the tyranny of the weak over the strong’,²⁸.

Just like Arnold and Wilde, Yeats would equally have constructed his ideal Irish society as more or less the exact opposite of English/British mainstream society. Thus, if Britain was suffering from a severe crisis of faith and was dominated by materialism and an unflinching belief in scientific progress the Irish would be governed by a spiritual ethos; likewise if Britain was rapidly turning into a highly industrialised country Ireland would focus on agricultural production; if Britain was to be modern Ireland would be anti-modern.

Indeed, the founders of the Irish Free State used much the same logic as Yeats did so that many of them conceived of Ireland as the opposite of an increasingly secularised and industrialised Britain: Ireland, in contrast, was to be a fundamentally Catholic as well as agricultural state. Accordingly, the 1937 *Constitution of Ireland*, replacing the 1922 *Constitution of the Irish Free State*, recognises freedom of worship yet stresses the ‘special position’ of the Catholic Church (a provision that was eventually to be removed in the 1970s). Moreover, in a deeply socially conservative gesture article 41.2 of the Constitution virtually banned married women from going to work on the grounds that ‘[...] the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved’.

The long-prevailing reactionary socio-cultural ideals of Irish officialdom may be best summed up by the then-Taoiseach Éamon de Valera’s 1943 St. Patrick’s Day radio speech entitled “The Ireland That We Dreamed of”. In this speech the politician presents his dream of Ireland as an anti-materialist bucolic place in which –

²⁸ See Lord Illingworth’s statement in Act 3 of *A Woman of No Importance*: ‘The history of women is the history of the worst form of tyranny the world has ever known. The tyranny of the weak over the strong. It is the only tyranny that lasts.’

specifically Catholic – spirituality is still a significant part of the everyday lives of a farming god-fearing population constituting a sort of “tribal society” in which the elderly continue to pass on their wisdom via storytelling:

The ideal Ireland that we would have, the Ireland that we dreamed of, would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that men should live. With the tidings that make such an Ireland possible St. Patrick came to our ancestors fifteen hundred years ago promising happiness here no less than happiness hereafter.²⁹

Apart from the importance de Valera attaches to the role of Catholicism within the state Yeats already at the turn of the century pictured his ideal Ireland in quite a similar way as the future president would do almost half a century later. Thus, as mentioned in chapter 1, in 1898 Yeats held a speech in honour of the failed Irish Revolution of 1798 in which he juxtaposed the image of industrial England, where ‘whole districts [are] blackened with smoke’, with the vision of a pure ‘Ireland [that] will always be in the main an agricultural country’. Not unlike de Valera he stresses that the Irish are essentially an anti-materialist spiritual people who hate ‘the materialisms of England’ and the poet, believing in the great importance of the imagination, adds that they shall be endowed with ‘an imaginative culture and the power to understand imaginative and spiritual things’. (speech qtd. in *M&M* 113)

Obviously de Valera’s as well as other leading Irish politicians’ ultra-conservative ideas, in particular the radical promotion of Catholic (family) values and of an agriculture-based economy, have had a long-lasting impact on post-independence Ireland’s socio-economic development. With regard to the belated industrialisation of the island stagnation reinforcing emigration has been the result while with regard to social policy a reactionary climate, fuelled by a conservative interpretation of the Catholic faith, has been at the root of legislation permitting censorship while banning divorce and abortion – the latter up until this very day (unless there is a serious threat to the mother’s life).

²⁹ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ireland_That_We_Dreamed_Of>

To some degree, as argued above, these Irish socio-economic phenomena are rooted in a rejection of the more progressive politics and society of the former coloniser, Great Britain.

In the last part of this chapter I would like to have a closer look at how an opposition to values perceived as being typically “English” or “British” have shaped Yeats’s and Wilde’s ideas and writing. In particular I shall consider the themes of anti-utilitarianism/hedonism, spirituality/the imagination and an intellectual return to ancient Greek and Celtic society.

CHAPTER 2.3 THE BRITISH CONNECTION: MIRROR IMAGES

‘It is a symbol of Irish art. The cracked looking-glass of a servant.’ (Joyce, *Ulysses*)

Considering Arnold’s writing on “the Celt” and the Celtic element in English literature and culture it is evident that from an English perspective it was a political advantage to claim Celtic cultures as part of English culture. Even if Arnold had personally been of a different mind it would have been unwise not to defend this opinion if he wanted his campaign for the introduction of a Chair of Celtic at English universities to succeed. Obviously, the British or, as Arnold at one point puts it, the “English Empire” had an interest in holding on to all her dominions including those closest to her heart, that is, the ‘Celtic’ ones. This interest resonates with Arnold’s historically not unfounded claim that there runs a ‘Celtic fibre’ within the English people. It is equally reflected in his spirited rejection of the statement that the English and the Celts are ‘[a]liens in speech, in religion, in blood’ as had once been maintained by the eminent politician Lord Lyndhurst, three times Lord Chancellor (Arnold 177).

In contrast to Arnold’s defence of the idea of kinship between the English and the Celtic peoples, the majority of 19th century Irish people, with the obvious exception of the Unionists, had no reason to stress their cultural, genetic or other allegiance with England or the British Empire. Having had to suffer from a lot of social and political injustice under British rule, including most famously the successive issuing of a large number of so-called “penal laws” drastically limiting the rights of Roman Catholics and Presbyterians through many centuries, most Irish

people would rather have emphasised their identity as a people apart from the British in order to gain (greater) independence from Britain.

While neither Yeats nor Wilde were by any means militant nationalists they were both well aware and proud of their Irish background. Given Yeats's indirect as well as direct involvement in Irish politics as a writer and Senator there exist sufficient documents to prove that he supported independence. However, once (relative) independence had been established the Anglo-Irishman Yeats was soon to be disappointed by the strong reactionary influence of the Catholic Church, as well as the Catholic middle classes, on Irish public life and legislation in the Free State. Feeling increasingly marginalised by a majority Catholic state he grew more and more ostentatiously proud of his Anglo-Irish Protestant heritage. While this pride is a feature of many of his poems, in particular in his collection of poems entitled *The Tower*, it is well summed up in prose by his impassioned 1925 Senate speech in favour of the preservation of the right to divorce. There he identifies himself as 'a typical man of that [i.e. the Protestant] minority' who considers the potential abolition of divorce to be 'grossly oppressive'; citing such great Irish Protestants as Burke, Swift and Parnell, Yeats goes on to insist that his 'are no petty people' but 'one of the great stocks of Europe' who have created not only 'the most of the modern literature of this country' but also 'the best of its political intelligence',³⁰.

In contrast, Wilde, at least in written form never commented quite as directly on matters of Irish identity as his colleague did to whom Ireland held particular symbolic significance as nothing less than a symbol of the world; in Yeats's own words:

To the greater poets everything they see has its relation to the national life, and through that to the universal and divine life [...] You can no more have the greatest poetry without a nation than religion without symbols. One can only reach out to the universe with a gloved hand – that glove is one's nation, the only thing one knows even a little of. (article by Yeats dated September 2, 1888 qtd. in *ID* 15-6)

Moreover, Wilde, dying prematurely in 1900, never lived to witness the Easter Rising and the creation of the Irish Free State so that we can only guess at what his reaction

³⁰ See Yeats's speech on divorce (Seanad Éireann - 11 June, 1925): <http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/Debates%20Authoring/DebatesWebPack.nsf/takes/seanad1925061100010>

to these highly significant historical events might have been like. Yeats's ambivalent reaction to the rising has meanwhile been recorded in one of his most famous poems, "Easter, 1916", featuring the iconic refrain 'A terrible beauty is born' (16) expressing the poet's simultaneous shock and awe in face of the events.

Wilde's "Irish point of view", meanwhile, is more often than not written between the lines than into the lines. It is indirectly manifest in his witty and often ironic criticism and subversion of core values of Victorian Britain. Many of his, as well as Yeats's, ideals are an inversion or "mirror image" of mainstream British values of his time. That is to say, while you didn't have to be Irish to be opposed to mainstream British values, Wilde's position as an Irishman and cultural outsider certainly made him more apt than most cultural insiders to spot and criticise shortcomings of British society.

What is particularly noteworthy in the context of the search for alternatives to Victorian Britain's mainstream culture is Wilde's life-long fascination with ancient Greece – a passion traces of which we have already had a glimpse of when discussing his poem "Ravenna" in part 1 of the present chapter. This interest in (a revival of) Greek culture and philosophy was not unusual at the time given that Greek literature and Greek philosophy were still widely read at British (public) schools and universities. As Frank M. Turner points out since 'a knowledge of Greek was required for admission to both Oxford and Cambridge [...] a knowledge of Greek [...] and a familiarity with Greek culture were characteristic of a large portion of the British political elite as well as of the leaders and clergy of the Church of England' (*The Victorians and Greek Antiquity* 5).

Moreover, intellectuals facing a general crisis of faith fuelled by scientific progress and Darwinism were increasingly looking back in time to find inspiration for different – often areligious – codes of morality and living. Indeed, it occurred to intellectuals such as Matthew Arnold who 'found traditional modes of Christianity untenable' and who 'suspected [that] human life were finite and limited to temporal existence' that 'the Greek example might suggest the best spiritual accommodation that human beings could make to their situation'. Thus, Arnold believed that the society of Periclean Athens (ca. 5th cent. BC), characterised by its promotion of the arts and education, represented an epoch in which, as Turner puts it, 'human nature

displayed its most nearly self-perfected intellectual and spiritual life'. Consequently, when Arnold champions "Hellenism", which he juxtaposes with "Hebraism", in *Culture and Anarchy* (published as a book in 1869) he effectively makes 'a statement of radical Victorian humanism'. (Turner 30)

The goal of this new Hellenist humanism was to develop a style of living that would be essentially atheist yet still be guided by certain moral codes. Where there is no hope of divine reward for our actions, Arnold reasons, all we can do is to look back in history and try to emulate the best examples of - atheist – living. In a time when religious values were in decline Arnold's promotion of "Hellenism" thus represented 'a militant call to secular living that promised little or no moral trauma'. In such a secularised society, Turner stresses, 'culture' became 'the only mode of meaningful perfection open to human beings'. (31)

Like Arnold Wilde equally reacted to the decline of faith arguing in *The Critic as Artist* via the character Gilbert that a belief in the immaterial was in fact anachronistic: 'Metaphysics do not satisfy our temperaments, and religious ecstasy is out of date' (CAA 253). He goes on to theorise that our ancestors 'have exhausted the faith-faculty of the species' and that as a result their 'legacy' to his generation was 'the scepticism of which they were afraid' (ibid.). With no afterlife to dread or hope for all we are left with is the endeavour to live 'intensely, fully, perfectly' and to assure that in the name of 'Socialism' which is to be based on and further promote the new 'Individualism' everyone will get an equal opportunity of doing so (SOM 159-60). This new 'Individualism' having through the workings of 'Socialism' and 'Science' done away with pain, disease and injustice 'will be perfect harmony'; indeed 'Individualism' will be 'the new Hellenism' given that it will be 'what the Greeks sought for, but could not, except in Thought, realize completely, because they had slaves, and fed them' (SOM 160).

Ultimately, as in Arnold's argument, culture as a means of individual self-realisation is to fill the gap declining faith has left. In *The Critic as Artist* Wilde celebrates the ancient Greeks as the model artists, and thus as the model individualist citizens, praising their concentration on the concrete instead of the esoteric. As the character Gilbert explains, '[t]he Greeks were a nation of artists, because they were

spared the sense of the infinite' adding that 'nothing but the concrete can satisfy us' (ibid. 254).

Overall at least three of Wilde's lasting preoccupations – Hellenism, hedonism (within the wider context of Aestheticism) and homosexuality – were shaped by his knowledge of Greek philosophy and culture. In an age of growing secularism and materialism the ideas and ideals of ancient Greek and Renaissance culture became for many intellectuals an antidote to what they deemed undesirable aspects of Victorian society. Within an Irish nationalist context the Irish Literary Revival to which Yeats's works contributed greatly, being based on the recovery and new interpretations of ancient Irish themes constituted a similar retrospective cultural movement at the time.

Enthusiasm for ancient Greek mores and philosophy in the midst of 19th century Britain may seem anachronistic – yet by contemporaries this was not considered to be the case. Indeed the idea of the 'Viconian concept of analogous ages'³¹ meaning that 'certain ages of Greek history [...] were seen as analogous to certain periods of modern history' was highly popular (Turner 12); in fact, Yeats's alternating gyres of history are a rendering of the same idea. As a consequence of this widespread notion of historical analogy '[w]riting about Greece was in part a way for the Victorians to write about themselves' (ibid. 8).

Incidentally, among many other scholars, John Pentland Mahaffy, one of Wilde's teachers at Trinity College Dublin, advocated the theory of analogous ages. To his mind '[e]very thinking man who becomes acquainted with the masterpieces of Greek writing, must see plainly that they stand to us in a far closer relation than the other remains of antiquity' since '[t]hey are the writings of men of like culture with ourselves, who argue with the same logic, who reflect with kindred feelings.' Consequently 'they are thoroughly modern, more modern than the epochs quite proximate to our own' (Mahaffy qtd. in Turner 10). These and similar teachings must have left a deep impression on the student Wilde who would later write in *The Critic*

³¹ See Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), Neapolitan philosopher, and author of *Principi di Scienza Nuova* ("The New Science"), in which he developed a cyclic theory of history. The Viconian cycle consists of three recurring phases: (1) the Theocratic or Divine Age of gods, represented in primitive society by the family life of the cave, to which the voice of God (thunder) has driven mankind; (2) the Aristocratic or Heroic Age of heroes, characterized by incessant conflict between the ruling patricians and their subject plebeians; (3) the Democratic Age of people, in which rank and privilege have finally been eradicated by the revolutions of the preceding age.
Source: www.finnegansweb.com/wiki/index.php/Vico

as Artist that '[w]hatever, in fact, is modern in our life we owe to the Greeks. Whatever is an anachronism is due to medievalism' (CAA 226).

Clearly while championing pagan Hellenic culture Wilde's statement at the same time implies a rejection of medievalism associated in *The Soul of Man under Socialism* with 'the real Christ', 'real Christianity' and 'its love of self-torture' (158).

Wilde's call for a 'New Hellenism',³² was thus closely interlinked with the general crisis of faith and his opposition to this particular "medieval" version of Christianity (over-) emphasising pain and suffering as the defining moments of life and death. As a model dandy and defender of hedonism he believed that we should oppose the prevalent 'worship of pain',³³ and instead enjoy life following the example of Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, who claims to be able to resist 'everything except temptation',³⁴. The Renaissance, Wilde believed, had got it right 'with its new ideals of the beauty of life and the joy of living' which explains why 'Christ had no message for the Renaissance' (SOM 158).

Just like Yeats who had invented a whole new essentially atheist history-driven Weltanschauung in *A Vision* (which partly imitated a Renaissance book³⁵), Wilde was likewise trying to fill the spiritual gap declining Christianity had left with a modern version of secular-oriented Greek and Renaissance philosophy. Considering Yeats's Nietzsche-inspired doctrine of "tragic joy" (see chapter 1) it is moreover clear that, similar to Wilde, Yeats rejected pure suffering as an ideal going so far as to claim that even the moment of our own death may be a joyful one.

In any case, although Wilde was a hedonist he had enough sense to acknowledge that even unpleasant work has to be done, which is why – as mentioned before – he had high hopes for 'the slavery of the machine'. On the premise that '[u]nless there are slaves to do the ugly, horrible, uninteresting work, culture and

³² See SOM 160: 'The new Individualism, for whose service Socialism, whether it wills it or not, is working, will be perfect harmony...The new Individualism is the new Hellenism.'

³³ See SOM 158: 'Shallow speakers and shallow thinkers in pulpits and on platforms often talk about the world's worship of pleasure, and whine against it. But it is rarely in the world's history that its ideal has been one of joy and beauty. The worship of pain has far more often dominated the world.'

³⁴ See *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Act 1: Lord Darlington: 'I can resist everything except temptation.'

³⁵ See Adams 67: In the introduction to *A Vision* 'we are also offered as part of the fiction, an elaborate design of the wheel [i.e. the Great Wheel of reincarnation] said to be reproduced from the *Speculum Angelorum et Hominum* and looking indeed as if it came from a Renaissance book of occult wisdom (fig. 2).'

contemplation become almost impossible' and that '[h]uman slavery is wrong' Wilde concluded that 'the future of the world' depended on 'mechanical slavery' (SOM 141). Once machines did all the hard dull work for humanity and Socialism had abolished private property everyone, not only the select few 'poets', 'philosophers', 'men of science' and 'of culture', would be 'enabled to choose the sphere of activity that is really congenial to them and gives them pleasure' (ibid. 129). Only then Wilde's aestheticist maxim that the State is 'to make what is useful' and 'the individual is to make what is beautiful' could be fulfilled (ibid. 140).

Wilde's above statements appear to have been influenced by two major sources. Thus, on the one hand, particularly the latter stands in the tradition of *l'art pour l'art*. As such it is reminiscent of the French decadent writer Théophile Gautier's influential introduction to his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) where he asserts that '[t]here is nothing really beautiful save what is of no possible use. Everything useful is ugly, for it expresses a need, and man's needs are low and disgusting, like his own poor, wretched nature'³⁶.

On the other hand, both Wilde's statements appear to be indebted to William Morris's writings on Socialism. Morris was not only the founder of the Socialist League but he was also a leading figure in the British Arts and Crafts movement. Unlike other socialists he did not merely demand fair pay and sufficient leisure time for workers - that 'every man will reap the fruit of his labour' and 'have due rest' (*Useful Work* 12) – but he also requested that the working process as well as the end product of our work should give us pleasure. Following his credo that work is only worth doing if there is 'hope of rest, hope of product, hope of pleasure in the work itself' (ibid. 2) Morris, similar to Wilde, advocated the idea that we should enjoy our work so that 'it becomes a part of the pleasure of our lives' (ibid. 13); and what, Wilde seems to conclude, could give more pleasure than the production of what is 'beautiful'?

Both Wilde and Morris strongly react against the remorselessly utilitarian philosophy of British industrial mass production in which individual factory workers

³⁶ See the French original: 'Il n'y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien; tout ce qui est utile est laid, car c'est l'expression de quelque besoin, et ceux de l'homme sont ignobles et dégoûtants, comme sa pauvre et infirme nature. -- L'endroit le plus utile d'une maison, ce sont les latrines.'

were routinely condemned to doing hard, boring, repetitive work which paid little money, allowed them hardly any holidays and left no room for individual creativity. As a counter reaction the Arts and Crafts movement emphasised the aesthetic and spiritual importance of handiwork based on the personal relationship of the worker with the individual product whose design would often be inspired by British nature and traditional British designs.

Both Morris, a proponent of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and the aesthete Wilde rejected industrial production in its current form. However, both agreed that it would be beneficial if machines were used whenever work had to be done whose execution would be merely injurious to human workers. Thus, Morris, generally appreciating the 'value of intelligent work' defined as 'the work of men's hands guided by their brains' believed that machines should only be used if 'the nature of the thing made compels it, or where the machine does what mere human suffering would otherwise have to do' (*Some Hints on Pattern-Designing*). Wilde similarly argued that machines must do 'all unintellectual work, all monotonous, dull labour that [...] involves unpleasant conditions' (SOM 140). Thus, both men were opposed to the dominant British work ethic of the era according to which, as Morris puts it, 'all labour is good in itself'³⁷ (*Useful Work* 1).

While Yeats, unlike Morris and Wilde, was at no stage of his career a socialist of any kind he was nevertheless an outspoken critic of industrialism. The Yeats family when living in London had been friends with William Morris' family and no doubt the poet had as a young man become familiar with Morris's socialist philosophy. Like the other two writers Yeats subsequently believed that not all work is good work, that the means and circumstances of production matter and that there is a spiritual and moral dimension to work as well as to the end product. Yeats also valued the art and cultural significance of traditional handicraft. Thus he gave crucial financial support to his sisters' embroidery workshop and Irish Arts and Crafts press, the Cuala Press, which published many of his works. His sisters were also strongly influenced by the Morris family since in London Elizabeth Yeats had previously worked for William Morris while Lily Yeats had worked as an embroiderer for Morris's daughter May.

³⁷ See *Useful Work* 1: 'In short, it has become an article of the creed of modern morality that all labour is good in itself – a convenient belief to those who live on the labour of others.'

Similar to Morris Yeats was preoccupied with the idea of resurrecting the tradition of what Morris dubbed 'Popular Art' yielding handmade everyday objects whose ornamentation was considered to be an expression of the workman's 'necessity [...] for variety in his work' and whose production would give him 'pleasure'. This kind of art and with it the workman's pleasure, Morris argued, had been 'killed by commercialism' (*Useful Work* 21). Wilde who also believed that our work should give us 'pleasure' (*SOM* 129) and had besides borrowed some of Morris's ideas for his American lecture tour on interior design entitled 'The House Beautiful' would no doubt have agreed.

While his works and actions speak for themselves Yeats moreover clearly positions himself as an anti-industrialist opposed to 'commercialism' in a speech given in New York in 1904 in which he describes his Irish Utopia, posing industrialist materialist England as the antithesis to his ideal of an agrarian spiritual Ireland. Uncharacteristically in the first part of the speech, as Ellmann points out, the poet's rustic dreams mingle with bits of (Fabian) socialist ideas that he had possibly picked up on visits to Morris's house in the 1880s. Thus, the poet maintains that on a social plane Ireland, unlike England, shall not be divided into 'a very rich class and a very poor class' rather if there may be a 'few rich, there shall be nobody very poor' (speech qtd. in *M&M* 113).

This comes across as a remarkably egalitarian vision from a man who would later, radicalised by the events of World War I and the Irish Civil War (1922-23), wish for God to 'fill the cradles right' ("Under Ben Bulbin" IV 5) and fear the uncontrollable uprising of the masses, those 'Base-born products of base beds' (ibid. V 6) who would take over when '[m]ere anarchy is loosed upon the world' ("The Second Coming" 4). In the first part of the same speech Yeats moreover again juxtaposes his ideal of the Emerald Isle with the realities of industrial England imagining Ireland to remain 'a place where men plow and sow and reap, not a place where there are great wheels turning and great chimneys vomiting smoke' (speech qtd. in *M&M* 113).

This idealisation of agricultural work is yet another point Yeats has in common with Morris, who proposed that in order to enjoy greatest possible 'variety of work' everyone should from time to time perform that 'most necessary and

pleasantest of all work – cultivating the earth’ (*Useful Work* 19). Wilde, on the contrary, might have taken issue with this ideal arguing that there was ‘nothing necessarily dignified about manual labour at all’ and that man was ‘made for something better than disturbing dirt’ (*SOM* 140).

Coming back to Yeats’s New York speech, its second part marks a transition from somewhat socialist to more feudal ideas. Thus, the author outlines an ideal Irish society whose members, as opposed to the contemporary philistine English mass, would not be ‘singing songs of the music hall’ but ‘[keep] alive the ideals of a great time when men sang the heroic life with drawn swords in their hands’. Overall this society would not be modern, like English society, but strive to ‘preserve an ancient ideal of life’. Finally, instead of physically and mentally transforming into mere parts of machinery, as factory workers might, and instead of living in an increasingly secular deracinated culture, as English people – from Yeats’s point of view - did, the Irish would always be blessed with ‘an imaginative culture and power to understand imaginative and spiritual things’. (*M&M* 113)

Yeats obviously cast the English and the (ideal) Irish way of living in terms of each other’s mirror images within a discourse of materialism versus spirituality. In his rejection of the materialism of English society he resembles Arnold who, as mentioned in part two of this chapter, condemned the materialism of his ‘race [that] has built Bond Street, Liverpool and has pronounced it very good’ (176); Arnold equally associated the Celts with spirituality and nature, as opposed to English rationality and culture, claiming that their extraordinary almost feminine ‘sensibility’ signified that they were ‘close to’ ‘the secret of natural beauty and magic’³⁸ (108). Reacting against an overwhelming materialism Yeats for his part certainly had such an affinity to magic.

In his New York speech Yeats presents his dualist vision of England and Ireland not merely implicitly by opposing an England where ‘whole districts [are] blackened with smoke’ with a pristine green Ireland that would ‘always be in the main an agricultural country’ but by explicitly referring to a ‘war between two civilizations, two ideals of life’. Thus, Yeats imagines the Irish people in terms of a

³⁸ See Arnold 108: ‘Again, his sensibility gives him a peculiarly near and intimate feeling of nature and the life of nature; [...] he seems in a special way attracted by [...] the secret of natural beauty and natural magic, and to be close to it, to half-divine it.’

spiritually and environmentally “pure” nation that needs to be rescued from English cultural and industrial “contamination”. This idea of protection from “contamination” is also reflected in the speech’s introduction where the poet rhetorically asks: ‘What is this nationality we are trying to preserve, this thing that we are fighting English influence to preserve?’. (M&M 113)

Wilde was not preoccupied as Yeats was to some extent with environmental questions but he did take great interest in the “spiritual” side of things. The difference between his own ideal culture, be it based on a Greek or an Irish island, and mainstream English culture equalled to him the difference between a culture that truly valued the freedom of the imagination and one that might consider flights of fancy amusing at best and dangerous at worst.

Thus, similar to Yeats, Wilde was afraid of certain kinds of English “intellectual contamination” namely in the shape of “practicality”, “common sense” and “philistinism”. Both Yeats and Wilde were indeed, in Arnold’s words, two Celts ‘always ready to react against the despotism of fact’ (102). The importance of the imagination and the subjective spiritual or psychological dimension as opposed to so-called reality and objective facts is paramount to both of their works.

In particular Wilde criticises what he perceives as a typically English brand of utilitarian thought which suffocates the birth of innovative ideas by only allowing for ideas that are “practical”. Thus, in *The Critic as Artist* the character Gilbert (who can be assumed to be more or less Wilde’s alter-ego) claims that ‘it is not so easy to be unpractical as the ignorant Philistine imagines’ adding that there ‘is no country in the world so much in need of unpractical people as this country of ours [i.e. England]’ (256-57). ‘With us [i.e. the British],’ he affirms ‘[t]hought is degraded by its constant association with practice’. While at first this sounds like a provocative dandyesque exaggeration it actually makes perfect sense whenever Gilbert goes on to explain that no one who holds a profession is ‘able to form a disinterested intellectual judgment’ since ‘the necessity for a career forces every one to take sides’ (257). Gilbert furthermore states that ‘Anything approaching to the free play of the mind is practically unknown amongst us [i.e. the English]’ (277) by which Wilde suggests that the English should learn to think outside the box, free of moral, religious or scientific constraints. Indeed, having stated a tendency towards ‘Philistinism’ as the

English people's main weakness, Arnold seems to agree with Wilde's above statement declaring that 'in spite of good sense disapproving' one often feels 'exhilarated' by the 'gay defiant reaction against fact of the lively Celtic nature' (Arnold 109) and as mentioned before he even advises the English to use the 'Celtic quickness of perception' to 'free [themselves] from hardness and Philistinism' (ibid. 175).

In direct opposition to the cliché of the average earnest utilitarian Englishman and in defiance of the popular Christian-inspired ideal of sincerity Wilde's ideal man and artist is the Liar, as described in *The Decay of Lying* (see discussion chapter 1), whose unconstrained creativity is so powerful it does not rely on - the repetition or inversion of - reality. Wilde puts it in a nutshell when he writes in a letter to the editor of the St James's Gazette defending *Dorian Gray* that naturally the characters of his novel 'have no counterpart in life' since '[t]he function of the artist is to invent, not to chronicle' and, consequently, '[i]f they [i.e. the characters] existed they would not be worth writing about'. Wilde's Liar, being the ideal artist and man, is in fact the model innovator who does not merely repeat what has gone before him but radically questions or even disregards all received wisdom and may thus arrive at genuinely innovative ideas – just as Einstein did who dared to question something as fundamental as Newtonian physics. When Wilde claims that 'England will never be civilized till she has added Utopia to her dominions' adding that she needs 'unpractical people who see beyond the moment, and think beyond the day' (CAA 257) he highlights that none of England's social or other problems will be solved by endlessly repeating the same schemata (such as that of charity) but that truly innovate ideas are needed to make a difference.

As discussed in the sub-chapter on 'Truth' (see chapter 1) Yeats went just like Wilde on a life-long crusade to fight 'the despotism of fact'. Without doubt *A Vision*, which Yeats called his 'Blake book'³⁹ for good reason, constitutes the poet's "manifesto" in defence of the imagination in the midst of an increasingly aspiritual, rational age. Ironically, however, in an unpublished "dialogue" between two spirits that was to be part of *A Vision* one of Yeats's main spirit communicators by the name

³⁹ See Yeats's letter to John O'Leary, dated August, 1892 (qtd. in *M&M*): 'If I had not made magic my constant study I could not have written a single word of my Blake book, nor would The Countess Kathleen ever have come to exist. The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write.'

of Michael Robartes likens the process of assembling Yeats's spiritual system to the scientific process of deduction in which the microcosm gets projected onto the macrocosm. Thus, Robartes maintains that the time will come when people will start believing in the immortality of the soul again and then 'it will be understood that just as a man can investigate the laws by which the ocean moves in a cup of water we can investigate by studying our own minds the final destination of the soul' (qtd. in *M&M* 235). It is more than just a little curious that a spirit who supposedly introduced Yeats himself to the truth about the universe should feel a need to defend the poet's introspective method of investigation into metaphysical matters.

Apparently Yeats felt so insecure about the reception of *A Vision* that its teachings belonging to the beginning 'revolt of the soul against the intellect' of which the poet considered himself to be 'a voice' (letter by Yeats qtd in *M&M* 94-5) needed to be justified intellectually or, better still, scientifically. Indeed, Yeats's intense life-long interest in magic, spiritualism, occultism and the like testifies not only to his great willingness to believe in the supernatural but also to his need for some kind of proof or immediate experience of it. Thus, paradoxically, Yeats's (as well as many of his contemporaries') intense individual exploration of the supernatural was on the one hand a reaction against the overtaking of a scientific materialist worldview while at the same time being complicit with it as the methods used to explore the supernatural were often trying to gain solid "scientific" proof of the immaterial.

Overall it is very difficult to say whether Yeats himself believed in his system. In all likelihood Richard Ellmann was right in remarking that '[a]s a man he [i.e. Yeats] sometimes believed in his system and sometimes did not' (*M&M* 230). What is, however, certain is that Yeats was convinced that a belief in the immortality of the soul, whether it be "true" or not, was a necessary prerequisite both for the survival of the human species as well as for artistic creation. Thus, in 1914 in a paper on spiritualism he voices his scepticism wondering whether there may be a 'world-wide conspiracy of the unconscious mind [...] that speaks through dreams, to create a false appearance of spiritual intercourse, a seeming proof of the soul's survival after death; a renewed fabrication by nature of an old falsehood necessary perhaps to the order of the world; perhaps [...] necessary even to the continuance of human life?' (qtd. in *ID* 233).

Elsewhere he deplores that a decline in the belief of the immortal soul generally equals a decline in the quality of literary creation engendering a bland realist aesthetic that necessarily remains on the surface of things: '[...] We condemn the art and literature of modern Europe. No man can create, as did Shakespeare, Homer, Sophocles, who does not believe, with all his blood and nerve, that man's soul is immortal, for the evidence lies plain to all men that where that belief has declined, men have turned from creation to photography' (see leading article for the review *To-Morrow* in *M&M* 246). Such a fear of "photography" is again reminiscent of William Morris's opposition to machine-production with its (semi-)automatic copying of an original, the product consequently lacking all signs of creativity of its maker; in Morris's view "creation", that is, 'intelligent work' is always to be preferred to "photography": 'We ought to get to understand the value of intelligent work, the work of men's hands guided by their brains, and to take that, though it be rough, rather than the unintelligent work of machines or slaves, though it be delicate;' (*Some Hints on Pattern-Designing*).

"Photography" or copying is also what Wilde feared most both in life and in art. As mentioned before, he believed that contrary to popular perception it is the individualist artist who 'invents a type' and that it is 'Life [that] tries to copy it' so that ultimately 'Life imitates Art' (*SOM* 179). He also put an interesting spin on the church-proclaimed imitation of Christ arguing that Jesus was the supreme individualist and that it is his intense individualism we should strive to emulate rather than trying to copy his exact deeds. In Wilde's own words 'he who would lead a Christlike life is he who is perfectly and absolutely himself'. Man's station in life or profession are of no avail 'as long as he realizes the perfection of the soul that is within him' given that '[a]ll imitation in morals and in life is wrong' (*ibid.* 137).

Yeats equally valued individualism very highly. This shows in the creation of his own highly idiosyncratic belief system, his preference of the effects of the 'subjective' era/gyre over the 'objective' era/gyre as well as politically his fight for an independent Ireland that would be markedly different from Great Britain and controversially (particularly in later life) his championing of the leadership of an aristocratic cultured élite over the leadership of the - proletarian - masses.

Overall both authors were deeply preoccupied with the opposition between the de-individualising power of materialism as associated with “typically” British industrialism and utilitarianism on the one hand and the creative, imaginative, spiritual power of the individual (artist) on the other.

In the following and final chapter I would like to explore in which way both authors use the theme of the split self, in particular within the context of the self as split into an active and a passive part, an “actor” and a “spectator”.

CHAPTER 3: THE SPLIT SELF: ACTORS AND SPECTATORS

‘To love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance’
(Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*)

‘Cast a cold eye / On life, on death. / Horseman, pass by!’
(Yeats, *Under Ben Bulbin*)

‘All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players’
(Shakespeare, *As You Like It*)

Both Wilde and Yeats believed that what really distinguishes human beings from other beings is the power of their imagination. Our imagination is what elevates us above the status of animals since it allows us to transcend the immediate here and now as well as the effects of history to imagine ourselves as somebody else and even somewhere and sometime else, as the philosophy of the Irish Renaissance and Wilde’s “New Hellenism” demonstrate. This imaginative projection allows us to escape, at least to some extent, from the shackles of our historical circumstances, family background and perceived personality. It is, to borrow a phrase from W.E. Henley’s poem ‘Invictus’, what enables us to remain the ‘[masters] of [our] fate’ and ‘[captains] of our [souls]’ despite the fact that we are thrown into this life with no choice of where, when or to whom we are born.

In Yeats’s terminology the power of the imagination to literally change our “self” is symbolized by the “mask” allowing us to incorporate our “anti-self”. The “mask” thus represents the ability to break free from our everyday self, being according to Yeats mostly a mere consequence of and reaction to our surroundings, and to become someone completely different, even someone whose personality is diametrically opposed to that of our ordinary “self”.

In spite of the liberating potential of the anti-self the Yeatsian self is nevertheless not completely free, given that in *A Vision* the poet describes the life of each soul as a journey all around the cycle of reincarnation leading from extreme subjectivity, that is, individualism, to extreme objectivity, that is, altruism and back again. In the end the soul has not much of a say in this endlessly repeating cycle but may at best learn to accept and rejoice in this Nietzsche-style “eternal recurrence”.

Alternatively it may at some point drop out of the cycle and join the so-called mysterious “Thirteenth cycle” representing some kind of Nirvana or state of oneness with god. This “Thirteenth Cycle” which according to the new version of *A Vision*, published in 1937, ‘may deliver us from the twelve cycles of time and space’ indeed has, as Ellmann points out, despite ‘its absurdly mechanical title, [...] many qualities of divinity’. Thus, as Ellmann observes, the “Thirteenth Cycle” constitutes the system’s ‘anti-self’ opposing the system’s ‘determinism or quasi-determinism’ by assuring that ‘free will, liberty, and deity pour back into the universe’. (*M&M* 282)

Similar to his colleague Yeats Wilde believed that what is of interest in people - and what should consequently be of interest to novelists - is not who we fundamentally “are”, given that in the last analysis we are all made of the same stuff sharing ‘that dreadful universal thing called human nature’ (*DOL* 170), but the “masks” we are wearing. In other words, what is critical is whom we imaginatively construct and project ourselves to be. As Vivian remarks in *The Decay of Lying* ‘what is interesting about people in good society [...] is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that lies behind the mask’ (169).

In *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* Wilde proposes to change this reality and get rid of social differences so that everyone might have the opportunity to choose their own mask. Wilde dreams of a voluntary socialism that would abolish private property and thereby strengthen Individualism by ensuring that nobody would ever again ‘[confuse] a man with what he possesses’ (132). Neither rich nor poor would go on wasting their lives ‘in accumulating things and the symbols for things’ (133). Having been stripped of all their belongings and attendant social status people would no longer have an identifiable social identity, something akin to Yeats’s “self”, but having been freed from social expectations and the compulsion to fulfil them may ‘freely develop what is wonderful, and fascinating, and delightful in [them]’ (*ibid.*). In

other words, having been newborn as blank canvases everyone may construct a new identity or “mask” realizing themselves in whatever ‘sphere of activity [...] is really congenial to them and gives them pleasure’ (SOL 129).

Just like Yeats exploring his anti-self, the Wildean socialist individualist, whose identity is no longer a mere consequence of, or reaction to, his surroundings re-imagines himself from scratch. In doing so the socialist individualist’s genius correlates with that of Wilde’s innovative “Liar” who invents stories that do not merely copy life but create it anew thereby, to borrow a phrase from *The Critic as Artist*, ‘[giving] an accurate description of what has never occurred’ (CAA 221).

Given Wilde’s and Yeats’s constructivist approach to ideal identity as a product of our own imagination it does not come as a surprise that many of their heroes who have “realized” their “Individualism” or explored their “anti-selves” also view life as such as a construct or a stage and themselves alternately as actors or spectators.

The dialectic of action versus passive contemplation is indeed a theme that preoccupied both authors in their search for a perfect unified existence. It is, as we have seen, intricately linked to both authors’ conception of human beings as fundamentally split – as beings who being “actors” and “spectators” simultaneously live and watch their own lives and may assume different personalities or “masks” for instance by merging with their apparent opposites or “anti-selves”.

The Wildean dandy is a prime example of the hero or heroine who is well aware of him- or herself as both subject and object, actor and spectator of his or her own life. This heightened awareness of the split self accounts for many of the comical effects in Wilde’s social comedies. Thus, Wilde’s dandy heroes usually lead some sort of double life whether only in their imagination or (also) in “actual” life.

One example for a dandy who leads an imagined double life is the character of Cecily Cardew in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Intrigued by her ward Jack’s mysterious wayward brother Ernest, who is in fact an invention by Jack who goes by the name of Ernest whenever he amuses himself in town, the country girl imagines a passionate romance with said Ernest, the details of which she records minutely in her diary. Following Wilde’s maxim that ‘Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates

Life' (*DOL* 179) Cecily turns from being the spectator and heroine of her imagined life to being the creator and heroine of her "actual" life whenever she finally meets and duly falls in love with Ernest, who in this case is in fact Jack's friend Algernon pretending to be Ernest so that he could finally meet the beautiful ward.

Obviously Jack and Algernon both have split selves leading double lives, Jack pretending to be Ernest in town and Algernon pretending to be Ernest in the countryside. They do so for the same reason namely in order to win the girls they love who will both only love a man called Ernest. Moreover, their "Bunburying", meaning the invention of a relative living in town or the countryside for the purpose of having a convenient reason for sudden departures, enables them to enact multiple personas in their lives. Thus, their Ernest-persona or mask allows both Jack and Algernon to pursue their pleasure only. While Algernon never really does anything else this is of particular importance to Jack who, whenever he gets tired of his serious persona as "uncle Jack" taking care of his ward in the countryside, may adopt the fun-loving personality of his "anti-self" Ernest in town.

In the dénouement the adopted Jack discovers that he is by birth Algernon's elder brother Ernest who had been mislaid by his nanny at Victoria Station while Algernon makes arrangements to be re-christened Ernest in order to please his fiancée Cecily. Thus Wilde's comedy shows that there is no difference between who we imagine ourselves to be and who we "really" are or may become. All the different personas that we invent or that society attaches to us are equal parts of our split self and no part is more "earnest", that is, true, than the others.

However, as Wilde's comedy shows, if we want to be happy it is necessary for us to reinvent ourselves, as Jack, Algernon and Cecily do, instead of letting society decide who we are. The worst that can happen, Wilde implies, is that we may discover that we have been speaking the "truth" all along; thus, when Jack famously asks his fiancée at the end of the play 'Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?' she replies that she can, trusting that he is 'sure to change', that is, that he will go on reinventing himself and won't let his birth identity put an end to his creative play of multiple personalities.

The split or multiple self is obviously a theme that is of equally high importance in Yeats's work where it is based on his, already discussed, philosophy of the anti-self. Given that according to Yeats whenever the poet assumes the position of his anti-self 'by taking the Universe minus himself' (cf. *Notes in Poems* 584) he may study his "self" from an outsider's perspective it becomes understandable why Yeats was so attracted to the idea of us being simultaneously actors and spectators in the tragi-comedy of our own lives and more generally of the history of all mankind.

However, it is noteworthy that in Yeats's work this theme is hardly presented in as light-hearted a manner as in Wilde's comedies. If Yeats presents the self as being split into an actor- and a spectator-part he usually emphasizes the passive spectator-part and combines it with an aloof bird's eye view of tragedy unfolding. This literally "super"-man-like perspective serves the psychological purpose of "dwarfing" (ensuing) catastrophe so that it may become more palatable. The attainment of such a superior perspective on things was indeed part of Yeats's motivation for writing *A Vision*: as can be deduced from his following statement its creation was strongly motivated by his wish to come to terms with the world by metaphorically "dwarfing" it: 'At present I am concentrating the history of the world into twenty pages or so, and then I shall do the same for the next world. Both will seem better so abbreviated.' (*M&M* 244)

Such a soothing dwarfing of existence in times of political turmoil is also what Yeats envisages in "Lapis Lazuli". Thus, if in this poem Yeats portrays the eyes of the Chinamen sitting on a mountain as 'gay' even though war is about to destroy the world this is because just like Dorian Gray they have become quite detached 'spectators of life' who may easily 'escape the suffering of life'⁴⁰. Yeats clearly associates the Chinamen's zen-like calm contemplative attitude not only with psychological but also with physical superiority so that he imagines them on a mountain offering them a bird's eye view of the coming catastrophe.

Indeed, within the poem Yeats creates a stunningly clear hierarchy between detached contemplation of life and active participation in life, between "spectators"

⁴⁰ See *Dorian Gray* (chapter 9): Dorian explains his indifference towards his lover Sibyl Vane's suicide to the painter Basil Hallward: 'To become the spectator of one's own life, as Harry [i.e. the dandy Lord Henry Wotton] says, is to escape the suffering of life.'

and “actors”. This hierarchy is furthermore gendered as well as split along the lines of Europe and Asia, associated with the subjective and the objective gyre or era.

At the bottom of the hierarchy are the ‘hysterical women’ (1) whom Yeats introduces in the first stanza and who, in stereotypically feminine fashion, appear to be wholly governed by their emotions. Being ‘sick of the palette and fiddle-bow, / Of poets that are always gay’ they implicitly demand that in times of coming war artists should turn their attention from art to more important things since ‘if nothing drastic is done / Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out’ (2-6).

The second stanza presents those people who have discovered their “mask” and are consequently aware of the “part” they play in the cycle of eternal recurrence. They are the “Hamlets”, “Lears”, “Ophelias” and “Cordelias” of this world who are capable of “tragic joy” in the face of destruction knowing that the end of one era or “gyre”, when ‘Tragedy [is] wrought to its uttermost’ (20) and consequently ‘cannot grow by an inch or an ounce’ (24) merely signifies the beginning of another era. In Yeats’s hierarchy of wisdom those who have found their mask being “actors” are literally one level up from the hysterical women since they are metaphorically located on a stage.

In the third and final fourth stanza, Yeats introduces the superior Chinamen ‘carved in Lapis Lazuli’ (38) whom he imagines to be climbing towards a house on the mountaintop. Clearly their upward physical trajectory reflects on their elevated mental attitude, their Buddha-like ‘gay’ (56) solemnity in the face of catastrophe which is based on their traditional Asian understanding of life and death as an endless cycle in which ‘All things fall and are built again’ (35).

At this stage in his life, influenced by Nietzsche’s concept of the superman, Yeats clearly idealised the sort of detached passive spectatorship he associated with Asian philosophy, which he would in turn associate with the “objective gyre” as opposed to the European “subjective gyre”⁴¹.

Turning to Wilde’s work, even though he was more enthralled with Greek than with Asian philosophy consistently favouring the intensification of individualist

⁴¹ See *ID* 189-90: ‘If Hamlet, nervous, desperate for knowledge, and full of self, embodies Europe, Buddha with empty eyeballs, rapt beyond passion or knowledge or self, embodies Asia. [...] It is apparent that Europe and Asia were new representations of the subjective and objective gyres [...].’

subjectivity rather than the loss of it, his stance on the hierarchy between contemplation and action seems just as clear as his colleague Yeats's. Thus, rejecting the conventional work ethics of his time Wilde candidly asserts the supremacy of contemplation, associated with artistic innovative imagination, over action, associated with mindless repetition of the same dull existing models. As Gilbert says in *The Critic as Artist* (part I) 'When man acts he is a puppet. When he describes he is a poet' (233). In other words, as Gilbert further elucidates, our imagination is not restricted by probability and facts and may thus create truly unique memorable heroes such as Leda and Achilles while action 'dies at the moment of its energy' and is 'a base concession to fact' (234).

In part two of *The Critic as Artist* Gilbert furthermore suggests that we should model ourselves on the ancient Greek gods whom Aristotle and Epicurus imagined to lead a life of contemplation of their own 'perfection' and as spectators of 'the tragedy-comedy of the world that they have made'. We too should become spectators of life by '[setting] ourselves to witness with appropriate emotions the varied scenes that man and nature can afford' thereby '[making] ourselves spiritual by detaching ourselves from action, and [becoming] perfect by the rejection of energy'. (256)

This, in a sense, is part of the mission statement of any dandy of Wildean description, whether his name be Gilbert or Dorian. Thus, Wilde's dandies resemble the 'aesthetic critic' Gilbert sketches out whose 'true ideal' is to lead 'the ΒΙΟΣ ΘΕΩΡΗΤΙΚΟΣ' (Gr. 'the contemplative life') 'looking out at the world' from 'the high tower of Thought' just as Yeats's Chinamen do (ibid.). Leading a 'calm' and 'self-centred' contemplative life, Gilbert explains, the 'aesthetic critic' cannot be harmed by life and consequently will be 'safe' (ibid.). Wilde expresses the same idea in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* when in the wake of his lover's Sibyl Vane's suicide Dorian explains his apparent indifference to the painter Basil Hallward: 'To become the spectator of one's own life, as Harry [i.e. the dandy Lord Henry Wotton] says, is to escape the suffering of life' (chapter 9).

While generally endorsing contemplation Wilde also clearly shows the dangers of such a purely artistic attitude towards life: Having lost his ability to sympathize with others after Sibyl's suicide Dorian loses a part of his humanity a fact the first hideous changes in his otherwise perfect portrait reflect. As a professed

spectator of life Dorian emotionally no longer truly participates in the “play” of life but has transferred part of his humanity on the portrait and is therefore no longer truly alive. Having transformed into a “spectator” in order to overcome his grief it stands to reason that everyone else from Dorian’s point of view turns into “actors” performing on the stage of life for his pleasure only. Succumbing to Lord Henry Wotton’s fatal influence Dorian comes to accept his friend’s theory that ‘The girl never really lived’ (120) since all her life was only about acting and so Dorian can enjoy her death as an aesthetic event just as he would enjoy the death of Juliet (whom Sibyl had played) on stage. Dorian comments:

When she knew its [i.e. love’s] unreality, she died, as Juliet might have died. She passed again into the sphere of art. There is something of the martyr about her. Her death has all the pathetic uselessness of martyrdom, all its wasted beauty. (chapter 9, 127)

In his extreme passivity and indifference Dorian identifies more and more with the destructive death drive literally sucking the lifeblood out of everyone surrounding him. His detached joyless search for ever new sensations propels his inner ‘metamorphosis’ which, as Glick points out, ‘culminates in his murder of Basil’. The ‘almost vampiric’ Dorian, who enjoys collecting rare objects, has turned ‘from the consumption of objects to the consumption of people’. Dorian’s emotional detachment from life is complete, Wilde suggests, since Dorian when murdering his friend neither shows ‘real sorrow [...] nor real pain’ but ‘simply the passion of the spectator’; far from building for himself a ‘refuge from modern life’ Dorian’s ‘spectatorship results in a dangerous splitting of subjectivity’. (Glick 150)

Thus, while in his work Wilde generally encourages everyone to foster a contemplative attitude towards life - with the exception of the poor who he believes would be fully justified to finally become active and start a revolution⁴² (but only so that they too could then lead “aristocratic” contemplative lives) - he shows drastically what consequences such an attitude might in the most extreme cases entail. *Dorian Gray*, whose hero unwittingly kills himself when – in Wilde’s own words - he ‘tries to kill his conscience’ by stabbing his by-then hideous portrait shows that even the

⁴² See SOM 130: ‘We are often told that the poor are grateful for charity. Some of them are, no doubt, but the best among the poor are never grateful. They are ungrateful, discontented, disobedient and rebellious. They are quite right to be so. [...] Why should they be grateful for the crumbs that fall from the rich man’s table? They should be seated at the board, and are beginning to know it. [...] Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man’s original virtue.’

most perfect dandy's separation between body and soul can never be complete. In other words, we can never detach ourselves completely from our deeds unless we kill ourselves. Indeed, Wilde remorsefully had to admit that *Dorian Gray*'s one 'artistic error' was that it was 'a story with a moral' namely that 'All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment' and that those who like Lord Henry Wotton want to be only spectators of life will find that 'those who reject the battle are more deeply wounded than those who take part in it'. (Letter to the editor of the *St James's Gazette*, 26th June 1890 in *SOM & Selected Critical Prose*)

While, given his admiration for the Nietzschean superman, this may not have been Yeats's intention some of his work idealising an emotionally detached spectatorship-attitude towards life shows its potentially dehumanizing effects just as much as *Dorian Gray* does.

Thus, the Chinamen in "Lapis Lazuli" being 'carved in Lapis Lazuli' (38) are obviously made of stone hinting not only at the eternal existence of the "objective" principle they represent but also showing that such an attitude as theirs may not only be super-human but in-human. Similarly Yeats's poem "An Irish Airman Foresees his Death" not only presents a personality that is remarkably stoical in the face of his potentially imminent destruction but one that borders dangerously on a glorification of aggressive nihilism: Neither loving his people nor hating his enemy the airman had come to the conclusion that 'The years to come seemed a waste of breath, / A waste of breath the years behind' (14-15), and merely fights following a self-destructive kamikaze-style 'lonely impulse of delight' (11).

Yeats's later poems lose some of the glorification of the superman as supreme spectator of life and show that no matter how hard we may try to '[c]ast a cold eye / on life, on death' - as Yeats's self-written epitaph goes (see "Under Ben Bulbin" VI 8-9) - no matter how much we may wish to detach ourselves from our humanity, vulnerability, mortality - in the end we will have to accept it. Any Oisín-style flight into the immortal Otherworld can only temporarily offer us '[v]ain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose' ("The Circus Animals' Desertion" II 4). We can only flee from our humanity into an ideal world for so long yet at some point it will call us back and like Oisín returning from the Otherworld we shall touch the mortal ground and die. *Dorian*

who like Oisín managed to flee all his life from the hands of time equally dies as he tries to remove the last visible remnants of his humanity by destroying his portrait.

Our artistic creation, by which we try to immortalize ourselves and our ideas, has its root in our steadily decomposing bodies. As Dorian's portrait shows we cannot ignore them forever. With art, Yeats argues in "The Circus Animals' Desertion", we build "ladders" in order to elevate ourselves from the condition of mere matter yet we must not forget the humble fragile origins of even our loftiest ideals to which we will eventually return:

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart. (canto 3)

In the end, as Yeats writes in "Sailing to Byzantium", a meditation on growing old and the wish to flee into an eternal artificial Otherworld, our soul is 'fastened to a dying animal / [and] knows not what it is' and no image, portrait, mask or ideal we create will be able to carry us '[i]nto the artifice of eternity' (III 6-8). Yet while no mask or imaginative reinvention of ourselves will turn us into immortals it may sometimes help us to live better.

CONCLUSION

‘The words of a dead man / are modified in the guts of the living’
(W.H. Auden, ‘*In Memory of W.B. Yeats*’)

When W.B. Yeats first met Oscar Wilde he was deeply impressed by the extraordinarily artificial yet at the same time spontaneous effect of Wilde’s conversation. As the poet remarks in his memoir *Four Years*,

My first meeting with Oscar Wilde was an astonishment. I never before heard a man talking with perfect sentences, as if he had written them all over night with labour and yet all spontaneous.

and further,

I noticed, too, that the impression of artificiality that I think all Wilde’s listeners have recorded, came from the perfect rounding of the sentences and from the deliberation that made it possible. (Ibid. chapter 6, 130)

Unfortunately, Yeats did not record the details of that night’s or any other night’s conversation with his peer, yet it is safe to assume that once the younger man had overcome his awe and timidity their talk would have been worthwhile eavesdropping on. In spite of their difference in age these two Anglo-Irish writers must have shared quite a number of interests, reaching from poetry to drama to the – Irish – arts in general. They also shared a keen interest in the meaning and construction of identity, a theme that features prominently in both their works.

Based on a discussion of Wilde’s and Yeats’s identity theories revolving around the symbol of the “mask” and Yeats’s idea of the “anti-self”, the aim of my thesis has been to create a posthumous “dialogue” between these two writers on the question of self-constructed identity, highlighting the differences and similarities in their approaches and conclusions.

This “dialogue form” has allowed me to consider a broader artistic, philosophical, cultural and political picture than if I had discussed the works of only one writer. Moreover it appeared to fit the subject particularly well: after all, Yeats considered all creativity and poetry to spring from a dialogue with the anti-self or rather ‘a quarrel with ourselves’ (*PASL* 331) and personality-wise the flamboyant Wilde may well have been his initially timid younger colleague’s anti-self. Finally both authors frequently use the dialogue form in their work to give a voice to

multiple or conflicting opinions. Thus, in his poetry, for instance in “Ego Dominus Tuus”, Yeats often stages conversations with his – ghostly – anti-self creating a sort of séance-inspired effect while the dialogue-form in Wilde’s *The Critic as Artist* and *The Decay of Lying* is more likely inspired by the author’s familiarity with the Platonic dialogues.

With regard to the idea of the anti-self being the opposite of our public persona I was interested in exploring the “hidden”, less publicized side of these two men. Thus, Wilde tends to be remembered as a brilliant conversationalist, playwright of witty social comedies and homosexual martyr, while the image of at least the young Yeats is that of a late romantic poet steeped in the Celtic Twilight of his ethereal unworldly subject matters.

Yet in fact both writers far from being merely witty or escapist were intensely political-minded. As *The Soul of Man under Socialism* proposing a unique kind of voluntary individualist socialism shows Wilde’s interest in social reform predated his stay in prison by many years. And even Wilde’s dandy-characters are thoroughly political in their anti-utilitarian stance. Yeats’s championing of pre-Christian ancient Irish culture and spirituality in “The Wanderings of Oisín” is equally just as political as his much later poem “Easter, 1916” given its intrinsic nostalgia for heroic feudal times when the Catholic-Protestant division did not yet exist, the British colonizers had not yet arrived and spirituality was still a part of everyday Irish life. Even Yeats’s lifelong involvement with what W.H. Auden satirically called the ‘mumbo-jumbo of magic’ that Yeats had made ‘the centre of his work’ (*The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats* 5) far from being an unworldly pursuit was a decidedly political activity rejecting the materialism and utilitarianism of post-Darwinist industrialist Victorian Britain.

At first glance neither Wilde’s individualist socialism nor Yeats’s yearning for a feudal society, idealization of Protestant Ascendancy culture and at times borderline fascism are necessarily particularly appealing to the average modern day reader. However, in this case the devil, or rather the angel, is in the detail. Thus, there are a number of attitudes and ideas woven into both authors’ political philosophy that are still valuable and topical today.

Wilde's idiosyncratic version of socialism, for instance, shows that in quite a modern way he conceived of people as being born as equals who should be given equal opportunities to realize their individual personality, talents and leisure. Private property is to be abolished in order to give everyone, not only the aristocracy, the opportunity to realize themselves professionally, artistically and privately.

Even Yeats's feudal dream of post-independence Ireland in which 'an ancient ideal of life' would be fostered by 'a race of gentlemen [i.e. peasants], keeping alive the ideals of a great time when men sang the heroic life with drawn sword in their hands' is not entirely reactionary. Nowadays it is common sense amid Western cultures that it is important to try to keep alive the national heritage and language or, as Yeats puts it, the 'imaginative culture'. Moreover, the poet's rallying for Ireland to remain 'in the main an agricultural country' while hardly being conducive to economic growth should strike a chord with modern ecologists who would agree that it is undesirable to live in a country where, as in Victorian England, 'whole districts [are] blackened with smoke'. (Yeats's 1904 N.Y. speech qtd. in *M&M* 113)

Naturally Wilde's and Yeats's view of the subject as a construct of society or ideally as a self-construct as well as their emphasis on the intrinsic subjectivity of our perception of reality are equally ideas that still resonate with modern readers and paved the way for the concerns of the modernist movement. Their questioning of the existence of an objective truth, such as when Wilde states that '[a] truth ceases to be true when more than one person believes in it' (*Phrases and Philosophies*) or when Yeats writes that '[t]here is no truth / saving in thine own heart' (*The Island of Statues*) in a way even seems to anticipate the findings of Einstein's theory of relativity.

Finally the idea of the self-constructed self as such could not be more up-to-date given that millions of people day after day actively manage their own image on social media all over the world. We have indeed become, to paraphrase Wilde, 'spectators of our lives'. However, it would be to Wilde's and Yeats's disappointment that such self-imaging not always serves the purpose of leading a fulfilled life by realizing one's creative potential but often seems to be more propelled by a commercial utilitarian impulse to literally "sell" our selves on the relationship market as well as on the job market.

As to today's self-imaging of the Irish individual in Ireland and Northern Ireland in particular the current violent dispute over the reduced flying of the Union Jack on Belfast City Hall demonstrates that British and Irish identities still tend to be conceived of in terms of opposition and mutual exclusion. Matthew Arnold's construction of English and "Celtic" identity appears tolerant and inclusive in comparison. Maybe Wilde could come back and draw a Utopia on the map?

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Abstract auf Deutsch

Der Diskurs von “Sein” und “Schein” ist in der westlichen Philosophie traditionell geprägt von einer Aufwertung des “Seins” gegenüber einer Abwertung des “Scheins”. Innerhalb dieser Logik repräsentiert das Symbol der Maske eine unerwünschte Verschleierung des Selbst mit dem Ziel der Irreführung des Gegenübers. Die wissenschaftlichen Erkenntnisse des 19. Jahrhunderts, insbesondere des Darwinismus und der Geologie, stellten dieses theologisch geprägte Selbstverständnis des viktorianischen Menschen radikal in Frage und provozierten eine neue Debatte um die Identität des Menschen.

Die beiden viktorianischen anglo-irischen Schriftsteller Oscar Wilde und William Butler Yeats entwickelten vor dem Hintergrund dieser Debatte ihre eigenständigen Theorien der “Maske”. Sie erkannten das kreative Potenzial der modernen Zersplitterung des Selbst als Möglichkeit der Selbst- anstelle der Fremdkonstruktion von Identität. Die Maske wird im Sinne des Karnevalesken außerdem zum Symbol der Entdeckung von Aspekten des Selbst, die im Alltag durch soziale Konventionen zum Verschwinden gebracht werden. Im weitesten Sinne ist die Maske Emblem für den Glauben der beiden Autoren an die Kraft der Kreativität und Vorstellungskraft im Kampf gegen den Materialismus, den Utilitarismus und das Philistertum des stark industrialisierten imperialistischen britischen Weltreichs.

Ziel der vorliegenden Arbeit ist es, anhand ausgewählter Werke vor dem Hintergrund des Symbols der Maske die Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede im Verständnis der beiden Autoren von Identität als (Selbst-)Konstrukt zu beleuchten. Dabei wird auch der kulturhistorische und philosophische Hintergrund der jeweiligen Theorien miteinbezogen.

Das erste Kapitel ist Wildes und Yeats’ Konstruktionen der individuellen Identität gewidmet. Insbesondere behandelt es die für Yeats zentralen Konzepte des “anti-self” (u.a. präsentiert in *A Vision*) sowie von “tragic joy” und verbindet Yeats’ Philosophie mit jenen William Blakes und Friedrich Nietzsches, insbesondere der Doktrin des “Übermenschen” und der “ewigen Wiederkehr”. In einem Vergleich von Wildes und Yeats’ Philosophien werden anhand von Wildes Prosawerken seine Ideale des “Lügners”, des Dandy sowie des “Individualismus” auf einer sozialistischen Basis

erläutert. Ein besonderes Augenmerk liegt dabei auf Wildes subversiver Auffassung der Beziehung zwischen Fakt und Fiktion.

Vor dem Hintergrund der Beziehung von Selbst und Maske, Selbst und “anti-self” im Spannungsfeld zwischen “Realem” und erstrebtem “Idealem” liegt der Fokus des zweiten Kapitels auf der Konstruktion idealer “Anderswelten” beziehungsweise irischer nationaler Utopien. Wildes und Yeats’ Idealisierung der griechischen und irischen Antike in ihren frühen Gedichten “Ravenna” und “The Wanderings of Oisín” erscheint als Symptom ihrer Ablehnung der imperialistischen, christlichen, materialistischen Mainstream-Kultur des britischen Weltreichs. Der zweite Teil des zweiten Kapitels kontextualisiert die Definition von keltischer und britischer Kultur als Gegenpole im Rahmen einer Besprechung von Matthew Arnolds Studie *On the Study of Celtic Literature*. Auf der Basis von Arnolds Gegenüberstellung des praxisorientierten Prinzip des “Hebraism” mit dem kontemplativen “Hellenism” in *Culture and Anarchy* sowie William Morris’ gemäßigt sozialistischer gesellschaftlicher Utopie untersucht der dritte Teil Yeats’ und Wildes anti-utilitaristische soziale Vision.

Das dritte und letzte Kapitel bildet eine Rekapitulation und Reflexion über das zentrale Thema des gespaltenen Selbst im Werk beider Autoren, insbesondere die innere Spaltung des Menschen in einen aktiven und einen kontemplativen passiven Teil. Anhand von Beispielen aus ihrem Werk wird aufgezeigt, welche Wertung Yeats und Wilde diesen gegensätzlichen Aspekten zumessen und welche Gefahren sie in diesen Haltungen sehen.

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WS 2002 -	Universität Wien, University College Dublin: Diplomstudium Anglistik
	Sprachen
Deutsch	Muttersprache
Englisch	Cambridge Certificate C2 (Juni 2011)
Französisch	DALF C2 (Juni 2011)
Finnisch	Fennistik-Studium
Italienisch	Schriftlich: Gute Kenntnisse, Mündlich: Geringe Kenntnisse
Spanisch	Anfängerniveau
Irisch	Anfängerniveau
Latein	Gute Kenntnisse
	Sonstiges
WS 2006 -	University College Dublin: Erasmus-Studienjahr
SS 2007	(Schwerpunkt Irish Studies)
WS 2008 -	Conservatoire d'Arras, Frankreich: Klavierstudium
SS 2009	
1994 - 2006	Erste Private Musikschule Hietzing, Wien: Klavierstudium